

Pianist Jeremy Denk stays sharp at chamber festival

Chris Felcyn *Special to The Detroit News*



Pianist Jeremy Denk says he's drawn to unusual works. (Michael Wilson)

Not all daredevils wear star-spangled suits and jump canyons on their Harley. Some of them drive Steinways.

As the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival rolls into its second week, among many attractive concerts on the schedule are three events with pianist Jeremy Denk, a most fascinating, and daring, artist.

Denk has been described as an omnivorous musician, someone with broad-ranging tastes that go far beyond the conventional keyboard literature. And sometimes those tastes have wandered into areas not usually associated with music.

“I went to college a little bit young, and I had some difficulty choosing between my academic and musical vibes,” Denk recalls. “So I went to Oberlin because they have great programs in everything, and I wanted that kind of education. I did a double major at Oberlin in piano and chemistry.” And how did that work out?

“About three years into chemistry, I sort of realized that I didn’t really like it,” he laughs. “I sold all of my chemistry textbooks the minute I graduated.”

Today, Denk combines a keen intellect with a fearless work ethic that has made him an eloquent interpreter of just about anything you can think of. From Bach’s Goldberg Variations to Gyorgy Ligeti’s thorny Etudes, from the poetry of Ravel and Debussy to the Himalayan challenges of Charles Ives’ “Concord” sonata, they’re all fair game in Denk’s hands.

“I tend to be drawn to unusual or ‘limit’ pieces, pieces on the edge of nervous breakdown,” he says. Saturday at the Seligman Center, the piece Denk will be taking to the edge is Cesar Franck’s piano quintet.

“The Franck quintet is a piece that I’ve played a lot over the years, and it has its partisans and its conscientious objectors. It’s overheated. It’s like a race car that’s constantly revving, living on the edge of your seat all the time.”

And that’s exactly the sort of thing that drives Denk. “The strings always yell at me for trying to play everything too fast in the last movement, because I feel like it should gather itself into kind of a hurricane. The piece kind of depends on this sense of almost teetering off the edge of playability, sort of like an extreme snowboarding situation.”

On Tuesday, the scene shifts to Kirk in the Hills and the E minor piano quintet of Johannes Brahms, a piece Denk calls “one of the tried and true warhorses of the piano Germanic repertoire. The slow movement is the most beautiful waltz, basically, ever written. What’s interesting to me is the kind of early Brahms demonic quality, especially the way he unleashes the piece at the end.”

In between, on Sunday night, Denk will appear with members of eighth blackbird, a cutting-edge group of adventuresome classical musicians, at one of the festival’s new venues, the 555 Gallery in southwest Detroit. The program includes “Lieux retrouvés (Found Places)” by the contemporary English composer Thomas Ades. It’s a piece Denk will be performing with eighth blackbird’s cellist, Nick Photinos.

And of course it’s a bear to play.

“This is an incredibly difficult but also thrillingly fun piece for cello and piano, and I’ve almost managed to learn all of the notes,” he laughs. “It ends with a wonderful infernal can-can, the ‘Can-can Macabre.’ I think it is basically unplayable for both instruments, but we’ll do our best.”

Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

Jeremy Denk

Call (248) 559-2097

greatlakeschambermusic.org

■8 p.m. Saturday

Tickets \$40

Seligman Performing Arts Center at Detroit Country Day School

22305 W. 13 Mile (at Lahser), Beverly Hills

■7:30 p.m. Sunday (with members of eighth blackbird)

Tickets \$40

555 Gallery

2801 W. Vernor Highway, Detroit

■7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Tickets \$35

Kirk in the Hills Presbyterian Church

1340 W. Long Lake, Bloomfield Hills

Hear Chris Felcyn's interview with pianist Jeremy Denk 3 p.m. today on WRCJ-FM (90.9).