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Classical review: Phyllis Chen's toy piano concert at Doug Fir is seriously good

In the hands of Phyllis Chen, the toy piano is no toy, but "serious" isn't the right word to describe her concert at Doug Fir Lounge on Thursday.

She's a serious musician, a classically trained pianist adept in traditional repertoire, and she's dedicated to bringing high technical standards to the tiny version of the instrument. But her captivating performance was animated by unbridled inventiveness, the kind of joyous creativity that playing with toys is meant to inspire.

Share Stephen Montague's "Mirabella: A Tarantella" and Fabian Svensson's "Toy Toccata" dispelled any notion the toy piano is unworthy of a virtuoso touch; the latter, a furious play of right hand on white keys and left hand on black, was intended precisely to counter the toy piano's image as cute and innocuous. Chen's fingers were fleet and precise, and she made the most of the instrument's limited dynamic range. By contrast, Takuji Kawai's "Prayer" and John Cage's "Suite for Toy Piano," the seminal toy piano piece, highlighted its quirky sound in music of beguiling simplicity.

Electronic augmentation figured into Andrián Pertout's "Exposiciones," with a CD of sampled gamelan sounds accompanying increasingly convoluted chromatic arabesques, and Alvin Lucier's "Nothing Is Real," for grand piano, tape recorder and amplified teapot. An ingeniously simple sound exploration, the Lucier piece introduced fragments of the Beatles' "Strawberry Fields Forever" on the piano, then repeated them in a recording on a tiny, tinny speaker in a teapot whose lid Chen manipulated like a wah-wah pedal.

The other portion of the program for grand piano, Leos Janáček's "On an Overgrown Path," was a sometimes haunting evocation of childhood, partly inspired by the memory of the death of the composer's daughter. Unmiked, unlike the toy piano pieces, its quieter moments fared least well against the background hubbub of the bar.

Chen closed with two of her own multimedia pieces, devised in collaboration with her partner Rob Dietz, a video artist and electronic musician. Both included video as well as counterpoint for hand-cranked music box and toy piano, and both hinted at childhood recalled: "Into the Rabbit Hole," with imagery from "Alice in Wonderland," and the poignant "Carousel," with carousel video snippets in hand-held home-movie style.

-- James McQuillen