A virtuoso returns

Yuja Wang joins forces with another young classical talent for SB show
And a Violinist Makes Two

YOUNG CLASSICAL PIANO SUPERSTAR YUJA WANG MAKES ONE OF HER REGULAR STOPS IN SANTA BARBARA, IN A CONCERT WITH VIOLINIST LEONIDAS KAVAKOS AT THE GRANADA

By Josef Woodard,
News-Press Correspondent

Yuja Wang and Leonidas Kavakos

When: 7 p.m. Monday
Where: The Granada Theatre, 1214 State St.
Cost: $35-$55, $15 UCSB students
Information: 899-3335, artsandlectures.sa.ucsb.edu or 899-2222; granadasb.org

It might be considered a risk that Santa Barbara could take the repeat exposure to the captivating live presence of pianist Yuja Wang for granted, given her multiple appearances in various formats in town. But virtually every appearance shakes off any feared complacency and reminds us of the profundity of her music-making, and our great fortune in having heard her live in the 805, for years.

That was especially true of last year’s solo recital at the Granada, the classical piano highlight of the year. The stunning all-German repertoire included bold, hypnotic readings of Schumann’s “Kreisleriana” and Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” sonata. Even the New Yorker took respectful note of last year’s Granada show with a profile of Wang in the magazine.

For this year’s Yuja sighting, she will join forces with another high-profile young classical sensation, violinist Leonidas Kavakos, at The Granada on Monday, courtesy of the UCSB Arts & Lectures series. The program includes Janacek, Schubert, Debussy and Bartok. Out in the world, the pair has worked together and recorded Brahms Violin Sonatas.

Locally, they share having been showcased as up-and-coming artists in the A&L series of emerging classical artist series at Hahn Hall. Ms. Wang’s first Santa Barbara appearance, in Hahn Hall, came just as she was making a precipitous rise as an early twentiesomething pianist, back in 2009.

Born in Beijing, she ended up in the U.S. and made an initial splash playing with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at the age of 20, while a student at Curtis Institute of Music. Comparisons to another classical piano star from China, Lang Lang, are relevant only to a degree, given her distinctly personal touch — and for many, subtler sensibility. As she told in an interview, “there are so many people in China, and millions learn to play music, especially the piano. If you think about the amount of people, and the intense competition, there aren’t so many musicians who have made it.”

“The education in China is very strong, and we are trained to physically learn the instrument first, almost like machines. But then later, we can add the emotional qualities. I think it was good that I spent my early years in China and then grew up in the West. It is extremely competitive in China.”

For a virtuoso so seemingly fully-developed and mature by a relatively tender age, she has had a fairly casual accounting of her musical education — also unlike Lang Lang’s famously severe early musical training.

“I played piano from the time I was three years old,” she says, “but it was just something I did. My mother is a dancer and my father a percussionist. I also learned calligraphy and art. Piano was just another (creative) thing that I did. I never thought it would be my career, until I was going to Curtis and they encouraged me to go into music.

“I always thought of it almost as a hobby,” she laughed. That was then, the story is different now.

By now, the pianist is a bonafide classical superstar. She brings intensity, mastery and subtlety to her work and, on a more surface level, is not averse to showcasing her beauty in intriguing fashion statements onstage (to occasional controversy from conservative music fans). This year’s freshest accolade was her winning Musical America’s prestigious Artist of the Year 2017 award.

Meanwhile, her role as virtually an honorary Santa Barbaran continues. After next week’s appearance, she’ll be returning to perform at the Music Academy of the West in a special Steinway tribute concert, with Jean-Yves Thibaudet on May 21, as part of the Academy’s 70th anniversary year. She’s welcome around these parts any old time.

Leonidas Kavakos

Captivating pianist Yuja Wang will take the Granada stage on Monday.