

Classical notes from a provocative pianist — Matthew Edwards plays the Sanchez

By Jean Bartlett ARTS CORRESPONDENT

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San Francisco Bay Area native Matthew Edwards will present a classical piano performance this Saturday at Pacifica Performances Sanchez Concert Hall. Many Pacificans know Edwards as the pianist for the San Francisco Symphony Chorus as well as pianist and organist for St. Andrew Presbyterian Church here in Pacifica.

“I have been blessed to have served the congregations at Terra Nova Church Center in Pacifica for close to 20 years,” said Edwards. “I am grateful to the many wonderful, loving people there who have listened to my playing so patiently and for so long.”

Pianist Edwards will open his program with several pieces by Alexander Scriabin. Composer, pianist and self-appointed mystic, Scriabin was considered to be the primary figure of the Russian Symbolism movement (an intellectual and artistic movement predominant in Russia at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.) Edwards will play the composer’s final three sonatas — (8th, 9th and 10th.)

“To my mind, these one-movement tone-poems form a unified triptych,” said Edwards. “The 8th is the most complex and the longest of Scriabin’s one movement sonatas. Its opening measures present five contrasting motifs that represent the elements of earth, air, fire, water and the mystic ether; in that order. Scriabin himself described this sonata’s harmonies as “Drawn from nature, as if it had never existed before.”

“The 9th sonata is called “Black Mass,” Edwards continued. “As the name suggests, it is an exploration of the shadow; an inquiry into the darker side of our nature. Scriabin described his 10th sonata as ‘a sonata of insects. Insects are born from the sun — they are the sun’s kisses.’ Within the piece is an atmosphere of unbridled ecstasy and eros.”

In the second half of his program, Edwards will present Beethoven’s Sonata No. 29 in B-flat, Op. 106 “Hammerklavier.”

“Beethoven considered this his greatest sonata,” said Edwards. “In ‘Hammerklavier,’ Beethoven conjures a narrative of rare power and significance. The piece speaks to our shared anxieties and to the often painful realities of our ‘condition.’ It is not Classic; it is not Romantic, though one can hear those elements. The prevailing tone of the opening movement strikes me as something very close to a grave psychic or spiritual crisis. A meditative transitional section takes us safely to the shores of the final fugue. I have come to feel that there is an unaccountable, grace-filled joy and acceptance that is at the heart of its rapturous conclusion.” It was at age 9 that Edwards discovered his passion for piano.

“I started with clarinet, as did my stepbrother,” said Edwards. “He was pretty darned good immediately and I was consumed with frustration and jealousy. After breaking said clarinet over a chair in a precocious fit of artistic rage, I was given Grandma’s old upright — something I could not break was the idea.”

“By the time I was 11 or 12, I was completely taken with the piano,” said Edwards. “Though making a living at it was not something that was considered possible in my family, my heroes growing up were Rubinstein and Arrau and that lot! I admired them unconditionally and realized that I had the ability to understand and to a certain degree, emulate what they were doing.”

Edwards’s piano studies were local and private, with Sharon Mann-Polk of Berkeley and Marta LeRoux of San Francisco. “I started at Holy Names College in Oakland as a young (too young at 14!) music major,” said Edwards. “I transferred after two years to Cal Hayward where my father taught political science. I ended up with a B.S. in mathematics.” Edwards also had a brief period of coaching from the remarkable pianist, composer and teacher Julian White — which proved crucial to Edwards’s professional development. Edwards would go on to solo with the Contra Costa, Solano and Tassajara Symphonies as well the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, the Santa Cruz New Music Works and the Stanford Woodwind Quintet, among other venues.

“When I was a child I would have to say that I loved the feeling of my hands on the keyboard, and that wondrous quality of being lost in the sound as well as in a beautiful place; a playground where you are free to do what you want. Of course, things are not so easy when we get older but I must say, that I am still seeking to recapture that quality of simply ‘being’ at the instrument, with as few preconceptions of ‘interpretation’ as possible. For me, there is an endless depth of meaning and subtlety in the art of music. Music by its nature is fleeting and dependent upon time to make its point. But nobody knows what ‘time’ is. This may explain the mysterious power of great music. For me, the ideal is to try to look as freshly as possible at what you are playing, as if it had not been seen before.”

If you go:

Where: Pacifica Performances Sanchez Concert Hall, 1220 Linda Mar Blvd.

When: Saturday, May 17 at 7:30 p.m. Doors open 30 minutes before show.

Tickets: \$20 general, \$15 seniors/students/members, \$12 senior or student members, free under 18.

Contact: call 650-355-1882 or email

info@pacificaperformances.org.