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View From the East: The Talented Donal Fox

By Greg Sandow | November 1, 2001

One night about a year ago, [Donal Fox](#) sat down at the piano in [Merkin Hall](#) and began to play “[The Star-Spangled Banner](#).” This was the start of “Transformations, Variations, Improvisations,” a half-concert (someone else shared the program, I can’t remember who) on which Donal played some partly improvised compositions, none of them ever heard in New York before.

I’d first heard Donal perhaps two years before that, in a friend’s living room, where a white grand piano sat, hardly ever played. But that night Donal was sitting at it, playing the “[Moonlight](#)”

[Sonata](#) with rich, warm, and sensitive authority. I was just about transfixed. From then on, I’d see Donal sometimes, when he visited New York from where he lives in Boston, and our friends might happen to give a party. By then I’d learned a few things about him – that he’s widely respected in Boston, that he’s played jazz with the likes of [Oliver Lake](#) and [David Murray](#), that he was composer-in-residence with the [St. Louis Symphony](#) in the early 1990s, that he’s recorded with David Murray and others on jazz labels, and that [New World Records](#) has released two CDs of his classical compositions. His music sits on the border between jazz and classical – but that, I realize (as I type the words), might be a clichéd and misleading way to describe it. It too quickly suggests “crossover,” a scary label that from long experience suggests (at least to me) that the music might not be very good classical or very good jazz. But Donal is an expert on both sides of this eroding fence, and the music he makes (like [Edgar Meyer](#)’s fusion of classical and bluegrass) simply comes from being who he is. He doesn’t have to break any barriers or prove any points. He’s completely at home in everything he does.

He began the national anthem – or, more precisely, his composition called “Star-Spangled Banner Fractured” – with a whip crack of authority. Some pianists have a big sound. Some are exciting. But rarely do I hear one whose playing, from the very first note, forces me to listen as irresistibly as Donal’s does. I’m reminded (for a long-ago comparison) of [Al Carmines](#), who used to write and play musicals at the [Judson Church](#) in the [Village](#). One chord from him and the whole audience sat up. Donal, I think, could bring the entire [Pentagon](#) staff to attention, if he played “The Star-Spangled Banner” there.

When the tune got to “the rockets’ red glare,” it dissolved into rumbles. They didn’t come as a surprise; they’d been prepared by the previous phrases, which (after a straight beginning) already had been darkened by heavy pedaling. The obvious comparison here would be with [Jimi Hendrix](#), but Donal’s version was less stark, less weighty with a message (Hendrix played his bruised and fractured anthem at the height of the [Vietnam War](#)), and, true to his classical training, more plainly coherent. The music of “the rockets’ red glare” would emerge in later passages, which apparently were improvised, like a soft echo of parts of itself, started but never finished. And at the end, the final cadence of the song emerged suddenly, as if from clouds of smoke. The performance might, of course, have had another meaning now, after the [September 11 attacks](#). A year ago, it seemed partly playful. (More playful than Hendrix, too, whose version was deadly serious.) Though even now I don’t mind the playfulness. There’s also a lot of



thought behind the piece, and maybe it catches all the ambiguities of a time when we all feel patriotic but still hope that, as far as possible, no more people will be hurt.

Next came something called *Four Chords from TJ's Intermezzo*, which Donal – a most engaging speaker – introduced by explaining its material. This included, no surprise, four chords (he played them; they sounded like a wistful combination of [Debussy](#), [Scriabin](#), and, because of how they were voiced and arpeggiated, [Bach](#)). He also introduced us to a forceful major sixth at the high and low extremes of the keyboard, and to the notion of repeated notes. “Variations” was part of the concert’s title; here, Donal said, he’d show himself “working the variation form with select material.” I don’t think it matters that “variation form” suggests variations with a more formal theme. But what’s hard to say is why Donal’s comments sounded so little like dry analysis, or like an elementary music appreciation course, full of information nobody with cultivated ears would need. Instead, Donal, with a wise kind of innocence, seemed honestly fascinated with how his music is constructed. He shared his fascination with us; I doubt anyone in the Merkin audience thought he sounded too didactic.

At the start, as the music outlined the four chords with the Bach-like arpeggiations Donal had demonstrated, I noticed most of all his touch. His phrasing was more romantic, more nuanced than you’ll often hear in Bach (but then the chords are richer, too, than Bach’s, and more chromatic). He made the notes short, distinct from each other, but still blended in a glow of pedal (lighter, this time, than in the fractured anthem). Each note had its own weight; each had its own tale to tell, though always moving forward as part of the whole.

Then the piece got wild. Donal swept up and down the keyboard, apparently enjoying the sheer noise of dissonance, sounding like a man out for a happy romp, though he never played imprecisely (the notes were always clear) or lost sight of his material. The climax of the piece was great fun. The right hand moved upward and the left hand, thumping out a line in octaves, moved downward, both heading toward the extremes of the keyboard. (Was this an echo of the sixth at both extremes?) After that, the music thinned into soft commotion in a single register, medium high. Magically, the arpeggiated chords returned, though the final ending – not expected, necessarily, but inevitable, once we heard it – was that massive, widely separated sixth. In [Broadway](#) terms, that would be a “button,” a sharp conclusion designed to make the audience applaud. Here it was a sign both of force and wit.

We all did applaud, of course. “You’re a tough crowd!” Donal said, with wry appreciation. Then he launched into an explanation of the next piece, which bore an oddly academic title: *Variations on Schoenberg’s Phantasy for Violin, Op. 47*. But the premise (emerging from gentle wisecracks about [Schoenberg](#)’s neglected skill as a bluesman) was much more lively: Take the violin part of the *Phantasy*, which Schoenberg wrote almost as an independent entity, before he wrote the piano part. Add a bass line to it. Make it jazz.

