

PALM BEACH ARTSPAPER
News and reviews from the arts in and around Palm Beach County

13 March 2014

Pianist Dong makes thrilling, important Florida debut

BY GREG STEPANICH

The art of recital programming is an elusive one given that there's so much repertory to choose from, but in solo performances, pianists generally follow a chronological order, going from the Baroque or Classical periods to the present.

The terrific young Chinese pianist Fei-Fei Dong, a medalist at the last Van Cliburn competition last year, followed this norm only in the largest sense, in that she began her concert Monday night at the Rinker Playhouse with a sonata by Muzio Clementi. The rest of her program was more like a selection of delectables than an essay in musical progress, and it was delivered in splendid style.

A native of Shenzhen who is now a master's student at Juilliard, Dong is just 22 and stands at the very beginning of her career. But she has tremendous technical facility, a laudable ability to bring out a work's narrative arc, and a great deal of coloristic resource. She seemed more comfortable in the faster, flashier parts of her program, and in some places she overdid it, but you got the distinct impression that this is an artist who is honest, responds with spontaneity to the music as it's happening, and who is unafraid to take risks to get her musical thoughts across.

The Clementi that she opened with, the Sonata in F-sharp minor (Op. 25, No. 5), was a favorite of Vladimir Horowitz's (as the program booklet duly noted), and with good reason. It's a beautiful piece, harmonically inventive and surpassingly elegant. Dong played the first movement with the same kind of introspection Horowitz gave the work, and she kept tight control on the tempo, too, so that by the time she got to the triplets in the closing bars of each section, they unfolded naturally rather than sounding like a desperate bid for attention.

She demonstrated a sober, lovely tone in the slow movement, and a good sense of slow pacing, then tore into the finale at breakneck speed, impressively rattling off long series of tricky thirds (Clementi was very proud of his ability to play thirds quickly and cleanly, as Mozart noted). But there was more to it than that; this was brilliant, technically immaculate playing that also had fine dramatic shape.

After the Clementi came the Fourth Sonata (in F-sharp major, Op. 30) of Alexander Scriabin. Although it has hints of the harmonic daring the composer would soon bring to all his piano works, the Fourth is still in the Chopin-Liszt tradition. The restlessly self-indulgent first movement is more or less a prelude to the second and final movement, a nervous, churning Prestissimo that explodes in old-fashioned key-pounding bravura in the coda.

Dong built the work surely from its first bars to its last, so that you could hear its essential unity; it's less a sonata than it is a long etude. She has a fine understanding of Scriabin's particular tonal perfume, and gave its first movement just the right amount of delicacy. Her rhythmic control was sure and gripping in the second movement, and if she didn't hit everything cleanly in the last ecstatic bars, it scarcely mattered; this was an exciting, stirring performance.

Another Horowitz specialty, Chopin's neglected Introduction and Rondo (in E-flat, Op. 16), followed, and the large audience at the Rinker could clearly hear how her technique sparkles. The theme of the Rondo itself is actually somewhat tricky, but Dong made it sound easy and natural, and she tossed off the page after page of

glittering figuration that came afterward with perfect assurance. It's showy music, but exceptionally high-grade showy music without a trace of bad taste, and Dong let Chopin speak for himself.

The first half closed with a popular contemporary American piece, the four-part suite Gargoyles (Op. 29) of Lowell Liebermann. Although the music is redolent of composers such as Moszkowski, Chopin, Prokofiev and Liszt, these pieces are charming, entertaining crowd-pleasers, and hugely difficult to boot. Dong played them masterfully, again with great rhythmic surety and dazzling technique. We heard only the music and what it was trying to say, and nothing of the tremendous effort required to play them.

The outer two movements were brilliant and hair-raising, while the second's derivation from the Chopin A minor Prelude allowed her to imbue all that shifting harmony with mystery. The Ravel-like third movement also showed off Dong's wonderful left-hand work; she has true hand independence, which makes me eager to hear her do Bach someday. In the finale, the recurring descending chromatic motif was hammered out with Rachmaninovian forcefulness, and she finished the work in exuberant fashion.

For the second half, Dong played the complete Preludes (Op. 28) of Chopin, which sometimes works as a cycle and sometimes doesn't. She played these amazing miniatures as a set, moving without much pause between any of the, and generally taking fast tempos; Nos. 2 and 4, for example, usually cause for deliberation, she dispatched without sentiment, giving the first true slow tempo to the mournful No. 6 (in B minor).

Her ability to pianistically glitter was apparent in the lighter mood pieces — Nos. 3, 5, 10, 19, and 23 in particular — and in some respects her reading of No. 5 (in D) was one of the best things she did; it was supple, immaculately accurate and springtime fresh. In the dramatic virtuoso preludes — Nos. 8, 12, 16, 18, and 24 — she was ferocity itself, blazing up and down the keyboard, to spectacular effect. But she also rushed things, in particular No. 22 (in G minor), which she presented as a chaotic blur; thrilling, yes, but it could have been slower and still worked for her structural purposes.

I think she was trying to give as spontaneous a reading of these pieces as she could, without preparing things too much beforehand and just letting the mood take her, which gave the Preludes an edge-of-the-seat quality that was gripping. A case in point was the transition from No. 16 (in B-flat minor), a blizzard of angry scales and thumping, propulsive left hand rhythms, into No. 17 (in A-flat), a gentle, almost barcarolle-like piece. Dong went from the huge ending of No. 16 immediately into the chords of No. 17 by hammering the repeated C's while slowing down, as if she was trying to apply the brakes to a car going much too fast, or to get a word of calm into a conversation with a furious person.

I'm not certain it really worked, but it was a marvelous choice from the standpoint of artistic integrity, something that could be said about the whole cycle. Overall, this was a brilliant interpretation of the Preludes, but generally too fast and too rushed. I'm glad she did it this way, but I'd also like to hear it again with her taking some more time to show us the softer side of her art.

Dong encoored her recital with a Chinese piece, Colorful Clouds Chasing the Moon, a folk tune arranged by Jianzhong Wang in rich Romantic style.

This recital was Fei-Fei Dong's Florida debut, and it was an important one. She seems to me to have all the makings of a major pianist, and hers is a career that lovers of the piano will want to follow with interest.