

## Pianist Joyce Yang demonstrates substance, flash



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Joyce Yang

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I like a musician who is honest about contemporary music.

"Quite a shocker" was the way pianist Joyce Yang summed Carl Vine's Piano Sonata No. 1, after encouraging her Wortham Theater Center listeners to devise their own visual scenario for the music they were about to hear.

The silver winner of the 2005 Cliburn International Piano Competition may have been indulging in a little salesmanship Saturday - as piano music goes, the shock value was maybe an eight out of 10 - but it takes guts to change a program to include such a work and then to own up to the challenge she posed.

Besides courage, lots of technique and a vivid sense of drama were essential for bringing off the 1991 work by the contemporary Australian composer. Yang had those traits down pat throughout her Society for the Performing Arts recital.

The rest of the program was traditional: four sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti, the Piano Pieces, Op. 119 of Johannes Brahms, the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue of J.S. Bach and Robert Schumann's *Carnaval*. But Yang ordered the works with a sharp sense of dramatic contrast. That alertness carried even into the set of Scarlatti sonatas. In character, tempos and even keys the order of the four hinted at the format of the multimovement sonata of the Classical and early Romantic eras.

Scarlatti wrote his music long before the design of the Steinway piano Yang played was finalized. Perhaps sensing the origin of the sonatas as harpsichord music, she played them chastely with expressive reserve, clean technique and crisp articulation. But some of the repeated chords really gain far more character on the harpsichord. Passages that might crackle there were simply alert on a modern piano.

In contrast, Bach's music in general is amazingly durable. Its character manages to survive transfers to the most unexpected idioms.

So, Yang's playing of the Fantasy and Fugue on the Steinway rather than a harpsichord had little effect on the brilliance of the work. Indeed, the joyous energy she brought to the fugue and the meticulous distinction between the fugue theme and its counter melody were exhilarating.

Both the Brahms and Schumann sets were character pieces - Brahms' abstract, Schumann's laden with extra-musical connections through the titles of the 21 movements. Yang stressed the dreamy side of Brahms and the sometimes quixotic, quick-cut changes of character in the Schumann pieces. She delivered both sets with authority, superb musicianship and, above all, a simplicity that was beguiling.

Vine's work alternated between nontonal and tonal harmonies, between pell-mell cascades of notes and simpler sections, between the release of pent-up energy and pauses for reflection. The music was tough at times, yet the composer always knew when the intensity had run its course and he needed to revert to calmer moments. That sensitivity to listeners' saturation points added a subtle but necessary emotional shape for Saturday's audience. That was the best road map they could have had with such a new work.