

The Oregonian

Angela Hewitt brings rigor to Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier"

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Angela Hewitt, the Canadian-born pianist, brought her World Bach Tour to Portland this week. On Sunday, she played Book I and tonight, she finishes with Book II. Her playing, as we've come to expect from her recordings and frequent appearances in Portland, was engaging, but what surprised me was her unapologetic rhythmic freedom in a style that continues to straightjacket many pianists. A revelation. Here's my review.

When I woke up Monday morning, the music of Bach was still bobbing about in my brain. Bits of preludes and fugues floated by, holdovers from Angela Hewitt's unforgettable concert Sunday afternoon.

By this time, we know the Canadian-born pianist's penchant for lucid performances of the Baroque era's greatest composer, but her all-Bach program still offered an afternoon of astonishments. Presented by Portland Piano International, Hewitt performed the first of two concerts devoted to the "Well-Tempered Clavier." She plays Book II tonight in the Newmark Theatre.

Go if you dare. The concert will stretch your mind and your soul in ways you won't believe.

Disguised as study pieces for Bach's wife and children -- "Hey, honey, take a look at these when you get a sec" -- the set of 48 preludes and fugues broke ground by demonstrating that the 18th century's tonal system could be expanded from a handful of keys to 24. Each piece in the set pushed new limits of musical ideas.

Much of the music is familiar to today's students and piano teachers, but few pianists have the courage and intellect to perform the entire set in public. Technically, the music leaves almost nothing unexplored, from the serene examination of C Major in the first Prelude, to the happy flurry of black notes in the Prelude in C-Sharp Major, to the improvisatory style of the E Minor Fugue, to the tragedy of the five-voice Fugue in B-Flat Minor.

It is music of compression and expansion, unity and difference, density and clarity. Two hours of listening to this feels like a lifetime. When Hewitt finished, I wondered if she would be able to stand up and walk off the stage. I could barely move, myself.

But the audience's stamina was nothing compared with hers. Famous for her poise, she sat regally still at the keyboard. When she did move -- to emphasize an odd note or an unprepared harmony -- the moment became all the more pointed.

I won't soon forget the magic in the trill that started the G Minor Prelude, as if capturing a butterfly from overhead. Or the astonishing loudness she produced with three ascending chords in the B-Flat Minor Fugue. Or the vivid agogic expressivity (rhythmic give-and-take) she liberally employed.

You get the idea. At every turn, Hewitt maintained a vibrant connection to the music and the keyboard. Bach never sounded so newfangled.