

Tauranga Musica Review Sylvia Jiang, Sunday, 21 July, 2024

Tauranga music-lovers were treated to a magnificent performance Sunday afternoon by New Zealand pianist, Sylvia Jiang; the latest instalment in Tauranga Musica's 2024 concert season.

It is no coincidence that Jiang, a graduate of the prestigious Juilliard School, chose Tauranga in particular to launch her 2024 New Zealand tour. It was on the same stage at Baycourt (and on the same Steinway piano) that she performed her first professional solo recital at the age of just 15. Having studied and performed abroad for the past ten years, her selected repertoire centered rather appropriately around the theme of home.

Jiang opened the first half of the concert by featuring two impressionistic works by New Zealand composers. Gareth Farr takes for his inspiration the view from his windows of the tidal waves advancing and retreating in *The Horizon from Owhiro Bay*. From the opening bar Jiang's mastery was evident creating a warm, buttery opening introduction from the instrument. But it was her remarkable ability to imitate so precisely the sounds of running water that was perhaps the most mesmerising to listeners. The work has a brilliant shape of rise and fall, like the tides, which only a performer of Jiang's international reputation could facilitate masterfully. Kenneth Young's *A Time and Place There Was* is an entirely different soundscape. Composed while listening to New Zealand's iconic bird choruses, the work is chaotic; like the sound of many simultaneous conversations, and includes a corruption of the national anthem. With meticulous precision and attention to detail Jiang was a pleasure to watch as she carefully placed every finger with scrupulous intention and care.

Jiang followed the New Zealand compositions with a movement from the *second piano sonata* of George Walker (1922-2018); America's first African American composer to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize in music. Walker, having experienced first-hand America's troubled history with race throughout the 20th Century, saturates his sound with pain and longing. There was an uncomfortable eeriness which pervaded this work - an unspoken and unresolved tension which Jiang captured powerfully with her unfaltering technical precision. Jiang quite visibly played with tremendous feeling, deliberate intention, and a determined expression.

To close the concert's first half, Jiang performed Chopin's *second piano sonata* - a work famous for its recognisable funeral march. Through the sonata Jiang inexplicably managed to convey the story of a proud Polish nationalist, answering the call to arms to resist foreign invasion and occupation. In the first movement Jiang passionately captured all the necessary vitality and enthusiasm of youth. The physical demands of the second scherzo movement clearly mirrored the struggle and exhaustion of resistance and battle, while the funeral march of the third movement, played with incredible grace and beauty, reminded us all of the inevitable cost of war. The fourth and final presto movement, (more of a scherzo than the second movement, one has to admit), was appropriately likened by the performer to the nattering following a funeral as the crowd inevitably disperses from the graveside. Never before in this reviewer's time have I ever heard the stories in Chopin's music more succinctly understood, captured, and more eloquently and skilfully told.

The concert's second half featured works by composers whose styles were considerably influenced by folk music in its myriad forms.

Gershwin's *Three Preludes*, are excellent examples of a composer adapting the sounds of popular and modern music to suit the modern concert stage. Presumably the "meat and potatoes" repertoire of any Juilliard student, Jiang perfectly captured the unique and quirky Gershwin soundscape - a highlight being the slower more bluesy second prelude with its walking left hand and strong right hand melody.

Gao Ping, a one time professor of composition at Canterbury University was inspired to write *Nostalgia* (part of a greater work, *Distant Voices*), while staring out of his window and thinking of home. Like Farr, he was inspired by the water and its movements while the rain fell during a particularly lonely holiday break while a student at the University of Cincinnati. In this remarkable work, Jiang, with spellbinding skill and dynamic control, recreated the unmistakable sounds of a gentle shower metamorphosing to a rapid downpour and then back again.

Jiang concluded her concert with Prokofiev's mighty *Sonata No. 7* - one of his "war sonatas" - and arguably one of the greatest pieces of piano literature. Jiang summoned almost superhuman stamina for her performance of this work. The opening movement, demanded chaotic counterpoint and a seemingly never-ending yet ever-changing rhythmic palette of daunting proportions. The second movement, almost anthem-like with its strange chord clusters, offered a moment of respite before the fierce and final movement showcased Jiang's superior precision, technique, and mastery of balance.

For an encore, Jiang performed the same encore she delivered fourteen years ago in the same space and on the same instrument - Grieg's *Nocturne Op. 54, No. 4*

Undoubtedly, while clearly a consummate performer of the very highest international skill and standard, Jiang's greatest gifts must lie in her remarkable abilities as a musical storyteller. It is the almost hypnotic manner in which she is able to simultaneously paint a scene while also narrating a journey.

Chalium Poppy
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