

World favourite

With his Chinese-American roots, George Li's performing style reflects an international outlook, based on an innate understanding of the role that classical music plays in different cultures.

Stephen Wigler meets a young pianist with real audience appeal

WHEN GEORGE LI TOOK PART IN THE 2015 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, he quickly became a favorite, perhaps *the* favorite, of the Russian audience. Many believed that the then 19-year-old Boston-born and American-trained pianist should have been awarded the gold medal instead of the silver he won for sharing second prize with Lukas Geniušas. While he was the only pianist among the top five medalists who was not Russian-born and trained, it was Li's playing that seemed to strike the deepest chords with the Russians seated in the hall.

Li was born in the United States to parents who had emigrated from China. His two most important teachers in Boston have been Dorothy Shi, with whom he studied between the ages of four and 12, and Wha Kyung Byun, with whom he continues to study. Both were born and raised in the Far East, but Li's playing sounds Russian. Indeed, in its high bravura, technical daring, full-blooded tone, poetic sensibility and almost improvisatory approach to music that is rhapsodic in form, Li's pianism may have reminded older members of his Moscow audience of the young Emil Gilels (1916-1985). This would have been obvious to any listener who heard Li's Moscow performance of Chopin's Ballade in G minor, which, like those Gilels used to give, began with great pathos and proceeded to ever-greater climaxes of force and grandeur.

It was, at least in part, the audience that spurred Li to do his best in Moscow: 'Every artist wants to establish a connection with the audience and in Russia it's easy,' Li says. 'When I looked beyond the expressionless faces of the judges sitting in the front row, I loved seeing how much the audience were enjoying themselves. They care so much about pianists and the music we play that it helped my performances enormously. As it turned out, [winning] the Competition was not the most important thing for me; it was the chance to play in front of Russian audiences.' Nevertheless, winning that silver medal has transformed his life, Li says: 'It's changed everything from the time I was just a Harvard [University] freshman who was playing several dates a year, but whose engagements did not interfere with his going to classes. The Competition totally opened up my career.'

His opportunities have included several dates with Valery Gergiev and the Mariinsky Orchestra, concertos with prestigious orchestras in Europe, Asia and North America, and recitals in venues such as Vienna's Musikverein, Moscow's Bolshoi, Washington's Kennedy Center and Paris's Louvre Museum Auditorium. He has been so

George Li: 'The Tchaikovsky Competition totally opened up my career'

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busy that he had take a year's leave from Harvard, where he has now returned to study English literature – 'currently Shakespeare and the Romantic poets,' he explains.

'Combined with studying repertory, performing concerts, and learning new repertory, my academic life makes for a lot of work,' Li admits. 'Sometimes I'm so busy that it's difficult to find balance. It's hard to learn new repertory, but it's also a pleasure because the great literature for the piano is endless.'

The summer has been an especially busy time for Li, including visits to Seattle for a week-long chamber-music festival, followed by solo recitals in Chicago and New York before flying across the Atlantic for appearances in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and France. He won't be back home until October when, after appearances on the East Coast, he heads to Harvard for the first semester of his junior year.

In late June, Li spent 10 days in a five-city concert tour of China. 'I like Chinese audiences a lot,' he says. 'They may not be as well educated musically as those in Russia – after all their exposure to classical music began much more recently. But there's one very interesting thing about them: in contrast to European and especially American audiences, you see kids everywhere in Chinese concerts. That's probably because more children are exposed to classical music there than in any other country I know. More than 50 million children study music in China – and most of them do it when they are sitting down in front of a piano: 🎹'

GEORGE LI'S DIARY

Sep 4

Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No 1

Valery Gergiev, *conductor*

Grafenegg Festival

Austria

Sep 6-10

Prokofiev Piano Concerto No 1

Valery Gergiev, *conductor*

Rotterdam Philharmonic Festival

The Netherlands

Oct 8-10

Prokofiev Piano Concerto No 3

Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester

Berlin, Germany

Oct 14-16

Prokofiev Piano Concerto No 3

Stamford Symphony Orchestra

Stamford, Connecticut

USA

www.georgeli pianist.com

arizona state university

school of music

music.asu.edu

480.965.5069



Piano Faculty

Walter Cosand *Piano*

Robert Hamilton *Piano*

Baruch Meir *Piano*

Caio Pagano *Piano*

Andrew Campbell *Collaborative Piano*

Russell Ryan *Collaborative Piano*

Hannah Creviston *Piano Pedagogy*



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Performing opportunities off campus include ASU concert series at the renowned Musical Instrument Museum and the Scottsdale Center for the Performing Arts. The School of Music is also home to the Bösendorfer and Yamaha USASU International Piano competitions, a biannual event that brings distinguished artists such as Martha Argerich, Sergei Babayan and Sofya Gulyak to the ASU campus for adjudication, recitals and master classes.

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