

Young pianist shines at orchestra's Mann Center Tchaikovsky show

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Pianist Yijia Wang and Philadelphia Orchestra principal guest conductor Stephane Deneve made their Mann Center debuts Wednesday.

by **David Patrick Stearns**, Music Critic

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“What would we ever do without Tchaikovsky?” asked conductor Stéphane Denève at the Philadelphia Orchestra’s annual Mann Center Tchaikovsky Spectacular on Wednesday.

Truth is, most works on the all-Tchaikovsky program would have been exhausted from over-exposure long ago were it not for succeeding generations of performers re-interpreting the music in ways that keep it communicative.

Denève is one of them. And a new face was Chinese pianist Yijia Wang — *not* the famous Yuja Wang. This Wang (who wore too many clothes to be Yuja) is 21, won the orchestra’s Albert M. Greenfield Student Competition last year, and just graduated from the Curtis Institute of Music, having studied with Meng-Chieh Liu and built a notable resumé and repertoire.

Her reading of Tchaikovsky’s *Piano Concerto No. 1* was not what you’d expect. Emerging artists begin their careers placing virtuosity first; any sense of personality peaks out from the confines of impressively energetic tempos. Wang took her time. Each phrase was molded with its own deeply felt character. Even when Tchaikovsky reiterates his thematic material obsessively, she had strong emotional explanations.

The concerto is a series of soliloquies with bursts of heroic music that Wang met well enough, though without the personal connection heard elsewhere. Then, in the famous finger-busting final-movement flourish, she unleashed a stentorian sound. She’d been saving it, obviously — aided by Denève’s similar regard for building long-term musical arcs.

In his Mann Center debut, principal guest conductor Denève charmed the audience with his patter but, more important, delivered performances that were pulled together and had much to say — that’s particularly impressive considering that rehearsal had been curtailed by a power failure. He had every confidence that, even in long quiet spots, he would keep the attention of the Mann Center’s more recreational listeners.

Denève’s tempos in *Waltz of the Flowers* were intriguingly relaxed, starting with a fearlessly expansive reading of the harp cadenza. Tchaikovsky’s *Francesca da Rimini* had a particularly strong musical narrative. Denève had each episode in the *1812 Overture* returning with escalating tension. The digital cannon fire, which he treated as another instrument in the orchestra, felt underpowered at first but made a more commanding impression upon returning in a higher-tension context.

If only the peripheral elements of the Mann Center were more welcoming. You navigate the traffic to get out there, pay \$20 for car parking — or, if you’re like me, bicycle yourself into a state of dehydration — only to have security people treat you like you’re on probation and concession stand workers handing you your soda with a manner suggesting indifferent dismissal. Somebody somewhere has forgotten why we gather to hear music.

Read more by **David Patrick Stearns**
