



THE DRANOFF INTERNATIONAL 2 PIANO FOUNDATION

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CLASSICAL MUSIC: ALL HANDS ON DECK FOR THE DRANOFF

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CLASSICAL MUSIC: ALL HANDS ON DECK FOR THE DRANOFF

One hundred and seventy-six keys. Two hundred fingers. And one four-handed winner.

This week, Miami will once again host one of the most prestigious events in the music world, the Dranoff International Two Piano Competition. Founded in 1987 by pianist Loretta Dranoff in memory of her late husband and performing partner Murray, the biennial competition draws 10 teams from around the globe for a chance to capture the top prize and launch a career in this specialized niche of the classical repertoire.

Each team performs three recitals of music of their choosing, as well as the Lillibulero Variations, a new work by Sir Richard Rodney Bennett, music by Max Reger and music for single piano, four hands. Three finalist teams will be announced Friday, and on March 16, each duo will perform Max Bruch's Concerto for Two Pianos in a grand-finale concert to decide first, second and third place.

If three days and 10-hour sessions of duo-piano music seem a bit daunting for even the most passionate pianophile, take heart. The semifinal performances will be streamed live from the Victor E. Clarke Recital Hall on the University of Miami campus, and viewers can dip into the competition at home or work as they're able (www.dranoff2piano.org).

The teams are a truly international assemblage, hailing from Britain, Serbia, Russia, Japan, Spain, South Africa and, in one case, Taiwan and Israel, with as many diverse backgrounds as musical personalities.

One of the most intriguing elements is that this 11th Dranoff will host two sets of twins: Susan and Sarah Wang, the only U.S. team in the semifinals, and Richard and Valentin Humburger from Germany.

THE U.S. TEAM

The Wangs of Ridgewood, N.J., have significant history and experience with the Miami competition. They took first prize in the Dranoff junior division in 2001 and were semifinalists in 2005 but did not make it to the finals. In 1999, the only other year a junior Dranoff division was held, the winners were Andrew and Gilbert Wong -- another pair of twins.

"I think I've learned a lot since last time," says Susan Wang, the elder by three minutes. "I had just started graduate school then, and I remember being stressed out. I was kind of upset that I didn't make it to the finals, but I think I've improved a lot, and I have high hopes this time. I feel more prepared, and it doesn't feel as overwhelming."

Though just 24, the Wangs are not only experienced in the ways of competitions but also clearly media-savvy. They have several performance videos posted on YouTube, and their slick website (www.wangpianoduo.com) offers photos, bios, home pages for each and video and audio clips.

Sibling piano duos are not unusual, with this year's Spanish team, Victor and Luis del Valle, among them. Yet twin teams are less common, and one wonders if there is an advantage for such interconnections in a milieu in which unanimity of phrasing, seamless exchanges of fleet passagework and anticipation of each other's dynamics and coloring are essential.

"There are definitely parts of our playing that are very intuitive, and we work together very well," Susan Wang says. "A lot of times we can just look at each other, nod and understand what the other person is asking for."

But sometimes having such a similarity of expression can be a debit.

SOUND ALIKE

"We've been criticized for sounding too much alike," Susan says. "And as with all duo teams, we're still individuals, and we have to argue about interpretation all the time."

"Being sisters makes that a little more stressful, I think," she says laughing. "Taking criticism from your sibling is never easy. That's one of the disadvantages."

"I always find it funny when people ask what it's like being twins, since I don't know what it's like not being a twin," says Sarah, who believes the close connection is beneficial personally and professionally. "We grew up together, and my duo partner is actually my best friend. We share a lot of things."

On her home page, Sarah remarks that even though they play as one entity, there are clear contrasts, musical as well as personal.

"Susan is more direct, and her way of playing is more straightforward," Sarah says. "I like things that are more poetical and more lyrical. When we were younger, a teacher would always assign me the more lyrical parts and Susan the more rhythmic parts. So, in pieces where I need some rhythmic security I always trust what she's doing."

She says she took some of the Dranoff judges' comments to heart when the Wangs didn't make the finals two years ago.

'A lot of their comments basically were, 'You've got to be older.' A lot of the comment had to do with stage presence almost as much as the music.'

This time Sarah says she feels differently. "I still get very nervous, but I feel more like I'm wanting to share music that I enjoy playing."

Twins have enjoyed some degree of success at the Dranoff, with the Elkina Piano Duo taking the top prize in 1993 and the Trivella Duo winning in 1999. Another finalist twin team, the De Stefano Piano Duo, took third place at the last Dranoff in 2005.

The Hamburgers have already attained renown in their native Germany. They have nabbed a number of prestigious European competitions, including a special prize at the ARD International Music Competition for their performance of Mauricio Kagel's Capriccio. But still, the 28-year-olds feel that taking the top prize in Miami would give their careers an extra boost.

"If we win the Dranoff it will help us get a foot in the door to the large agencies," Valentin says from Germany, in a conversation translated by Dranoff board member Gabriele Fiorentino. "We don't really have any expectations. We walk into the competition with the attitude that we will give it our best. We have our own way of interpreting things and our own sensibilities, and we'll leave it up to the jury to respond to it."

The Hamburgers have a special interest in contemporary, experimental works and have presented a number of premieres by leading German composers, including Kagel's Capriccio and works by other modernists, such as Ulrich Leyendecker and Pierre Boulez.

SAME SENTIMENT

Like the Wang siblings, the Hamburgers feel being twins brings advantages and challenges.

"The benefit of being a twin is, of course, the musical development," Valentin says. "We developed the same way and had identical training. And our talents are alike. Even our body language while playing is very similar.

"The drawback can be that during collaborations when there are disagreements they can become very personal and sometimes go beyond the matter at hand."

The potential for clash and the occasional explosion is exacerbated when the brothers are performing at one piano.

"Playing four handed is different from two pianos," Valentin says. "On two pianos, you have a sense of deep connection and closeness. But with four hands, there is the feeling of being . . . crowded."

Richard agrees that the inability to "escape" from your duo partner when stress and emotions are running high can make life difficult.

"You don't have such a great distance, and you can really get under each other's skin."

Still he feels the benefits of that inescapable bond and artistic intimacy far outweigh the occasional frustrations and musical conflicts.

"You take on the same identity," Richard says. "One feels what the other one thinks. To share a gene pool really gives you a great precondition to collaborate on music."

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