

Thursday January 31, 2013

[The Buffalo News.com \(/\)](http://TheBuffaloNews.com/)

City & Region

Fain's work is a confluence of live violin playing, film, spoken word and choreography

'Portals' transcends typical recital fare

By Daniel J. Kushner

NEWS CONTRIBUTING REVIEWER

Updated: January 26, 2013, 11:46 PM Published: January 26, 2013, 11:46 PM

Violinist Tim Fain visited University at Buffalo's Center for the Arts on Friday to present his "Portals," a rare confluence of live violin recital fare, spoken word, film, and choreography.

With a program populated entirely with exuberant yet meditative works of living American composers, "Portals" sets out to be a "multimedia musical exploration of the human longing for connection in the digital age," according to the project's website.

The concert's chief conceit is that rather than present the compositions with live musical accompaniment and onstage collaborators, Fain performs alone, with sparse set design and lighting. His artistic colleagues provide support via prerecorded film on a screen behind Fain, as if they are performing together via Skype in real time.

I must admit that I was at first skeptical about the incorporation of video elements into what is essentially, at first glance, a solo recital. The device of film projections has become a very common trope in contemporary performance, and while it has utilitarian value and can solve logistical dilemmas for touring productions such as "Portals," it is incredibly challenging to achieve equal integration of both live performer and video. Too often, one element reveals itself as more essential, and the other is merely an interesting add-on.

As each of Fain's cohorts makes his or her on-screen entrance, we see them in the intimacy of their own private spaces: radio host Fred Child walks down a grand spiral staircase en route to "logging on" to recite poetry excerpts by legendary songwriter Leonard Cohen.

Pianist Nicholas Britell walks through the living room of his stylish city apartment to his piano.

The evening's first composition was Lev Zhurbin's "Sicilienne" for violin and piano, a work with unadorned, folk-like lyricism and grand harmonies.

In Nico Muhly's work for live and prerecorded violin called "Honest Music," Fain brought a distinctive tenderness to the ardent composition, as the ethereal wails of the violin overtook the sonic space. Visually, Fain duets with himself, as video shows him performing the prerecorded track in an unoccupied concert hall as in-person Fain performs on stage. As the composition progressed the distinction between the two Fains' performances dissolved entirely.

The violinist's masterful dexterity and control of intonation revealed a playing style characterized by ebullience and uncanny control. Fain's infallible musicianship was most evident in the compositional centerpiece of "Portals": Philip Glass' "Partita for Solo Violin," a 33-minute mesmerizer comprising seven movements. Glass interrupts the locomotion of his signature Minimalist phrasing with Romantic asides that recall the virtuosity of 19th century violinists and the composers whose work they championed.

"Partita" was equally inventive in its visual presentation – exquisitely choreographed by Benjamin Millepied (of "Black Swan" notoriety) and interpreted in three film sequences by dancers Craig Black, Julia Eichten, and Haylee Nichele.

The first dance tableau features Black, traversing in perpetual motion through a bedroom and bathroom with movement that is at once violent and completely fluid. In the second dance sequence, Nichele dances restlessly through the Copland House as Fain is seen playing cryptically in each room she fleetingly occupies.

In these scenes, Fain achieves an astonishing feat in the concert hall setting – the film material becomes

the primary focus, and his live performance is now the accompaniment supporting the story told on screen. In other words, a concert with video suddenly morphs into silent film with live music.

Ultimately, "Portals" transcends cohesive recital programming, veering squarely into innovative storytelling territory by mid-concert, before ultimately reinforcing the unparalleled poignancy and irreplaceability of live performance.

By Daniel J. Kushner

NEWS CONTRIBUTING REVIEWER

Copyright 1999 - 2013 - The Buffalo News copyright-protected material.