

Curtain Call

For pianist Michelle Kim, music is the key to her character and her life

Classical music lovers gathered together at the Concert Hall of the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts at the end of April to attend the debut performance by Korean pianist Michelle Kim, where her graceful interpretation of works by Bach, Schubert, Schumann and Liszt immediately won over the local audience.

This was Michelle's first solo performance in the city, but with her passion and willpower she was quickly able to capture the attention of the city's music lovers. "I am very competitive. I want to play well in public and I always love to be on stage," she says.

It was a charity concert and all proceeds will be donated to the American Women's Association, Education and Charity Fund, which supports various Hong Kong Charities. For Michelle, the concert was also an opportunity for her to pay a tribute to the city and its people as she has chosen here to be her new home in Asia.

A musical prodigy, she started her studies aged four and performed her orchestral debut with the Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra at age ten. Despite her tender years Michelle did not feel nervous, and was thrilled with the opportunity of playing alongside such famous musicians and a handsome conductor, even though she only had one month to prepare. "I did not feel intimidated. I could not and would not back out. I was never afraid of anything. I had to show them that I was able to do it." The performance was a tremendous success and some years later, she was again invited to play with the Orchestra in a concert that was televised nationally.

She attributes her success to her parents and teachers, recalling that her mother let her



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try out different lessons such as piano, violin, cello, painting, ballet and even story telling. “I loved all the classes, but since I was only four years old, I did not know what would be the best for me. Then my piano teacher told my mother that I had potential playing piano. My piano teacher was a very encouraging person.”

Later on, Michelle and her family moved to California to join her grandparents and other relatives, and she studied with John Perry at The Colburn School of Performing Arts in Los Angeles before joining the Juilliard School in New York at 17, her family moving to join her a little while later. In New York she obtained her Bachelors and Masters of Music, received the Arthur Rubinstein Award, and met her husband. She also studied with Joseph Kalichstein, Oxana Yablonskaya and Temuri Akhobadze and garnered top prizes in national and international competitions including the Leschetizky Piano Competition, the Bartok-Kabalevsky-Prokofiev International Piano Competition and the Vincenzo Bellini International Piano Competition.

Michelle was encouraged and supported during her studies by a number of good tutors and they became what she terms her “musical parents”.

“Of course, it is important that my parents offered me my education, but when I felt lost and empty (learning music), only my musical parents would understand my feelings and know what I needed.”

Music has been a large part of her life since childhood, when she would practice ten hours a day, and she admits she loves being a performer and promoting music. “Piano has become my life,” she states simply.

To her, practice is the key that unlocks not just her skills but also her ability to focus and understand what she has to do as a pianist. “Practice helps me to focus on what I am doing,

Since I would like to be a professional musician, it allows me to understand the responsibilities of a serious musician. Practice also provides me with the integrity to see things through,” she says.

Aside from practice, she attributes her success to her attitude. “Music makes me very humble because there are so many levels and I find myself always in the process of learning. There are two types of people. One shows you what they can do and the other serves music and is willing to be part of it. I wouldn’t be who I am if I am not willing to be part of it.”

Serving and being part of the music mean that there are the inevitable sacrifices. To Michelle, these sacrifices were the time that she spent practicing and the strict tutoring, when



Previous page

- 1 18k white gold necklace pavé with diamond, platinum ring set with diamonds (right hand), 18k white gold earrings pavé with diamonds, all by Chaumet
- Chiffon dress with ruffles by Salvatore Ferragamo

This spread

- 2 Crepe dress with lizard belt, lemon quartz necklace, all by Bottega Veneta
- Diamond ring (guest's own)
- 3 Black with pink chiffon ruffle dress by D&G



she could have been enjoying more normal childhood pursuits. When she was a child, she received one-to-one tutoring and though she does not want to generalise she found the Asian tutors more reserved and the teaching style much more disciplined compared with what she experienced in the United States. She says that students in Asia are seldom encouraged to display any individualism, unlike her experience in the US where they were encouraged to express themselves and to be brave. “But,” she concludes, “I think we should have such discipline first as we need the foundation to be able to achieve higher quality and be able to express ourselves.”

