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Young Concert Artists, Inc.

Chu-Fang Huang, pianist

KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Pianist Chu-Fang shows astonishing skill and versatility

By C.J. Gianakaris
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Young Chinese pianist Chu-Fang Huang, performing Sunday afternoon at Western Michigan University's Dalton Center Recital Hall, came bearing first-rate musical credentials.

She performed here as the 2006 winner of the Young Concert Artists International Auditions, placing her in the elite company of such earlier winners as Richard Goode, Ruth Laredo, Murray Perahia, Emmanuel Ax and Dawn Upshaw, now superstars in classical music.

Her appearance in Kalamazoo closed this season's Young Concert Artist Series, sponsored by the Bullock Performance Institute within the School of Music at WMU. Huang lived up to her billing as an enormously gifted pianist, exhibiting impressive mastery over a broad range of musical types. The result was a delightful, thoroughly engaging concert.

Opening with several Domenico Scarlatti sonatas, Huang displayed an exceptionally refined touch. Scarlatti favored presto note repeats and demanding arpeggio runs up and down the keyboard. Trills must be clean and hand cross-overs immaculate -- all achieved by Huang with pristine classical precision. Legato movements emerged smooth; melody sang ardently. Her Scarlatti surpassed the ordinary, illuminating the score with fresh, intelligent insights.

Yet, for her final selection, Huang showed entirely different qualities, physically immersing herself in Ravel's impossibly demanding "La Valse." Chromatic runs, at break-neck speed, alternated at climactic moments with blistering glissandos, setting the keyboard on fire. Even when Ravel's score

threatened aural chaos, Huang drew half-wild phrases into a comprehensible whole. Upon the completion of her "La Valse," the audience audibly released its collective breath.

Huang prefaced selections to offer essential background to some works. She explained the very different musical styles of three contemporary Chinese pieces she was to play. Chu Wang-Hua's "Liu Yang River," based on Chinese folk tunes, was utterly guileless and charming, using native harmonies and harp-like strumming, up and down the keyboard. Though Chinese at its core, its veneer sounded Western, creating a bridge for American audiences.

Ying-Hai Li's "Xi Yang Xiao Gu (Flute and Drum at Sunset)" imitated the pipa's sound, relying on tight trills on the modern piano to generate vibrato effects -- effectively accomplished by Huang.

Most impressive was Jian-Zhong Wang's "Shin Jinag Fantasy," with roots in northwest China, according to Huang. Beginning with loud, dramatic chords, the work resembled early 20th-century Russian music with a strong gypsy influence. Its tour de force arrived at the conclusion in the form of a wild, passionate dance throughout which Huang maintained uncanny note clarity.

Schumann's "Fantasy in C Major" (Op. 17) was the longest single work. Huang obviously admired it greatly, and her playing was sweetly Romantic, as called for. Huang showed unflagging artistry, whatever the musical style.