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# Rutgers International Pianists Gala in Review

RUTGERS INTERNATIONAL PIANISTS GALA FEATURING PIANISTS OF THE  
MASON GROSS SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

MIN KWON, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND CURATOR

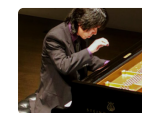
WEILL RECITAL HALL AT CARNEGIE HALL, NEW YORK, NY MAY 8, 2017

The Mason Gross School of the Arts of Rutgers University presents yearly piano galas which feature consistently fascinating, thematically unified programs and high-level performances. Though the performers generally include numerous doctoral students (and alumni), the concerts also include talented undergraduates, giving us a sneak peek at some largely undiscovered potential stars.

Past galas have included a Schumann and Chopin 200<sup>th</sup>

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anniversary concert in 2010 and an all-Debussy 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary one in 2012, among others. This year, the uniting theme was diversity itself, drawing upon the varied cultural backgrounds of the nineteen participating students. The program was designed to take listeners “Around the World” with music from fifteen different countries (with duplications only in the cases of Russia, the US, and Korea). Though the concept is not at all a first (in fact, “Around the World” was a favorite titled program of this reviewer’s pianist father, Robert Schrade), the idea lent itself quite naturally to a concert including nineteen musicians from fifteen countries.

The musicians at Mason Gross make up a virtual United Nations, with the gifted and gracious Artistic Director, pianist, and teacher, Min Kwon, at the helm. The variety was heightened by native garb from the performers’ respective countries, and Ms. Kwon, who emceed from her chair onstage, joked about her role bringing to mind a Miss Universe pageant. The word “pageant” was apt, in its best sense, especially with such a fantastic array of colors and sounds.

The music began with Hui Diao of China playing four selections from *Eight Memories in Watercolor* (1979) by Tan Dun (b. 1957). *Blue Nun*, *Staccato Beans*, *Herdboy’s Song*, and *Sunrain* were the folk-inspired pieces, played with visible immersion and finesse. Music of Manos Hadjidakis (1925-1994) followed, played by George Lykogiannis of Greece. Two dances, *Syrtos* and *Kalamatianos* from *For a Little White Seashell*, Op. 1 (1947-48), brought some exotic rhythms and seven-eight meter, and, as Ms. Kwon suggested, some thoughts of ouzo!

Though the musical itinerary zig-zagged, flow and variety were clearly a priority. Spanish music followed well after the Greek, and Enriqueta Somarriba of Spain was up next playing *Aragonesa* from *Cuatro Piezas Españolas* (1909) and *Ritual Fire Dance* from *El Amor Brujo* Suite (1915) by Manuel de Falla (1876-1946). Both were handled with aplomb and a minimum of physical display. This reviewer was almost relieved *not* to see the popular Arthur

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Rubinstein-esque forearm antics in the *Fire Dance*, just Ms. Somarriba's natural, individual interpretation.

Michael Bulychev-Okser of Russia followed with two transcriptions, *Liebesleid* (1923) of Sergei Rachmaninoff after Fritz Kreisler and Liszt's *The Nightingale* (1842) after Alyabyev. Both renditions, surefire through some dense virtuoso writing, will perhaps acquire more elasticity with time, though they showed considerable strength. Following these came *Sakura-Sakura* (A Fantasy for Piano, 1953) by Kozaburo Hirai (1910-2002), which took the listener to Japan via a well-phrased, thoughtful interpretation by Junko Ichikawa. We sadly missed the next programmed work by Nodar Gabunia (1933-2000) which was to be played by Alexander Beridze, an excellent pianist I have reviewed before, but who was unfortunately away. Ms. Mijung Cho from Korea thus was next, playing *Korean Rhapsody* (1975) by Eun-Hoe Park (b. 1930) with – again – considerable pianistic facility through some very florid composition.

