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Review: Yung Wook Yoo, Piano Recital on September 22, 2001 at the Terrace Theater, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Washington, D.C.

Review by Ronald Broun, Washington Post

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Liszt's Sonata in B Minor seems to be in every young pianist's repertoire, and that is almost always a mistake. Few performers meet its enormous technical demands and fewer still have anything like the heroic temperament to make all the scales and arpeggios mean something. Unless the piece is attacked and conquered it sounds cheap and vulgar, the claptrap of a composer-virtuoso who left a ton of notes surrounding a vacuous emotional center.

Yung Wook Yoo played this monster in his recital Saturday night at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater about as well as it can be played. Yoo has a big technique that lets his imagination roam free, but what distinguished this performance from so many others is his fierce, almost reckless musicality. He roared through the sonata, confronted it, faced it down, exploited its thunder, and along the way was not afraid to drop a few notes here and there, an inevitable, inconsequential byproduct of Liszt interpretation at the cutting edge.

Yoo seized Frederic Rzewski's "Cotton Mill Blues" by the throat, reveling in its depiction of machinery throbbing satanically out of control. Beethoven's late Sonata No. 30 in E, Op. 109, is not quite yet Yoo's piece -- there is more there than he found -- but he did find a singing, aristocratic line in a Liszt transcription of a Beethoven song ("Adelaide"). Bach's sprawling Toccata in E Minor opened the program.