

Preview**Oberlin Artist Recital Series: Cooper Competition winner George Li returns to Oberlin on March 1**

by Mike Telin



Since his First Prize win at the inaugural Thomas and Evon Cooper International Competition in 2010 at age 14, American pianist George Li is quickly establishing himself as a young pianist to watch. On Saturday, March 1st beginning at 8:00 pm, in Finney Chapel, George Li will return to Oberlin for his debut performance on the Oberlin College Artist Recital Series. Li's program includes Schoenberg's *Sechs Kleine Klavierstücke, op. 19*, Beethoven's

Sonata No. 32 in c, op. 111, Rachmaninoff's *Variations on a theme of Corelli, op. 42* and Ravel's *La Valse*.

Praised by the *Washington Post* for combining “staggering technical prowess, a sense of command and depth of expression, Li was also a First Prize Winner in the 2010 Young Concert Artists International Auditions. In 2012 Li won the Gilmore Young Artist Award and received the Tabor Foundation Piano Award at the Verbier Academy. He has performed as soloist with orchestras including the Spartanburg Philharmonic, the Akron Symphony, the Xiamen Philharmonic in China, the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra in Venezuela to name a few. Li's 2013-14 season include recitals at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston and he appears as soloist with the Richmond Symphony, the Hilton Head Symphony Orchestra, and the Nordic Chamber Orchestra. He is currently in the Harvard University/ New England Conservatory joint program.

Now 18 years old, George Li is an impressive guy who's thoughtfully moving forward with his career. During a recent telephone conversation we discussed many things, including his Artist Recital Series program, his thoughts on interpretation, his university studies and his feelings about the overuse of the word prodigy. I began by asking him about his recollections of the 2010 Cooper Competition?

George Li: Mostly the excitement, meeting new people and building relationships with my colleagues. It was a broadening experience for me. I learned so much about performing because I got a lot of feedback from musicians and judges during the master classes. And the experience of playing with The Cleveland Orchestra was unforgettable.

Mike Telin: I well remember your performance of the Chopin Concerto No. 1. Am I correct that Jahja Ling was the conductor for that performance?

GL: Yes. He was great and really supportive and had great suggestions. He is just a wonderful person.



MT: Are you still performing the piece?

GL: Yes, I've played it a couple of times since then in Sweden and I do want to play it again.

MT: It is slightly less than four years since you won the Cooper and now you are returning to perform on the Oberlin Artist Recital Series. You've chosen a demanding program: Why did you choose these particular pieces?

GL: At this time it's important for me to grow [and expand] my repertoire. I learned these pieces over the past summer and I want to play them as much as possible to gain more experience. Another reason is that I am thinking of entering some competitions in the future like the Tchaikovsky and the Chopin.

But from a more musical point of view, recently the Beethoven Sonata has become one of my favorite pieces. It's so emotionally riveting and so spiritual. I'm also thinking of it from an orchestral perspective, I try to bring out some of the sonata's orchestral qualities. I also like all of Beethoven's symphonies and I try to make parallels between his symphonies and the sonata.

MT: That's very perceptive of you. Why did you choose the Schoenberg?

GL: I think it's a good introductory piece and I remember my teacher telling me that learning it will help me with phrasing and nuances – it's full of one-note crescendos and shapes. It also has a lot of theatrical playing in it — all these little gestures that capture the audience's attention.

MT: You don't need me to tell you this, but pianists have stacks of music by Rachmaninoff to choose from. Why did you decide on the Corelli variations?

GL: The first time I heard the piece it excited me a lot and I knew I wanted to play it. I started researching it and discovered that it was written during one of Rachmaninoff's darkest times. He was pouring all of his darkness into the piece. I think it's great and I don't hear that many performances of it in comparison to some of his other works. I felt like this was a good opportunity to play it.

MT: And finally, the Ravel.

GL: I really like this piece too. Here again I think of the piece as an orchestra. I heard a recording of the Boston Symphony Orchestra with Charles Munch which was great and so I try to keep those kinds of sounds and colors in my mind.

MT: I think it's great to hear that you use the orchestra as a reference point. Is this something you have always done?

GL: That's a good question because four years ago I did not think of playing the piano in this way. But it is something I have definitely been thinking about since I started listening to more orchestral music. My teacher has been encouraging me to do this in order to find a broader range of colors that can be replicated on the piano.

MT: Are you also looking at the pieces from a theoretical standpoint?

GL: Yes, more and more. Especially after high school. I went to an arts school, Walnut Hill, that is very strong in theory. After studying form and analysis it has helped me to think of music in terms of structure.

MT: You're currently enrolled in the New England Conservatory/Harvard joint program. I think I can guess what you're studying at NEC but what about Harvard?

GL: I haven't declared a concentration yet but I'm just taking a variety of courses. Last semester I took statistics and some music courses. This semester I'm taking French, expository writing and conducting which I think is going to be very helpful for me. Studying the scores of symphonies will help a lot. I'm also studying music history.

MT: You're also part of the Young Concert Artists Program.

GL: Yes and YCA Has been great for me! They've been very supportive of whatever choices I've made — like going to college. They are also protective because they know that I am at Harvard and I need to concentrate on my studies so they have been trying to limit my performances this year. When I was applying to colleges they gave me very good advice, and good advice about applying to competitions. And being part of YCA has been great for meeting new people and building relationships.

MT: It's been fun to follow your career and I also remember hearing your performance with the Akron Symphony a year or so ago. But when I read articles about you online, they all seem to describe you with one word, prodigy. Personally I feel it's overused but I do want to hear your feelings about that.

GL: Obviously they mean it in the best sense, but yes, I think it is overused. I guess it is a good word but I do get tired of hearing it all the time. I feel like there should be a better word to use when describing someone. I just want to be known as an artist, as someone who creates art and shares it with people to enjoy. Obviously it's hard not to focus on technique and virtuosity because that stuff is very important. But my main focus is to make music and express the emotions that are inside the piece and to convey those emotions to the audience.

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