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[Cellist Newman moves beyond mere playing](#)- [Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic](#)

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There was a time -- and we're talking a century ago and more -- when being a classical musician meant both composing and performing, generally in a symbiotic way. One of the many exciting things about Thursday's debut recital by the gifted young cellist Clancy Newman is the way he seems to have made composing a central part of his musical life.

For this program, presented in Herbst Theatre by San Francisco Performances, Newman offered splendid accounts of standard repertoire works by Barber, Brahms and Chopin, and he had an excellent partner in pianist Noreen Cassidy-Polera.

But surely the most memorable aspect of the evening was Newman's performance of his "Four Pieces for Solo Cello," a charmingly scattershot suite of exercises exploring different aspects of his own instrumental persona.

In the opener, titled "Avant garde improv," Newman created a delightful pastiche out of various cello effects -- big harmonic glissandos with a touch of distortion a la Jimi Hendrix, spooky trills played near the cello's bridge, a wailing siren imitation, even a wordless bickering dialogue.

"The pizzicato piece" (Newman's titles are nothing if not descriptive) conjured up a fierce ostinato with a spiky melodic overlay; it was so fierce, in fact, that he broke a string within a minute. The remaining pieces, "Trance music" and "Passacaglia," also mixed jazzy rhythms with a wide variety of melodic ideas.

What was so heartening about this collection was not that Newman's compositional technique is particularly strong. It's the fact that he writes music at all -- and that by doing so he makes the case for composition and performance as being activities that are intimately bound up with each other.

More than that, the music he writes obviously grows directly out of his experience as a cellist. It flatters his distinctive talent and draws on his technique as a virtuoso to make its point. For a listener, it creates a picture of an integrated and wholly engaged musical imagination.

That portrait was fully supported by the standard works on the program. Newman, the 2001 winner of the Naumburg Competition, plays with an intensity and fervor most soloists could only envy.

His string tone is robust but sweet, with a commanding dynamic range and superb rhythmic control. In lyrical passages -- most memorably in the slow movements of both the Barber and the Brahms F-Major sonatas -- he shapes a phrase with unerring ease and grace.

And in Chopin's "Introduction and Polonaise Brillante," Newman's technical mastery proved entirely dazzling. The encore, Shostakovich's Cello Sonata, offered more fireworks.

My only complaint had to do with Newman's tendency to overshadow the piano, even in stretches (such as the final of the Brahms) where his colleague had the important musical material. Cassidy-Polera, a pianist of deft technique and appealingly crystalline tone, deserved to be made a

more equal partner in the proceedings.

For this recital, San Francisco Performances tried something new and different, a 6:30 p.m. start time that President Ruth Felt said might help patrons who wanted to make an earlier evening of it (and eat after the concert without competing for scarce restaurant reservations). The plan is to see how it goes down with their subscribers.

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Clancy Newman played some of his compositions at Herbst

