

Thursday, April 14, 2005

## Asian idol

### Stunning skills and looks propel Chinese pianist Yundi Li

**Janelle Gelfand | Enquirer staff writer**

It's every concert pianist's nightmare: You've overslept and now you're late for your big concert. Frantic, you throw on your sweats and Nike shoes and hop onto your bike. Meanwhile, the musicians in the orchestra are checking their watches.

Suddenly, you morph into - Tour de France champ Lance Armstrong! You tear through town, arrive in time and sail coolly through your performance.

Thankfully for pianist Yundi Li, he was merely acting in a Nike ad that aired on television during last summer's Olympic Games. But when you meet Li, you know that nothing could shake the quiet confidence and unruffled demeanor of this onetime prodigy.

"Actually, I need to sleep well, and nothing else special," says Li, 22, about his preconcert regimen. He performs a recital Sunday for the Greater Cincinnati Chinese Music Society's 10th anniversary.

Born in the central China town of Chongqing, Li is one of the most stunning pianists to emerge in decades. At age 18, he won the prestigious Chopin Competition in Warsaw, which launched his international career.

"I decided to do that not to get a prize, but I just wanted to try and see, and also to have fun," Li says, simply.

Since then - besides being the first classical artist to be featured in a Nike ad - Li has been racking up debuts with the world's greatest orchestras.

He's got more than technical prowess to make him a star. Tall, slender and with a thick mane of black hair, he is a matinee idol in Asia. Two years ago, when he toured with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra to Japan, his adoring fans, who skewed young and female, ran up to the stage with flowers and stuffed animals.

"I think it's because I play a lot of concerts in Asia, and people know me more than in the West," he says, laughing. "I only appreciate that they have an interest in the music."

He started playing at age 4 - not piano, but an accordion he saw while shopping with his mother.

"It was like a toy," he says. But he caught on quickly, and by 7, he started piano lessons.

"My parents were not musical, but always supported me to study music," Li says.

His parents' generation lived through Mao's Cultural Revolution, an oppressive period when Western music was banned. "We lost time and lost the connection (to classical music)," Li says. "For me, this generation is very lucky, and we have a good chance."



[Zoom](#)

WHEN YOU GO

**Who:** Pianist Yundi Li

**When:** 3 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Corbett Auditorium, University of Cincinnati

**The program:** Mozart, Schumann and Liszt

**Admission:** \$20-\$65; (513) 236-6731

RELATED LINKS

• [Cincinnati Chinese Music Society](#)

Li graduates in June from the Hanover (Germany) Conservatory of Music, where he studies with Israeli pianist Arie Vardi. He performs about 60 concerts a year and has just released his third album for Deutsche Grammophon.

His new album of Chopin Scherzos and Impromptus combines brilliance with poetic feeling. Above all, he has mastered the elusive art of pianistic color. Sherzo No. 4, in particular, has the beauty and depth of a bygone era.

The reason, perhaps, may be found in his idols: piano legends Arthur Rubinstein, Vladimir Horowitz and Sviatoslav Richter, as well as Argentinian pianist Martha Argerich.

"They are totally different personalities," he explains.

And personality is what makes playing a recital so different from cutting an album, he points out.

"You can't put all your different ideas in one record," he says. "That's why the audience wants to go to a live concert, to hear the artist playing. Each concert should be different."

*E-mail [jgelfand@enquirer.com](mailto:jgelfand@enquirer.com)*

---

[Print](#) | [Go back](#) | Copyright 2005, *The Enquirer*