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Joel Fan whirls through piano delights at this weekend's Northwest Sinfonietta

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By Rosemary Ponnekanti — Staff writer

Fresh from its latest recording session with pianist Joel Fan, the Northwest Sinfonietta opens its 2013-14 season this weekend with “FAN-tastic,” a combination of Schubert, Mozart and some glitzy piano party pieces, including two of the dances from the recording. Concerts repeat in Seattle, Tacoma and Puyallup.

With Reference Recordings, the Sinfonietta recorded seven rare dance-inspired works for piano and orchestra at Pacific Lutheran University's Lagerquist Hall, to be released next April. Fan – a New York concert pianist whose credits include a debut with the New York Philharmonic at age 11, collaborations with Yo Yo Ma, a solo international career and premieres of many new works – is a regular soloist with the Sinfonietta, including their most recent Cuba tour last January. Admired by critics for his “uncanny technical skill” (Washington Post) and “probing intellect and vivid imagination” (New York Times), Fan says he's excited about the recording collaboration – his first with the chamber orchestra.

“It's very fulfilling, really fun,” says the pianist. “It's a different process from solo recording, where you just worry about yourself. (With an orchestra) you have limited time to do a lot, so it's definitely very focused, very efficient.”

This weekend's concerts include two of the works from the recording – Saint-Saëns' “Wedding Cake” Valse Caprice op. 76 and Chopin's “Krakowiak” Concerto Rondo in F op. 14 – as well as two standard piano showcases, Chopin's “Polonaise Fantasie” and Liszt's “Mephisto Waltz.”

“It's unusual, beautiful and intellectually satisfying repertoire,” Fan says, of the program. “They're not just frothy showcases. The ‘Wedding Cake’ is like fizz on the top of champagne, it's wonderfully effervescent. The ‘Krakowiak’ (is based on) a Polish national dance, it's a wonderful work even though it's so early (in Chopin's career). The ‘Polonaise Fantasie’ is really a fantasy on the idea of a polonaise, and the ‘Mephisto’ is true program music.”

For his “Mephisto Waltz” Liszt took as inspiration the storyline from poet Nikolaus Lenau's “Faust,” where Faust and Mephistopheles (the Devil) gatecrash a party. While Mephisto plays erotic tunes on his violin, Faust seduces a guest and everyone ends up dancing their way into hell.

After intermission the orchestra sinks its teeth into the kind of classical chamber orchestra repertoire it's known for: Schubert's Overture in D (“Italian”) and Mozart's Symphony no. 38 in D, the “Prague.”

The Northwest Sinfonietta plays “FAN-tastic!” in three performances. 7:30 p.m. Oct. 11 at Benaroya Hall, 200 University St., Seattle; 7:30 p.m. Oct. 12 at the Rialto Theater, 310 S. 9th St., Tacoma; 2 p.m. Oct. 12 at Pioneer Park Pavilion, 330 Meridian Ave. S., Puyallup. Tickets \$27-\$55/\$10 student rush 90 minutes before show with ID. Seattle 866.833.4747; Tacoma 800.291.7593; Puyallup 800.838.3006.

nwsinfonietta.org

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