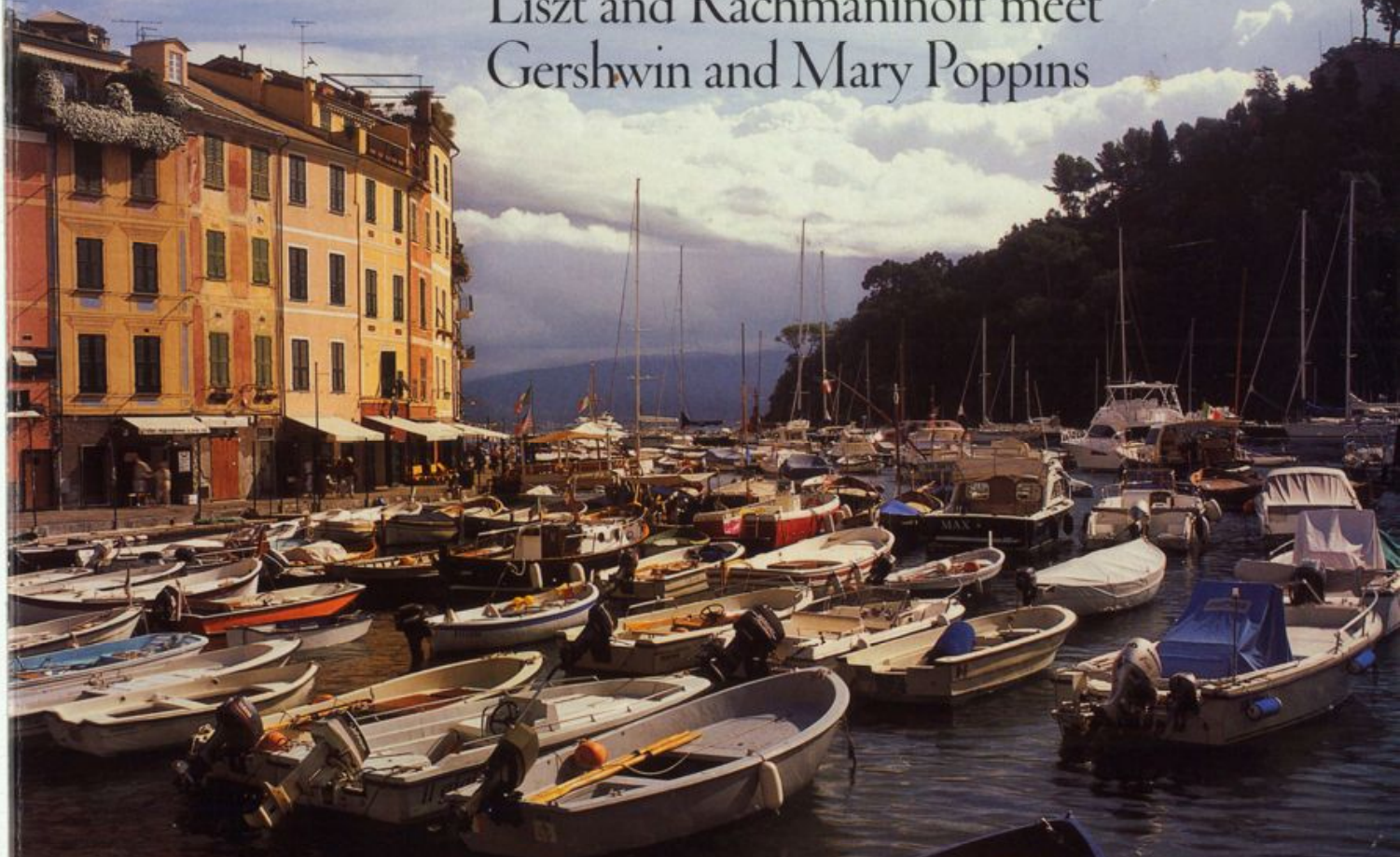


Virtuoso
Travel+Life

THE GUIDE TO INSPIRED PURSUITS

MAESTROS on the
MEDITERRANEAN

Liszt and Rachmaninoff meet
Gershwin and Mary Poppins



Museum as Muse
Ten institutions that can make a trip

The American Riviera
California gives rise to garden romance

+ Warm winter lodgings, Argentine cuisine, and New York for the holidays



The Piano Lesson

Liszt, Rachmaninoff, "Chopsticks," and Mary Poppins:
HILLARY HAUSER tunes into the music scene at sea.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRENT HUMPHREYS

