

Barrie Concert Review – Saturday January 20th, 2018 at 7:30 p.m. - Pianist Sheng Cai - Liszt's Twelve Colossal Transcendental Études



A Colossal Concert Indeed

Submitted by Sandra Ruttan

The latest in the Barrie Concerts series took place Saturday evening, January 20, at Hiway Pentecostal Church. It was titled “Liszt’s Twelve Colossal Transcendental Études” and featured pianist, Sheng Cai playing one of Barrie’s own magnificent Shigeru Grand pianos. In his welcome, Bruce Owen, of the Barrie Concert Association Executive, commented that few pianists would play all of Liszt’s Études at once and joked “I hope Sheng Cai survives it.” As the evening progressed it became increasingly evident that not only are the Études colossal masterpieces, but also that Sheng Cai has the kind of colossal technique and energy that is needed to play them.

At the youthful age of 28, Sheng Cai has performed extensively across Canada, the United States, and in China. He has won numerous piano competitions, including the Bosendorfer International Piano Competition. He has also done special recordings for, and had performances broadcast by the CBC. He is well known for his virtuosic playing and his enthusiasm for bringing lesser known “treasures” to the attention of his audiences, sometimes offering his own compositions as well.

Saturday’s concert did not start with the Liszt Études, but rather with a set of pieces by Schumann, “Scenes from Childhood” Op. 15. Originally just called “Easy Pieces,” this set of 13 short and charming pieces imaginatively evokes moods and moments as varied as that of a pleading child to that of a child rollicking around as a knight on a hobby-horse. In their relative simplicity, “Scenes from Childhood” created a beautiful contrast with the technical fireworks of the Études which were to follow. Sheng Cai’s playing of them demonstrated much sensitivity and control.

The Études took the energy of the concert to another level. Although the études explore many moods and feelings, there are few moments where there is not something incredibly fast going on, whether it be runs, trills, arpeggios, or tremolos. Sometimes these were in the forefront and played with great power. Sometimes they were embellishment to slower melodies and vertical harmonies, and played with such muted delicacy that they seemed to froth and bubble and liquify into a shimmer of sound. But almost always, Sheng Cai’s fingers were flying.

There is a reason few pianists would play all 12 Études at once, but Sheng Cai not only survived, he thrived. It was plain that he loved the thrill of mastering passages of technical difficulty and

it was this thrill that he brought to his audience. When the last fast and furious passages of the Études were over, the audience rose to their feet in a standing ovation that resulted in not one, but three encores. It was truly a colossal concert.