

SAN BERNARDINO: Masterwork concert to feature masterful pianist Rufus Choi

For pianist Rufus Choi, performing a concerto is almost a duty.

“I want to communicate my love for music, which gives me a purpose in life,” he said in a recent interview. “It’s my duty to make the composer’s notes come alive, to help realize the vision of the composer. So I bring something, add something new – my own brand, my own character. I work to help the audience see the composer’s vision through my lens.”

Choi will be the featured soloist at the San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra’s “Masterwork Mélange” concert at the California Theatre of the Performing Arts in San Bernardino on Saturday, March 26.

“Masterwork Mélange” will feature three master composers: Humperdinck, Shostakovich, and Rachmaninoff.

Choi will perform Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 2. He has won numerous awards and has been featured at the Salzburg Festival, the Great Hall at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow and the Los Angeles Music Center among other venues.

Choi’s first award was at age 9, when he won a piano competition to perform a concerto with an orchestra.

“It was then that I realized this was what I would do with my life,” Choi said. Until that time, he had been dividing his practice time between the church organ and the piano.

“The Rachmaninoff Concerto No. 2 has so many melodies that are so beautiful and so well-written,” Choi said. “Most concerti have one, maybe two, melodies that can stand alone, but this one, all three movements can stand on their own as a wonderful piece.”

Choi acknowledged that Rachmaninoff was a great pianist as well as a great composer.

“He wrote with long, warm phrases, and a harmonic language that is very intense,” Choi said. “My own background is with Russian music as my teachers were all Russian. So this music is very close to me and my background. It is very passionate and it speaks to me.”

San Bernardino Symphony Conductor Frank Paul Fetta described the concert as “musical journey from the whimsical to the sublime” in a press release.

Whimsical could describe the prelude to “Hansel und Gretel,” an opera written in 1890 by Englebert Humperdinck and loosely based on the fairytale by the Brothers Grimm. The opera was a popular musical work, considered a masterpiece by the likes of Richard Strauss, and in 1923, the Royal Opera House of London chose it for their first complete radio opera broadcast.

Dmitri Shostakovich composed Symphony No. 9 in 1945, according to the San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra, as a grand celebration for the Russian victory over Nazi Germany in World War II. It ended up being a light, jovial symphony which Fetta described in a press release as a “visually evocative presentation juxtaposed with strong satiric overtones,” as Shostakovich wrestled with making his compositions ideologically appropriate for the Soviet-era government while conveying celebration.

The event’s pre-concert talk will be presented by “Shostakovich” and “Rachmaninoff” as portrayed by two members

of the Inland Valley Repertory Theatre at 6:30pm.

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