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Colossal and Gracious: Fei-Fei Dong in Recital

BY DR. GARY LEMCO

Though she played only one encore, a small Chinese piece, “Colorful Clouds Chasing the Moon,” pianist Fei-Fei Dong had more than won an enthusiastic audience’s eternal gratitude with her powerful renditions of music by Galuppi, Schumann, Chopin, Liebermann, and Liszt for the Steinway Society the Bay Area’s concert Saturday, October 15 at Le Petit Trianon Theatre, San Jose. Sporting a naturally gracious charm and stage presence, Dong shared her musical passions unstintingly, concluding with a colossally vibrant performance of the inimitable Liszt Sonata in B Minor. Dong no less bears a formidable arsenal of digital gifts, including the ability to span wide intervals at volcanic speeds, a fierce and supple trill, and a marvelous sense of tone color. Her selection of repertory this evening took full advantage of her strong suits.

Dong opened with Baldassari Galuppi’s Sonata No. 5 in C Major (c. 1800), a galant masterpiece whose beauties were first revealed to me by master pianist Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. The music combines some archaic procedures from the high Baroque, namely Scarlatti, cross-fertilized by the clarity in Mozart and Clementi. The opening Andante enjoyed all the earmarks of a richly conceived music-box, with Dong’s deliberate ostinato bass line’s supporting a flexible, arioso treble. The pace and elegance of line – including marvelous trills – supported the ternary structure of this mesmerizing first movement, its jeweled staccati and suave singing voice. The ensuing Allegro had the vitality of crisp attacks and solid landings. With the finale, Allegro assai, a real tour de force in Scarlatti’s bravura style, we had a cleanly rendered, loving realization of a piece that nicely traverses distinct styles in music history.

Dong then turned to the young Robert Schumann, whose 1829 cycle of twelve pieces, Papillons, Op. 2, we had savored at the prior concert, by Jon Nakamatsu. Rare it is to hear two alternative renditions of the same piece as part of a concert series: where Nakamatsu’s reading endeared itself through the literalness of the occasion and sincerity of expression, Dong emphasized the flirtatious, light-hearted, and sentimental character of the diverse Waltzes, Polonaises, and Märchen that constitute the progress of the “butterflies,” both social and imaginative. “The nostalgia for the dream” has long served as my own rubric for the Schumann ethos, its fusion of literary and musical personae. Dong’s Prestissimo in E-flat really took flight, and she had reminded us in her brief commentary that aloft butterfly wings resemble masks. Her F Minor Waltz (Semplice) had a gossamer delicacy. The “Grandfather Dance” that concludes the cycle charmed Tchaikovsky enough for him to include it in his Nutcracker Ballet, so our succumbing its mock-austere symmetries came as no surprise.

The 1840 Chopin Waltz in A-flat Major, Op. 42 allowed Dong to exploit a sensational, even wild, bravura. The piece proffers two competing rhythms, 2/4 versus 3/4, in a loose rondo form, a passionate evocation of a Parisian ball. Opening with a mighty trill, the last two notes of each invoke the melodic tissue, the waltz moves with intense propulsion, especially given Dong’s manic tempo. If the interior lines suffered some smear or blur, the sheer bravura of the occasion overwhelmed our pedant’s objections; and the audience rose in delighted acknowledgement, despite the fact that the last piece before intermission had not arrived.

The 1989 set of four Gargoyles by Lowell Liebermann (b. 1961) disarm our preconceptions that contemporary music must, by necessity, assault our nicer judgments. A Juilliard graduate and prolific composer-pianist, Liebermann accepts the “influences” in his work as a matter of course, admitting that he “tweaks his homages.” The opening Gargoyle, rather than scaring us away, captivated our attention with its three-note motto, which often exploded into runs and scalar passages easily reminiscent of Prokofiev’s Op. 11 Toccata. Ms. Dong gave us a workable “program” for the set, invoking the idea that Liebermann’s inspiration at the Notre Dame Cathedral had inspired him to anthropomorphize the stone grotesques, with the second movement – Adagio semplice – depicting the lonely creature. The third movement, a water piece, suggested to Doing a nymph or ondine, beckoning to the lonely figure; while the mad finale invoked a wild orgy or last-minute dance in devilish gallops, a spasm of twisted life just before sunrise sends all the spirits back to their graves. In other words, Dong alluded to Mussorgsky’s A Night on Bald Mountain as now cross-fertilized by Saint-Saens’ Danse Macabre. It surely worked, especially with the music’s obsessive repeated notes -shades of Ravel’s Le Gibet – complemented by astonishing, bravura block chords and breathless runs. I found myself recalling poor Charles Laughton’s Quasimodo, weeping next to the gargoyle high on the Notre Dame Cathedral, lamenting, “Why was I not, too, made of stone?”

The grand finale came in the form of Liszt’s monumental Sonata in B Minor, which the Schumanns and their “progeny” Brahms loathed, but Wagner and Schoenberg admired. Liszt had orchestrated Schubert’s “Wanderer” Fantasy in 1851, and he found its one-movement-subdivided-into-four much to his ‘classical’ taste. Whether any sort program attaches itself convincingly to this ecstatic – in the full sense of Dante and Omar Khayyam’s excursions into Heaven and Hell – music remains pure speculation. But that Liszt enjoys transforming his melodic and rhythmic kernels into every conceivable human affect provokes no doubt. How often his score calls for “grandioso” effects! The opening page alone proffers three themes – there will be five in all – that move from a repeated low G through a descending, modal scale, to a chordal and ominous tune picked up by every Universal horror movie of the 1930s, to a stellar apocalypse in D Major. In the course of this music’s cascades, runs, leaps, trills, interludes, and bursts of extreme passions, we could hear every kind of pianistic influence that would grace the music of Debussy, Granados, and Scriabin. A true world unto itself, the Liszt Sonata garnered from Ms. Dong her complete commitment, often raising her out of her piano bench, in paroxysms of vehement menace and passion. If this performance were anyone’s initiation into this piece, he need not envy those of us who had Horowitz or Bolet as their first guide.