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## *Broad Street Review*

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# Philadelphia Young Pianists' Academy's Sixth Annual Piano Festival: Ching-Yun Hu

## Pianist of power and substance

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Summer is not kind to classical-music lovers. What a welcome relief, then, to learn of the Sixth Annual Piano Festival of the Philadelphia Young Pianists' Academy. The festival, running from August 5 through 12, 2018, provides musical manna you can sink your teeth into.



Ching-Yun Hu's powerful performance kicked off PYPA's 2018 Piano Festival. (Photo courtesy of PYPA.)

Take Sunday afternoon's recital by academy artistic director Ching-Yun Hu. A first-place winner of the Arthur Rubinstein competition and recipient of many other prizes, she is no stranger to local audiences. But her performance on Sunday offered significant interest and daring.

Hu selected a program with traditional roots, but 20th- and 21st-century sensibilities. All the composers represented were active within the past 100 years, and two are what we somewhat oddly refer to as "living composers." One was so alive, in fact, that he was seated in the row in front of me.

### **Topsy-turvy program**

The inclusion of three works by Rachmaninoff — the weighty second piano sonata and two familiar songs — gave a tip of the hat to late Romanticism. Two short works by Bach were presented in transcriptions by Rachmaninoff and Jeremy Gill.

Gill's work was titled a "Fantasie-Transcription" and is truly a flight of engaging originality spun off from the original Bach duet, "Wie selig sind doch die," from Bach's cantata *BWV 80* ("A mighty fortress"). Gill lets the Bach notes out of the bag, where they frolic and have a great adventure, then contentedly return to the world of Baroque majesty.

Hu also selected three sparkling *Concert Études* by Nicolai Kapustin, a contemporary Russian composer who infuses his work with jazz elements. The program included Ravel's absorbing *Gaspard de la Nuit*, three movements, each a unique universe of complexity and intrigue, studded with to-die-for melodies. The performance ended with an encore, a Spanish dance by Granados.

However, the pianist did something unusual at the start of the recital: she flipped the order of the program without a word to the audience.

This was seriously disorienting to some listeners. Though initially annoyed, I actually enjoyed the change. Scrambling the selections upset the apple cart of my expectations. It became an aleatoric moment: what would she play next? Classical musicgoers don't get a lot of surprises, and this forced us to listen to the music on its own terms. Next time, though, a warning, please.

### **An aural challenge**

The actual music? Challenging in the best possible sense. Playing a Steinway grand, Hu demonstrated immediately and consistently her mastery of the keyboard, making a strong, memorable impression as an unorthodox artist of power and vigor.

Her interpretation of the Rachmaninoff sonata was a revelation (she recently released a new album that includes this selection). I can understand why she wanted to start the program with lighter selections, since she had to build up steam before tackling the sonata and *Gaspard*. And what steam it was!

Hu's playing has a driven, windswept quality, with forceful rising and falling scales, ending on a sustain pedal retained so long it seemed to take on a life of its own. And yet there was tenderness, though not delicacy. That was reserved for the short selection "Lilacs," which Hu played as though it were part of the sonata.

I was delighted to discover Kapustin, a Russian composer, born in 1937. Full of classical conviction, the études also swing with the rollicking world of jazz and rag. Hu turned up the volume in these études with high energy and sinuous jazz phrasing. However, at times I wondered whether a tinny upright piano might not better capture their swagger and sly wit.

Throughout the program, I was awed by the sheer explosiveness of Ching-Yun Hu's playing — a style that was probably a little too forceful, even thunderous, for my taste but which expanded my capacity to listen in new ways. I can't wait to hear more from this exuberant performer and engaging musical personality.