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Music review: Washington International Piano Festival

By Cecelia Porter August 1, 2012

Summer music festivals abound in the Washington area. This year, classical music celebrations included the [William Kapell Competition](#) and Festival at the University of Maryland, the Castleton Music Festival in Virginia, the Washington Early Music Festival, and the Washington International Piano Arts Council competition and festival.

Hosted by Catholic University, the Washington International Piano Festival runs until Saturday. On Tuesday, Chongxiao Liu from China and festival co-director [Ivo Kaltchev](#), Bulgarian-born and now living in the United States, teamed for a night of solos and a duo at the Ward Recital Hall. Soloist Liu filled the first half with Brahms's Ballades, Op. 10, and his Rhapsodies, Op. 79. After intermission, Kaltchev joined Liu on one keyboard for Rachmaninoff's Six Pieces, Op. 11.

Two ideas merge in Brahms's Ballades: A vocal narrative telling an ancient story combines with a quintessentially romantic piano style, though traces of symphonic breadth, rhythmic trickery and inner contrapuntal lines pop up in the first Ballade. Liu's accounts, while technically commanding, sounded more studied than spontaneous, impeding the sense of a narrative on the move from start to finish. Similarly, Liu skillfully mapped out the course of both

Rhapsodies — marvels of variation technique — down to the finest detail. Liu approached Brahms's music with brutal percussive attacks — vertical motions, although these works also demand the sense of a horizontal line, as in a song melody, along with fluid harmonic movement.

For Rachmaninoff's youthful Pieces, Liu and Kaltchev captured the contrasting emotional timbres of these settings: the soothing pulse of the Barcarolle, the playfulness of the Scherzo; and the cosmopolitan cast of the Waltz.

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The pianists couldn't rise above the monotony of the Rachmaninoff duo. Two-person music of the 19th century was generally written for amateur performers who played less challenging arrangements of orchestral works, for example, in a world in which recordings were not yet available to the public.



Festival co-director Ivo Kaltchev teamed with another pianist on Rachmaninoff's Six Pieces. (Courtesy of Catholic University of America)