

Tuesday Musical: pianist Fei-Fei in Annual Baxtresser Concert (Nov. 21)

by David Kulma



How can a composer tell a story through instrumental music? Although it's a complex topic among music intellectuals, great performers can easily cut to the quick with carefully considered performances full of imagination. In Tuesday Musical's annual concert dedicated to the late Margaret Baxtresser on November 21 at E.J. Thomas Hall, the pianist Fei-Fei brought both engaging musicality and delightful spoken commentary that

showed how vivacious and poetic pianism can create a compelling narrative.

Opening with Beethoven's *Sonata in E-flat*, Op. 31, No. 3, Fei-Fei amply made her point clear. Beethoven loved playing with rhetorical possibilities in his sonatas, and this one focuses on humorous juxtaposition and exaggerated overindulgence. Beethoven and classical music concerts are not really known for their humor, but Fei-Fei played so imaginatively that I did in fact laugh once to myself as she brusquely pounded multiple octaves of F and then turned on a dime for the impending sunny melody. The second-movement scherzo was very fast, yet graceful, while the fourth-movement finale was full of admirable bombast in her loudest dynamics. She played with such interpretative freedom that this well-worn work became an explorative journey.

Schumann's *Kinderszenen* paints pictures of childhood nostalgia, and again Fei-Fei knew how to draw out the right colors to display a panoply of moods as described by Schumann's piquant titles. It's hard to pick out highlights from such a stellar performance, but the famous "Träumerei" was a supple dream, while the final movement where "The Poet Speaks" was magical in its translucency. Fei-Fei purposefully doesn't leave much time between movements, so each one began with a certain striking juxtaposition as her musical affect opened up a new world.

Debussy's *L'Isle joyeuse* is a perfect piece for a painterly story-telling concert. Here the pianist brought a different fire to this famous work that made every note exciting. She allowed the low rumblings to sound murky, while the bustling trills and rapid swirls were apt metaphors for the sounds of the surf. To top it off, her passionate rendering of the big tune and powerful ending made this avoider of standing ovations reconsider his position.

In the second half, Rachmaninoff's *Moments Musicaux*, Op. 16, made an odd bedfellow for the clearly programmatic works that went before, but Fei-Fei advocated for this group of six pieces based on their spicy emotionalism — even in abstract packages. These *Moments* showed off Fei-Fei's easy handling of late-Romantic beauty. Her broad musical lines and sensitive rubato brought out the immediacy of Rachmaninoff's gorgeous melodies.

Her encore — a flashy arrangement by Jianzhong Wang of a Cantonese folk song titled *Colorful Clouds Chasing the Moon* — easily melded with the sound world of Debussy and Rachmaninoff. The filigreed flurries of sound amidst the lovely tune brought an amazing concert worthy of Margaret Baxtresser's memory to a close.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 9, 2019.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)