

Fei-Ping Hsu

A journey from China's cultural revolution to America's concert halls

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The Chinese-American pianist Fei-Ping Hsu, who has died aged 51 in a road accident while on a concert tour of China, had the misfortune to live in "interesting times". After surviving the cultural revolution of 1966-76, during which he gave many performances of the Yellow River Concerto, he left to pursue his career in the United States.

A Washington Post review in 1989 reported that he played with "a commanding athleticism born of grace and agility... His instincts run to big sounds and bold statements." Those who heard him at the Rubinstein competition in Israel in 1983, where he won the third gold medal, long remembered his sensational performances of the Tarantella from Liszt's Venezia e Napoli, and Chopin's Sonata No 2 in B flat minor.

His recordings, including mazurkas by Chopin and Beethoven's Moonlight sonata, reveal a spirited approach with an engaging rhythmic instinct and rich tone. He was small of stature and youthful in appearance; his friends describe him as a relaxed, cheerful and generous person, a "man of faith" who had a positive influence on all those around him.

Hsu was the son of a pastor on Gulangyu island, off the south-east coast of China. An idyllic enclave much influenced by Jesuit missionaries, the area earned the nickname of "Piano Island" because of its extraordinary number of pianos - more than 500 in the early 1950s. Hsu was a child prodigy, and, by the age of 14, had already performed Chopin's 24 Etudes.

He entered the Shanghai Conservatory, then China's most sought-after musical training ground (thanks to the impact of teachers from the great Russian tradition), but his studies came to an abrupt end when the college was closed down during the cultural revolution. His last teacher died in Hsu's arms after being brutally tortured by Red Guards.

Banished to the countryside, Hsu worked on a rice farm and in a factory; his friend, the pianist Hung-Kuan Chen, who won second prize at the Rubinstein competition when Hsu won third, recalled that Hsu never regained the same flexibility in his fingers after his banishment.

He was, however, summoned back to the piano to perform the Yellow River Concerto - a hybrid piece, based on the Yellow River Cantata by Hsien Hsing-hai, written by a committee of composers from the Central Philharmonic Society of the People's Republic of China, and promoted by Mao Zedong's wife, Jiang Qing, as a suitable "revolutionary" work.

For two years, Hsu and a group of musicians walked across China behind a three-wheeled vehicle carrying an upright piano, playing the Yellow River Concerto several hundred times to soldiers and farm and factory workers. Although this was an arduous task, he was pleased to have been the first Chinese pianist allowed to return to his instrument.

After moving to America, Hsu studied at the Eastman School of Music, and with Sasha Grodnitsky at the Juilliard School of Music; he subsequently became a US citizen and settled in New York. After his success at the Rubinstein competition, he made his New York debut in 1984.

Hsu was sustained by his strong Christian faith. According to Hung-Kuan Chen, he had been diagnosed with cancer while still in his teens, but had refused treatment, feeling that "if it was his time to go, he would". That time came when the van in which he was travelling hit a stationary tractor on a dark road near Qiqihar, in north-eastern China.

Hsu is survived by his wife and daughter.

· Fei-Ping Hsu, pianist, born December 20 1949; died November 27 2001