Somewhere on the Mediterranean, between Saint-Tropez and Portofino, concert pianist Min Kwon takes the stage in Palm Court, the deck-12 lounge of the 1,080-passenger ship *Crystal Serenity*. Wearing a crimson blouse and slim black skirt, she sits before the stark white Steinway, then launches into a haunting, prayerful rendition of Chopin's nocturne in C-sharp minor – the posthumous one many of her listeners recognize from the Academy Award-winning film, *The Pianist*.

She follows this with a medley of recognizable Rachmaninoff pieces, including the "Full Moon and Empty Arms" theme based on the composer's second piano concerto and his ultraromantic "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini."

Speaking and playing – "Here's how Rachmaninoff turned this melody upside down..." then, "Here's how he used a theme from *Manon Lescaut*..." – she draws her audience into the beauty of classical music, linking widely familiar pieces with some serious piano literature – such as the bone-jangling, technologically impossible *Don Giovanni* opera transcription of Liszt.

The latter is a hair-raising performance, the kind that turns pianos into splinters, but Kwon has turned it from potentially intimidating into accessible fun by confiding in her audience. It seems the great Liszt once got into technical trouble while playing the piece, though he managed to save face.

"He just fainted away in the middle of it, and they had to carry him off," Kwon tells us. "Now, I hope that doesn't happen to me!"

The Palm Court exhibition is a mere half hour warm-up for the grand, hour-long *Concerto Extravaganza* recital the pianist is to give five evenings from now. That concert, as well as the Chopin and Rachmaninoff and Liszt she has just played, serve as "crossover performances," which, in the classical music world, is a much-used method for developing new audiences, increasing younger audiences, and keeping classical music alive.

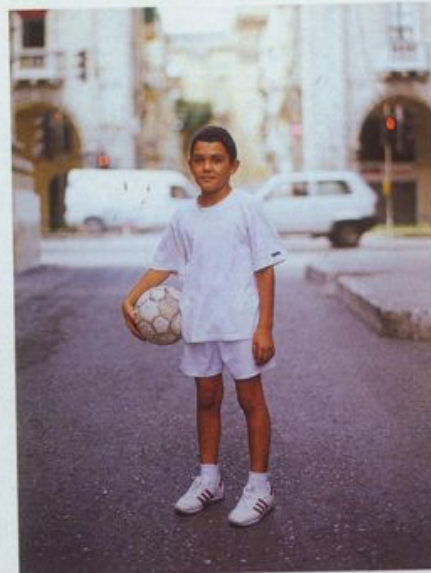
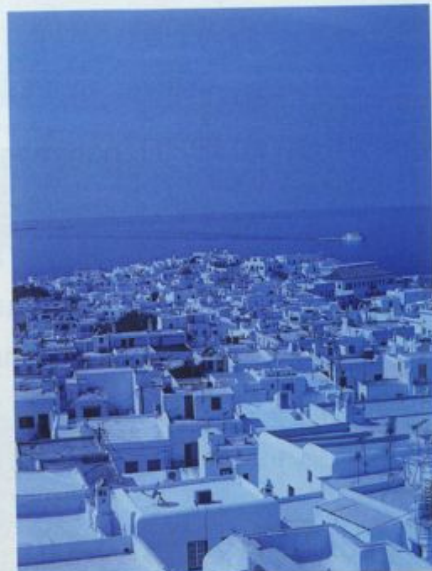
Crystal is singular among cruise lines for such musical entertainment – as well its enrichment programs. Along with lectures, bridge lessons, language study, even computer classes, this ship offers the popular (and jam-packed) "Passport to Music" classes, in which passengers learn to play basic songs on a Yamaha keyboard. The thought behind this study at sea is that when you're relaxed and away from home, you can more easily absorb things you've wanted to learn but simply haven't gotten around to because of the complexities of modern life. In essence, passengers can sample classes just as we'll be sampling some of the Mediterranean's most enchanting ports.

