



## George Li, *pianist*

### THE BUFFALO NEWS

#### Piano Prodigy George Li to Showcase his Talents Today at Kleinhans

Mary Kunz Goldman  
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George Li was 15 when he played Chopin's First Piano Concerto with the Cleveland Orchestra and won the Cooper International Competition. It included \$10,000, a full four-year scholarship to the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, and concerto performance opportunities in Beijing and Shanghai. That was in 2010. Since then he has gathered speed. In November, he aced the Young Concert Artists International Auditions, garnering new national accolades.



Today, as part of that prize, he is giving a free recital on the Buffalo Chamber Music Society's Gift to the Community series. For his recital, which takes place in the Mary Seaton Room of Kleinhans Music Hall, Li is playing Beethoven's "Moonlight" and "Waldstein" Sonatas as well as the Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor by Chopin (the sonata with the famous Funeral March). He is also playing two pieces by Liszt, the Consolation No. 3 and the Concert Paraphrase on Verdi's opera "Rigoletto."

It is quite a program. Li is up to it. Already, he is an old hand at concert situations. "I don't really get that nervous," he says. "I just feel this anxiety to play, I feel like I want to play. Like, the day before, I'm already feeling the adrenaline on stage. I try to be in the music-making mode. I try to think about what the composer wants in the specific piece of music. I try to enter that world, I guess." Li speaks sweetly and earnestly. There is something poignant about it.

The image of the young Asian pianist is practically a cliché. The phenomenon predates Lang Lang and Yundi Li, another acclaimed Chinese pianist. Vladimir Horowitz, who died in 1989, used to joke about the endless parade of pianists from the East. And the wave shows no sign of ending.

Asian-Canadian pianist Ryan Wang, just 5 years old, recently made his Carnegie Hall debut, in the Weill Recital Hall of the fabled musical landmark. No fewer than five Chinese pianists are among the finalists for this year's Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, taking place later this spring. People have attributed the proliferation of Asian pianists to the strong work ethic associated with that ethnic group, plus the strict discipline of Asian parents - a trait publicized in the recent best-seller "The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother."

But Li's story suggests that the roots of the phenomenon run deeper than that. "I'm quite strict, but I don't think I'd be as strict as tiger," laughs his mother, Katie Li. "Not too extreme, let them have their choice, but I try to guide them toward what's good. We always eat together. We talk about things. I guess I tell them about what I really like, by and by some of that value systems slip into them."



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She grows more pensive, though, discussing the life in China that she left behind. She and her husband, Jian, grew up during China's repressive and violent Cultural Revolution, which created chaos and led to many people's torture and deaths.

"Nobody in my city had the money to buy a piano, let alone own one," she says. "They didn't allow music on radio. During the Cultural Revolution it was considered something that would corrupt your soul. The Cultural Revolution was a disaster. For 10 years, you were not allowed to go to school." Her husband, she adds, had to stop playing the violin because he was forced to go into the country and work on a farm. "We wasted all our youth." It is easy to imagine that they were not going to let their son waste his.

It makes sense, in view of Katie Li's memories, that love of music – a music once brutally forbidden to them – is what has propelled so many Asians to the high echelons of the classical music world. Her son does not sound on the phone like a hothouse musician. He has a quiet sense of humor. His parents, for all their vigilance, were not able to prevent him from catching the American bad habit of peppering his sentences with the word "like." Perhaps nervous being interviewed, he often uses the word multiple times in one sentence.

He talks about music with genuine enthusiasm, complete with a teenage twist. Unable to see very far into the past, he attributes the wave of Asian pianists to superstar Lang Lang. "There are eras of piano, for example like, 80 years ago, 60 years ago, you had like Van Cliburn who was really big, and I think a lot of Americans were playing a lot of piano and classical music," he says. "Then it moves to Russia, then it went to Korea, and now it's moved to China. Especially with the rise of Lang Lang, a lot of Chinese people have been inspired to take a similar path, to try to win competitions, to gain that kind of stardom. His rise has inspired a lot of Chinese people to take up classical music and to learn more about piano, and so like everyone learns piano in China now."

Li was born here, and began playing as a boy. "I was 4 and a half," he says. "My parents love listening to classical music. When I was young, my mom would take me to a lot of concerts in Boston. I listened to the classical radio station. At night, going to bed, I'm being constantly exposed to classical music, being surrounded by it. I guess I just went along with it."

He looked up to the Russian prodigy Evgeny Kissin, now 41. "It was pretty funny, 'cause when I was little, I idolized Kissin," he says. "One of the recordings was him playing the 'Moonlight' sonata. Every time I listened to it, I guess my jaw would drop. Now I'm still honored to play the same piece."



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"I don't really get that nervous, I just feel this anxiety to play, I feel like I want to play before ... let's see, the day before, I'm already feeling the adrenaline on stage, I guess I just try to think about the music more, when I get a little anxious to play, I try to be in the music-making mode, I try to think about what the composer wants in the specific piece of music. I try to enter that world, I guess."

Sacrifices must be made. Li hates that he can't play baseball. It has to stay a spectator sport. "Sometimes I go out and shoot some hoops," he says. He laughs, self-conscious.

It is rigorous, the life he has chosen. "During school days, I practice four hours a day," he says. "Weekends and holidays I practice seven or eight." He practices more, he adds, when a competition is coming up.

And competitions will be coming up. Li looks forward to the Van Cliburn Competition some day. "And the Tchaikovsky Competition," he adds.

Though competitions have drawbacks, he keeps an open mind. "If you think about them as a way of learning, a learning experience, it's useful," Li says. "You can learn a lot about how the other people play. At the same time, a competition, I feel there's some supposed way of playing that you have to mesh with. If you don't do it, you won't win or something. If you think of it as a personal learning experience, and try to express what you think, it's just, a win-win situation."

And piano, to him, is all about a bigger thing, called life.

"I think playing music isn't just about locking yourself in a practice room. It's also about experiencing other things," he says. "Being able to experience life in general, having a good education, learning from other cultures. I guess all this can impact how well you can make music.

"I feel it's important to have other interests. I have interest in reading, I read a lot of things, like novels, newspapers and stuff. I read 'The Life of Pi.' " He laughs. "That was cool."