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MUSIC

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The 8:01 for Schumann Is Now Ready for Boarding

By ANNE MIDGETTE



Yefim Bronfman performing for commuters in Vanderbilt Hall of Grand Central Terminal during yesterday morning's rush.
Librado Romero/The New York Times

From the information booth in Grand Central Terminal it sounded like distant background music: a radio, perhaps, or the sound system in a restaurant. Farther up the ramp toward 42nd Street you could see a crowd of people. And once in Vanderbilt Hall, a passer-by was enveloped in a thick fog of sound emanating from a concert grand piano, played with intensity by a bearlike man in an orange suit at 8 on a Wednesday morning.

“Do you know who he is?” one man asked, and fished for his reading glasses when an explanatory flier was placed in his hand.

He was Yefim Bronfman, the concert pianist, who teamed up with the Food Bank for New York City for one event in the Go Orange campaign this week to raise awareness of hunger in New York. Mr. Bronfman's performance inaugurated an online benefit auction at FimaForFoodBank.com; the winner will receive a home concert by Mr. Bronfman and the use of a seven-foot Steinway for six months. (Fima is Mr. Bronfman's nickname.)

In keeping with the theme, volunteers wearing orange scarves and pins were positioned around the hall to pass out fliers. Because the concert had been publicized beforehand, a few spectators

staked out territory near the piano even before Mr. Bronfman lumbered in, resplendent in a three-piece suit in a tone that verged on burnt umber, specially procured for the occasion.

Banter with the audience is not Mr. Bronfman's style; he acknowledged the applause, sat and plunged directly into the intermezzo from Schumann's "Faschingsschwank aus Wien" (Opus 26). There was no program; no announcement of individual pieces. Each excerpt was greeted with applause, followed by a brief bow from Mr. Bronfman, who then applied himself seriously to the next work: a thick, dark reading of a familiar Chopin étude (Opus 10, No. 12), the final movement of Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata, another movement of the Schumann.

And there was indeed an audience. As a steady stream of commuters passed, nearly everyone at least looked to see where the music was coming from. Some stopped and stayed; some listened briefly and moved on, usually after something tangible — a climax, a run, a flourish — in the music. Some were drawn by the applause and stopped to hear what would happen next. Some walked by without stopping: one woman carrying a cello case on her back glanced over but moved steadily on. Several commuters were already listening to music over headphones; without exception they passed by.

Vanderbilt Hall, cavernous and echo-y, is not an ideal acoustical environment for serious piano listening. But it certainly magnified the force of Mr. Bronfman's playing and gave a certain emphasis to its extremes, from the fortissimos of Balakirev's showy "Islamey" to the magical, magnetic hush of a Scarlatti C minor sonata.

"I've heard him in Avery Fisher Hall," said Bob Liebler, who works in the area, "and it sounded better here. And in Avery Fisher Hall I couldn't have stood 10 feet from the piano."

"It was a wonderful morning surprise," he told Mr. Bronfman, who took time to talk to a few fans after the performance.

"It was a surprise for me too," Mr. Bronfman replied. "Usually I don't even practice at this hour."

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