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Imagination would boost pianist's technical strengths

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By **R.M. CAMPBELL**
P-I MUSIC CRITIC

Meany Hall for the Performing Arts has worked hard over the past couple of seasons to bring young, unknown talent to Seattle, especially pianists.

The 21-year old artist Yuja Wang, who made her local debut Wednesday night at Meany, is a good case. When she was booked, the Chinese pianist was hardly a breath away from her North American premiere. Then she made her New York debut, toured Asia with the New York Philharmonic and began to appear with prestigious orchestras, conductors and at festivals in Europe as well as the United States. Along with the impressive round of dates, she was hard at work at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia - now a hotbed of eager and talented Chinese students -- studying with Gary Graffman, the same pianist/teacher who guided Lang Lang to international fame. This week, Deutsche Grammophon signed Wang to an exclusive recording contract, with her debut recording of Chopin, Ligeti, Scriabin and Liszt scheduled for release Feb. 17.

MUSIC REVIEW PIANIST YUJA WANG

WHEN/WHERE: Wednesday night

at Meany Hall

As one might expect from a young virtuoso, Wang chose a virtuoso program. She left no doubt that her technical abilities are all they are said to be -- simply astonishing. It would seem there is little she cannot do. Anything requiring sweeping power, bold approach, rapid-fire staccato, great leaps on the keyboard, double thirds and octaves come readily from her arsenal.

The high point of the evening came at the end -- the reduction of Stravinsky's ballet score "Petroushka" for solo piano, transcribed and retitled by the composer as "Three Movements from Petroushka." What is lost in the piano version are all the extraordinary colors provided by Stravinsky in the orchestral score. What is gained are greater intimacy and intensity. Wang made the most of everything Stravinsky gave her: all the dazzling bravura she turned into thrilling drama, so much so it was easy to visualize the narrative itself.

Alexander Scriabin is the not the easiest composer to penetrate, either for listener or pianist. Wang focused all her attention on making the opaque transparent and the difficult disarming. She succeeded to a large degree. No wonder some of Scriabin's music will be heard on Wang's debut recording.

Brahms' "Variations on a Theme by Paganini" is one of the great works of the piano repertory, not only because of the composer's vivid use of Paganini's most famous tune but the brilliant effects he achieves in sheer virtuosity. Wang got the second but not so much the first. Her playing was four-square and lacking in imagination, essentially going from one technical blockbuster to another. I would like to hear her play it a decade hence.

As a gesture to novelty, Wang played the Sonata in A Minor, "Reminiscenza," by the 20th-century Russian composer, Nikokai Medtner. The single movement work is attractive enough and well organized but lacks compelling ideas. I don't know why she chose the piece.

Wang was scheduled to open her recital with Mendelssohn's "Variations serieuses," but she substituted three familiar sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti -- K. 427, 380 and 455. It was the least satisfactory playing of the night. The notes were generally in place but the phrasing was unshapely, the sound shallow. Nothing seemed considered. Alas.

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