



A prodigy with a Russian repertoire

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Last month the [Noontime Concerts™](#)

recital series at Old St. Mary's Cathedral presented the prodigious fifteen-year old cellist Tessa Seymour from the Preparatory Division of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Today the Preparatory Division was represented by the equally prodigious sixteen-year old pianist Andrew Yang, a student of William Wellborn, who has also performed in this series; and there was an element of poetic justice in

Yang bringing a program to conclude this month's Russian Music Festival. When Wellborn chose a program to celebrate the bicentennial year of the death of Joseph Haydn in May, he had to put up with the renovation work on the cathedral at its noisiest. (In my [review](#) I proposed that the cathedral be renamed "Our Lady of the Jackhammer.") In a gesture of professionalism at its best, Wellborn dismissed the adversity by making light of it with one remark to the audience: "I should have played Rachmaninoff." Today he had is revenge, so to speak, by sending over his prize Preparatory student to play Rachmaninoff.

Rather than include the usual warhorse, the C-sharp minor prelude from the Opus 3 [Morceaux de Fantaisie](#), Yang opened with the G minor prelude, the fifth in the Opus 23 collection of ten. This prelude is almost as familiar as the C-sharp minor but goes through a different set of moods and makes different demands on how the soloist should determine the points of climax. Yang honored the score with fidelity and precision, allowing those climaxes to emerge and dominate with full impact. He followed this with the somewhat less emphatic fourth prelude from the same set in D major, concluding his Rachmaninoff set with the fourth of the Opus 16 [Moments Musicaux](#) in E minor. This is the one that [Wikipedia](#) describes as "the torrential *Presto*;" and that description is far from inaccurate! Again, Yang recognized that fidelity and precision were all that were necessary to let the music speak for itself; and through his disciplined control that "torrential" spirit could rage with full force.

The Rachmaninoff compositions were followed by a single short work by Alexander Scriabin, the second of his two Opus 9 compositions for the left hand alone, the nocturne in D-flat major. If Rachmaninoff's preludes constitute a major departure from Frédéric Chopin's approach to the genre (which, in its turn, was a departure from Johann Sebastian Bach), Scriabin's nocturne honors Chopin (even with its choice of key), while viewing his approach through a slightly different lens and imposing the left-hand-only technical constraint. Yang handled the constraint excellently, never letting go of the lyric melodic line that, while rich with Chopin-like embellishing gestures, served as the spinal cord of the composition. Scriabin's sense of brevity also provided a welcome interlude between Rachmaninoff's larger scale of composition and the three-movement sonata by Sergei Prokofiev (Opus 83 in B-flat major) that concluded the program.

This sonata is the middle of a set of three sonatas sometimes called the "War" sonatas, the other two being Opus 82 in A major and Opus 84 also in B-flat major. In spite of Prokofiev's debilitating problems in dealing with the Stalinist Russian government, Opus 83, first performed in January of 1943, received a Second Class Stalin Prize. However, if Stalin and his bureaucrats heard this sonata as a salute to the heroic Russian stand against Germany, they seem to have missed much of the sardonic tone of the work. Yes, the first movement has a decidedly martial character; but its *real* character is probably closer to his conception of Mercutio in his *Romeo and Juliet* ballet, who can easily make fun of both sides of the warring Montagues and Capulets. Then there is the bizarre way in which the parallel sixths on the Andante Caloroso movement almost seem to mimic the tune "White Christmas," which Irving Berlin had composed in 1940. Whether or not Prokofiev had sources that could have exposed him to this song may remain a mystery; but, had that been the case, this movement could have made for a heavily-encoded jab at Stalin and his cronies.

Because this sonata is so technically demanding and on a much larger scale than any of the works preceding it on this program, an effective performance again comes down to honoring what the score requires. Once more Yang came through with both clarity and a general sense of goal that moved the ear through the intricacies of each of the sonata's movements, bringing the final Precipitato movement to the (what else?) abruptly precipitous conclusion that crowns the impact of the entire work. This climactic conclusion of such a demanding sonata also provided the best way to bring the entire October Russian Music Festival to a close.

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Alexander Scriabin (from [Wikipedia](#))