Which worked triumphantly. Surely we’ve all heard transformations of classical music into jazz, like the [Swingle Singers](#): Bach or, a couple of generations ago, an amusing jazzy piano piece by [Alec Templeton](#) called “Bach Goes to Town.” Usually these come off a little bit like stunts, as if jazz was leading its new classical partner onto the dance floor, with a little smile on its face because it knows the shy classical kid doesn’t dance very well. (Which isn’t to say the Swingle performances aren’t good Bach, or that they don’t swing.) Donal’s Schoenberg, though, reminds me a little of one jazz take on a classical piece that’s really exhilarating, looked at from either side – [Ron Carter](#)’s version of the first movement of the Bach Third Brandenburg Concerto, where a string ensemble plays the music straight while Carter improvises along with Bach on his bass. (To be utterly precise, the strings repeat a couple of bars, to give Carter a little more room to stretch out; you’d have to know the Bach by heart to notice.)

What Donal does, first, is to add an [ostinato](#) bass (or ostinato-like bass; I didn’t check to see if the two note pattern literally repeats). It sets up a jazzy rhythm, though, so suddenly the Schoenberg-derived notes above it start to hop. It also creates a strong tonal center. Here we run into a familiar phenomenon of extended 20th-century tonal harmony: Any note in the chromatic scale, played over a tonic pedal, will sound like it belongs somewhere in the key. Simply saying that, however, isn’t quite the same thing as making it work in practice, especially when most of the notes fall outside the center of the key (as defined, let’s say, by the tonic chord, or by a pentatonic scale on the tonic, or in other ways), and, even

worse, when the notes themselves wouldn't suggest the key.

So Donal's arrangement of them – involving rhythm, repetitions, and other changes from Schoenberg's original – is crucial to making them swing, which they delightfully do in his composition, and to cajole them into seeming to make some kind of non-[12-tone](#) harmonic sense. Here I think Donal is helped by the rich chromatic palette of [post-bebop jazz](#), which goes in for chords just as dense as those in atonal music. In fact, years ago when I was studying at the [Yale School of Music](#), people used to quote a line spoken, evidently in a rich [Turkish accent](#), by Bulent Arel, a composer who'd taught at Yale before I got there. It was easy, Arel supposedly said, to write atonal music: "Take jazz chord. Make strange!" (My apologies if this story, remembered from second-hand accounts after many years, misrepresents Arel's English.) Donal has, in a way, done the same thing in the opposite direction. "Take atonal chords. Make them jump." It's done (to my ear, at least) with rhythmic smoke and mirrors. Take a Schoenberg chord. Play it a couple of times in a jazz rhythm, with the kind of swing you'd get in jazz. Suddenly it *is* jazz. Magic!

The piece really swings, with an extra brainy kick of verve because we know how much brainy fun Donal is having. One game that doesn't need any knowledge of Schoenberg involves the ostinato (or ostinato-like) bass. In places, Donal abandons it, sometimes charmingly. The first time is a lovely little musical twist, a sudden brief flowering of quarter-note triplets which sound for just an instant like they're slowing the rhythm down. The end of the work is cute, too. The bass line, two notes a minor third apart, quietly develops a major third – which, in retrospect, turns out to have been lurking in the harmony all the time. Donal's music, for reasons like this, is a great diversion for people who like the ways music is constructed, though his dash, wit, and virtuosity (plus his lyricism) leave plenty of room for everybody else.

I won't talk in such detail about the rest of the concert. *Vamping with T.T.* was another jazz-like take on twelve-tone music. ("T.T.," get it?) The row, which Donal demonstrated before he played the piece, naturally falls into sonorous, even juicy chords, with just a hint of melancholy. Donal played the simple series arrestingly, as well – in bare octaves, but with lots of flair, goosing the tempo as he went through all four basic forms of the row. The ending of the piece was striking, taking a path very different from the ending of *Four Chords*. The music evaporated into low, light, staccato notes, and then faded away into silence, while Donal's hands still went on playing. *Themes from Gone City* ended the first half of the program, and was an impressive contrast. It was slow and lyrical. Arpeggiated chords (very carefully voiced, with hints of inner melodies) accompanied a melody high above them – except that the melody seemed to need the accompaniment to flow the way it wanted to. Or, to put it the opposite way, the melody notes might just as well have been part of the texture the accompaniment created. All the elements of the piece melded together much more organically than words like "melody" and "accompaniment" might suggest.

After intermission came three takes on existing classical works, including one by [C.P.E. Bach](#), another by J.S. Bach (both unspecified), and finally the [Prokofiev](#) Toccata, Op. 11. This all gave Donal a chance to end the concert by taking his virtuosity for a ride. The C. P. E. Bach piece married baroque music to stride piano, with great driving energy; the J. S. Bach became a seething surge of rhythm. In his Prokofiev transformation, Donal departed from the original as early as the fifth bar. Prokofiev starts with four measures of pounding 16th-note Ds, alternating between the pianist's hands. At bar 5, the right hand starts playing C and E for two measures, but Donal kept it going twice as long. But then the whole beginning is pianissimo in Prokofiev, and a lot louder as Donal asserts it, so of course he's not playing the piece as it's written. Instead, he uses parts of it as a point of departure for what I take to be improvisation. I suspect that his technique isn't quite strong enough to play Prokofiev's original at top speed, but his version brought the concert to an exuberant and thundering conclusion. Right then, I knew I wanted to write about the evening, but I didn't have the chance; I'm thrilled to do it now. Everybody interested should check out Donal's two New World CDs (which include some of the pieces I've described here). But there's no substitute for seeing him live. Somebody should book him in New York.

(Full disclosure: I'd never claim to remember music in this much detail a year after I heard it. I worked from a videotape that Donal kindly sent me many months ago.)