

The Oregonian

Gabriela Montero's improvised classical

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It's Sunday afternoon at the Newmark Theatre, and roles have been reversed at Gabriela Montero's piano recital. Members of the audience are shouting tune titles, and somewhere on the orchestra level a man is singing "Bess, you is my woman now" from George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." Montero, clearly enjoying herself, responds to the Gershwin fan, "I need you to sing a little more. Just for my pleasure."

The performance was as unorthodox as any recital ever presented by Portland Piano International (formerly the Portland State University Piano Recital Series) -- every bit of it was improvised, and it repeats at 7:30 p.m. Monday night in the Newmark Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway. As recently as a century and a half ago, though, it wouldn't have been so out of the ordinary. Liszt was famed for his extemporizing skill, as were Chopin and Beethoven. Improvising was essential to Baroque performance practice, and the pianist Robert Levin has been introducing audiences to classical-era improvisation for years, taking themes from listeners and making elaborate cadenzas from them just the way Mozart used to do.

The 38-year-old Montero has been winging it at the keyboard since she was growing up as child prodigy in Venezuela, and took her skill public with the encouragement of the great pianist Martha Argerich. She began doing live improvised Webcasts from her living room a year ago, and now fully-improvised concerts have become part of her touring schedule.

Aware that people generally associate improvisation with jazz, she stressed in her program note that she's not a jazz pianist. While she has occasionally dipped into jazzy harmonic language and syncopation, her idiom Sunday was thoroughly classical, echoing mostly the sound of the first half of the 19th century and occasionally reaching further back in time.

For her opener and finale she chose the inspirations, poems by Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges; the audience was asked to choose for the rest of the concert. With ease, Montero turned the promenade theme from Modest Musorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" into something like a Domenico Scarlatti sonata, treated Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" theme as a Lisztian set of variations, and dressed up "Happy Birthday" with major-minor coloration in the manner of Franz Schubert.

It could have been just a grand party trick, but Montero's technique was terrific -- her gentle take on the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" was bright and subtly colored through superb tone control -- and her musical thinking was rich and interesting, with clearly articulated counterpoint.

She also had a winning personality, an affable stage presence that encouraged audience participation. When she offered one last opportunity to suggest tunes, there were cries from all around the room. "The Snoopy theme!" "Greensleeves!" "Totentanz!" "Autumn Leaves!" She ended up going with "La Cucaracha," and went on to create an alternate universe in which Chopin dodged his tuberculosis by moving to Mexico and living happily ever after.