

The Continuing Adventures of Pianist Joel Fan



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BY PETER BURWASSER

Joel Fan is one of those pianists who seem to have the technical ability and the intellectual breadth to play just about anything they want. His career to date has largely circumvented the standard repertoire, at least on his recordings, focusing instead on delightful side roads in musical history, music with an international flavor, and, significantly, works by living composers. As he explains, this New York City native acquired his artistic curiosity at an early age.

I am curious about your education. Did you always plan to be a professional musician? What took you to Harvard, rather than a conservatory?

I always knew that nothing would ever compare to sitting at the piano and playing a concert! So, it really became a dream of mine early on. I played with the New York Philharmonic at age 11, and that was an experience I'll never forget, walking on stage at Avery Fisher Hall and looking towards the back of the hall. I also attended Juilliard Pre-College, which was a really fun, encouraging experience. So by the time I went to college, I felt that I'd already had enough of a conservatory experience.

How did you end up playing with the New York Philharmonic at 11? What did you perform?

I was the winner of auditions and performed the Mozart Concerto in A Major, K 488, a piece which remains in my repertoire to this day.

You studied with the late composer Leon Kirchner at Harvard. Were you a composition student? I never had the opportunity to meet him, but he seems to have been an especially passionate and inspirational sort. What was that experience like?

For me, Kirchner was a dominant force at Harvard, but one who was at times at odds with the structure of academia. He championed the value of live performance and sought to connect performers with the composer's frame of mind, looking at the



notes and figuring out what the composers truly meant before they wrote the notes. He was at times biting and caustic, and would not hold back in speaking his mind or voicing his opinions. Though I was not a composition student, I always felt he was there for me, to answer a question, lend guiding inspiration, and encourage me to push ahead. I'm forever grateful for his presence and I still think about the things that he told me.

What exactly did you study with Kirchner? Was it a specific class you took, or private instruction?

I took Kirchner's Music 180 class, which was devoted to chamber music performance. I continued on to do an independent study with him, where we discussed music, and from there our relationship developed. He had me compose as well, although I found the process of composition to be more difficult than playing the piano.

Can you speak about the connections between you, Leon Kirchner, and Leon Fleisher?

Leon Kirchner and Leon Fleisher were friends and colleagues, closer in their earlier years. I remember seeing a photo of them playing four hands. There were similarities between the two—they were both moved by the world, by science, by physics in particular, and took inspiration for music from all around them. Both were dominant personalities, alpha figures, tremendous pianists and great teachers. One of my favorite moments was watching a recital by Fleisher in Carnegie Hall while I was sitting next to Kirchner.

Did you play the music of Kirchner for Fleisher when you studied with him? If so, what was the feedback?

I actually never played Kirchner's music for Fleisher. With Fleisher I was most interested in hearing him teach the classics—Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann—so I played works such as the Beethoven concertos, the Schubert B \flat -Major Sonata (posthumous), the Brahms Paganini Variations, and the Schumann Fantasy.

Your discography includes music from around the world. Where did your fascination with international culture come from?

The cellist Yo-Yo Ma and his groundbreaking Silk Road Project showed that there's a vast world out there of non-traditional music which is flavorful and deserves to be explored and played. The piano provides resources beyond any other instrument (yes, I'm biased!), and I'm always seeking to add new repertoire that will appeal to audiences today. For example, I'm currently exploring music by Wang Jianzhong, amongst other Chinese composers, for performance on an upcoming Asian tour and also in the U.S.

You also have a healthy share of music by living composers in your repertoire. Is this an important part of your career? Is there new music that you are playing now that is especially exciting for you?

Yes, contemporary music is important to me, because there's something special about playing a work for the first time and having it come to life. Who knows what works will be considered the canonical masterpieces 100 years from now? Composers like to send me their music, and then I look for ways to program it into future concerts. The best thing about playing music by living composers is being able to work with them to see what they mean. When Kirchner wrote his final work, the Sonata No. 3, "The Forbidden," for me, I saw the process of creation. When I recorded the world premiere of Bolcom's *Nine New Bagatelles*, he also explained some details in the printed score, including tempo changes. These are experiences

that I can then take back to thinking about what it would've been like to have worked with the great composers of the past directly.

Have you tried your hand at composition? I know that you have done some transcriptions.

Yes, I have composed—nothing notable. It might be something I go back to later, when I feel I have something unique to add. I've been fascinated by transcriptions and love to perform my own—for example, of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, which is a real showstopper when you combine the orchestral textures and piano writing—and also music of Richard Wagner, which is rarely played on the solo piano.

Your new CD includes works for piano and orchestra that are not piano concertos, including music by well-known composers in material that is not very well known. How did you discover this repertoire?

The label and I were looking for CD repertoire that would be vibrant and exciting discoveries for listeners. Works like the Chopin *Krakowiak* and Saint-Saëns *Wedding Cake* immediately appealed to me. The Chopin *Krakowiak* is rarely played; it's a piece based on a Polish dance of the same name, and it's a stunning, virtuoso romp that combines poetry with excitement. The *Fantaisie-Ballet* by Pierné, the *Vals-Capricho* by Ricardo Castro Herrera, and the *Polonaise brillante* by Weber (with some help from Liszt) show a range of piano writing from the intimate to the exuberant. And the Gottschalk *Grand Tarantella* and the Cadman *Dark Dancers* are just fun works to play. So it really came together in a compelling package.

Are any of the works on the new CD new to you? How did you discover the music?

Actually, the works on the CD were also new discoveries for me. The various works came up at the suggestion of the record label, and it was lots of fun to acquire such interesting repertoire.

Your career so far has largely been about exploring interesting but somewhat obscure corners of music, at least on recordings. Can we expect Beethoven sonata or Mozart piano concerto recordings anytime soon?

I look to combine traditional repertoire with the unexpected, to provide a uniquely satisfying journey for my audiences. For example, on my earlier discs, I've included sonatas by Prokofiev, Schumann, Ginastera, and Barber, and juxtaposed those with music by composers as diverse as Vasks, Sculthorpe, Piazzolla, and Nazareth. In recent seasons, one of my favorite recitals is my "Monster Sonatas" program; Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata*, Rachmaninoff's *Sonata No. 2*, and Scriabin's *Sonata No. 5*, three works rarely heard together due to their vast demands on the pianist, yet providing a gratifying emotional arc. On another program, I open with my transcription of Richard Wagner's *Overture to Die Meistersinger*. I then contrast his music with that of his fellow Romantics Brahms, Liszt, and Chopin. Concerto-wise, I've recently performed Beethoven's *No. 4*, Rachmaninoff's *No. 3* and *Paganini Rhapsody*, and concertos by Mozart, Liszt, Chopin, Shostakovich, and Tchaikovsky, but also works such as Morton Gould's *Interplay* and Szymanowski's *Symphony-Concertante No. 4*. So, yes, I'm looking forward to recording more and surprising my audiences!