

# Performance Today

## Today's FREDLINES with host Fred Child

### No page-turner required



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The only sound...was the thrumming crickets.

And then Gary Graffman began playing a gentle Prelude by Federico Mompou.

This was at the end of a concert at the Music@Menlo Festival, in suburban San Francisco. Gary Graffman is a venerable American pianist, nearing his 80th birthday. For the past two hours, he'd played a remarkable concert using only his left hand.

Graffman sprained a finger on his right hand in 1979. He changed fingerings to avoid the wounded digit, but that only twisted his hand further. Before long, his ring finger and pinkie were curling up on their own, and for almost 30 years, Graffman has been unable to use his right hand at the piano.

Graffman has had a tremendous career since then as a teacher (he counts Lang Lang among his students), and he was president of one of the world's premier music schools, the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, from 1995 until 2006.

And every now and then, Graffman plays a full solo recital of music written for left hand alone. At Menlo, he played a massive program: Brahms' one-handed version of the Bach Chaconne, a Sonata by Carl Reinecke, four studies by Max Reger, a pair of wacky miniatures by Scriabin, a piece Leon Kirchner wrote for Graffman in 1995, etudes by John Corigliano and Felix Blumenfeld, Leopold Godowsky's fiendish arrangements of Chopin etudes.

As I sat among the most enthusiastic concert crowd I've been a part of this year, I couldn't help but think of Jim Abbott.

Abbott was born without a right hand, but pitched in the major leagues from 1989-1999. He would cradle a glove on his right arm while throwing, then quickly transfer the glove to his pitching hand. If a ball was hit to him, he'd catch it, squeeze the glove between his right arm and torso, pick the ball out with his left hand, and throw it again.

The first time you saw Abbott pitch, you couldn't help but focus on his one-handedness: "How is he doing that? Can he field a bunt? How long before he drops the glove?" But as the game wore on, your focus would shift: "His fastball has some jump today. Nice change of speeds. Great break on the curve!"

I had the same experience watching Gary Graffman. At the beginning, my head was full of questions: "Can he really play all those notes that fast? With one hand? What will his right hand do?"

But as the evening wore on, my focus was completely drawn in by the power and depth of Graffman's musicianship. The Reinecke Sonata was transparent and beautifully phrased. The Blumenfeld was lavish and lush. The Reger miniatures were little acrobatic gems, full of light-hearted leaps up and down the keyboard, and an impossible (yes, I saw it, but I still say IMPOSSIBLE) three-part fugue for just the left hand.

So what DOES Graffman's right hand do during a two hour concert of music for left hand alone? For most of the evening, it sat quietly in his lap. Occasionally it twitched, seeming to want to get into the act. The thumb might trace small circles in the air, as if conducting the left hand's performance. And of course, Graffman has the most relaxed page-turns of any pianist in the business. While his left hand was flying up and down the keyboard, his right hand would casually come to his mouth for a quick friction-giving lick, then slowly go to the upper corner of the music, wait for the right moment, flick the page across, and spend a moment smoothing the music flat. Then...back to rest in Graffman's lap.

At the end of every piece, the audience of several hundred would wait for the music to die away into complete silence...then erupt into, not just polite applause, but raucous cheering and stomping. And at the end of the evening, Graffman had to play a pair of encores. The second of which was this lovely Prelude No. 6, for left hand alone, by Federico Mompou.

As it came to a serene conclusion with a final chord, several hundred listeners held their breath as one, savoring the resonance around St. Mark's Episcopal Church. As the chord died away, all that could be heard, for a still moment, was the thrum of the crickets outside.

Until Graffman stood for a final bow, as the audience stood to thank him, cheering and stomping.