

Pianist Sergei Babayan Steps In To Play With SoNA

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The music of Rachmaninov runs deep in Sergei Babayan – not just because both are Russian.

It was Rachmaninov's music that inspired a rebellious teenager to return to the piano when he wanted to do "anything but not music."

"It required time and diligence and many hours' dedication," Babayan says of studying music, "and at that age, things are more difficult."

In the Soviet Union of his youth, Babayan's path was laid before him at a young age. There was a "very strong educational system," he recalls, "so they would find a talent and start developing it quite early."

But in spite of his rebellion, there was a moment when Babayan realized, "I cannot be someone else. I must be a pianist."

Since then, he has competed and played around the world, from Carnegie Hall to the Rudolfinum-Dvorak Hall in Prague to the Salle Gaveau in Paris, and recorded the music of Scarlatti, Ligeti, Messiaen, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Ravel, Schubert, Liszt, Vine, Respighi and Prokofiev. But he'll return to his beloved Rachmaninov when he performs Jan. 21 with the Symphony of Northwest Arkansas.

Babayan is clearly not the anticipated performer, Taiwanese pianist Ching-Yun Hu, who was injured earlier this week.

"Of course, in show business, things happen," says Paul Haas, SoNA's music director. "We all know that. When we found out late Monday that (she) wouldn't be able to play the solo part in SoNA's performance of Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No.3, we knew we had to find a replacement artist – and fast.

"It's a testament to the entire SoNA staff and organization that we ended up – less than 24 hours later – with one of the hottest performing artists on the circuit today: Sergei Babayan. Not only has he played onstage with the greatest orchestras and conductors in the world, but he just last month played 'Rach 3' with the Mariinsky Theater Orchestra under the baton of Valery Gergiev," Haas enthuses. "This is a real coup for SoNA, and a real coup for Northwest Arkansas."

In his blog, Haas promises that both the Rachmaninov piece and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5, the second offering, transcend time and place.

Called "Rach 3," the piano concerto was featured in "Shine," the movie about tortured musician David Helfgott, Haas points out, and "only the most prodigiously talented artists can even approach it, let alone play it with insight and depth."

Premiered in New York in 1910, "this is one of the most famous pieces of all time," Haas says. "It is gorgeous, thrilling and has a certain cult status."

And, he adds, it was written for American audiences.

Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5, which dates to 1937, is "the greatest symphony by the greatest symphonist of the 20th century," Haas says. "This piece has everything in it, from love to despair, from life to death. It speaks to me powerfully, in a way that no other piece does."

Written by Shostakovich under intense political pressure from Joseph Stalin, the Fifth Symphony speaks of freedom, Haas says, while the ending of Rachmaninov's concerto "is a hymn to life and love," according to Babayan.

And, he promises, "I know many people who have come to classical music because of the music of Rachmaninov."

"He is a composer who can draw even those who are very far from classical music in because of the deepest humanity the music has."