

Gretna Music brings in the big guns

New season at Elizabethtown College begins with world-class pianist Joel Fan



Joel Fan

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Gretna Music never has been known for bringing in the big names. The modest chamber music series, based at Elizabethtown College, has earned a following because it brings to central Pennsylvania high-caliber musicians whose names may *occasionally* appear in the New York Times, but never on a symphony marquee.

This season, Gretna Music is taking a turn for the higher profile. The lineup of artists coming to Elizabethtown includes the Canadian Brass, a classical supergroup if ever there was one, and Chanticleer, America's most respected and beloved vocal ensemble.

Even if you don't recognize the remaining names on the roster, it's likely you know of their spouses and recital partners — musicians like Gil Shaham and Yo-Yo Ma.

"There is a reason why every one of these artists ended up on one of our programs," said Carl Kane, Gretna Music's artistic associate. "It was a very long negotiation process."

Michael Murray, Gretna's executive director, explained the logistics: Five of the seven concerts were booked through same agent, Opus 3 Artists.

DETAILS

Joel Fan, presented by Gretna Music, Sat., 7:30 p.m., Leffler Performance Center, Elizabethtown College, \$20, \$15, students 18 & under \$1, half-price for ages 19-26, 361-1508.

Murray and Kane told Opus 3 who they wanted and how much money they had to work with. And then they waited. And made more phone calls. And waited. In the end, they ended up with the star-studded lineup, but concerts that are hardly standard fare.

"We are making a concerted effort to explore the whole world of classical chamber music," Kane said.

The series opens Saturday with a world music recital by pianist Joel Fan. He's best known for sitting at the left hand of Yo-Yo Ma whenever the famed cellist needs a pianist to perform with his Silk Road Ensemble, a group of musicians dedicated to merging the music of the East with Western classical traditions.

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"We figured, if he plays with Yo-Yo, he must be good," Kane said of Fan. They had never heard the pianist before he came to Elizabethtown last fall to play a reduced version of Chopin's B Minor Concerto with the Enzo Quartet. Murray and Kane stood in the rear of Leffler Chapel, astounded.

"He totally changed the tone color of our piano," Kane said. "He is as good a pianist as has ever played here."

Coaxing a rainbow of sounds out from the keys is Fan's specialty. His latest CD, "World Keys," juxtaposes Prokofiev, Chopin and Liszt with works by 20th-century composers from Syria, Egypt and China. Much of this same music, plus Chopin's B-flat Minor "Funeral March" Sonata will be on Saturday's set list. It's a program Fan will be playing for the first time, and he's looking forward to it.

"What I'm trying to do is have the listener hear the piece in a way they have not heard it before," Fan said.

That should happen, he hopes, when his audience contrasts the deep, bell-like sounds of the Chopin sonata with the high, pristine chimes of a piece written by a Chinese composer.

"I'm trying to understand the instruments that the composers are trying to evoke through the piano," Fan said.

As the only pianist scheduled to perform at Gretna this year, he feels a little extra pressure to deliver a sell-out performance (if not a sell-out crowd) this weekend.

"Of course I'm biased, but every chamber music series should include a piano recital," Fan said.

Here's a quick look at Gretna Music's full 2007-08 season line-up:

Nov. 17 and Feb. 2: Violinist Adele Anthony (who just happens to be married to violinist Gil Shaham) will present the complete Bach partitas and sonatas for solo violin.

Dec. 6: The Canadian Brass holiday tour will make its only Pennsylvania stop in Elizabethtown.

March 17: Brazilian guitarist Paul Galbraith will perform arrangements of well known classical works on his custom-made eight-string guitar.

April 6: Verve Records guitarist Russell Malone has backed the likes of Harry Connick Jr. and Diana Krall. At this solo gig, he'll perform jazzy standards from the American songbook.

April 12: The season concludes with a dozen singers from Chanticleer traveling from California to Elizabethtown. The famous all-male chorus will present "My Spirit Sang All Day," a program that starts with Palestrina and traces vocal traditions straight through to the present day.