



## Prog-Rock for Piano

By ADAM BAER

Not since the beginning of The Beatles's art-rock period has a band of popular musicians been as fervently lauded by the critical cognoscenti as the British prog-rock phenomenon Radiohead is being now.

Radiohead entered the collective unconscious with humble garage-rock intentions, but unlike The Beatles, it only took them one real pop hit, a brooding teen-angst lament called "Creep" on the album "Pablo Honey" (1993), and a subsequent hit album called "The Bends" (1995), to retreat into their honest compositional imaginations.

In fact, since the 1997 release of the universally acclaimed album "O.K. Computer" — a paean to electronica, the Internet age, and progressive art-music that has garnered praise even from highly regarded classical music critics — Radiohead has been walking the line between composers and postmodern rockstars.

what he'd just played as the room's teenagers. "All those Chopin Preludes and Etudes have been working up this," he said.

And, indeed, that's apparently how seriously Mr. O'Riley takes Radiohead. He presented a full two-hour exploration of some of the band's best songs, along with those of songwriters Nick Drake and George Harrison. A radio host comfortable in front of a live audience, he provided exuberant context for the mix he made ("The next two songs are both 'in 5' and in the key of C!") he said feverishly of the relationship be-

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lice," offered a French impressionistic sound and jazzy chords, as Mr. O'Riley's right hand inventively accompanied his left with a solid ostinato and the bitterness of the melody (its lyrics read: "This is what you get when you mess with us") finally resolved itself.

In "Let Down," Radiohead's most beautifully gloomy masterpiece, pianistic bells rang in a buoyant andante tempo, as haunting, layered melodic motives snuck in. It was polyphony rife with discordant tones that resolved like Bach appoggiaturas. For "Motion Picture Soundtrack," Mr. O'Riley mimicked the bleeps of computer-speak as descending cascades of scales seemed to randomly, chaotically, appear and disperse.

In fact, listening to Radiohead on the piano emphasized the oeuvre's worth to the world of concert music. These are true art songs — if we'd heard the words Friday night, we'd even have noticed how the poetry is temporally displaced above the musical punctuations — and if you listen carefully they even destroy genre-enforcing words like "classical" and "rock" on their own.

Their next two records, "Kid A" (2000) and "Amnesiac" (2001) were recorded together and broke musical ground with a stimulating blend of computer tones, electronic sampling, jazz fusion, Stravinskian harmonies and rhythms, layers of Messiaen-like textures, and stirring trademark motifs that seemed at once dark, affectionate, and intelligent.

Today, Radiohead enjoys a reputation for music that interests both the young and seasoned classical musicians.

And, funny, those are exactly the extremes that frame the musical personality of pianist Christopher O'Riley, who is famous both for his interpretations of Stravinsky and his kid-friendly public radio show, "From the Top." He brought to Miller Theater Friday night evidence of his own Radiohead obsession: a set of original transcriptions of the band's music (and favorite influences) for solo piano.

"I don't think we're in Grieg Piano Concerto land anymore," Mr. O'Riley mused to a cheering audience made up mostly of college students and young professionals. He had just opened the concert with "Airbag," the overture track of "O.K. Computer," and dressed in black jeans and a dark sportcoat, he looked as excited by

tween Radiohead's "Black Star" and Nick Drake's jazzy "Riverman"). And when he plunged into the depths of each piece, he really lost himself, kicking his legs up, eyes closed, the sonic momentum on the rise, as if he were privately playing a song he'd just fallen in love with on his piano at home.

By transcribing Radiohead for the stark palette of the solo piano, Mr. O'Riley has made a statement about what constitutes good serious music and why it needn't be commissioned by a symphony orchestra to deserve attention.

Mr. O'Riley's transcriptions proved that Radiohead can be as unflinchingly moving for true compositional reasons as any working classical composer. Each song's harmonic and melodic crisis was dramatically rendered, and Mr. O'Riley took great care to allow his interests in dissonance and jazz not to invade the music but rather to amplify its original purpose.

In his interpretation of "Thinking About You," Mr. O'Riley drew a correlation to Chopin's G Major prelude by finding the song's incessant engine and providing perpetual motion runs between his two hands that blossomed like staggered video flowers. The hit single "Kharma Po-

Of course, hearing one after the other on as even a plane as the piano's well-tempered keyboard, I couldn't help but notice Radiohead's harmonic and rhythmic habits more prominently than I do when I hear them in the context of an electronic multi-instrument studio recording. The concert certainly shouldn't have been any longer than it was.

But in the end every talented composer has a stamp. And while I'm not proclaiming that Radiohead's songs are comparable to Brahms lieder or Bach arias, I do want us to remember that Schubert's music in its day was, above all else, a social connector. It wasn't until the 20th-century idea of urban highbrow culture came into play that they became frilly gems performed for the ears of ticket-buying socialites.

What Christopher O'Riley accomplished Friday night was more than a public exploration of his extra-classical interests. It is a reminder that the fact that teenagers find a certain music compelling shouldn't color your view of whether or not it's quality stuff; and the fact that an academic composer's music gets a hearing in a serious concert hall certainly shouldn't either.