Three works from the US completed the first half. Michael Maronich gave an intelligent reading to *Interlude II* (2003) by Leon Kirchner (1919-2009), bringing interpretive sensitivity to what is often treated as chiefly cerebral. He seems well suited to play more music in this vein. Kevin Madison, next, played his own composition entitled *room for milk* (2017) – a fascinating piece with driving rhythms and jazz elements (including a final reference to Joplin's rag, *The Entertainer*). Mr. Madison remarked that as a musician of mixed race he wanted to address the lack of representation of African-Americans in classical music, and he is off to a promising start. Carl Patrick Bolleia concluded the half with the ever-delightful *Serpent's Kiss* from *The Garden of Eden* (1974) by William Bolcom (b. 1938). Ms. Kwon showed insight in matching this humorous piece to such an uninhibited player. Though some stomping was overly loud in this listener's opinion – the stealth and suavity of the "serpent" were well captured elsewhere.

To open the second half, we heard the impressive pianist Anna

Keiserman of Russia playing *Basso Ostinato* (1961) by Rodion Shchedrin (b. 1932). A virtual pianistic tightrope, this piece leaves no split second for error, and there were none to speak of. Ms. Keiserman played brilliantly (and from memory), quite a feat considering the nerve-racking nature of these group concerts. What followed was aptly described by Ms. Kwon as “Liszt meets Liberace,” a fantasy on a Philippine folksong entitled *Ang Larawan* (c.1943) by Francisco Buencamino, Sr. (1883-1952). While the highly florid piece interested one chiefly as a novelty, the performer, Abraham Alinea of the Philippines, was noteworthy. While one tries in reviews to react to the music and not to biographies, it was shocking to learn from Ms. Kwon’s preface that he had been self-taught until only three years ago, when formal lessons were begun – spurred coincidentally by a course with Ms. Kwon entitled, “How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?” Apparently he learned how very quickly.

Playing late in such a long evening is challenging, but these young players gave their all. Shimrit Tsiporen of Israel commanded one’s full attention with her mature artistry in *Pastorale* and *Toccata* from *Five Pieces for Piano*, Op.34 (1943) by Paul Ben-Haim (1897-1984). Two selections (*Chula* and *Valsa Caprichosa*) from *Cenas Portuguesas*, Op. 9 (1887), by José Vianna da Motta (1868-1948), were engaging in the hands of Nuno Marques of Portugal. Francesco Barfoed from Denmark followed with two pieces of Carl Nielsen (1865-1931) first an early work, the *Humoresque-Bagatelles*, Op. 11, No. 1 (1897) followed by the third of *Three Piano Pieces*, Op. 59. Mr. Barfoed handled the contrasting styles and textures with assurance and artistry remarkable for one so young. I-Wen Wang followed Nielsen with a work by Yi-Chih Lu (b. 1982) based on a traditional folk song entitled *Grasshopper Playing Tricks on a Rooster* (2014). An interesting piece, set in alternating jazz and “classical” idioms (including a reference to Paganini’s 24<sup>th</sup> Caprice), it was given a crowd-pleasing performance.

Approaching the evening’s home stretch and representing Chile, composer Patricio Molina (b. 1989) performed his own piece, *A*



*Nicanor Parra* (Chilean Rhapsody, composed in 2012), demonstrating a fluent command of the instrument as well as a natural sense of his national music. He also added a Brazilian Samba he had newly composed, in fact for Ms. Kwon (one must add “resident muse” to her job description!). The concert, in all honesty, was a bit too long (starting at 7:30 and ending close to 10), but it is understandable that Ms. Kwon, as dedicatee, would tend to yield to such a request. One felt for the subsequent performers, who had waited all evening for their moments.

The concert closed with offerings from Korea and Cuba, *Three Korean Minyo* (2014) by Edward Niedermaier (1983) given a superb performance by Rachel Yunkyung Choo of Korea, and works of Ernesto Lecuona (1895-1963) including *Danza de los Ñañigos* (1930), *La Comparsa*, and *¡Y la Negra Bailaba!* played with mellow artistry by Erikson Rojas, soon going off to assume a professorship himself. Bravo to them and to all who participated in the occasion. One can only admire Ms. Kwon and all those at Mason Gross for this entire undertaking. One eagerly awaits the next!

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by [Rorianne Schrade](#) for New York Concert Review; New York, NY

 MAY 14, 2017

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