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Lee: Reveling in Ravel

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Throughout her Terrace Theater recital Saturday, pianist Soyeon Lee displayed a stunning command of the keyboard, from the beautifully gauged weighting of her finger strokes to the scrupulous calibration of inner voices and dynamics. But the second half of the program revealed a very different, far more nuanced pianist than the first half did.

Lee clearly has an affinity for Scriabin, whose Etude, Op. 2, No. 1 and B-Minor Fantasy, Op. 28, came right after intermission. All the composer's impulsive fire was delivered with high energy but without overstatement, and his lyricism emerged in sweeping arcs that seemed as natural as breathing.

Even better was Lee's reading of Ravel's "La Valse," which tapped such a rich vein of color and such cumulative power from her Steinway that the beauties of Ravel's more familiar orchestral version of the piece were barely missed.

So how could such a perceptive pianist deliver so soulless a run-through of Schumann's "Carnaval" earlier in the program? Phrase after phrase came and went, sculpted within an inch of its life but devoid of any emotional investment, any sense of romantic rhapsody.

Ditto her performances of two Scarlatti sonatas -- which suggested the objective precision of a player piano -- and of Huang Ruo's "Trees Without Wind," which sounded more like a set of showy piano tricks than an evocation of Buddhist meditation.

But that Scriabin and Ravel was the stuff of greatness.

-- **Joe Banno**