



Craig Smith | The New Mexican

At home between pianos

Joel Fan is an energetic kind of guy. Whether playing in recital or as a concerto soloist, working in Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble with other musicians from around the globe, or giving a cellphone interview from a plane stuck on a runway at John F Kennedy International Airport, the pianist exudes vim, vigor, and musical brains.

He's also one of the rare birds who can convey animation on a studio recording. When it came out this June, his Reference Recordings debut CD, *World Keys: Virtuoso Piano Music*, debuted at third place on the Billboard classical chart. And it's not a cream-puff album by any means. Besides some notably difficult repertoire by Prokofiev, Liszt, and Schumann, it includes unusual and finger-twisting fare by four contemporary composers — Egypt's Halim El-Dabh, China's Qigang Chen, Latvia's Peteris Vasks, and Turkey's Ahmed Adnan Saygun.

In May 2003, Fan and violinist Colin Jacobsen joined cellist Yo-Yo Ma for a Pro Musica benefit at the Santa Fe Opera; Fan has since returned twice to solo in a Mozart concerto and Chopin's E Minor concerto with Pro Musica. On Sunday, Nov. 4, Santa Fe audiences get their fourth chance to experience his bubbling artistic personality when he solos in Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G Major with Santa Fe Pro Musica. Pro Musica artistic director Thomas O'Connor conducts the concert; other repertoire consists of the orchestral version of Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite* and Bartók's *Divertimento for String Orchestra*.





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Pasatiempo: I've interviewed people in unusual places, but talking to someone in a plane on the tarmac is a first.

Joel Fan: That's just how it is at JFK. All New York airports are notorious for delays. Even so, even a plane gets to be home when you fly a lot. Or you make the plane home for the few hours you're on it. Cellphones have made it a lot easier to go on tour.

I'm really looking forward to going back to Santa Fe for this concert. The first time, with Yo-Yo, was unbelievable. It was just a great experience. It's been a great experience every time, I'll tell you, coming back and playing with Tom and the band. They're such great musicians, such great collaborators.

Pasa: Are you doing this particular Beethoven concerto, the fourth, often this season?

Fan: I wouldn't say I'm doing it a lot this season. I'm doing the Beethoven first a lot. But Tom and I talked about this one a couple of seasons ago, and I think it's an ideal piece for his orchestra and this situation. It's a more intimate work than some of the other concertos. It has just as much range as the bigger ones, just in a different emotional landscape.

It's amazing to play any Beethoven, of course. The other piece I'm playing this season (of Beethoven) is the op. 110 piano sonata. It's nice to be comparing those two. Another interesting thing is Beethoven's Triple Concerto, which I played last season. The Triple has a very similar opus number to the fourth, but it's nowhere near the great piece the fourth concerto is. But there are similarities in the ethereal piano writing.

Pasa: It sounds like you've got a busy year ahead.

Fan: This is a really great season! One of the highlights is I have a solo recital coming up at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. That solo album I released back in June, that did very well. I was really happy about that, and Reference Recordings, they're really behind me. I'm integrating music from that CD into my new concerts. And I'm working toward a new CD.

Pasa: What might you record for that?

Fan: Well — I can't say everything — but Gottschalk and Jelly Roll Morton. It's going to be pretty clever. We're looking, possibly, at a new commission from a current American composer. The idea is to keep it pretty wide-ranging and eclectic.

Other playing: I just played the Rachmaninoff "Paganini Rhapsody" and the Rachmaninoff third [concerto] just a few months ago, out in Ukraine, of all places, with the Odessa Philharmonic. I am also doing Chopin two in F Minor this season. A lot of really cool, cool stuff. In April I'm playing Messiaen's Turangalila Symphony with Alan Gilbert [former Santa Fe Opera music director] at the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic.

Pasa: What will you play in Las Vegas, where you're going?

Fan: Oh, I'm not playing in Vegas. I'm supposed to play in Nevada next season, in Carson City. This is actually to visit my mom. I just squeezed it in. See, I just toured Texas. I did San Antonio, and I played at the George Bush Sr. presidential library in College Station. They have a great piano there.

Pasa: A Steinway?



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Fan: Yes, a Steinway. Signed by George Bush Sr. It's amazing what your tax dollars go for. I just played in Vermont, a solo recital in Burlington. That really was a beautiful place.

I go to beautiful places all the time. I get off the plane and say, "This has to be the best job in the world. Not only are you getting to play beautiful music and do what you love; you're meeting people, you're staying in touch, they're becoming friends. You're just privileged to enjoy life."

My other hobby is driving. I'm, like, a crazy driver; I love to drive. I just spent time driving all around Vermont to see the foliage up in New England at this time of year. I make it a point to rent a car wherever I go.

Pasa: Do you travel with your scores these days or keep the music in your head?

Fan: It's all in my head. I don't usually carry music; piano books are usually really heavy. I regret to say this, but the Beethoven sonatas [volumes] are so thick and heavy, that I just tear the one I want out of the book. I don't carry those heavy things if I can help it.

Pasa: Do you have a favorite edition? Schnabel, von Bülow, Bärenreiter, another one? Many pianists favor only one out of the many available.

Fan: I use the Schirmer editions! Actually my old teacher, Leon Fleischer, only taught from the Beethoven [original] editions. I use Schirmer, but I check against the Bärenreiter *Urtext* [unedited] scores sometimes. ◀

details

- ▼ Joel Fan with Santa Fe Pro Musica; music of Ravel, Bartók & Beethoven
- ▼ 3 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 4
- ▼ Lentic Performing Arts Center, 211 W. San Francisco St.
- ▼ \$15-\$60; 988-1234 & 988-4640