

Two celebrated child prodigies make their Bay Area debut with the California Symphony on October 15 & 17, 2006

Event launches 20th anniversary season of the
critically-acclaimed orchestra, founded by
conductor Barry Jekowsky

While other kids their age are listening to music on iPods, 12-year-old **Conrad Tao** and 14-year-old **Peng Peng** are busy practicing the classics – from Mozart and Beethoven to Rachmaninoff and Chopin – for upcoming performances with major orchestras.

Regarded as two of the world's most exciting emerging pianists, Tao and Peng Peng will make their Bay Area debut with the California Symphony at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek on **Sunday, October 15**, and **Tuesday, October 17**. These performances will be Tao's first on the West Coast and only Peng Peng's second (he was the featured guest artist with the San Diego Symphony for three performances over last week's Labor Day Weekend). *[Full bios below]*

The two Juilliard students, who are also composers, will play the rarely-performed Mozart's Concerto in E Flat Major for Two Pianos (K365), believed to have been written in 1779 by Mozart as a duet for himself and his sister. The first movement of the 24-minute piece – which Tao and Peng Peng will perform publicly for the first time – opens with an imposing orchestral introduction, then is dominated by the pianos. "It's so exciting to hear one young prodigiously gifted child – but to hear two of them playing together, there is something really indescribable about that if you are sitting in the audience, no matter how old you are," says California Symphony conductor Barry Jekowsky.

Tao and Peng Peng's joint appearance coincides with the launch of a season-long celebration of the California Symphony's 20th anniversary, founded by Jekowsky, the former San Francisco Symphony principal timpanist and Associate Conductor of the National Symphony in Washington D.C. Last year, *Reader's Digest* named the Walnut Creek-based company "The Best Symphony Orchestra in America," in part for its unique heritage of presenting gifted young performers early in their careers. Among those previously featured who have since achieved international acclaim have been violinists **Kyoko Takezawa** (presented in 1987 at the age of 16), **Leila Josefowicz** (in 1990 at age 12), **Sarah Chang**

(first of three appearances, in 1991 at age 9), and **Hilary Hahn** (in 1998 at 18); pianists **Helen Huang** (in 1993 at age 10), **Joyce Yang** (in 1999 at 13), and **Chloe Pang** (in 2005 at 13); and cellist **Alisa Weilerstein** (in 1996 at 14).

“It was the greatest honor to make my professional debut with the California Symphony,” says Chloe Pang, who will be performing in a special PBS-Carnegie Hall series to be broadcast by NPR’s “From the Top” on September 29. “Maestro Jekowsky knew exactly what colors to achieve in the menacing, dramatic opening of Mozart’s D Minor Piano Concerto, enabling me to freely express myself. I am forever grateful.”

According to Jekowsky, “Twenty years ago, it was basically unheard of for a professional orchestra to bring in a 9-year-old soloist. They either appeared with a youth orchestra or in a children’s concert.”

Jekowsky has been conducting gifted young performers as far back as the late 1970s, when he was studying for his master’s degree at Juilliard. The late Dorothy DeLay – a Juilliard instructor who is widely regarded as the most influential American violin teacher of the 20th century – had him conduct many of the concerto concerts featuring her best students. He also had the privilege of conducting 12-year-old violinist Midori at the Aspen Music Festival early in his career, and regularly featured young artists on the subscription program at the National Symphony.

“People often ask me, ‘How do you find them?’” he relates. “I used to go to New York once or twice a year for auditions. Now it’s mostly through word-of-mouth, because teachers know they can trust that their students will have the best possible experience.”

Indeed, no matter how young they are, Jekowsky says he always treats his guest stars as consummate professionals. “They fully understand what I’m talking about and I never treat them less than that.” Each appearance begins with a private meeting, allowing the young artist to express preferences concerning styling, pace and speed. “So they can feel infinitely comfortable that nothing will get in the way of their performance, and they can just relax and play their hearts out,” he explains.

The program for both subscription performances – on **Sunday, October 15, 2006, at 4 pm** and **Tuesday, October 17, at 7:30 pm** – will begin with John Williams’ “Happy Birthday Variations,” which the Oscar-winning composer created in the mid-1990s. “This is hardly ever performed, and in fact you can’t even find a recording of it,” says Jekowsky.

Rounding out the repertoire will be Brahms Symphony #1 and the world premiere of the first movement (by Kevin Beavers) of “Concerto for Orchestra,” a work-in-progress commissioned by the California Symphony that will debut during the season finale in May 2007. The unprecedented piece – which consists of four individual concertos, each featuring a different section of the orchestra – is being created through a unique collaboration of the award-winning alumni of the California Symphony’s prestigious Young American Composer-in-Residence Program. The second and third movements will debut on March 11 & 13, 2007, followed by the fourth movement and performance of the suite in its

entirety on May 6 & 8. The composers – Beavers, Chris Theofanidis, Kevin Puts and Pierre Jalbert – will be present at the respective unveilings of their compositions.

