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Rachmaninoff Rising

By Brenda Rees

Armen Ter-Tatevosian has a two-pronged dream: expose the human race to the joys of classical music and reward young talent embracing the art. This month, Ter-Tatevosian gets a little closer to both goals as he produces this year's Rachmaninoff International Piano Competition and Festival (RachFest for short) at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium and Walt Disney Concert Hall from June 12 through June 22. It's the third installment of the triennial event, which was previously held in Pasadena and Los Angeles in 2002 and 2005.

The competition will feature 24 young pianists from all over the world vying for fame, prize money and the chance to record a CD. In addition, the gold medal winner will be invited to play and tour with the Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra of Moscow, one of the world's oldest and most respected orchestras.

Bringing RachFest to roost in the Los Angeles area may be music to the ears of serious music aficionados, but establishing a new piano competition in a classical music scene already saturated with competitions was – and still is – a dicey proposition.

"It's tough and expensive to take on this kind of proposition," says John Perry, faculty member at the Colburn School of Music in downtown L.A. and a juror for the first two competitions. Perry says he has high hopes for RachFest because Southern California "needs this kind of exposure. Fort Worth has the Van Cliburn [International Piano Competition] and New York the Naumberg [International Violincello Competition]. We're an international city; we need to be known as a player in the community."

What sets RachFest apart from the more than 300 other competitions is "the level, the scope and the requirements," says the Russian-born Ter-Tatevosian. "Also, our jurors come from different countries and are renowned artists themselves." More to the point, he says, RachFest is truly international at even its highest levels. "We're unique because we have two countries – the United States and Russia – participating as organizers," he says. "Not even in Europe does this happen."

It certainly helps that the organization's moniker is inspired by one of classical music's 20th-century icons, Sergei Rachmaninoff, who immigrated to the United States after the Russian Revolution and lived in Beverly Hills until his death in 1943. A master in the Romantic style of European classical music, Rachmaninoff composed symphonies and concertos that are among the more hauntingly beautiful and technically difficult pieces for musicians to perform. Remember pianist David Helfgott who, according to the 1996 movie "Shine," lost his mind learning Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto?

Not surprisingly, Rachmaninoff selections are part of the competition's mandatory program; but new this year will be several Rachmaninoff song transcriptions by the Grammy Award-winning American pianist and competition juror, Earl Wild. "These are songs not known to the general public," says Ter-Tatevosian about the selections: "O, Cease Thy Singing," "Vocalise," "Floods of Spring," "Do Not Grieve" and "In The Silent Night."

Another new element introduces a little “American Idol”-like audience participation into the competition schedule. After each round, audience members will vote on their favorite performer. At the end of the final round, the winning pianist will be awarded a \$3,000 gift certificate from Old Town Music of Pasadena.

But, like many endeavors that depend on the goodwill of patrons, RachFest is struggling to navigate the stormy waters of a troubled economy. Ter-Tatevosian says he has been working with a bare-bones staff and a limited budget. For the first time this year, the festival can't even afford to pay airfare for the 24 contestants who will be flying in for the competition.

“This year, we are having some financial difficulties,” admits Ter-Tatevosian. “But I hope that we will establish this organization as able to handle these productions and even bigger ones in the future. So much of this work is like making tunnels. We want to soon see the light at the end of it.”

In spite of this year's tight purse strings, Ter-Tatevosian has big plans for RachFest. He envisions three different kinds of Rachmaninoff International Competitions – piano, vocal and conducting – each on a three-year cycle so there would be one every year.

Before he dedicated himself to organizing the competition, Ter-Tatevosian produced the International Piano Symposium around the L.A. area for six years, which introduced young talent to masters until its last session in 2004. Young people need to be encouraged to explore classical music, says Ter-Tatevosian, who remembers his own musical childhood with fondness.

“Our home was always filled with music,” he says. “I studied music back in the Soviet Union and graduated from a conservatory. My father was a composer and my mother was a violinist.”

As part of his organization's community outreach, Ter-Tatevosian is distributing 200 festival tickets to Pasadena Unified School District students in the hope of introducing them to the pleasure of hearing great music. “The whole theme of this festival is building bridges,” Ter-Tatevosian says of connections between countries, students and artists, performers and audience members – including schoolchildren who may have never heard live classical music before.

Despite the stress and logistical problems of putting together an international event, Ter-Tatevosian looks forward to hearing the contestants perform. “It's so very enjoyable to hear them,” he says. “You can see and hear how music is related to the soul of a person as they play.”

The Third Rachmaninoff International Piano Competition and Festival takes place from June 12 through June 22. The first and second rounds are held at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium's Gold Room; tickets cost \$19. The final round and award ceremony takes place at the Walt Disney Concert Hall; tickets cost \$40 to \$120. Tickets can be ordered from Ticketmaster by calling (213) 365-3500. For more information, call (310) 356-8060 or visit www.RachFest.com.