

# FAVORITE

## WU HAN

Pianist and  
Co-Artistic Director  
of the Chamber  
Music Society of  
Lincoln Center and  
Music@Menlo  
photo: Lisa-Marie  
Mazzucco



*Winterreise (Winter Journey): The Snow Storm*  
Katia Setzer Berry (b. 1988)  
2015, oil on panel, 16 x 12 in.  
Private collection

Wu Han used to suffer from stage fright — but only when performing a certain piece of music. Although she is an accomplished pianist and one of the most engaging onstage presences in classical music, she still must steel herself when sitting down at her Steinway piano to play *Winterreise*, the cycle of 24 songs (*lieder*) by the Austrian composer Franz Schubert.

“I have to fight back tears when I’m performing those pieces,” Wu Han says. “I’ve taught myself not to become personally involved with them, but to remain rather cold-hearted.” The *Winterreise* cycle, composed in 1827, is based on poems by Wilhelm Müller that recount a young man’s unrequited love and his self-imposed exile into an actual and metaphorical winter landscape that mirrors his despair. “I am so moved by the works that it wasn’t until only four or five years ago that I started to perform them in public,” Wu Han explains. “After playing them, I still walk away feeling emotionally drained, but I no longer sob onstage!”

When Wu Han and her husband, David Finckel, the noted cellist and co-artistic director of New York City’s Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center (CMS), were devising the 2015 program for their annual Music@Menlo Chamber Music Festival in Silicon Valley, they focused on Schubert, with *Winterreise* as a highlight.



In addition to curating that festival’s musical program, Wu Han also commissions a visual artist to create images that reflect its content. So, in 2015 she commissioned young Katia Setzer Berry to paint a series of oils on panel that depict the multi-part storyline of *Winterreise*.

“David and I knew that Katia is a special artist and one who knows the music well, as the daughter of Philip Setzer, a member and former colleague of David’s in the Emerson String Quartet. We knew that what she would create would be right.” Indeed, Berry’s six oil paintings nearly sold out during the festival’s run, with Wu Han and Finckel purchasing perhaps the most visceral scene, which shows the poems’ hero setting off into the winter landscape, alone, seeking solace, his figure a blur. “Every time I look at this painting, which hangs in our apartment in New York, it reminds

me of why I do what I do in life.”

Wu Han adds, rhetorically, “How can you capture the sensation of the cold, the loneliness of the character, the fluffiness of the snow? To paint snow is kind of impossible. Katia has produced so many textures of white. Her figure has a bit of the madness about it, a young man in a delusional state of mind. His sadness and his love are conveyed.”

Unlike many performers in classical music, Wu Han actually speaks directly to her audiences, beyond her extraordinary playing. At many CMS concerts, for instance, she comes onstage to welcome the audience and explain the program. As someone who readily admits to having been raised in humble, yet loving, conditions in her native Taiwan, Wu Han is adamant in her belief that “classical music is not some-

thing elite. Art and music are for everyone. Music is a natural expression of being human.”

Many of the musicians that Wu Han and Finckel hire for CMS concerts are young, yet already accomplished. “All young artists need to be given a chance, a voice,” Wu Han stresses, noting that Schubert was a mere 31 when he died, while Berry was still in her 20s when commissioned to paint the *Winterreise* cycle.

Wu Han recounts, too, how during the earliest and darkest moments of the pandemic, she spent every day editing a performance of *Winterreise* she had recorded earlier with baritone Nikolay Borchev. “Every day for a month, my husband and I listened to the recording, editing the words and getting the right colors of the performance to where we wanted it to go, a place we thought was a good representation of the state of *Winterreise*.”