EMBARKING FROM BARCELONA on an itinerary that includes not only Saint-Tropez and Portofino but also Cannes, Livorno, Valletta, Bari, Mykonos, and Athens, I entered my deck-10 penthouse convinced that my favorite place on the ship would be my private veranda. There I would greet each port at sunrise, spend afternoons dining on room-service sushi, and, evenings, snifter of Amaretto in hand, watch every enchanting speck of land as we sailed by. As it turns out, I start my days on the veranda

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Talent pool: Min Kwon, cruise-ship soloist and the youngest professor of piano at Rutgers University.



Ports of call (top to bottom, left to right): Bari fisherman, the neighborhood on Mykonos, junior soccer player in Valletta, Mykonos window, streets and cheese shop of Saint-Tropez, a doorman in Monte Carlo, and seafood fresh from the Mediterranean. Right: Poolside aboard the *Serenity*.

with coffee and croissants brought to me by my cheerful butler (who keeps reminding me that we are on a *ship*, "not a boat, Madam!"), and after that I'm not there much because there are a zillion things to do elsewhere.

Classical music lovers dream of tours with classical music themes. The idea of setting oneself afloat from day-to-day reality to soak up nothing but music is a fantasy come true. Although this sailing is not a classical music-themed cruise per se, music – particularly piano music – is taking place all over the ship.

The classical-pop-Broadway pianist Richard Berman (a Russian pianist whose recent CD, *The Glory of Love*, has inspired rave reviews on Amazon.com), plays daily in the Crystal Cove lounge. John Mentis entertains nightly in the ship's Avenue Saloon, an elegant dark-wood room that fills with passengers the moment he hits the keyboard. Mentis, whose repertoire consists of many of his own arrangements, has played 13 world tours for the cruise line – including all of *Serenity's* voyages since it launched last summer. Min Kwon, who has performed on Crystal ships for

I start each day on my private veranda with coffee and croissants brought to me by my cheerful butler (who keeps reminding me that we are on a *ship*, "not a boat, Madam!").

six years and who sports the title of Crystal's "Classical Artist of the Year," says the cruise line is one of the few to consistently present classical music.

"I don't want to compromise by playing only 'Für Elise,' the 'Moonlight' sonata, and 'Clair de Lune,'" she says. "I can play all the tough Bartók, the classical repertoire, and still engage the audience by telling stories about the pieces." The fact that Crystal now presents classical piano performances on the *Serenity's* primary stage, the cavernous Galaxy Lounge, Kwon adds, "is a big deal!"

I join newfound friends there one evening to hear Bernard Walz, an electrifying Australian pianist who infuses classical with Broadway, ragtime, jazz, and pop. Like Kwon, Walz lures his listeners in with a crossover approach but tonight pushes it further by spinning bits of pure Mozart, Beethoven, and Grieg into an arrangement of his own called "I Love a Piano." He follows this with his own pyrotechnic version of "Chopsticks," performs an equally tempestuous set of variations on the "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" theme from *Mary*

