



Art & Soul: Joel Fan tames 'Monsters of the Steinway' for Gretna Music



By [Ellen Hughes | Special to PennLive](#)

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[Gretna Music](#)'s "Monsters of the Steinway" series continues Feb. 23 with pianist [Joel Fan](#) playing what he calls "one of the greatest creations of music literature."

The Monster moniker refers not to the charming Fan, but to the difficult repertoire top-notch pianists have been tackling in this series, organized to celebrate the new [Steinway](#) piano that has taken up residence at [Elizabethtown College](#).

Fan has played for Gretna Music twice before. Artistic Coordinator Carl Kane calls him "a fun guy, one of our favorite pianists," and lamented that Fan's favorite doughnut store near the train station has just closed. I told Fan the bad news when I reached him by phone at his home in New York, but he didn't seem too upset. He told me instead about the great sushi dipping sauces he'd sampled in Denver, where he'd just been playing a recital.

Fan is one of the performers in Yo-Yo Ma's [Silk Road Ensemble](#). He had his New York Philharmonic debut at the age of 11 and has won several important international piano competitions. "Precious few pianists can make such interesting, compelling sounds with a wide range of different shades of tone color," Kane said of him.

This is Fan's first time playing Elizabethtown's new Steinway, and his performance of the very challenging "Hammerklavier" sonata by Beethoven is intended to show just how wonderful this piano is. Kane said that the sonata "never fails to awe and thrill listeners with its epic virtuosity and expressive sweep."

Fan agrees. "It's an amazing creation of moods and emotions," he said. "It's a privilege to play it. It's definitely a journey of Titanic proportions. It illustrates the ultimate limits of what a piano can do."

"It's not just the sound, it's also the silences," that Beethoven uses so effectively, he continued. Beethoven's music reflects the struggle of the individual versus the universe, Fan said.

"This sonata reaches spiritual heights on a cosmic level," he added.

I asked how daunted he was by the prospect of playing this 40-plus minute work in Elizabethtown. He talked about the mental preparation before striking the first note and the hours at the piano to learn and memorize such a monumental work. "It's why you practice your craft," he said. Then he laughed and said how much fun it is to play it.

This combination of serious intent tempered with a sense of fun is what Kane says helps to "humanize artists."

Also on the program is Rachmaninoff's Sonata No. 2. Fan said it's also very difficult, exploring as it does polyphonic textures. Although it's composed in a completely different style from Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata, they are both masterpieces, Fan said.

Rachmaninoff was criticized in his time as being anachronistic, out of synch with 20th century composers, looking backwards instead of being a bona fide composer of his own time. Maybe that's why we find his music so deliciously accessible today.

Starting the program is Scriabin's Sonata No. 5. It's "an orgy of ecstasy," Fan said. He called it one of the most difficult pieces ever written for solo piano, the real monster of this program. Only 12 minutes in duration, it begins literally with a big bang. Like Rachmaninoff, Scriabin was Russian, but he was experimental, "writing on the edge of tonality," Fan said.

He said that these 3 sonatas explore the limits of the instrument and imagination, reaching for the most expansive expression of both.

Is this a bit heady for Central Pennsylvania? Not at all, according to Fan. His experience with Gretna audiences is that they are knowledgeable, engaged, and friendly. "Musical language draws people closer together," he said, breaking down the barrier between performer and concertgoer in a shared experience.

"This unusual combination of repertoire will make for a fun, enlivening and engrossing experience," Fan said. This Monster of the Steinway doesn't sound at all terrifying, at least not for those of us in the audience.

IF YOU GO: Gretna Music presents Joel Fan, February 23, 7:30 p.m., Elizabethtown College, Leffler Chapel and Performance Center, Baugher and College Aves. Tickets: \$20-15, Students, half-price, 18 and under, \$1. Info: 717-361-1508 or gretnamusic.org.

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