



Sung-Soo Cho in Review

SUNG-SOO CHO, PIANO

WEILL RECITAL HALL AT CARNEGIE HALL, NEW YORK, NY

NOVEMBER 27, 2015

If only people flocked to recitals the way they throng the retail outlets on “Black Friday,” they would have been treated to an exceptional young artist of great promise. Sung-Soo Cho looks all of age twelve, but he is probably double that, considering that he is pursuing a doctorate and also teaching at the college level.

The entire recital was extremely well-prepared and played, with abundant mechanical gifts fully displayed in a wide-ranging program (Haydn to 21st century). But technique wasn’t the whole story: Mr. Cho manages to phrase very musically, and definitely has an “ear” for refined piano color and a wide tonal palette. I could only have wished that some of the program had been a bit less controlled, that he had conjured up the sense that he was communing with the instrument and the music more spontaneously—a place he did arrive by the end of the program.

Mr. Cho’s specialty, according to his bio, is contemporary American piano music. Indeed, the finest performance of the evening was his mesmerizing rendition of John Corigliano’s *Fantasia on an Ostinato*, which refers, through layers of texture, to the Allegretto movement from Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony. In this work, which Mr. Cho made sound much better than it really is, his coloration and

sense of organization and drama were superb. The work is indebted to the “minimalist” movement for much of its gesture, but it is a language that Corigliano speaks somewhat “maximally.” Here Mr. Cho was in perfect union with the composition and the piano.

Mr. Cho also brought a beautiful sense of “space” to the *Distance of the Moon* (a New York premiere) by Michael Ippolito (a student of Corigliano).

Haydn’s Sonata in B Minor, Hob. XVI: 32, which began the recital, was played with great flair and crisp articulation, though in a work so compact I missed the repetitions of the expositions (and possibly even the recaps) in the first and third movements. Let us not treat Haydn as a mere appetizer.

Mr. Cho showed a marked sensitivity to the subtlety of so-called Impressionist French repertoire, playing three Debussy Préludes from Book II with perfect sonority. *Les fées sont d’exquises danseuses*, in particular, featured “exquisite dancing” of nimble, delicate fingers over the keys.

Before intermission, Mr. Cho barnstormed his way through Liszt’s concert “paraphrase” of Verdi’s *Rigoletto*. He managed its fierce business with great musicality, perhaps the only thing missing would have been a slightly “grander” air about the whole—surely that will come as he matures.

The final work on the program was Brahms’ compendium of pianistic difficulties: the Paganini Variations, Op. 35, played in its entirety. Here I really felt that Mr. Cho let go and showed us more of himself. He varied the voicing and color of each repeat wonderfully, and at the same time managed to make the piece sound “easy.”

All in all, a successful debut. Just a note, as anyone who reads my reviews regularly knows: If you are giving a recital in a major New York hall (or really anywhere), it is NOT ACCEPTABLE to have no program notes, especially when there are unusual works or premieres on the program.

Mr. Cho favored the audience with a fun encore: *A Gliss Is Just a Gliss* by David Rakowski.

by [Frank Daykin](#) for New York Concert Review; New York, NY

DECEMBER 2, 2015

MAXIMUM | MINIMUM | MODERN • Sung-Soo Cho (pn) • ALBANY 1617 (60:04)

CORIGLIANO *Fantasia on an Ostinato*. IPPOLITO *The Distance of the Moon*. ADAMS *China Gates*. LIEBERMANN Duo. REICH *Piano Phase*. CARTER *Caténaires*. RAKOWSKI *Études*: No. 21, “Twelve- Step Program”; No. 30, “A Gliss is just a Gliss”

Sung-Soo Cho is not exactly a contemporary-music specialist. As is clear from the videos on his web site (at least as of March 2016), he’s a formidable Lisztian, and he can coax gorgeous sounds from Debussy’s *Preludes*. Still, this debut recital for Albany shows a rare affinity for recent Americana too.

