



Renowned guest pianist Joel Fan to play Gershwin, Bernstein with Helena Symphony



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Internationally acclaimed virtuoso pianist Joel Fan opens the Helena Symphony's winter season with performances of two popular American works, Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," and Bernstein's "Age of Anxiety" 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 28, at the Helena Civic Center.

Praised for his commanding technique and the passion he brings to his performances, Fan has earned accolades from music critics across the continent.

He began playing piano at age 5, and by 11 "I knew this is what I wanted to do," Fan said in an IR phone interview from New York City. "I had dreams about it. 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 the music to life. It's quite magical."

Among those touched by the magic, was The New York Times, which lauded Fan's "powerful touch and ... big sound...his playing was the picture of textural clarity...with the sparkle and rhythmic suppleness of a jazz improviser."

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

And The Ellsworth American wrote, "Joel Fan ... should have a halo of superlatives around his head. He sat at the piano as quietly as at a desk and proceeded to give vibrant, passionate, tender, sparkling life to the thousands of notes under his fingers. Each melodic theme seemed to grow throughout the modulatory transitions into full bloom as an organic whole. His playing ... was one of those times when one wished the music would never end."

In collaboration with the renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma as a member of the Silk Road Ensemble, Fan has appeared in numerous venues such as Carnegie Hall in New York, the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, and on the popular nationally televised programs “Good Morning America” and “Late Night with David Letterman.”

Fan not only embraces classical music in his repertoire, but has commissioned new works and is also passionate about world music.

“(Rhapsody in Blue) is such a classic American piece,” said Fan. “Audiences love it.”

Gershwin’s work “introduced a uniquely American voice” into the world of classical music at a time when it was overwhelmingly a European art form, said Helena Symphony Music Director Allan R. Scott. “Rhapsody in Blue” began the infusion of American popular music into the classical tradition. It also legitimized jazz as a serious form of music.

“Rhapsody in Blue,” like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Great Gatsby” has come to define American life and culture during the Roaring ‘20s, Scott said.

Fan will play another work during the second part of the concert, Leonard Bernstein’s Symphony No. 2, “The Age of Anxiety.”

Based on the Pulitzer Prize winning poem of that name by W. H. Auden, the 1949 symphony is an exploration of “our difficult and problematic search for faith.” The characters in Auden’s poem are four lonely strangers who meet in a bar. Through their four personal points of view they review the life of man.

“It’s such a beautiful piece,” said Fan. “It has drama, melancholy, longing, excitement and passion. It’s accessible, yet honest and has a lot of integrity. He hit the sweet spot. It appeals to a large audience. It’s also a really, really good work.”

This distinctly American evening of music opens with the “Overture to The School for Scandal” by Samuel Barber, directed by the symphony’s apprentice conductor Breanne Cutler. Since the work’s premiere by The Philadelphia Orchestra in the 1930s, it has remained popular with both audiences and musicians.

Concert tickets are \$10 to \$50. To order call 442-1860 or order online at helenasymphony.org.

If you go ...

What: Helena Symphony performs ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ and ‘Age of Anxiety’ – guest pianist Joel Fan; also Overture to ‘The School for Scandal’

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 28

Where: Helena Civic Center

Cost: \$10 to \$50

Contact: 442-1860 or helenasympphony.org