Having trained in both Korea and the

US, Michelle is able to see the advantages of both styles of teaching and believes that it is the tutor that is important not the style of teaching: “Talented teachers are always sensitive and they are able to understand that each student is different. Though I may be only one or two years older than my students, I really want to pass on what I have learned and share my experiences with them.”

She still remembers how one of her fellow students, an American-born Korean, was quite nervous and reserved at the beginning, but Michelle was able to draw her out to talk about her family, her boyfriend and her feelings, which helped her to express herself better in her music.

Though Michelle admits she does enjoy teaching she does not, at present, have any plans to turn it into a full-time job: “Nothing is confirmed yet. I am still very interested in concert playing.” But if she has to give up her performing career one day, she says she would like to continue being involved with music: “I like to connect with people. The experiences are joyful. So I would like to be an ambassador of music or art. I cannot imagine my life other than that.”

She believes music is her source of energy: “I draw strength from music,” she concludes. Thus, whenever she feels uncertain or unhappy, she will seek comfort from music. So, wherever she goes, she needs to be near to a piano.

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Music has taken Michelle all around the world, and allowed her to get to know many great orchestral musicians: “I am very lucky as I have learnt so much through these experiences. Of course, some of these experiences are great and some of them are bad, and I have learnt what should not be done. However, if I go for a trip or for performance, I always think on the positive side. If I think negatively, I will not be able to experience great things.”

That might also be the reason why it took just a few months time for Michelle and her husband, who works in the finance sector, to settle in Hong Kong. On her arrival last year, she immediately fell in love with the city and strongly believes that this is the right place for her to build a new home. At the time she had the choice of living in Hong Kong or Singapore, and she chose the SAR without hesitation. “I am a city girl. I like the vibes of Hong Kong. I feel comfortable in an international city. I am very open and here I can be myself, because people here do not judge you by the way you talk and act. I feel relaxed here.” But the downside is that in order to be with her husband she has already had to cancel or reschedule work several times. “My manager is mad with me,” she says with a laugh.

She plays mainly classical music, but to her, great music is great music no matter if it is Chinese, hip hop or pop: “But if you give classical music a chance, you will find how awesome it can be, and great pieces last forever.”

Moving to Hong Kong also means that she is closer to her roots and the country of her birth, but since her family is in the States, there is little reason for her to visit Korea except to work or visit her father's friends. She admits she does not know how much Korea has changed because she was so young when she left and her memories are not that strong. But there is one thing she is certain of, that

almost every Korean family would like to have a daughter rather than a son. She says that Korean women are given more opportunities for work and they are always closer to their parents. “Again, I am not trying to generalise, but Korean women are gentle in appearance but fiery at heart.”

Over the past few years, Hong Kong has become home to several top world-renowned pianists such as Lang Lang and Yundi Li, and now for Michelle Kim. But she says, “It is important that I find my own position. If I feel safe in a place, I think I have to move on and prove that I can do better.” She adds thoughtfully, “Life is a journey and you should let it take you to where you should be. Of course, I could always move back to where I come from but I prefer to accept the challenges.”



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4 18k yellow gold ring pavé with diamonds and set with garnets. 18k yellow gold earrings pavé with diamonds, all by Chaumer. One-shoulder dress with crystal trim by Valentino.

5 18k yellow gold necklace pavé with diamonds, 18k yellow gold ring pavé with diamonds and set with garnets all by Chaumer. Gold silk stain strapless gown with crystal brooch (guest's own).

Set: Vivian Mak | Photos: Martin Yu | Styling: Sun Wong | Makeup: Zee Fan | Hair: King Lee | Chair: Designish