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Review: Music

Filling in for Andre Watts, a young pianist dazzles Academy audience

By Lesley Valdes
INQUIRER MUSIC WRITER

It's not very often you get to witness the birth of a career. Maybe every couple of decades or so, an unknown fills in for an established artist and the result matches the thrilling risk. And if it does — when a career is launched this way — the moment really does have the mythical splendor of Aphrodite arising from the sea.

How many memories go back 30 years — when a teenage Andre Watts launched his career with Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic? Or even earlier, when Bernstein thrillingly replaced his mentor, the conductor Dimitri Mitropoulos? Thirty years ago, Watts had the good fortune to fill in at the last minute for the highly touted

Glenn Gould.

Monday night, Watts repaid history's musical favor. At 5 p.m. — three hours before his solo recital for the All Star-Forum — the highly regarded pianist caved in to the flu. He stopped practicing at the Academy of Music and regretfully told Moe Spector, head of the All-Star Forum, he had to cancel. Very regretfully — for this was to be the rescheduling of the All Star-Forum recital Watts canceled in February because of a back problem.

And so Watts gave the opportunity of a lifetime to a 21-year-old pianist.

His name is Meng-Chieh Liu (pronounced MUN-cheh Lee-YOU). He is from Kaohsiung, Taiwan, where he has won a number of honors and competitions. Since 1985, he's been studying at the Curtis Institute,

where he graduates in May.

He is tall and wavy-haired, and has a sweetness in his face that matches the expressivity that proved captivating throughout Monday evening's music.

When he struck the opening chords of the Schumann *G Minor Sonata, Op. 22*, a look of ardor and the flourish of his long arms brought Cliburn to mind. That American's heroic style is, of course, also a characteristic of Watts' big-boned virtuosity. And if the interpretations that followed — of Beethoven, Debussy, Chopin and Franck — had the flair equal to efforts of these senior artists, they also had a lyrical finesse that is not always true of these men.

Liu played the program he plans to give as his graduation recital at Curtis Hall this Friday.

Schumann's ardors and agitations tumbled across the keyboard with a fine attention to matters of volume and voice-leading. Then came Beethoven's *Sonata in A major, Op. 101*. Its challenges include the attention to tenderness and lyricism, the ability to play softly without losing the thread of the composer's fluid thoughts.

Here, and in the second movement of the Schumann, Liu's ability to play pianissimo reminded me of Carl Sandburg's fog arriving "on little cat feet." Balancing Chopin's pliant lines and repetitive martial rhythms was the successful task in the *Polonoise Fantasy, Op. 61*, in which the pianist evoked lovely qualities of spontaneity and rumination.

In Debussy's *Estampes*, the difficulties involve the control of sensuality and probing subtle rhythms. Highly

colored, it is one of the French composer's most Spanish pieces, and Liu's evocation was superb.

And then it happened. The worst possible scenario. A memory lapse during the last piece on the program. Liu was the middle of the fugue in Cesar Franck's *Prelude, Chorale & Fugue* and he lost his concentration. He must have, finally, an hour and 40 minutes into the recital, really felt the terror of holding captive this seasoned of audience of 2,000.

A memory lapse is always horrible. But in the middle of a fugue, where the fingers must work as if on automatic pilot, it's a disaster. Once, twice, the young man stopped, paused, began the fugue again.

Once, twice, the audience held its breath in seconds that seemed — interminable. On the third try, Liu's fingers found their way through the crisscrossing melodies, and finally, blissfully, he arrived back at Franck's undulating closing theme.

No sooner did the music come to its sentimental stop than the applause began.

The trials were over. Meng-Chieh Liu proved himself a young artist of considerable grace — and guts. Before he was off the stage, the Academy audience was on its feet, award-



Meng-Chieh Liu graduates from Curtis Institute in May.

ing him a deserved standing ovation.

After the first curtain call, the young man once again showed his mettle, the type of spirit that will win him many friends. He sat back down at the piano, to play Liszt's arrangement of *Widmung*, "by Schumann," Liu said, "and I'll try not to forget."