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Tuesday, Nov 04, 2003

# Georgia Rowe

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GEORGIA ROWE: CLASSICAL NOTES

## Tickling the ivories just part of teen's repertoire

AT 15, Sebastian Chang may not be the world's youngest concert pianist. But he may be one of the most experienced for his age. He started playing almost as soon as he could walk, and he's been hard at work ever since.

"We had a piano in the house, and by the time I was 2, I was climbing up on it and tinkering out a few notes," says Chang, who was born and raised in Southern California. "In a few years, I was able to pick melodies off the radio by ear and smash them out to the best of my ability. My parents took this as a sign and enrolled me in music classes."

Formal lessons started at age 4. Today, many consider him one of the brightest up-and-coming musicians around.

Chang comes to Walnut Creek's Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts on Sunday evening to perform with the California Symphony. Under the direction of Barry Jekowsky, he'll play Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue."

The program, which opens the orchestra's 17th season, also includes Ibert's "Divertissement," Respighi's "Pines of Rome" and Charles Ives' "The Unanswered Question."

This will be Chang's first public performance of Gershwin's score, and in a recent phone call from his Orange County home, the pianist said he's been working hard to master it.

"It's a wonderful piece," says Chang. "I really appreciate what Gershwin does with the little motifs he throws in at the beginning of the piece and develops later. It has a lot of little ingenious quirks like that."

Jekowsky, who has introduced local audiences to prodigies such as violinist Sarah Chang, pianist Helen Huang and violinist Shunsuke Sato, says he was amazed the first time he heard Chang play.

"Sebastian is a huge talent," says the conductor. "Besides his technical brilliance and facility, his playing is very wise and intelligent -- not in a schooled way, but in the depth and wisdom of his interpretation. It's way beyond his years. I think the sky's the limit for him. He has all the right ingredients to become a superstar."

Chang, who is also a composer, has caught the interest of numerous conductors and music industry insiders. He has performed throughout the United States, Asia and Canada. His honors include a BMI/Carlos Surinach Prize, a Morton Gould Young Composers Award and an honorable mention from ASCAP. His compositions have been played by the Tokyo and Pacific symphonies, among others.

Chang's parents are not musicians -- his father is a structural engineer, and his mother, who helps manage his career, is a homemaker -- but he says their love for music gave him the foundation for a lifelong career.

At this point, he seems to be avoiding the kind of pressure that keeps many prodigies on a nonstop touring schedule. "Some months I don't perform at all, and in others, I'll do maybe five performances," he says. "There's no set number." Currently a high school senior, he enjoys a range of subjects, including literature, philosophy and sports. He was a competitive gymnast for eight years. He gave that up for music, but still finds time for golf and fencing.

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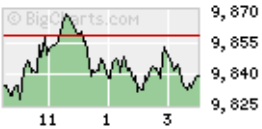
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As a composer, Chang's musical hero is Beethoven. "I admire Beethoven above all other composers, because he composed while he was deaf," he says. "I find that so amazing. I can't fathom what it would be like to compose without being able to hear any of the music you were writing."

He's studying Beethoven's "Waldstein" sonata, and also likes contemporary composers such as John Adams and Gyorgy Ligeti. "Right now, I'm trying to get through the first book of Ligeti's piano etudes," he says. "They're absolutely impossible."

In his spare time, Chang plays violin and clarinet. But he says the piano will always be his primary instrument.

"The great Russian pianist Maria Yudina said 'You think the piano is one instrument, but really it's a thousand instruments,'" he says. "I think that's true. Every note of the piano has its own unique characteristic. Every time I play the piano, I find something new to appreciate."

Sunday's concert begins at 7:30 p.m. The program repeats Tuesday at 8. Tickets, at \$39-\$59 (\$20 for students), are available at 925-943-SHOW.

ALSO THIS WEEK -- Conductor Alan Gilbert leads the San Francisco Symphony in the U.S. premiere of Anders Hillborg's "Exquisite Corpse," as well as works by Chopin, Scriabin and Smetana, tonight and tomorrow at Davies Hall. Tickets are \$15-\$97. Call 415-864-6000. Harpsichordist Richard Edgarr is both conductor and soloist for tomorrow's all-Bach concert by the Academy of Ancient Music at Berkeley's First Congregational Church. Two of the composer's harpsichord concertos -- BWV 1052 and 1055 -- are on the program. All tickets \$42. 510-642-9988. Chamber Music Sundaes plays Bach, Berg, Schubert and Kavasch, along with Robert Sibbing's "Songs of the Prairie" for soprano, English horn and piano, Sunday afternoon at Berkeley's St. John's Presbyterian Church. The program starts at 3:15; tickets are \$18 general, \$14 students/seniors, and \$7 youths. 415-584-5946. The Guarneri String Quartet celebrates its 40th anniversary Sunday evening at Herbst Theatre with a program of works by Beethoven, Sibelius and Arriaga. \$26-\$48. 415-398-6449. Murray Perahia leads the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields in two programs Nov. 2-3 at Davies Hall; the great pianist is also the ensemble's soloist in two Beethoven concertos. \$15-\$82. 415-864-6000. The San Francisco State University Opera Workshop presents Britten's "Albert Herring" Nov. 6-9 at the college's Studio Theatre. \$10, \$5 students/seniors. 415-338-2467.

Georgia Rowe's Classical Notes appears every week in Friday TimeOut. Reach Georgia at [growe@atdial.net](mailto:growe@atdial.net).



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