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## Skillet and Egg, but Not the Kitchen Sink

By Allan Kozinn

Young musicians are under enormous pressure to program inventively these days, and many do. But Phyllis Chen's piano recital on Thursday evening at the Thalia Theater at Symphony Space raised the bar for delightful quirkiness matched with interpretive sensitivity.

Ms. Chen began her program, "Pianos Big and Small," with repertory that was as standard as could be: Bach's Keyboard Partita in D, performed on a concert grand. She later returned to the conventional piano, and to the standard repertory (or at least its periphery) with Janacek's "On an Overgrown Path," Book I. But in between she played three works for toy piano. Or, more accurately, three toy pianos, a set of clock chimes, a CD player, a music box, a frying pan and an egg.

The Bach might have seemed out of place in this context, but it established Ms. Chen's bona fides. This was stylish, beautifully measured playing, lightly pedaled, crisply articulated and texturally transparent.

The Janacek, an emotionally charged series of reminiscences, let her put a more expansive palette on display: here Ms. Chen moved easily between a graceful, sometimes gauzy introspection and a forcefulness that put Janacek's pain and regret (about the death of his daughter, for example) into high relief.

The toy piano pieces were less substantial and certainly flightier than the Bach and Janacek works, but their sheer peculiarity commanded attention. The first was "Exposiciones," a 2005 work by Andrián Pertout for a microtonal toy piano and a CD with recorded bell tones and a steady, hollow percussive sound. It begins slowly, with rhythmic and melodic allusions to gamelan music, but gradually becomes a swirl of thick-textured chromatic scale figures.

Nathan Davis's "Mechanics of Escapement," commissioned for the occasion by Concert Artists Guild, is an involved exploration of the ringing timbres produced by both the toy piano and a set of bell chimes that Ms. Chen operated by pulling, striking or using a violin bow on them. At its climax it is almost nightmarishly mechanistic, yet that quality quickly evaporates, leaving only simple, slow-moving chimes at the end.



Richard Termine for The New York Times

Ms. Chen's own "Tale" from "The Memoirist" (2007) was the oddest and most entertaining of these pieces. In one segment Ms. Chen adds a toy piano descant to the repeating tune of a music box. Another involves heating an electric frying pan and scrambling an egg between keyboard passages.

Ms. Chen closed her recital at the grand piano, with Alvin Lucier's "Nothing Is Real," a deconstruction of the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever," first played live, then repeated via a recording of the live performance, heard from a small speaker inside a teapot.