

HELENA SYMPHONY CONCERT

## Acclaimed pianist Joel Fan performs Rachmaninoff with Helena Symphony Saturday



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Virtuoso pianist Joel Fan returns to Helena Saturday night to perform Sergei Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3, which is said to be one of the most difficult works ever composed for piano.

The Helena Symphony Orchestra concert is at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 28 at the Helena Civic Center.

In one of Fan's previous concerts here in January 2012 of Gershwin and Bernstein works, he drew thundering

standing ovations.

For the Helena Symphony's 60th anniversary year, it's bringing back some of its previous guest artists.

"He was certainly one of the most popular concerts," said Music Director Allan R. Scott. "People so loved him."

And it will be a special treat to watch and hear him play the Rachmaninoff concerto.

"It's the mother of all concertos -- it's a monster," Scott said. "You consume it, or it consumes you."

It's more than 40 minutes of nonstop playing, he said. "It's one of the greatest piano pieces of all time."

"The difficulties of the concerto are feared by all pianists (and well beyond the ability of most fine soloists)," wrote Scott in his program notes.

However, it's been in Fan's repertoire for a long time, he said in an Independent Record phone interview Monday from his home in New York.

"It's a beautiful piece," Fan said of the concerto. His piano teacher Leon Fleisher said that for a pianist it was "like climbing Mt. Everest."

"It probably has the most notes of any piano concerto out there," Fan said. "It has such long lines. It's so well structured. Rachmaninoff was just such a master of creating these long phrases that never end."

The piano "gets to do it all," he said, "from somber lyricism" to "hair-raising virtuosity. ... It's a remarkable work."

Written in three movements, the concerto has a massive cadenza (virtuoso solo passage) in the first movement, he said.

The second movement "is very passionate ... very chromatic," he said, "with a series of cadenzas."

“Rachmaninoff was a big fan of a unified motif,” he said, “where the key elements of the theme come back.”

The third movement sounds very similar to the opening of the first movement, he said.

“Rachmaninoff was very structured in the way he wrote music.” Strands and melodies of the first movement return in the third.

“Even though it’s a very long work, it has that satisfying feeling of being unified,” said Fan. “It feels very organic and whole -- a unified whole.”

“It’s very demanding for the pianist,” he added, but “it’s such a great piece,” that it’s a pleasure to play it.

“It just has beautiful melodies that are endless,” he said. “The piano just explodes at times. And it’s very kinetic -- the way the rhythm changes.”

He advised the audience to “listen very carefully to the very opening of the piece.” “That undulation of the orchestra -- those few bars almost have the DNA of the piece.”

“Listen for the orchestra part ... and the piano melody on top of it -- listen for the transformation of that theme that you first heard in the piano part and the transformation into a massive construction in the cadenza at the end of the first movement.”

And at the end of the piece, “listen for the triumphant moment” when it changes from a melancholy minor key to a major key, he said.

Fan, who was born in New York City to Taiwanese parents, began playing piano at age 5 and made his debut at age 11 with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

He dreamed of playing the piano, he said in a 2012 IR interview.

“It’s always been part of my life. It’s a very comfortable feeling playing (on stage) and exhilarating,” he said. “It’s comfortable because it’s what I was meant to do, and here in front of me is the instrument I’ve been studying all my life.”

“When you play music, it’s really an incredible experience to be on stage -- connecting with the audience, bringing music to life. It’s quite magical.”

And Saturday night, the pure, lush melodies of Rachmaninoff will be performed on the Helena Symphony’s concert Steinway.

“This piano is meant to play Rachmaninoff,” said Scott. The custom-made Steinway grand piano was a gift several years ago from the Bompert family.

Fan’s magical touch on the piano has been lauded by critics internationally.

Metro Pulse wrote of his performance of a different Rachmaninoff work, “Fan navigated the virtuosic minefield with daring, grace, and wonderful technique, without over-emotionalizing those melodic passages that have become synonymous with Rachmaninoffs 20th century romanticism.”

While the Albuquerque Journal wrote, “Joel Fan is precisely the kind of performer needed to keep the classical music scene alive and vibrant. Not only immensely talented, he is a bundle of infectious energy that cannot help but catch his audience in the net of his enthusiasm.”

Fan has wide-ranging musical interests and was hailed by the Boston Globe as “a champion of new music.”

He's appeared with world famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma as a member of the Silk Road Ensemble, performing at Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center.

His newest album, "Dances for Piano and Orchestra," focuses on the intersection of music and dance and includes seven unique works.

The symphony orchestra will also perform Peter Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet: Fantasy - Overture," and Paul Hindemith's "Symphonic Metamorphosis."

Tickets are \$12 to \$52 and are available at [helenasympphony.org](http://helenasympphony.org) or by calling 442-1860 or at the box office at 2 N. Last Chance Gulch, Suite 1 (on the Downtown Walking Mall).

### **If you go ...**

**What:** Pianist Joel Fan performs Rachmaninoff with the Helena Symphony Orchestra

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 28

**Where:** Helena Civic Center, 340 Neill Ave.

**Cost:** \$12 to \$52

**Contact:** [helenasympphony.org](http://helenasympphony.org) or call 442-1860 or visit the box office at 2 N. Last Chance Gulch, Suite 1 (on the Downtown Walking Mall)