Guest Performer Bios

CONRAD TAO

12-year-old pianist and composer Conrad Tao showed his interest in music at the mere age of 18 months, when he was found playing children's songs on the piano. He started formal piano lessons at age 3 and gave his first public recital at 4. At the age of 7, he was invited to give a recital at the World Piano Pedagogy Conference in Orlando, Florida. At 8, he made his concerto debut with the Utah Chamber Music Festival Orchestra performing Mozart's Piano Concerto in A major, K414 in two concerts. That same year, he won the 2003 Walgreens National Concerto Competition, which led to the performance of the Mendelssohn violin concerto in E minor with the Midwest Young Artists Concert Orchestra.

Conrad made his recital debut at the Miami International Piano Festival in March 2005 in their "Prodigies and Masters of Tomorrow" concert series, followed by another invitational recital in May 2005 in their "Discovery Series."

He performed his own *Sonata for Two Pianos* at the Aspen Music Festival in July 2005, in a packed Harris Hall concert celebrating Juilliard's Centennial. The *Aspen Daily News* article reporting on the event wrote: "The piece that received the most praise, and first of the many standing ovations, was an original composition by 11-year-old Conrad Tao...Who knew such large talent could come out of such small bodies!"

Tao's compositions have won national prizes and have been featured on Chicago WFMT radio's 50th anniversary program and the national radio program "From the Top." At age 10, his piano composition "Silhouettes and Shadows" took the BMI Carlos Surinach Prize, making him the youngest winner of the prestigious award for young composers in the Western Hemisphere. He was also the winner of the 2004 and 2005 ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer awards, and his *Sonata for Two Pianos* was featured at the 2004 award ceremony. He has given two composition recitals in New York City featuring 11 of his original works.

Tao is currently enrolled in the Juilliard pre-college division studying piano with Yoheved Kaplinsky. He studies composition privately with Christopher Theofanidis, an alumnus of the California Symphony's three-year Young American Composer-in-Residence Program who is currently on the faculty at the Peabody Conservatory and the Juilliard School. A former student at the Music Institute of Chicago, Tao studied piano with Mr. Emilio del Rosario for four years. He currently resides in New York City and is an eighth grader at the Professional Children's School.

Tao has been featured on many TV programs and newspaper articles for his extraordinary musical talent since the age of 5, including Chicago ABC's special news program "Baby Brainpower",

Chicago public TV channel 11's "ArtBeat", Sony Pictures "Life & Style", the Chicago Sun-Times and the Washington Post.

PENG PENG

Born in China, Peng Peng (pronounced *pong pong*) began piano lessons at the age of five, won the Jiang-Su Youth Piano Competition's "Piano Prodigy Prize" a year later, then debuted in his first public recital in Nanjing at eight. At the age of 10, his parents brought him to the States and enrolled him in Juilliard's Pre-College Division.

In 2002, Peng Peng made his concerto debut with the Xiamen Philharmonic Orchestra playing Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 1, and took first prize in the China National Youth Piano Competition of Xiamen. During the 2004-2005 season, he performed Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 2 with the Big Spring Symphony of Texas and Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 21 on the Philharmonic Orchestra of New Jersey's Discovery Series, and won the Junior Category of the 2005 New Jersey Philharmonic Orchestra Competition. He has also won Juilliard School's 2003-04 and 2005-06 Pre-College Mozart Piano Concerto Competitions.

In the last year, Peng Peng debuted at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall with Itzhak Perlman conducting the Juilliard Pre-College Chamber Orchestra, and at the Aspen Music Festival's Benedict Music Tent with the Aspen Festival Orchestra under the direction of Leonard Slatkin. Other performances included the Orlando Philharmonic, Norwalk Symphony, Corpus Christi Symphony, Big Spring Symphony, Midland-Odessa Symphony and Nashua Symphony, as well as recitals in Cincinnati and a European debut at the Musée du Louvre in Paris.

Peng Peng is currently studying with Yoheved Kaplinksy in the Juilliard Pre-College Division. While still in China, he previously studied under Hui-Fang Ye, Jian-Zhong Wang and Zhi-Jue Chao. An avid composer, he studies composition at Juilliard with Andrew Thomas. Thus far, he has written 18 works for piano, eight chamber pieces, and two works for orchestra. His *Scherzo For Orchestra* won the 2004-2005 Juilliard Pre-College Division Composition Competition.

Tao and Peng Peng can be heard on NPR's "From the Top" playing one of Tao's own compositions: <http://www.fromthetop.org/Programs/Performers.cfm?eid=219>. Peng Peng also appeared as a soloist performing Rachmaninoff's *Six Moments Musicaux, Op.16*: <http://www.fromthetop.org/Programs/Performers.cfm?pid=1885>.