

**Oberlin Artist Recital Series:  
pianist Bruce Liu at Finney (Apr. 30)**

by Daniel Hathaway



Montéal-born pianist Xiaoyu Liu was 15 when he won second place in the Thomas and Evon Cooper International Piano Competition in 2012 with his performance of “Rach 2” at Severance Hall with Jahja Ling and The Cleveland Orchestra.

Having in the meantime won the top prize at the 18th Chopin Competition in Warsaw in 2021, Liu returned to Oberlin on April 30 — now as 26-year-old Bruce Liu — to play a solo recital on the Artist Recital Series in Finney Chapel.

There are two distinct topics to address in reporting on a solo performance. First, was the program a good fit for the performer and the occasion? Second, how well did the performer put the music across?

As might be expected, Liu gave his audience plenty of Chopin, choosing contrasting pieces from different categories of the Polish composer’s oeuvre — a rondo, a ballade, a set of variations, a sonata, and three “new” études, ending with Franz Liszt’s improvisatory musings on a notorious opera character already introduced in the variations set.

CHOPIN *Rondo à la mazur in F Major, Op. 5*

CHOPIN *Ballade No. 2 in F Major*

CHOPIN *Variations on "Là ci darem la mano" from  
Mozart's Don Giovanni*

— *Intermission* —

CHOPIN *Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat Minor*

CHOPIN *Trois nouvelles études*, Op. Posth.

LISZT *Réminiscences de Don Juan*

That flight plan worked well both on paper and in execution, giving Liu's listeners — which on Sunday included many Conservatory piano students — something of a guided tour of Chopin's catalog without exhausting their ears. And establishing a link between the pieces that ended each half was a brilliant structural move that compared the talents of two masters of Romantic pianism better than words can describe.

Liu's playing was consistently impressive, at the same time stunningly virtuosic and coolly clinical, unsullied by so much as a nicked note or two. His crisp handling of repeated chords was breathtaking.

He saved energy and stamina for the more outré moments in the *Réminiscences*, where he perhaps intended to reveal a truth about the difference between Chopin and Liszt. Complex and fantastical as the former's figuration can be, it arises organically from the music that it embellishes rather than being layered on top to draw primary attention to itself.

As Liu's program progressed, other thoughts crept into the mind. Will his highly calculated playing of these pieces always remain the same, or is there room for the kind of spontaneity, playfulness, and surprise that delights the listener? This recital was an extraordinary accomplishment, but it provoked more admiration than an emotional response.

Almost treated as an afterthought, two brief but highly decorated Rameau pieces ended Liu's program on a light note.

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