

<http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/arts/pianist-ursula-oppens-taps-music-at-its-source-20170814.html>



August 14, 2017

[Entertainment](#)— [The Arts](#)

## Pianist Ursula Oppens taps music at its source



by **STEVE J. SHERMAN**

Pianist Ursula Oppens champions composers of her time.

by **Peter Dobrin**, Classical Music Critic

As Joseph Joachim the violinist was to Brahms and composers of his time, so is [Ursula Oppens](#) a pianist today who draws power by living close to the source of creation.

Oppens has commissioned dozens of works. Does this sense of ownership translate into insight or a sense of authority? There seemed something to the notion in the way Oppens pieced together her Sunday afternoon [Philadelphia Young Pianists' Academy](#) recital at the Curtis Institute of Music's Field Concert Hall.

The Rachmaninoff *Etudes* were intriguing, and the crisp wit of Stravinsky's *Piano Sonata's* was perfectly in character.

But never was she more in her element than in the second half of the recital, assembled from works written with her in mind. Oppens was particularly commanding in *Two Diversions* by Elliott Carter, for which she was dedicatee, vividly contrasting its rote patterns with splashes of color.

She brought out the cartoonlike elements in the first movement of John Corigliano's *Winging It*, which she premiered in 2009: the bright squiggles that serve as opening fanfare, and the bold gestures that follow. The work's three movements were written as improvisations, with Corigliano capturing the notation with computer assistance as he played, and Oppens preserved this feel.

The second movement drifts like a dinghy on a calm lake but prods the imagination. Mood is clearly drawn to anyone indulging imagery: dawn, ripples on water, and a journey that passes for progress to the happily indolent. Oppens was expert in the staccato flashes of light in a third movement whose spirit suggested the goblin of Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*.

Conlon Nancarrow — he was Arkansan by birth, a Mexican citizen by choice — never seemed more of-the-day than here. Oppens played two dancery movements of a 1988 work woven of obsessiveness — random in feel, punchy, whimsical, with a tune that appeared only teasingly. Again, Oppens played with a commanding presence. Lest anyone doubt ownership, the title assured it: *Two Canons for Ursula*.

