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## Wei Luo alternates the raw and refined in Princeton recital for Curtis

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PRINCETON - The summertime campus here is annually overrun with pianists (and a few violinists) when the Golandsky Institute welcomes artists young and old to learn healthy techniques that allow them to play well for as long as they love music. There's also a piano festival (ending Saturday) showcasing faculty and students expressing themselves without extraneous effort.

The exception of sorts was a Thursday recital at Taplin Auditorium of Chinese pianist Wei Luo, the latest Chinese wonder to hit the Curtis Institute. Not a student of Golandsky's Taubman Approach (at least not yet), she was an artistically restless contrast to the institute's placid

vener (each day begins with a gentle yoga class and ends with a concert enjoyed by a Birkenstock-shod audience).

Curtis rightly shields its younger talents from premature exposure. But this 16-year-old student of Gary Graffman (who recently participated in First Cliburn International Junior Piano Competition) seems unstoppable, even disdaining applause - not to mention the showiness of her Chinese contemporaries - due to apparent impatience to get back to Bach, Brahms, Haydn, and Prokofiev. And that has its own kind of magnetism.

Although Wei Luo's imposing personality has a refined side, her rawness is initially disconcerting, until you realize how seldom something so unfiltered, so genuine, is heard in traditional concert repertoire. While Ravel's *La Valse* conveys a crumbling post-World War I civilization going down with Gallic style, Wei Luo's performance suggested the more massive destruction of World War II. If there's one thing that sets her apart from Chinese predecessors Lang Lang and Yuja Wang, it's the size of her sonority - one that demands something larger than Taplin Auditorium.

Combined with her speedy tempos, Wei Luo risks landing in the fast-and-loud category, especially in pieces such as Brahms' *Paganini Variations Books I and II*, with its dense sonorities and feverish manner. Such a performance could have sounded cursory; instead, Wei Luo revealed the composer's unexpected flashes of wit. Haydn's *Piano Sonata No. 52* had meaningful rhetorical silences. Prokofiev's *Piano Sonata No. 7 Op. 83*, a piece that consciously reflects World War II, had lots of levels, especially in this performance, which revealed sardonic commentary behind the gunfire.

Equally intriguing were those odd moments when she took you so far inside the music that your ears left behind previous points of reference, partly because she immerses herself in the music with an intensity that borders on madness. One instance was the opening of Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in C-sharp Minor from The Well-Tempered Clavier Book II*. On the other side of that, though, one experiences the beauty of a purely experienced moment. Wei Luo is still in the process of harnessing her gifts. Yet one hopes that parts of her remain untamed.

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