’I was initially drawn to his AIDS Ward Scherzo for solo piano’

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Robert Savage

Marcus Ostermiller is a pianist who is, as he states on his website, “currently writing a doctoral dissertation at NYU on the question of AIDS-related meaning in the solo piano works of composers who died of complications from AIDS.” As part of his work he will be presenting Musical Responses to AIDS: Works by Robert Savage on December 10 at the NYU Black Box Theater. In the interview below Ostermiller discusses the connection between Franz Schubert and Savage, as well as Savage’s connection between zen practice and music. Along the way we learn about other composers and the impact of HIV on art.

Visual AIDS: In 2012 you had a recital in which you performed the works of Franz Schubert and late twentieth-century works addressing the AIDS epidemic. What did you see as the connection, and who were some of the other composers you played that night?

Marcus Ostermiller: In fact, I performed two HIV/AIDS-specific concerts in 2012: a solo recital at NYU and a collaborative benefit concert in Denver. Both programs addressed a parallel between Schubert and composers who died of AIDS. Composers living with HIV included Kevin Oldham (1960-1993), Chris de Blasio (1959-1993), Fred Hersch, and Robert Savage (1951-1993).

Schubert was an Austrian composer of the late Classical and early Romantic periods. He died at the age of 31. Typhoid fever was pronounced his official cause of death, but evidence suggests that the actual cause may have been syphilis. At the time of his death, he displayed symptoms of poisoning from mercury, a common treatment for syphilis at the time. His musical works received limited public attention during his lifetime, but he was well-respected among a small group of admirers in Vienna. Following his death, Schubert’s music gained a broader public appeal, and he is now considered to be one of the most prominent composers of that era. I selected several of his later works, including the A-major Piano Sonata, D. 959; a set of lieder from Schwanengesang, D. 957; and (for the solo recital) a set of Liszt’s solo piano transcriptions from the same cycle.

How did that night come to be, and what was the response from people in your community / program?

The response from attendees was remarkable. Many shared my fascination with the AIDS-syphilis parallel, and the implications associated with musical works conceived during periods of intense physical

and emotional turmoil. The benefit concert was wonderfully successful, earning thousands of dollars for the Joshua Gomes Memorial Scholarship Fund, an organization that awards academic scholarships to college students living with HIV. Members of my department at NYU have been enthusiastic about my research, and I am currently working with several of them to curate a performance of the AIDS Quilt Songbook at NYU for December, 2015.

Based on your work is there a deep connection between classical music and HIV/AIDS? Was the classic music scene impacted by HIV/AIDS? Was there a response through art?

The HIV/AIDS epidemic profoundly impacted the arts. Artists and musicians were suddenly faced with a heightened awareness of their mortality, many in the early stages of their careers. This resulted in an amplification of creative output. Creative minds were silenced prematurely, and it is devastating to consider the number or artistic works that were lost or stored away in a boxes somewhere. Art from that period was shaped by the social climate of AIDS. It is impossible to divorce the two.

For your upcoming recital you are focusing on the work of Robert Savage. Can you tell me a bit about him?

Robert Savage was a composer and practitioner of Zen Buddhism. I was initially drawn to his AIDS Ward Scherzo for solo piano, which he composed in the AIDS ward at Lenox Hill Hospital a year before his death. The upcoming performance features the Scherzo, and a selection of other late works that signify various facets of his experience with AIDS.

One thing that seems amazing about Robert Savage is his work bringing together Zen Buddhism, music and HIV. As someone interested in his work, what do you see as the possibilities of music when it comes to the ongoing crisis?

Savage’s Zen practice dictated that all facets of his life (music, work, meditation, etc) were manifestations of a common source: the natural world. His music and his experience with AIDS, then, should not be viewed in isolation from one another. My doctoral dissertation explores AIDS-related meaning in the works of Savage and Oldham. Musical meaning is a hot topic of debate among musicologists, and I have found Zen to be a particularly useful philosophical perspective for this discussion. If music is an outgrowth of the natural world, then it is fundamentally linked with human experience. AIDS-related works, such as Savage’s, illustrate this concept beautifully.

Musical Responses to AIDS: Works by Robert Savage
Performed by Marcus Ostermiller
8 p.m., December 10
NYU Black Box Theatre
82 Washington Square East

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