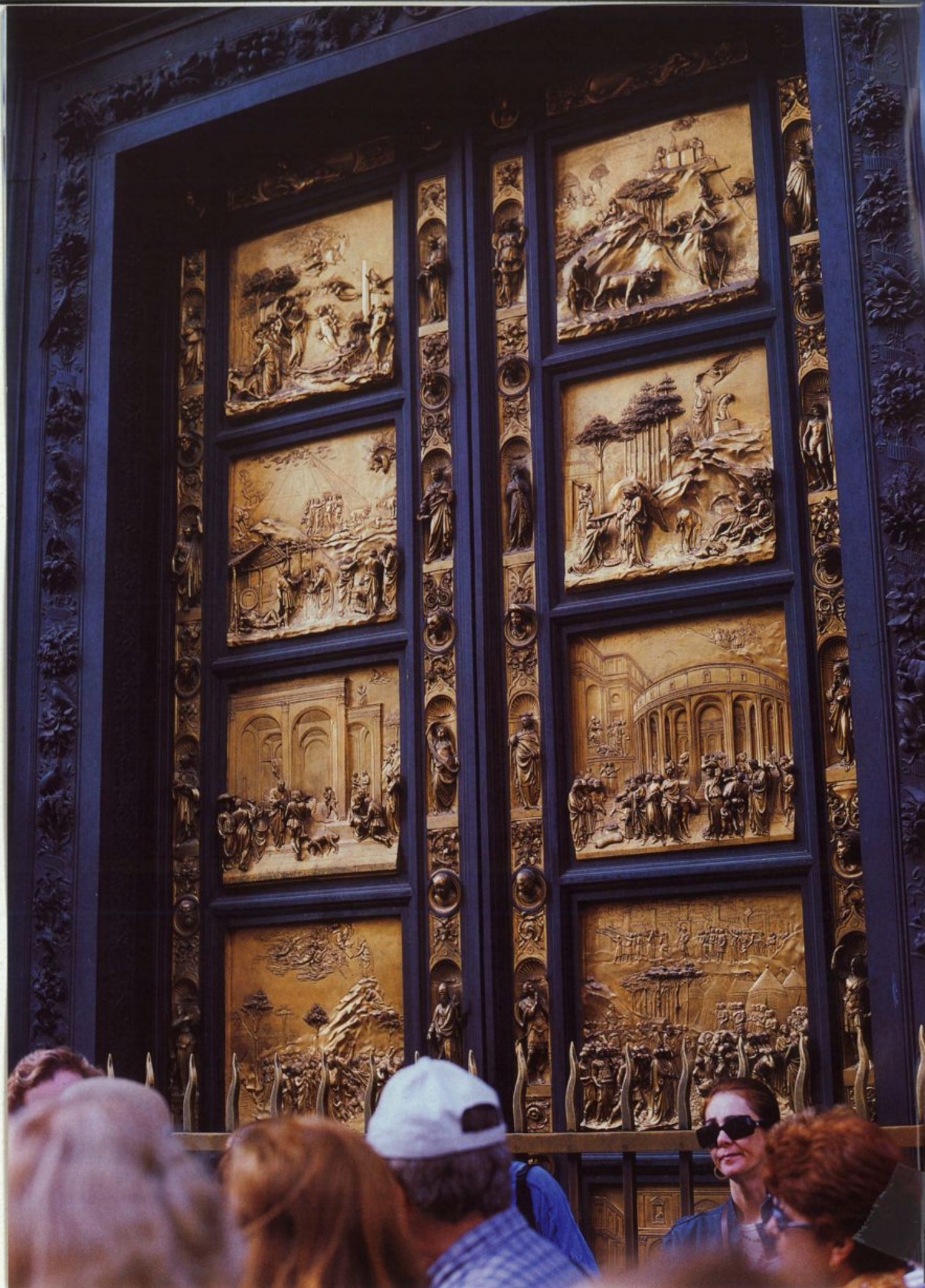


Poppins and, as an aside, notes that it was Julie Andrews who smashed a six-liter bottle of Cristal against *Serenity's* hull to launch it on its inaugural voyage.

When Walz launches into his next set – some Rachmaninoff (including the prelude in C-sharp minor), Chopin (the "Minute" waltz, "Fantasie Impromptu," and "Aeolian Harp" etude), some Tchaikovsky, and the ever-popular "Malaguena" – screens drop down on either side of the stage so that the audience can see close-ups of his dazzling finger work. The screens also prove fascinating for what follows: a chance to watch his hands in action as he delivers a red-hot, jazzy, seldom-heard piano-solo performance of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. (The piece is usually heard with orchestra.)

