

Sheng Cai

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Talent that puts Canada on the map

Pianist Sheng Cai delights Georgian Music audience

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by Sandra Ruttan, Special to the Examiner

A pianist who is possibly better than Glenn Gould. This is how 24-year old pianist, Sheng Cai, was introduced to his audience at the Georgian Music concert on Sunday afternoon. Certainly his biography is impressive. At the age of fifteen Sheng Cai made his debut with the Toronto Symphony. Since then he has concertized all over North America, as well as in China, England, Russia and the Czech Republic.

He has also been a prize winner in numerous international piano competitions and made recordings for the CBC. It was for good reason that the crowd at Central United Church settled into their seats with heightened anticipation of a wonderful musical event about to take place. The program he set out to perform turned out to have been "custom created" for this Barrie audience. The community here had made requests to concert organizers as to specific pieces they would like to hear performed.

In a brilliant display of versatility, Sheng Cai chose every piece on his program from this list of requests. Every piece was a well-loved favorite.

First was Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Sheng Cai's restrained and controlled playing of that famous first movement created an instant "space" with its hushed intimacy. His command of dynamics and mood became fully apparent as he made the transition to the playfulness of the second movement and the tempestuousness of the third. Especially delightful were moments when his choice of balance and voicing managed to bring fresh ways of listening to the very well-known piece.

His next choice, Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata is also well-loved. The hushed opening theme was imaginative and full of suspense. Again, confident shifts in tempo and thoughtful voicing created for his audience new ways to listen. The hymn-like second movement and the stormy third made obvious, again, Sheng Cai's expressive talent.

After intermission, he took a turn into impressionism with a set of pieces by Claude Debussy. In *Pagodes*, he offered the sonorous sounds of a Javanese Gamelan orchestra. After a magical conclusion, he skillfully conjured up the



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delightful sounds of Spain with *La soiree dans Granade*.

The wonderful sounds of a rainstorm were next with the piece *Jardins sous la pluie*.

Then the program turned romantic once more with Chopin's *Ballade No. 1*. At times warm and eloquent, at time openly exuberant, it was a clean and precise display of virtuosic piano playing.

Unflagging in energy, Sheng Cai concluded his performance with the dazzling *Islamay: Oriental Fantasy* by Balakirev, and, in response to a most enthusiastic ovation, an encore, *The Lark* by Glinka.

Glenn Gould? Debatable, but definitely an impressive artist in his own right.

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