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Pianist Ching-Yun Hu performed Tuesday in the first of several concerts this month for her Philadelphia Young Pianists' Academy.

Ching-Yun Hu opens concert series in mighty tangle with Rachmaninoff

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by **David Patrick Stearns**, Music Critic dstearns@phillynews.com

Though Sergei Rachmaninoff was one of the great 20th-century pianists, he might've thought twice about playing an entire recital of his own works, specifically with the musical cauldrons that are *Etude Tableaux* and *Piano Sonata No. 2*. But Ching-Yun Hu, in the opening concert of the Philadelphia Young Pianists' Academy that she founded — six more will follow through Tuesday — was her typical unstoppable self Tuesday at the Curtis Institute in an all-Rachmaninoff program with both works. By the end, you wanted to offer her an ice pack in lieu of flowers.

The main challenge, at least for her, wasn't pianistic technique, but the depth of emotional connection: Though her performances were super-engaged and entirely committed throughout, the *Piano Sonata No. 2* (in the compact 1931 version) was on a different level from the rest. Before that, her Rachmaninoff had drama, velocity, and a certain amount of poetry. But where were the colors that soften the sometimes-relentless density of this music? And that can change in a nanosecond, like some waterfall that suddenly shifts from one vivid shade to another?

Such qualities were heard in the sonata, which requires extra intervention from the performer to project the needed through-line amid Rachmaninoff's welter of notes. What suggests that Hu is a distinguished Rachmaninoff interpreter in the making, both here and elsewhere in the recital, is the way she identifies the music's contradictions. Once you get past Rachmaninoff's popular concertos, nothing is entirely what it seems. Hu finds the subsidiary motif that throws the meaning of what came before into question.

The infrequently heard *Etude Tableaux Op. 39* is especially prone to explore emotional gray areas, partly because the composer almost entirely (and interestingly) rejects the long-breathed melodies he's known for. Also, this is fairly evolved Rachmaninoff, full of passages that momentarily lapse into a fascinating netherworld where all of the usual points of reference disappear.

I didn't sense that Hu has lived with this music as long, if only because details tended to disappear when she was at full throttle. Happily, she's one of those pianists who hits a peak you think she can't possibly surpass, and then she does.

At Curtis Institute

Philadelphia Young Pianists' Academy concerts

Through Aug. 15 at Field Concert Hall, Curtis Institute of Music, 1726 Locust St. Programs include two young artists concerts (Aug. 10 and 11), a chamber music concert (Aug. 12, with Ching-Yun Hu and Mira Yevtich on piano), a piano recital by Ursula Oppens (Aug. 13) and the Philadelphia International Piano Competition winners' concert (Aug. 15).

Tickets: \$12.50-\$25, young artists concerts free with reservation.

Information: 215-893-7902 or pypa.info.