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MEDIA RELEASE

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Piano Prodigy: Conrad Tao in Recital

Sunday, February 13 at 3 p.m.

Desert Hills Presbyterian Church

34605 N. Scottsdale Road, Carefree 85377

Tickets: \$35; No Premium Seating; Student (K-College) \$5

Call (480) 488-0806, toll free (866) 488-0806 or visit www.azmusicfest.org for tickets.

Complimentary valet parking is available.

Sonata No. 23 in F Minor, Opus 57, “Appassionata”

Allegro assai

Andante con moto – attacca

Allegro ma non troppo – presto

Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770-1827)

Three Songs for Piano

Conrad Tao

I. Cocoon

(Born 1994)

II. Smoke

III. Catharsis

Barcarolle in F Sharp Major, Opus 60

Frédéric Chopin

(1810-1849)

Intermission

Selected Preludes from Opus 23 and Opus 32

Opus 32, No. 5

Opus 32, No. 12

Opus 23, No. 7

Opus 32, No. 10

Opus 23, No. 2

Sergei Rachmaninoff

(1873-1943)

Trois mouvements de *Petrouchka*

(Three Movements from *Petrouchka*)

Danse Russe (Russian Dance)

Chez Petrouchka (Petrouchka’s Cell)

La Semaine Grasse (Shrovetide Fair)

Igor Stravinsky

(1882-1971)

continued

Originally, a *sonata* was defined simply as a “sound piece,” which indeed describes the *Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Opus 57, “Appassionata”* by **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827). The work is all about dynamics, rhythmic pulse, thematic materials, and expressive variations on these three elements.

The First Movement opens with a dark melody, immediately followed by the “dot, dot, dot, dash” motif that has not yet become the “signature” of the still-to-be-composed *Fifth Symphony*. From the beginning, the music alternates between chordal harmonic textures, utterances of the repeated note motif, and the brief transformation of the first theme into quieter lyrical moments. Frequently, the music brings us up short with sudden rhythmic changes and harmonic wanderings. The intensity of the dynamic fluctuations and the often angry, riveting statements of the thematic material combine to make this a movement of urgent conflicts in sound.

The Second Movement is structured as a theme and variations. The theme is first heard in a peaceful chorale-like statement. The variations ensue, mounting in intensity and intricacy, then the mood reverts to a quiet, simple statement of the original theme. Without pausing, this section leads into the roiling, passionate Finale. This is Beethoven exploring new ideas *within* the Classical sonata form. The presto (“very quick”) portion is a continuous whirl of speed and furious momentum. The music, propelled forward by incessant, hammered-out passages and scales, is often abruptly interrupted by slow measures, only to plunge headlong into yet another relentlessly developed expression of the theme.

The entire *Sonata* is impassioned from its stately beginning to its huge final statement. Most certainly, it is huge in its demands upon the pianist!

Today’s pianist, **Conrad Tao** (born 1994), is also an accomplished composer, who has won national prizes since the age of seven. At 10, his piano composition, *Silhouettes and Shadows*, won the BMI Carlos Surinach Prize for young composers, recognizing him as the youngest winner of that prestigious award in the Western Hemisphere.

Conrad is a seven-time consecutive winner of the ASCAP Morton Gould Young Composer award since 2004; most recently for his 2010 piece, *Piano Trio*, which won the Foundation’s Charlotte V. Bergen Award. His first piano concerto, *The Four Elements for Piano and Orchestra*, was commissioned by the ProMusica Chamber Orchestra of Columbus (OH) and premiered in October 2007. In 2008, Conrad created *Fanfare Pro Musica* for the opening concert of the Orchestra’s 30th season.

During the 2009-2010, Conrad was composer-in-residence for Chicago’s Music in the Loft concert series. His *String Quartet No. 2*, commissioned by the Brooklyn Friends of Chamber Music for the Jasper Quartet, is being performed this season throughout the US.

Three Songs for Piano was composed in October 2010 and premiered in Washington, DC, on November 6, 2010 in a concert co-sponsored by the Washington Performing Arts Society and the Chinese Embassy. The composer has provided the following program notes:

“I have always loved the art of the song. Whether it’s *Erlkönig*, *Desired Constellation*, or *How to Disappear Completely*, there’s something magnificently enchanting about music written with the human voice in mind. *Three Songs* is my attempt to translate what I find so compelling about the art of the song to the piano.

“The first song, *Cocoon*, is a dive inwards, treating the body as a shelter providing warmth and insulation. The lyrical melody is searching for something deeply personal, some sort of emotional gratification; the music slowly gains in intensity before finally reaching bliss in an ecstatic moment, characterized by brightly colored

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harmonies and insistent statements in unison. This crucial moment is almost a realization, an acceptance. The melody, content at last, retreats, and the chords provide a soft bed for it to sleep on. As the last strains of the singing line die away, the soft, slowly pulsating sound of a resting heart is all that is left.

“*Smoke* begins with lush, hazy chords. They fade in and out, creating an uneasy and irregular rhythm. The song is built on the idea of smoke; what appears to be very much present is utterly formless, transparent on a material level. Climaxes are reached, only to dissipate without warning. Sometimes another layer of sound is revealed; sometimes nothing is found underneath. The song ends with wispy trails of smoke, dancing elegantly before disappearing into thin air.

“A restless, darting rhythmic figure starts off the final song, *Catharsis*. Deconstructed melodic elements slowly begin to make their appearance around the central figure, coalescing briefly into confident lines before breaking into pieces once again. The central rhythmic motif, which takes place entirely on one note, eventually expands into an insistent melodic germ. Collapsing on itself but always getting back up with improbable resolve, this steely figure carries the song to its end. Catharsis is indeed reached, with destruction happening from all visible sides, but the piece isn’t about tearing things down. This is *release*, and as the final notes of the work shatter into pieces, a burden is lifted.”

