

Joyce Yang

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Young pianist wows Tucson Symphony audience

BY CATHALENA E. BURCH

A collective "wow" whooshed through the Tucson Music Hall Thursday night moments after the young pianist Joyce Yang struck the final note of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1.

"Wow" is perhaps the highest compliment that concert-goers can give to a relatively unknown musician. It's an affirmation that the audience doesn't think the musician will remain unknown for long.

Yang, 19, guested with the Tucson Symphony Orchestra in its appropriately titled "Winners" concert - a nod to her second-place win in the prestigious Van Cliburn International Piano Competition this summer. The concert repeats at 2 p.m. Sunday.

On Thursday night, Yang showed Tucson why she won the prize: The petite pianist with lightening-fast fingers summoned such large and imposing sounds from the piano that you would have sworn she was putting far more than her light weight into it. With minimal physicality, she coaxed melody and rhythm that you would expect from a much more experienced and physical player.

The fact that she did it in perfect concert with the orchestra, led by the engaging and delightful guest conductor Albert-George Schram, was even more remarkable. You would think given her age and relative inexperience - she's performed with about a dozen orchestras since moving to the United States from South Korea six years ago - that she would show signs of stress, hints of uncertainty. Instead, Yang performed the technically challenging 32-minute concerto with the ease of a crusty pro.

Her play was beautifully refined with flashes of personality - the steeled look of concentration that contorted her face as she hunkered over the piano, the smile she shot Schram between movements - that endeared her to her audience of about 1,000. The performance was so crystalline, so nearly perfect and inspiring that all you could say was "wow."

The chorus of "wows" came as the audience bolted to its feet for a standing ovation - one that felt unrehearsed and completely spur-of-the-moment in the spirit that ovations should be offered. Too often, we stand because we think we owe it to the artist, no matter the performance.

As Yang made her way back to the piano for an encore, the audience fell back into its seats and a perfect quiet fell over the hall almost as if someone turned off the volume.

Then Yang, who still studies at Juilliard, played Scarlatti's Sonata in D minor with such delicious aplomb that she started a second wave of "wows."

Other highlights of Thursday's concert included guest conductor Schram, whose animated personality bounded from the podium as he danced and bobbed through sparkling and informed readings of Smetana's "The Moldau" from "Má Vlast" (My Fatherland) and Dvorák's rich Symphony No. 7.