Technically, the disc is a marvel. He has the dexterity to untangle the notes of this often extremely difficult music without displaying any sense of strain—and this fluency is heightened by the striking sensitivity of his touch (listen to the shimmering tremolos toward the beginning of the Ippolito, inspired by a Calvino story) and the unerring rightness of his vertical balances. This combination of virtues not only illuminates the complex overlapping rhythmic patterns of Adams’s *China Gates* and Reich’s *Piano Phase*, but also brings out the implied textual complexity of Carter’s 2006 *Caténaires*, a brilliant perpetual motion workout (certainly, a wilder piece than you might expect from a 98-year-old) written in a single line but with multiple voices, much in the manner of Bach’s solo violin music. It certainly sounds more contrapuntal in Cho’s hands than it does, say, in Aimard’s.

Interpretively, the recital is just as winning. Much of this music would seem to encourage high heat, if not ferocity. But while Cho can bring on the razzle-dazzle (try Rakowski’s jazzy “A Gliss is Just a Gliss”), there’s an overall sense of refinement, laced with moments of exquisite gentleness. I’m especially impressed with his reading of Corigliano’s *Fantasia on an Ostinato*. This gloss on the second movement of the Beethoven Seventh has become an enormously popular showpiece—so much so, in fact, that its success may well have undermined its purpose. It was originally written as a contest piece for the 1985 Van Cliburn, and it had a specifically polemical purpose. “A young performer’s life,” the composer argued, “is dominated by guidance: from living teachers to the encyclopaedic recorded repertoire of the world’s important pianists playing the standard repertoire, they are trained from childhood to re-create, rather than to create.” To counter this submissiveness, Corigliano wrote a piece that required the performer’s intervention: “I made the large central section a series of interlocking repeated patterns: the performer decided the number and, to a certain extent, the character of these repetitions.” Of course, since then, *Fantasia on an Ostinato* itself has been taken on by the “world’s important pianists,” including Ax, Oppens, and especially Grimaud. Still, even now that the piece has become nearly standard repertoire, Cho fulfills the composer’s wishes and makes it his own—in particular by playing down the music’s obsessive quality so artfully brought out by Grimaud. It’s a beautiful performance, as is his account of Liebermann’s *Nocturne No. 7*, with its disarming luminosity.

Any complaints? Only one with respect to performance: Reich’s *Piano Phase* was written for two performers, and the virtuosity required as they move out of phase is one of the primary joys of the piece; in this recording, Cho plays both parts,

which are overdubbed, a decision that mutes some of the music's impact. As for the production: The sound is generally good, but the uncredited notes are a disappointment. There's no discussion of why these particular pieces were chosen, how they interrelate, or how they form a coherent collection—as a result, the disc is apt to seem more random than it is. Then, too, the notes often quote (or misquote) the composers without attribution—a fairly sloppy procedure.

All in all, though, an impressive release. More from Cho would be welcome. Peter J. Rabinowitz

This article originally appeared in Issue 39:6 (July/Aug 2016) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

MAXIMUM | MINIMUM | MODERN • Sung-Soo Cho (pn) • ALBANY 1617 (60:04)

CORIGLIANO *Fantasia on an Ostinato*. IPPOLITO *The Distance of the Moon*. ADAMS *China Gates*. LIEBERMANN Duo. REICH *Piano Phase*. CARTER *Caténaires*. RAKOWSKI *Études*: No. 21, “Twelve- Step Program”; No. 30, “A Gliss is just a Gliss”

Here is an intriguing and varied disc of piano music by American composers. The *Fantasia on an Ostinato* (1985) by John Corigliano was written as a semifinal test piece for the Seventh Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. Beginning with an arresting dissonance, the music initially hints at the origins of the ostinato: the repeated rhythm of the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. The central panel of the work is a succession of intertwining repeated patterns, and it is up to the performer to decide the number of these repetitions, and their character. The first part of the piece centers around not only the rhythm of the Beethoven, but also numerous ramifications of its harmony. It is a fascinating piece, one that enchants the ear on first hearing and which continues to yield more and more on each subsequent playing. Corigliano plays with our expectations, too: for example, in a passage just before the five-minute mark, where the music could so easily slip into a jazz harmony. Yet Corigliano opts out at the very last moment, pulling the music back into his own terrain. The music veers off towards a more Impressionistic, watery space around eight minutes in; yet again, Corigliano's own voice confidently underpins this detour, so the passage is perfectly subsumed in the overall picture, leading elegantly to a dissonant climax before the Beethoven figure clearly returns. There is heavy competition in the piece in the form of Emanuel Ax on Sony (*Fanfare* 24:2) and Hélène Grimaud on DG (whose first chordal gesture, interestingly, is not played simultaneously), but Cho's version, with his commanding technique, holds its head high, shot through with the utmost concentration.

