

## A Young Pianist Climbs Mount Everest *Classical Music*

By FRED KIRSHNIT

With entries of both St. Thomas and St. Bart's in the next two weeks, my calendar seems to indicate that I am to spend Christmas in the Caribbean. Actually, I am simply continuing my circumnavigation of the area's most musical churches. To that end, I stopped in at Trinity Church on Thursday afternoon and was treated to that most treasured of auditory presents: the concert that exceeds all expectations.

Assaff Weisman is a recent graduate of the Juilliard School and is currently on the piano faculty of their evening division. He is a former student of Victor Derevianko in Israel. Mr. Weisman literally hit the ground running - running up the scale, that is, as he began the Haydn Sonata in E-flat major, Hob. XVI:49 the very instant that he sat down.

This was exciting, especially at his fast pace, but caught the crowd unaware and forced audience members to abruptly curtail their conversations and other noisemaking activities (some never did). In time, however, we could all appreciate the dexterity of this energetic practitioner and what we might call his Haydn-esque ebullience. There were, to be sure, some errors of enthusiasm and a couple of sloppy runs, but the movement as a whole was delicious.

The brilliance of the performance really came through in the *Adagio e cantabile*, which Mr. Weisman imbued with a great deal of dramatic heft. Its lyrical liquidity was truly beautiful. Haydn is not normally played this way, with a tinge of the heart on sleeve and a chink in the armor of the Deist empiricist. This pianist seemed to be telling the composer that it was okay to cry.

The finale may be marked *Tempo di minuetto*, but don't tell Mr. Weisman. The alacrity of the opening was back and the artistry was just dazzling. Authentic? Probably not. Thrilling? You bet.

That was but the warm-up to a climb up the pianist's Everest: Robert Schumann's *Fantasy* in C major. When I returned home after this recital, I pulled two old LPs off my shelf and found that both, in their liner notes, called this piece the greatest in the entire piano literature. I would not be so effusive, but it is a remarkably passionate statement and wields a terrific impact when played as expertly as it was on Thursday.

The work was Schumann's contribution to a fund-raising drive to erect a statue of Beethoven in Bonn. Schumann dedicated the composition to Franz Liszt, but in Mr. Weisman's hands we could hear the best of both composers. It was a little like experiencing one of the Liszt transcriptions of a Beethoven symphony. In any case this section, marked "Moderato, energetically throughout," never sounded more noble or grandiloquent than it did in this sterling performance.

The center of this piece is extremely memorable, but needs a Richter or a Horowitz to burn that memory into the psyche of the listener. Or so I thought before experiencing Assaff Weisman. Mr. Weisman eschews the big gesture in a work that seems to cry out for exaggerated dramatics, but makes it all work.

There is a theory that its middle part is a triumphal march designed to thumb the composer's nose at Friedrich Wieck for his unsuccessful attempts to keep his daughter Clara out of the clutches of Schumann. Clara was the one true love of Schumann - and also the one true love of Brahms - and the composer pours his entire heart and apparently psychotic soul into the first section, marked "To be played in a fantastic and passionate manner throughout." Here Mr. Weisman read the directions and reproduced them faithfully.

Finally, C major takes over in the last part, "With sustained slowness and restraint." I have never heard it played better. Except for the middle section, virtually the entire remainder of this long essay is in either C major or its relative A minor, and therefore there are no black keys employed except in modulation or accent. Pianists tell me this is the most difficult key combination to perform in, because without the black keys there is no place to look to get your bearings - the very reason why so many accomplished keyboard artists avoid the devilishly difficult Paganini Variations of Brahms. But Assaff Weisman handled it all with aplomb. Remember his name.

Being in a church certainly enhanced the experience. I arrived early and so was able to watch the stage being set. It was then that I heard the best music of the entire afternoon, as the organist intoned the "Wie lieblich sind Deine Wohnungen" ("How lovely are thy tabernacles") movement of Brahms's "A German Requiem."