



The Return of Ren Zhang to TCCA

By Charles Atthill
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The 2009-10 TCCA concert season ended on Sunday, May 16, as it began – with a piano recital. It was a repeat performance by Ren Zhang who so impressed the TCCA audience in 2006. It's not hard to see why he was invited back.

Beginning with Handel, Schubert and Debussy and ending with virtuoso fireworks, the program was varied and satisfying. Many young music students have experienced the varying demands of the exams of the Associated Board of the Royal Colleges of Music.

At the final, Grade 8, level a piano student plays three pieces (in addition to endless scales and arpeggios), one typically from the Baroque, the second classical, the third more modern, an opportunity to demonstrate different techniques, finger and pedal work, and interpretation.

The Chinese-American Zhang fully demonstrated his astonishing all-round musicality. In Handel's Suite in D minor, he delivered flowing clarity, rhythmic consistency, impeccable finger work and lightness of touch (so light that sometimes notes did not sound) in the six movements based on traditional dance forms.

The “classical” was four Schubert Impromptus. The term “impromptu” suggests “improvised,” but these are carefully crafted works. “Do you know any happy music? I don't,” Schubert once said. Zhang captured Schubert's underlying melancholy juxtaposed with the muted exuberance and understated elegance of the lieder-like melodies of the middle movements.

The “modern” piece, if a work published in 1905 can be called modern, was Debussy's “Suite bergamasque,” which includes the luminous beauty of “Clair de Lune.” Zhang more than met our expectations of shimmering impressionist tone-painting, contrasted with the classical dance forms of the other movements.

Zhang broke loose in the final two works. Joseph Hoffman's Kaleidoscope #4 is a rare technical challenge, defying the fingers to do what is asked of them, never mind probe the shifting colors as Zhang did.

And so to Pabst's “Paraphrase on Themes from Eugene Onegin,” Tchaikovsky's great opera. It was the Russian-German Pabst, revered as a pianist and teacher, whom Tchaikovsky asked, though never acknowledged, to complete his first piano concerto and edit his piano works. He was a two-piano partner of Rachmaninoff, but died at 43, “a pianist blessed by God,” best remembered for his interpretations of operatic themes. Zhang re-created all the flamboyance and drama of the opera.

The enthusiastic TCCA audience demanded more and got it: encores by Albeniz-Godowsky, Moszkowsky, Chopin, and a Flight of the Bumble Bee played faster than any bee has ever flown.

Zhang is technically dazzling but intensely thoughtful and insightful. He plays with economy of physical effort with all his energy going into the music itself. As Zhang said in the pre-concert forum: “When you play the piano you face your true self.” And what a self Zhang revealed.

Before the second half of the program, TCCA President Keith Porter and Vice President Aileen James presented the TCCA Spring Teen Scholarship \$1000 award to harpist Sage Po, and the \$500 Honorable Mention award to cellist Summer McCall.

So ended TCCA's 64th season, and so TCCA ceased to exist, only to be instantly re-born as “InConcert Sierra.”

Charles Atthill lives in Alta Sierra. Challenged by four-octave harmonic minor scales a sixth apart he never quite made it through Grade 8 piano.