

Second career for ace pianist

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Van Cliburn winning Pianist Jon Nakamatsu.

Overnight, pianist Jon Nakamatsu of San Jose went from the blackboard to the keyboard.

After winning the top prize at the 10th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 1997, the high school German teacher bid “auf wiedersehen” to the classroom and never looked back.

Since then, the Japanese-American pianist, who opted out of going to a conservatory to get degrees in German studies and education from Stanford, has launched an impressive international career.

“It was an amazing thing to me,” he said in a phone interview from his home in San Jose. “I came from a private teacher who was fantastic from the start ... She really became a conservatory for me.”

As part of his busy schedule, Nakamatsu will perform Tchaikovsky's fiery Piano Concerto No. 1 with the Santa Rosa Symphony this weekend during the final concert set of the subscription season.

Rounding out the Russian program will be Modest Mussorgsky's splashy “Pictures at an Exhibition” and Russian composer Sophia Guibaidulina's “Fairytale Poem.”

Just back from an East Coast performance tour, Nakamatsu said he is looking forward to playing the Tchaikovsky concerto with the orchestra under Music Director Bruno Ferrandis.

“Every time you get to a new instrument or orchestra or hall, you execute quite differently,” he said. “I'm really excited to be playing with Bruno. “He'll bring things to it that are new to me.”

The Tchaikovsky concerto has become such a reliable warhorse that it's easy to take it for granted.

“It's been played since its inception, repetitively, for a reason,” Nakamatsu said. “As much as the piano is centered and showcased, it's really interesting how the piano interacts with the orchestra.”

The dramatic concerto opens with a blast of horns, followed by the well-known introductory theme in the violins and piano (familiar to some in its incarnation as the Tin Pan Alley tune, “Tonight We Love.”)

One of the challenges of this athletic work, Nakamatsu said, is that the notes do not always fall naturally beneath the fingers.

“It really is very awkward for a pianist,” he said. “It almost seems as if he was more concerned with the sound and less concerned with how it physically felt.”

In the placid second movement, both the scoring and the mood lighten up. But the fireworks return in the finale, a virtuosic showpiece that pulls out all the stops.

“So much is going on, with the drama and the pyrotechnics,” he said. “But also, there's this amazing sense of line and melody and direction, and those are the things that really carry this piece.”

The polished and unpretentious Nakamatsu still resides in San Jose, where he was born to an engineer father and a mother who worked as a city employee.

“My parents are not musical,” he said. “But my paternal grandfather played Japanese instruments and taught himself to play the violin.”

Nakamatsu fell in love with the piano when he was still in preschool.

At age 6, he started studying with Marina Derryberry, a conservatory graduate who nurtured his talent.

“She knew how to teach kids,” he said. “And she knew how to train adults for a career.”

The first piano recital he went to as a child showcased Van Cliburn, the Texan pianist who stunned the world by winning the first International Tchaikovsky Competition back in 1958.

“We went backstage afterwards, and he knelt down on the floor and signed my program,” Nakamatsu recalled. “Years later, I went to the (Van Cliburn) competition, and I was able to tell him that he really made a nice impression.”

When it came time for college, Nakamatsu chose to major in German studies at Stanford while continuing to practice and perform in his spare time. After getting a master's degree in education from Stanford in 1992, he taught high school German for six years.

Nakamatsu was considered the underdog, up against a heavily favored Russian finalist, when he won the Gold Medal in the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition.

The prize, which is only awarded every four years, included a two-year concert tour capped by a Carnegie Hall appearance.

Now, that's all old hat to Nakamatsu, who performs concerts all over the world and serves as artistic director of the Cape Cod Chamber Music Festival.

The pianist said he misses teaching sometimes but lives vicariously through his wife, who teaches chemistry.

With seven recordings already under his belt, Nakamatsu is getting ready to release his first CD with clarinetist Jon Manasse.

“Jon Manasse is one of my musical heroes,” he said. “There's a mutual understanding that makes what we do completely unique. ... and it just keeps growing.”

Despite his unconventional path to a musical career, Nakamatsu said he has no regrets.

“I think it's just great for people to be well-rounded,” he said. “Music doesn't exist just in the notes. What makes it uniquely human is its humanity.”

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