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Pianist Mei-Ting Sun goes for the bold and beautiful

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Until two years ago, the Twin Cities couldn't boast of a major musical competition, unless one includes the Metropolitan Opera auditions, which are part of a larger enterprise that concludes at the Met's home base in New York City.

Then in the summer of 2002 came the Piano-e-Competition, an ambitious, large-scale event that drew competitors and judges from all parts of the world. The winner of the first prize, a 20-year-old Chinese-American, Mei-Ting Sun, received his prizes -- among them \$25,000 in cash and a \$75,000 Yamaha concert grand -- and since then his career has continued to expand. Sun played a recital Friday night at Sundin Music Hall at Hamline University in St. Paul, his first performance here since winning the competition, and displayed the mix of passion and almost superhuman technique that so impressed the judges in 2002.

There is, first, the immense sound he produces, a sound of orchestral size, both in amplitude and color, and a sound that at times Friday night proved almost overwhelming in the bright acoustics of Sundin Hall. Moreover, Sun can play the most daunting music without apparent strain.

In fact, there's a touch of the daredevil in some of the things he does, for instance, starting that tangled obstacle course, the Schumann Toccata, at breakneck speed and sustaining that tempo all the way through without ever blurring a passage. Nor, in this era of scholarly, self-effacing pianists, does he disdain good, old-fashioned showmanship: His final encore was the old Vladimir Horowitz arrangement of "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

Whatever one might think of that encore, even a curmudgeon would have to admit that this was a serious program, not merely an evening of piano acrobatics. True, one could argue of Sun's Scarlatti, the two brief sonatas that opened the evening, that they were too not delicate enough. Still, it was refreshing to hear someone apply to these works the full resources of the modern piano, as Horowitz himself did in this repertoire, rather than trying to imitate a harpsichord.

Sun's Schumann, which included "Kreisleriana," was more impressive, his Rachmaninoff, the Opus 23 Preludes, even more so. His Schumann was big-boned and exciting but also offered ample moments of introspection, the rich vein of lyricism, for instance, in the middle part of the third section. The Rachmaninoff Preludes, however, were really something: diverse, fully characterized and tonally rich, always singing in that special, slightly exaggerated, manner that brings this composer's often misunderstood idiom to life. Surely hardly anyone can play the famous G-minor Prelude as fast as Sun took it, and yet he spun the lyrical middle section as if from the most delicate gossamer.

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