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# Hues of Debussy in a Program Without Him

By STEVE SMITH

At home in Los Angeles the pianist Gloria Cheng is a celebrity: an invaluable new-music advocate and a preferred collaborator of composers like [Pierre Boulez](#) and [Esa-Pekka Salonen](#). [A review](#) of a recital Ms. Cheng presented at the Colburn School of Performing Arts in September breathlessly conjured a heady, star-studded scene. But Ms. Cheng's copious gifts are scarcely a mystery here, a point proved by the sizable, luminary-filled throng that assembled for one of her too infrequent New York appearances, at [Le Poisson Rouge](#) on Wednesday night.

Ms. Cheng's program, characteristically adventurous and filled with meaningful interrelations, largely duplicated that of her September event. But here she was joined by the [Calder Quartet](#), an outstanding California ensemble that New Yorkers got to know during its graduate residency at the [Juilliard School](#) from 2005 to 2007.

Debussy served as a stylistic lodestone for much of the solo portion of the evening; though not a note of his music was played, his evocative genius and timbral resourcefulness were everywhere. A luminous tonal fog permeated "Pianoforte," a 1975 work by the Canadian composer Claude Vivier, with clangorous attacks and refulgent overtone washes inspired by Indonesian gamelan (also a source of fascination for Debussy).

A similar density saturated Kaija Saariaho's "Ballade" and "Prelude," brief works in which a composer besotted with acoustic mystery fondly embraced traditional forms without sacrificing her characteristic sophistication. In strong, plainspoken melodies that emerged through moody harmonic clouds — and in the way Ms. Cheng caressed and molded them — came intimations of another composer: [Chopin](#).

Pierre Boulez's "Une Page d'Éphéméride," a gemlike 2005 miniature intended as part of a projected larger work, had a measure of Debussy's effortless charm in its lissome breezes and peppery bursts. Four of Messiaen's early Préludes, [commandingly played by Pierre-](#)

[Laurent Aimard at Carnegie Hall in December](#), sounded even better here because of Ms. Cheng's mercurial imagination and exacting touch, as well as a more intimate space.

The second half of her program opened with Daniel Strong Godfrey's pellucid, unhurried "Night Walk": Impressionism with an American accent. Ms. Cheng then brought on the Calder Quartet for Stravinsky's Three Pieces for String Quartet: quirky, powerful miniatures that set the stage for two works by [Thomas Adès](#).

In Ms. Cheng's hands Mr. Adès's Mazurkas — like Ms. Saariaho's "Ballade," created for [Emanuel Ax](#) — had a brusque, fractious genius not unlike that heard in the preceding Stravinsky. Ms. Cheng and the Calder players united in a dazzling account of Mr. Adès's Piano Quintet, in which seeming stylistic nods to Brahms, [Schubert](#), Stravinsky and more are transmogrified into a blazing tour de force of impish affection. Afterward Mr. Adès, [in town to perform with the New York Philharmonic](#), came to the stage to share a final roar of approval.