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Young Concert Artists, Inc.

PIUS CHEUNG, *marimbist*

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Cheung taps classics for marimba concert

By T.L. Ponick

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In his first-ever Washington solo recital at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater, classical marimbist Pius Cheung, under the auspices of the venerable Young Concert Artists Series, presented an intriguing program Tuesday of largely unknown pieces, all performed on an instrument most people would associate with the jazz repertoire.

To selections from Johann Sebastian Bach's "Goldberg Variations" - adapted for marimba - Mr. Cheung added Arnold Schoenberg's early atonal experiments "Sechs Kleine Klavierstucke" ("Six Little Piano Pieces"), Op. 19, as well as newer pieces by contemporary Japanese, Chinese and American composers.

While the "Goldberg Variations" sounded novel on the marimba and the edgy Schoenberg pieces were served in tastefully small portions, the best part of Mr. Cheung's program proved to be - surprise - the contemporary compositions.

Mr. Cheung led with Japanese composer Keiko Abe's "Variations on Japanese Children's Songs," an astringent series of meditations on simple tunes hearkening back to the composer's terrible childhood memories of World War II. Taking a cue from the music, Mr. Cheung explored the darker tones and emotions of his instrument to set the mood for this highly virtuosic piece.

In contrast, Chinese composer Zhou Tian's "Blowing Westward" is a somewhat impressionistic piece based on a contemporary Chinese short story. The composition enabled Mr. Cheung, who commissioned this new work, to explore the ghostly

overtones of the marimba clustering in the lower notes.

In a similar literary vein, American composer Andrew Thomas' "Merlin" is a meditation inspired by two short verses of Edward Arlington Robinson's eponymous narrative poem. Dreamy at times, challenging at others, it proved the perfect choice for Mr. Cheung to end his program.

However, the centerpiece of the evening clearly was the set of three etudes composed by the artist himself, which opened the program's second half. "Etudes" ("Studies") usually are simple drills for music students, aimed at overcoming challenging performance problems.

In the 19th century, however, Frederic Chopin revolutionized the etude by clothing each technical problem with brilliant, highly inventive melodies and figures, creating enduring miniature compositions that continue to excite audiences today.

Clearly, Mr. Cheung took Chopin's innovations as an inspiration for crafting his own etudes, of which he performed three. Tuneful, neo-Romantic yet technically difficult, these pieces not only showcased Mr. Cheung's mastery of his instrument but also demonstrated his considerable skill and promise as a composer in his own right - one who writes the kind of music people will want to hear.

As an encore, Mr. Cheung played a brief, winsome improvisation on "Over the Rainbow," bringing a successful end to a very different kind of musical evening.