Afterward a passenger asks Walz to autograph his CD (a Polygram Australia recording that was once a number-one bestseller in Australia). "I studied piano for 12 years and gave it up," the fan says. "You've inspired me to go back to it."

"That's when I know I'm doing the right thing," Walz tells me as the woman departs. "I don't measure my career by how many times I've been in Carnegie Hall – it's to share the joy of music."



Monumental attractions:
Monte Carlo's harbor and
armada of yachts as
viewed from the city's Old
Town. Opposite: Grace
Cathedral's "doors of para-
dise" in Florence.





Shipmates: Concert pianist Bernard Walz, Crystal's "Instrumentalist of the Year," who once entertained fans with magic tricks; Mozart and high tea fans Arpy and Levon Yazejian, headed to the ship's feng shui-designed spa; and Florence and Lionel Borcken – seasoned cruisers aboard to cap Florence's birthday in Valletta with champagne, caviar, and Min Kwon's *Concerto Extravaganza*.

WALZ'S PHILOSOPHY ECHOES that of Crystal's enrichment program as well as explaining its disarming popularity. Naturally I want to play bridge, tinker with digital cameras and computers, and hear a lecture or two, but instead decide to seek out Min Kwon for a private lesson. As a longtime "serious amateur" pianist, I've been having difficulty with a Chopin nocturne and think she might be able to help me. I luck out with a lesson scheduled to follow her much-anticipated concert in the Galaxy Lounge, when the *Serenity* sails between Livorno and Malta.

In the Stardust Club, Italian tenor George DeMott performs the songs of Mario Lanza, and at high tea in Palm Court, waiters in Mozart-period costume serve Viennese pastries while a trio plays Mozart chamber music.

In the meantime, I indulge in more music. Broadway productions unfold in the Galaxy Lounge, including a Gershwin tribute, *Fascinatin' Rhythm*, and Stuart Ross' musical, *Forever Plaid*, featuring the energetic "High C's," an a cappella quartet. In the Stardust Club, Italian tenor George DeMott performs the songs of Mario Lanza, and during high tea in Palm Court, waiters in Mozart-period costume serve Viennese pastries while a trio plays Mozart chamber music.

Then, before I know it, Kwon's Galaxy Lounge concert arrives. The *Concerto Extravaganza* is the pianist's own weaving together of Bach's "Italian" concerto, the "Elvira Madigan" movement of the familiar Mozart concerto, as well as the solo piano parts of Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Chopin, and Grieg concertos.

Kwon flows easily from one to the next while images of the composers flash onto the stage screens, and for the grand finale she performs the entire third movement of

Rachmaninoff's well-loved second piano concerto, with full Stuttgart Orchestra accompaniment booming from the sound system.

I'm awestruck, especially given how difficult it is for a concerto soloist to perform without benefit of a conductor. Kwon not only stays in unison with the Stuttgart track, she transports me into a passionate spiritual realm. Everybody in the audience feels it, too, and when the final thumping, ecstatic chords collapse into silence, we leap to our feet and go crazy with applause.

The next day I bump into a couple from Chicago who seem to have had a post-concert epiphany: "We want to go and hear classical music now," they tell me. "We don't know it, but we want to know it."

That's what Min Kwon, Bernard Walz, and Crystal Cruises like to inspire – a spark ignited, music ingrained while passengers also experience beautiful parts of the world: the twinkling shores of Sicily on the horizon; Stromboli, a towering volcano back-lit by the moon; Valletta's fascinating catacombs; Bari's Byzantine Old Town; a mesmerizing sea that encourages a swim off Mykonos....

As for my share of Crystal's at-sea learning, I return home with the gift of the private instruction I received from Min Kwon. Back in California, I practice my beloved Chopin nocturne daily with her advice in mind: "Keep a fluid motion and a curve at the end of each phrase in the left hand, and in the long right-hand cadenza, accent the first 16th note in each group of four." These words may sound puzzling to a nonpianist, but I disembark *Crystal Serenity* not only with new memories and friends but also a new ability to play Chopin I'll have all my life. ■