

Music

Ibes's Power In Reserve

By Joseph McLellan
Washington Post Staff Writer

Reprinted from yesterday's late editions

Pianist Willem Ibes, approaching his 60th birthday, finally made his Washington debut Monday night in the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater. The audience was small; Ibes is not exactly a household name on the East Coast. But by the end of his single encore, "General Lavine—eccentric" from Debussy's second book of Preludes, one could not help wondering why his arrival had been delayed so long.

Ibes does not have the high-gloss stage presence of most big-name virtuosos; he welcomes applause

with a diffident little smile, and he seems slightly awkward taking his bows. This may be because he has devoted most of the past 32 years to teaching, at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., performing in public only occasionally. But awkwardness fades away when he sits down at the keyboard; suddenly, he is completely at home.

Even then, he does not make a big display of technique. Throughout the program, his speed, power and accuracy seemed always adequate for the music at hand but never specially impressive in their own right. That changed when he got to the final number on his program, the concluding Toccata from Ravel's "Le Tombeau de Couperin," which was the evening's first really virtuosic piece. And suddenly, the technique was all in place, hammering out the notes with a machinelike precision but also with a very musical clarity of rhythm, melodic line and harmonic texture.

The program opened with the Three Intermezzi, Op. 117, of

Brahms, played well enough from the beginning but most impressive in the third, after his fingers had been warmed up for their evening's work. He then performed Beethoven's Sonata No. 31 with deep understanding, particularly in his grasp of the parallels with vocal music in some passages and his mastery of contrapuntal textures.

After the intermission, two Chopin Nocturnes and three Faure Barcarolles were played in exemplary style. The Barcarolle in G-flat, Op. 42, was particularly impressive, evoking the feeling of a boat on the water and of dramatic events underlying the music's tensions. But the high point of the concert was "Le Tombeau de Couperin," a study in contrasting styles, an interaction of ancient and modern musical ideals, a test of technique in its final movement and of music sensitivity throughout.

Ibes passed those tests with flying colors. Those who love the French repertoire will look forward to this pianist's next visit.

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CLASSICAL RECORDINGS

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Pianist Willem Ibes came as a bit of a surprise when he made his Washington debut in 1989 at the Kennedy Center; he was then approaching his 60th birthday, an artist of the highest quality, a professor of music and a teacher of Zen at St. John's University in Minnesota, and completely unknown on the East Coast. He will not be a stranger when he returns to the Terrace Theater on Thursday. This time, his arrival is preceded by a record (Westmark 2911) with a program that he played in the Grand Auditorium of UNESCO in Paris in 1990: two barcarolles and a nocturne by Faure, Chopin's Nocturne in D-flat, Op. 27, No. 2; Ravel's "Le Tombeau de Couperin" and Beethoven's Sonata in C Minor, Op. 111, all interpreted with a style and grace to match his sure-handed, unobtrusive technique. In his notes on the Beethoven, he says that it journeys to "that world where matter and spirit stand no longer in opposition, where time seems to have ceased." His performance makes it sound that way.

Willem Ibes, piano, Thursday, 7:30 p.m., Kennedy Center Terrace Theater (202-467-4600).

CRITICS' PICKS

The Washington Post critics choose their favorite shows of the week.

ART

■ It's been 10 years since three panels from Gerard David's *Saint Anne Altarpiece*, each marvelous, each maimed, were removed from exhibition at the National Gallery of Art. Now—carefully restored, thoughtfully reframed and newly reunited with half a dozen other pictures, from that Netherlandish master's, huge and complex

altarpiece—they're on display again through May 10.

This remarkable assemblage, part antique, part predictive, plays eerie tricks with time. While the stiffness of its draperies and severe symmetries lead the viewer back to the waning Middle Ages, its photographic details and complicated colors insistently suggest ages yet to come.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

■ Willem Ibes, Thursday evening in the Terrace Theater, headlines the week's piano music. Also worth noting: Mikhail Yanovitsky, today in the Terrace, and Philip Thomson, Friday night at Strathmore Hall.