

Ilya Itin, pianist International Piano Festival, Princeton

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Itin: Expressive, not flamboyant

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Ilya Itin is part of the Golandsky Institute's annual International Piano Festival.

PRINCETON, N.J. — Glancing at the lineup for the Golandsky Institute's annual International Piano Festival here, one might initially assume that it's yet another laudable program to put young classical artists on a solid career path, starting on the right (or correct) foot. Why, then, is one of the festival's most

important recitals by the well-into-middle-age pianist Ilya Itin?

The Golandsky Institute actually has a much broader reach, to pianists young, old, professional and otherwise, to acquire a piano technique with minimum danger of injury and to play without pain, no doubt the indirect legacy of pianists such as Gary Graffman and Leon Fleischer who, at the height of their considerable careers, lost the use of their right hands.

Itin, who placed well in the prestigious Leeds Competition and has a good career in Europe and the Far East, is apparently the institute's poster person. The idea is the physical freedom that allows pianists to be all that they can be. Music education veterans say that many such institutes exist with similar missions.

Evaluating the Golandsky Institute's effectiveness is well beyond the scope of an armchair observer. At Itin's recital Friday in Richardson Auditorium here, one can only say what one heard (a pianist with easy command of every

Artist Management

aspect of his instrument) and what one saw with a good view of the keyboard (which was practically nothing). He seemed hardly to move at all.

That's significant for those of us who witnessed the flamboyant rise of Lang Lang from the Curtis Institute, who represents the opposite of physical economy — and is seen, all too often, with worrisome Band-Aids on his hands. For Itin, lack of physical movement did not translate into a lack of expressive range in the least. Were that the case, one would certainly hear it in his formidable concert program including Chopin's Preludes Op. 28 and Ravel's Gaspard de la Nuit.

Chopin's 24 intentionally fragmentary preludes are like shards that hail from different worlds, almost like a series of archaeological objects. Whatever one might think of how Itin characterized the preludes individually, he gave each one its own coloristic tint, while also giving keen attention to the way they're sequenced with an intelligent tempo scheme. So there was unity — amid maximum diversity.

The greater feat, though, as in Ravel, who often inspires modern pianists to render feats of scene painting. Itin's approach was the opposite of that, emphasizing what the notes say (as opposed to how they sound). The music could have seemed dry from a descriptive standpoint. Yet the final movement's depiction of the mythical, demonic Scarbo — who usually seems fairly harmless with scene-painting pianists — was malevolent bordering on

terrifying. Undoubtedly, Itin is a major pianist, with an ease about him that makes you want to listen to him for hours.

Contact David Patrick Stearns at
pstearns@phillynews.com

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