

[Entertainment \(Http://Www.Philly.Com/Entertainment\)](http://www.philly.com/entertainment)

— [David Patrick Stearns](http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/david_patrick_stearns)

(http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/david_patrick_stearns)

Chamber Orchestra climbs the Red Cliff

Updated: OCTOBER 11, 2016 — 3:01 AM EDT

by **[David Patrick Stearns](#)**, Music Critic

What could have been an afterthought in Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia's opening concert was actually the hit on the Sunday start of the new Kimmel Center season: *Red Cliff, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* by Yiu-kwong Chung. Although the 60-year-old Taiwanese composer has written several concertos, his name was new to me. Even more happily, so were any number of other aspects of his music, thanks to his well-defined, charismatic voice.

Concisely written in four uninterrupted movements, *Red Cliff* is drawn from a 15th-century novel, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong, about warlords vying for control. But you didn't have to know that, so well did the music stand on its own. The first movement dramatically reversed the equation still pursued by some Chinese composers - Western classical music rehashed with an Asian accent - with fiercely Chinese music played on Western instruments. An *erhu* was on hand for more authentic musical commentary.



📷 **HANSHUN WANG**

Pianist Ching-Yun Hu delivered a knockout showpiece during the performance.

The second movement was full of entrancing thematic development, depicting an attempted alliance between three main characters in the *Romance*. The modest third movement was a prelude of sorts to the final movement, which is all about blazing ships. In purely sonic terms, it was like Bartók ignited, with big blocks of chords.

Music director Dirk Brossé conducted this world premiere as though he'd known the piece forever. Nothing was tentative in the Chamber Orchestra, which redeemed itself after ending last season in questionable form. Soloist Ching-Yun Hu, founder of the Philadelphia Young Pianists Academy, played with a level of detail reflecting her knowledge of the piece's scenario while delivering a knockout showpiece.

She was also soloist in Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 23 K. 488*, in a performance most notable for her deeply introspective treatment of the second movement. She took Mozart into the more confessional Chopin zone in ways that were admirably bold and

quite convincing. Similarly, Brossé's slowish tempos in Haydn's *Symphony No. 99* found undercurrents others miss but lacked inner pulse and dragged a bit.

As part of Chamber Orchestra's policy to give young artists a platform, Geoffrey McDonald conducted Arriaga's *Overture to Los Esclavos Felices*, a post-Mozartean romp written in 1820 by this teenage composer who died young.

McDonald is the son of Chamber Orchestra's board president, Susan Schwartz McDonald, which might prompt accusations of family favoritism were he not well along in a dues-paying career. He smartly kept the music's novelties integrated into a solid musical whole. Still, the overture was an odd choice, perhaps an outgrowth of McDonald's interest in Mozart's teenage work *La Finta Giardiniera*, which he will conduct next year as music director of New York City's On Site Opera.

dstearns@phillynews.com (<mailto:dstearns@phillynews.com>)



Published: October 11, 2016 — 3:01 AM EDT **The Philadelphia Inquirer**

© Copyright (<http://www.philly.com/philly/about/copyright/>)2016 Philadelphia Media Network (Digital), LLC [Terms of Use & Privacy Policy \(http://www.philly.com/philly/about/terms_of_use/\)](http://www.philly.com/philly/about/terms_of_use/)