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Pianist Seong-Jin Cho is ardently expressive in 1st SF recital

By Joshua Kosman



Photo: Harald Hoffmann

Pianist Seong-Jin Cho made the music of Chopin sound almost improvisational at Herbst Theatre.

Seong-Jin Cho, the 22-year-old South Korean pianist who made an enchanting local recital debut on Tuesday, March 28, burst into view in 2015 with a victory at the International Chopin Piano Competition. But don't let the competition medal fool you.

This guy's an artist.

Appearing in Herbst Theatre under the auspices of Chamber Music San Francisco, Cho showed off all the technical bravura that so often wins contests. He can get around the keyboard in no time flat, he can roll out thunderous chords and flying octaves without missing a step, and he mines the instrument for a wealth of textural detail and finely judged sonorities.

None of that, though, sets him particularly apart from your run-of-the-mill keyboard virtuoso. What Cho boasts, as old-fashioned as this may sound, is a poetic sensibility that evokes the fantastical sound world of the early Romantics.

I suspect that's why the music of Chopin seems to bring out the most revelatory side of Cho's playing (he made his first local appearance in November, giving a superb rendition of the composer's Piano Concerto No. 1 with the touring Warsaw Philharmonic). He approaches the music in a way that makes it sound quasi-improvisational, as though the interpretive choices and shifts in tempo or timing had only just occurred to him.

That's an illusion, of course, but an artfully drawn one, as Tuesday's performance of Chopin's Op. 28 Preludes made plain. In this set of 24 character pieces — couched, on the model of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," in each of the major and minor keys — Cho deployed his technique, panache and his elusive expressive manner to create a new sound world again and again.

He led the audience on a labyrinthine and endlessly refreshing tour from the ominous heavy tread of the A-Minor Prelude — with the rhythms of its melody expanded to fit the moment — through the contrasts of the sprightly B-Major Prelude and its stormy successor in G-Sharp Minor, and on to the concluding bursts of the D-Minor Prelude. There were marvels along the way, such as the way he segued almost without pause from the explosive urgency of the Prelude in B-Flat Minor to the winsome grace of the next piece, in A-Flat.

Cho is clearly a thoughtful and assertive artist, but he's also a young one, and there was evidence throughout the evening that he is still polishing and refining his ideas about some of the repertoire.

The performance of Berg's Sonata, Op. 1, that opened the program was lushly evocative but also sometimes tenuous in its direction. The exploratory impulse that enlivened the

pianist's approach to Chopin left Berg's more firmly logical creation sounding slightly aimless.

In Schubert's C-Minor Sonata, D. 958, though, Cho found an elegant middle ground between structural solidity and expressive freedom. He shaped the slow movement with matter-of-fact clarity, but indulged the unpredictability of the two latter movements superbly.

The two encores seemed designed to show off both sides of Cho's musical personality. Liszt's "La Campanella," with its cascades of octaves and demanding passagework, was a magnificent showcase for the performer's technical dexterity, while the slow movement from Mozart's F-Major Sonata, K. 332, brought the evening to a winningly insinuating close.