

Tonic modern sounds, off the beaten path

By David Patrick Stearns

Inquirer Music Critic

Philadelphia's more out-of-the-way concerts were the place to be over the weekend for bracing cross sections of modern music.

A surprisingly large audience spent Saturday night hearing Marilyn Nonken play Charles Ives' dense, cantankerous, monumental *Piano Sonata No. 2* ("*Concord*") at the Convention Center, presented by the fledgling Chamber Music Now! (The exclamation isn't mine.) Hardly an empty seat was seen at Settlement Music School on Sunday, when Philadelphia Orchestra principal timpanist Don Liuzzi gave an out-there recital of music for percussion, tape and violin that reminded you these are the instruments that define music of our time more than any other.

The Ives sonata is a perennial touchstone. There's so much in it that the piece is a quarry of meaning, making it rarely the same touchstone at any given encounter. Pity the young composers on the first half of Nonken's program. Only David Feurzeig's *Stride Rite*, with its collagelike juxtaposition of Harlem stride piano and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, had the kind of purpose and trickster sensibility that allowed it to stand up well next to Ives.

The best news is that Nonken lived up to her considerable press. There's nobody like her out there, from her attractive stage presence (think Bebe Neuwirth in Broadway's *Chicago*) to her lack of self-serving ostentation in a piece whose very presence on a program is, to say the least, cheeky. Unlike the better-known Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Nonken doesn't sell the music with digital scintillation.

Each of the four movements - which are inspired by specific American literary figures - had its own distinctive, well-chiseled character, which was a reflection of how deeply she meets the music on its own terms. Immediately in the opening Ralph Waldo Emerson movement, the music's thick textures and seemingly garrulous character were prioritized into layers, with a clear sense of progression from one block of thought to another.

"The Alcotts" movement was touching in its hymnlike simplicity, and large sections of "Hawthorne" and "Thoreau" were mesmerizing thanks to Nonken's deep concentration. Ives is often full of unhomogenized quotations from popular music, and Nonken never let them become jokey. What you heard was a musical Mount Rushmore, though instead of the conclusiveness that comes with the broad strokes of enshrinement, the performance raised myriad questions about who these literary figures were and what Ives was saying about them.

No single piece dominated Liuzzi's recital. The one world premiere, *Day and Night* by fellow