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Dangerous Denk
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DAVID STABLER

I never expected to hear any pianist -- dead or alive -- pair Charles Ives' rock-strewn "Concord" Sonata with Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata. But Jeremy Denk ain't no normal pianist. Denk capped the weeklong Portland International Piano Festival with a concert that left me and others incapable of speaking. Now, three days later, I have found my tongue. My review (below) will run in the O! section Sunday.

Many piano concerts are like trips to the shopping mall: safe, predictable excursions with a commercial intent.

Not Jeremy Denk's. Last weekend in Portland, the 37-year-old New York pianist took us to the edge of a precipice, lined himself up and jumped.

Denk's piano recital was so daring, so fraught with peril that I expected to see hazard lights flashing around the perimeter of the stage. Men with walkie-talkies would warn us to keep our distance. Ambulances would be lined up to handle injuries. Gawkers would sell souvenirs.

Below him lay the abyss of Ivesian chaos (Charles Ives' "Concord" Sonata), with its four movements of surging strife and transcendental difficulty. Beethovenian chaos followed (the "Hammerklavier" Sonata) with its own four movements of surging strife and transcendental difficulty. They are similar in intent, both ending where they began, making a dangerously brilliant pair.

Beauty and refinement -- the customary rewards of recitals -- ceased to exist. Instead, Denk took us to the heart of darkness with music that normally repels audiences: dysfunctional harmonies, chord clusters, lack of continuity, contradiction.

In his sprawling "Concord" Sonata (1915), Ives, who is considered the first authentic American composer, gives us dissonant dreams and nightmares, while sensory impressions of childhood, churchyard and Yankee bands parade by. Each movement is inspired by a key 19th-century literary figure: Emerson, Hawthorne, the Alcotts and Thoreau. It is music of memory and simultaneous complexities, free of historical European entanglements. And yet, with Beethovenian intent, Ives, a true pioneer, imposes his will on the chaos of experience.

In the murderous "Hammerklavier" Sonata (1818), Beethoven rages from his isolation due to deafness and loneliness. Unlike his other 31 sonatas, thunder opens the 45-minute work, cold harmonies laying bare the horror of a man who knows the world is closed to him. At the end, a blind, frenzied fugue explodes into fragments, the aural equivalent of a mental breakdown.

So that's what Denk set out for himself on a sunny Sunday afternoon at the World Forestry Center, in the final concert of the Portland International Piano Festival -- an extreme occasion neither ordinary nor repeatable.

Denk charged into the "Concord" with a "follow me" kind of confidence. He seemed well cast, part daredevil and part poet. His touch was purposeful enough so that we could detect his thinking, which clearly suggested that Ives was no kook. Still, and I don't know how any pianist could avoid this, we heard ambivalence in his playing -- between respect for the composer and awareness, even enjoyment, of Ives' eccentricities.

Denk's rhythmic impulses and physical strength avoided self-display. In convulsive moments he remained cool, his wildness not brutal, abandoned or ego-driven. He was no ham.

But "The Alcotts" pulled something different from him: the innocence of American "commonplace beauty," as Ives put it. We are in the Alcott home under the elms, where daughter Louisa wrote "Little Women," and Beth Alcott is playing a Scottish air on the parlor piano. It is pure nostalgia, and Denk hushed the auditorium with his touch of placid intimacy.

Yet another battle awaited Denk after intermission. Even Beethoven specialists like the late Artur Schnabel and Rudolf Serkin and today's Alfred Brendel avoid live performances of the "Hammerklavier" because it's so unforgiving. The compact Denk strode to the podium, impatient to plunge back into the fray, building coherency from the many shards with speed and pliancy.

Mystery shone through the slow movement with half-whispered hopes. He took the dreaded fugue at a terrific clip, but the piano itself couldn't keep up. It was bass-heavy and almost devoid of treble tone: We heard the boom without the crack. Still, Beethoven roared loudly enough.

Instead of an encore, Denk repeated the lovely "Alcott" movement, returning us, changed but unharmed, to the light.