The *Barcarolle in F Major, Opus 60* by **Frédéric Chopin** (1810-1849) opens with three chords marked *forte* (“loud”). Immediately thereafter, we hear a lovely, lulling melody, floating in thirds above broken chords in the left hand. This gentle, “rocking” three-quarter time is the signature meter of a *barcarolle*, the boat song of Venetian gondoliers. As the work proceeds, its harmonic color and mesmerizing melodic wanderings point directly to the future works of Impressionist composers Debussy and Ravel.

A new, pensive melody is heard, then the pace quickens, becoming rhapsodic. The three-quarter meter becomes energized and is now a lilting waltz. Throughout, Chopin’s vocabulary of trills and delicate, feathery scales infuses the fabric of the music. A quick, mysterious reprise brings us to a light and happy coda, as the work ends with forte octaves and chords.

The Russian piano virtuoso and composer **Sergei Rachmaninoff** (1873-1943) wrote two sets of *Preludes*. The first set, *Opus 23*, includes quiet restrained examples of the form, some “Chopinesque” settings, and the well-loved “Alla marcia” (#5 in *G Minor*) with a most captivating melody.

The second group, *Opus 32*, was composed five years afterwards: amazingly, Rachmaninoff wrote the entire opus in just 19 days! This group shares some thematic material. Some pieces are witty, some joyous, others exude dark musical tension, and some are achingly romantic.

It will be interesting and fun to hear the range of Rachmaninoff’s musical ideas as expressed in these two collections.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) wrote a piano version of his *Petrouchka* at the suggestion of the celebrated Artur Schnabel. This wonderful piece is not a reduction of the ballet score; rather Stravinsky conceived a wholly pianistic approach to his older work: “My intention was to give virtuoso pianists a piece of a certain breadth that would permit them to enhance their modern repertoire and demonstrate a brilliant technique.” In every way that counts, the work is surely a sparking, original composition for piano!

The piece consists of three tableaux, filled with Stravinsky’s customary irregular rhythms and harmonic inventiveness. The familiar themes evoke three well-loved scenes from the ballet.

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In the opening movement, *Danse Russe*, three puppets, Petrouchka, the Ballerina and the Moor, come to life and dance joyfully. Next, in *Chez Petrouchka*, Petrouchka is “jailed” in his cell behind the show curtain by a wicked magician. He is angry and sad, but brightens when the beautiful Ballerina visits. In the final scene, *La Semaine Grasse*, the music evokes the pre-Lenten carnival in St. Petersburg with crowds of revelers swirling around. Can you hear the joyous bells? Can you “see” and hear the performing bear?

It should be noted that the score for ballet made extensive use of the piano: Stravinsky originally wrote the work for piano and orchestra. In today’s recital, the keyboard becomes a virtual orchestra! The story of the doomed puppet and friends is told in acrobatic and high-speed, technically-demanding tempos and painted in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of harmonic colors. As written for solo piano, *Petrouchka* is a brilliant tour de force, as the remarkably talented Mr. Tao will make plain.

Notes by Fran Rosenthal

About today’s guest artist

Hailed by renowned music critic Harris Goldsmith as “the most exciting prodigy to ever come my way,” 16-year-old American pianist **Conrad Tao** was found playing children’s songs on the piano at 18 months of age and has never looked back. Born in Urbana, Illinois, he started violin lessons at 3 and formal piano lessons at 3½. He gave his first piano recital at 4, and at 8, made his concerto debut with the Utah Chamber Music Festival Orchestra performing Mozart’s *Piano Concerto in A Major*.

Conrad has appeared as soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Russian National Orchestra, the San Francisco Symphony, the Baltimore Symphony, and the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, among many others. He has given solo recitals at the Louvre Museum, the Ravinia Festival, UC Berkeley’s Cal Performance Series, and in Germany, Italy, Mexico, and Chile.

He has appeared four times at Festival del Sole (Napa Valley), three times at Festival of the Arts (Boca Raton), and also at the Miami International Piano Festival, New York’s Mostly Mozart Festival, and the Singapore Sun Festival. In 2008, he toured China with the Juilliard Orchestra, performing Prokofiev’s *Piano Concerto No. 3* conducted by Xian Zhang. Conrad was the only American artist invited to the 2009 Russian National Orchestra Festival at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. Highlights of this season include concerts in Hong Kong, a tour of Mexico, appearances with the Baltimore, Utah and Dallas Symphonies, as well as debut concerts in Germany.

An award-winning violinist, Conrad won the 2003 Walgreens National Concerto Competition, which led to the performance of the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto in E Minor* with the Midwest Young Artists Concert Orchestra at age 8. He was a recipient of violins from the Stradivari Society for three years.

Conrad currently studies piano with Dr. Yoheved Kaplinsky at the Juilliard Pre-College Division and composition with Christopher Theofanidis of Yale University. He also studied violin with Catherine Cho for five years at Juilliard. A former student at the Music Institute of Chicago, he studied piano with Emilio del Rosario, violin with Desiree Ruhstrat and composition with Matthew Hagle. Conrad is a senior in high school and currently resides in New York City with his parents and sister. This is his first appearance at *Arizona Musicfest*.

***Emerald Baton Impresarios Michael and Mary Carey
are sponsoring today’s recital.
Thank you for your continuing generosity!***