There follows what appears to be the only piece by the young composer Michael Ippolito in the current catalog: *The Distance of the Moon*, written as recently as 2015. Inspired by images invoked by a story in Italo Calvino's book *Cosmicomics*, in which a group of people row in a boat to the point at which the moon comes closest to the Earth, pop up to the moon via a ladder, and then proceed to milk the moon, the piece itself projects a sort of strange fantasy world, its early Impressionist swirlings moving slowly, inevitably, up the keyboard. At times, some of the writing seems reminiscent of Sorabji, but the musical surface refuses to remain in dense textures. Cascading, sometimes post-Impressionist, sometimes grittier than that,

this is a simply fascinating piece that demands a place in recital programs.

While there might be a proto-Minimalist element to Corigliano's offering, we are into that territory fully for John Adams's *China Gates* (1977). Underpinned by a "gamelan sounding bass," to quote the booklet notes, the onward patter above was inspired by an uncharacteristically rainy month in North California. All similarities with Chopin's *D ♭ Prelude* and that piece's link to precipitation pretty much end there. What is interesting here is the delicacy of Adams's piece. *China Gates* is fairly popular on disc, with Allan Feinberg setting it in a fascinating program that includes works by Davidovsky, Babbitt, Griffes, and more on Argo 436 935-2 (*Fanfare* 17:5), while the excellent Jenny Lin includes it on her fine, stimulating disc *Chinoiserie* (BIS 1110, *Fanfare* 24:1).

Lowell Liebermann studied with David Diamond and Vincent Persichetti at Juilliard. His *Nocturne No. 7* dates from 1999. The booklet notes hit the nail on the head when they state that the "pan-diatonic harmony creates the allusion of E-Major"; and Liebermann's melodic gift is left in no doubt. This sense of security is disturbed by the central panel, which rises to a mildly nightmarish climax before the sweet melody returns. In massive contrast comes the mechanical beginning of Steve Reich's *Piano Phase* (1967). It is scored for two pianos: Here, the two piano parts were recorded separately and then overdubbed and synchronized. Stretching out to nearly 20 minutes, it is a whirlpool that drags the listener in. While I would be fascinated to hear the version of *Piano Phase* on Alice 004 for two theorbos (reviewed in *Fanfare* 24:1 by Art Lange), and it is easy to hear why percussion ensemble versions of this piece are popular, there is something about the purity of the piano sound for this.

Listening to the hyperactive surface of Elliott Carter's *Caténaires*, it is easy to believe that it was written for Pierre-Laurent Aimard. The title translates as "chains" or "curves." The piece is monophonic, a "continuous chain of notes using different spacings, accent and colorings," in the composer's own words. David Rakowski (b. 1958) studied at the New England Conservatory and at Princeton, numbering Babbitt and Peter Westergaard among his teachers. He's clearly very good at titles, as these two etudes demonstrate. The *Étude No. 21*, "Twelve-Step Program" is an homage to Earl Kim (*Exercices En Route*, to be precise) and plays extensively with a wedge figure. The musical surface is knotty and Modernist. Cho's final offering is Rakowski's *Étude No. 30*, "A Gliss is just a Gliss" (see what I mean about the titles?). The composer himself calls this a "raucous sort of atonal honky-tonk"; the score itself is headed with the indication *deranged*. It is crazy music, but crazy in a good way; the quiet ending comes as a surprise given the hive of activity that precedes it, yet it is that sort of quiet fizzle out that would raise a restrained chuckle from a live audience if brought off well. Cho seems to revel in its demands, and he manages the close perfectly.

In fact, Sung-Soo Cho plays brilliantly throughout. He is a pupil of Philip Kewin, which pianist recently impressed with two discs on the Master Performers label. The recording is top-notch. Colin Clarke

This article originally appeared in Issue 39:6 (July/Aug 2016) of *Fanfare Magazine*.