

Chess in three movements



Music

By Robert W. Duffy, Beacon associate editor

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The history of music is an account of quite limitless invention, innovation and adaptation. There's evidence, for example, that flutes were made of animal bones as long as 37,000 years ago, but one suspects that for millennia before that invention, prehistoric men and women and children were making musical sounds with their hands and feet, with rocks and sticks and sinews -- and of course with their own voices.

Writing prose, as Cole Porter said to music, anything goes. And so it goes with musical instruments. Modern musical instruments differ dramatically from their ancestors. The oboe I play today is very different from the oboe of Bach's time.

And then there are instruments created imaginatively from materials and objects that versatile, non-traditional music-makers find at hand -- for example, mellow-sounding steel drums from 55-gallon drums. Still, who would expect a chessboard to become a keyboard for music.

Guido van der Werve did. He thought it would be a terrific idea and set about making such an instrument, a chessboard layout with the mechanics of a piano. It is an elegant object, square; and the surface of it is arranged in 64 squares, eight squares by eight, which coincidentally comprise the musical octaves of the major and minor scales.

On Tuesday evening at the newly opened World Chess Hall of Fame in the Central West End, van der Werve and pianist Matthew Bengtson played this



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The chessboard keyboard

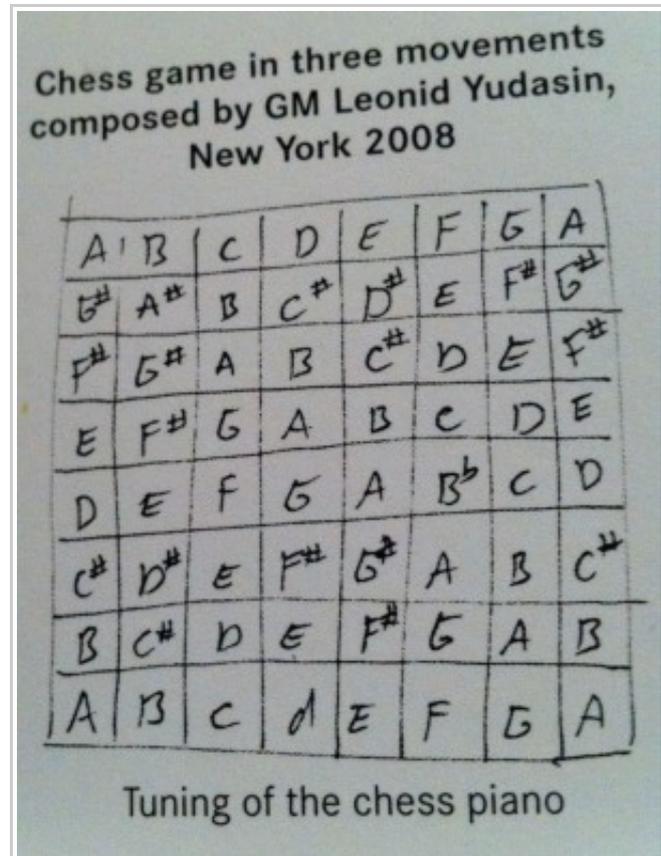
instrument to the moves of a game created by chess grandmaster Leonid Yudasin. The piece, of van der Werve's composing, is called "Number Twelve: Chess Piano Concert in Three Movements."

A string ensemble of nine musicians – four violins, two violas, two cellos and a bass -- accompanied the duo at chessboard. Ward Stare, resident conductor of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, conducted. He responded to the chess-playing pianists rather than they to his conducting.

As a move was completed and a note was sounded, the strings responded to the note produced on the chessboard. The pawns, rooks, knights, bishops, kings pieces were pressed down on the squares on the board, which in turn slipped down a half an inch or so, to activate the hammers that struck the strings to produce music.

Here endeth the mechanical and musical explanations, tortured as they must appear to the patient reader. Nevertheless, it is important to take into account the technical side of this innovation because of its genuine inventiveness and fascinating qualities. Any suspicion that might lurk in the cynical mind that this might be a come-on was dispatched, Van der Werve's music is quite listenable and the

DIAGRAM AND PLAYERS



Guido van der Werve is a student of archaeology, Russian language and literature, painting performance and film – as well as music and industrial design. One imagines that the latter two pursuits are most evident in the instrument on which he performed at the Hall of Fame on Tuesday, but that the previously mentioned disciplines all work together to inform his quite fascinating and attractive work in many disciplines.

Van der Werve was born in the Netherlands and lives today in Finland. He is currently in residence

sound of the chess-box piano was melodious. The Symphony musicians played with their usual distinction.

Chess, it seems to me, is intellectual and solemn and contemplative to the point of melancholy. “Number Twelve” struck me as fitting neatly into that serene and reflective groove, and was indeed melancholy, but without the depressive part of that condition. The picture it painted for me was country-house romantic, a pretty library room on a rainy afternoon, where an option, besides settling in with a good book, was to play a game of chess.

Chess playing, like music making, is cerebral, physical, mathematical, idiosyncratic, theoretical, complicated, intense and gratifying. It consists of moments of extraordinary activity, then rests, or moments of reflection. Such activity was reflected in the piano parts of the concert. As the music progressed through the three movements, activity increased as the moves on the board took a faster turn.

Symphony music director David Robertson noted that only one game is played in “Number Twelve,” and that it ends in a stalemate.

And in a very moving, entirely poetic and philosophical way, so does the music.

at the Kunstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin.

His opponent – or partner – in this game of musical chess is the Pennsylvania born keyboard artist, composer, writer and pedagogue **Matthew Bengtson**. He is also World Chess Federation chess master, although currently retired as a player.

Because invention is so much a part of this story, it’s interesting to note that Bengtson has performed at Thomas Jefferson’s house, Monticello, near Charlottesville, Va. Monticello is not only one of the great historic houses of America but an exquisite statement of Jefferson’s virtuosity as an inventor.

Jefferson was a musician, too, a violinist, so it is no surprise, given the quality of his nimble intellect, that he played chess. The Monticello website notes that in the summertime, Jefferson and his granddaughter Ellen Wayles Randolph would carry the chess set outdoors and play under the trees on the West Lawn.

Bengtson lives in Philadelphia.

At the end of the piece, after the stalemate is understood, and the piano plays no more, the violins and violas take up a sustained, mesmerizing “A.” This note, which is played to tune the orchestra at the beginning of every performance, becomes the final note of the van der Werve concert.

But of even greater consequence than this musical Alpha and Alpha is the realization that the chess piano concert has no ending. Stare said a musician called to his attention the fact that there is no concluding bar line, or music end, in the score.

Right, he said.

Thus it is that “Number Twelve,” like the chess game that animates it, is unresolved. It never really ends.

More from the Beacon on chess in St. Louis: [World Chess Hall of Fame opens in Central West End](#) by Brent Jones; [Chess Hall of Fame plans new strategy with opening in St. Louis](#) by Jonathan Ernst; On chess [Battle of the sexes](#) by Ben Finegold



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End game

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