

MUSIC NOTES

TONE, TECHNIQUE DISTINGUISH WANG

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There's very little of the austere in Xiayin Wang's piano playing. There is delicacy and precision, of course, but in her seething tempos, her choice of sumptuous repertoire and her natural dramatic flair, Wang wears her warrior's heart graciously on her sleeve.

A young pianist from China, Wang came to the United States a decade ago after creating a ruckus in Shanghai, where she graduated from the leading conservatory, won several major awards and scored significant performances. Currently promoting her debut CD, Wang has performed earlier this season at Red Bank's Two River Theater and returns to the Shore area Aug. 5 with a performance at Ocean County College in Toms River.

Wang has had particular success with works by Alexander Scriabin, a composer famous for his explorations of excess. She has recorded several of these and includes them on "Introducing Xiayin Wang" — the two Poemes, Op. 32, the Waltz, Op. 38 and the Vers la Flamme, poeme, Op. 72. Wang plays these for all they're worth, putting it out there for everyone to hear. The CD's other tracks seem on the surface like a conservative lineup: J.S. Bach, Mozart, Ravel and, for an encore, a sprinkling of Gershwin arrangements. But in fact, each of these is strongly tinged with the same emotional abandon.

The Bach piece on the album, a Concerto in D minor, BWV 974, is an arrangement of an unknown work by composer Alessandro Marcello, a direct contemporary of Bach's. Almost predictably, the Bach-Marcello is followed with Mozart, the popular Sonata in C Major, K. 330. More surprising is Wang's very modern, romantic take on both composers. Beneath that sparkling tone and flawless technique, she seems to be channeling Scriabin to play music written centuries before him. Call it inappropriate if you like, but it sounds to me like a fresh, invigorating walk through a beautiful private garden.

As has been noted many times before, Bach stands up especially to reinterpretation, and Wang's informed imagining of him as a Lisztian Romantic piano virtuoso appears not so far off the mark.

Maurice Ravel's "La Valse" also is on the CD, a work that abandons nearly all classical pretense to revel in gorgeous sensuality. This is Wang's bread-and-butter territory, and she plays it with reckless accuracy.

The Gershwin pieces that conclude share the romantic ardor to a degree, but in some spots, Wang's treatment is overly sentimental, turning Gershwin's finger food of nostalgia into a remorseful cheesecake. Some of this is the fault of Earl Wild, a pianist who transcribed two Gershwin melodies into major virtuosic etudes on this CD. But even in these gilded lilies, the jazz pop melodies require an effort of polite restraint to be truly effective, and Wang wants nothing to do with that.

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