

REVIEW: Escher String Quartet and Joyce Yang start at excellent at Rockport Chamber Music Festival

By Keith Powers / Correspondent

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With a program where each work seemed to upstage the previous, the performance getting better and better in a crescendo of virtuosity, pianist Joyce Yang and the Escher String Quartet offered an exhilarating evening of Russian music Friday evening at the Rockport Chamber Music Festival.

Yang began the program with three preludes from Rachmaninov, one each from opus 32, 23 and 3, pulled from his complete set in all the major and minor keys. It was such a bracing concert opener you wondered where things could go from there.

Her choices from the 24 preludes started with the stark energy of the G sharp minor, taken from the last set Rachmaninov wrote. Rather than tackle the whole major/minor set at once, Rachmaninov created just one prelude in opus 3 (1892), then 10 more in opus 24 (1903), and completed the set with thirteen in opus 32 (1910).

The G-sharp minor buries its cheerless melody under a pile of trills. Yang's second choice, the D major from opus 23, has a more balanced melodic idea, which shows up as a repeated, altered arpeggio. The finale of Yang's set — Rachmaninov's first, his C-sharp minor that became his trusted encore all his performing days — articulates one central idea, but in the complete range of tempos and dynamics — first as quietly and slowly as is manageable, but concluding with muscular emphasis.

It felt like a whole recital had been given in just three preludes, such was the range of musical expression and the breadth of artistry. Yang was magnificent: she can make the piano do anything she wants. One wondered how the quartet could respond.

By getting better. Escher took the challenge with a ferocious reading of Shostakovich's Ninth string quartet. Five movements are played without a break, but with easily distinguished characteristics. Energy and tremendous tension through each of its modulations drive this quartet with intellectual fury.

And it got better still. Yang did not win a special chamber music award at the Van Cliburn competition for nothing; joining forces with Escher after intermission, they charged through Shostakovich's G minor piano quintet.

Yang pushed the action, articulating her own lines with force and insight, urging the group to engage each phrase as an artistic possibility. The second movement fugue, one of many highlights, passed quietly and individually through the strings, culminating in a piano solo, which then developed a wonder of complex musical ideas.

The middle movement Scherzo veered from its freight-train opening section — driven by relentless pounding at the keyboard — to a lyrical folksong melody, then back to the ferocious pounding. It was noisy, fun and startling all at once. A fourth movement Intermezzo moved gracefully through all five instruments, with the piano line serving as a bridge to the finale.

With its sequence of unusual moods, the first four movements created the anticipation of a rushing, uplifting finale. Not so.

Yet another mood, lyrical but subdued, interrupted by some loony Russian circus music, brought the quintet to an understated, almost left-footed conclusion.

An encore was demanded. The quintet flipped the score back a few pages, and revisited the raucous Scherzo. No one minded the repeat.

The Rockport Chamber Music Festival continues through July 9 at the Shalin Liu Performance Center. For tickets and information visit www.rockportmusic.org or call 978-546-7391.

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