

Young pianists aim to bust down walls and barriers to classical music



By Brock Weir

Janelle Fung was just three years old when she first had a violin placed in her hands ahead of a violin lesson.

Just before her fourth birthday, however, she picked up that violin and smashed it as hard as a three-year-old could against the kitchen table.

Needless to say, that was the end of a violin prodigy, but even at that young age, Janelle knew her passions lay elsewhere.

“For a year, I badgered my mom for piano lessons,” she says. “She kept telling me to wait, wait, wait, and I think probably because a beginner violinist sounds like a cat dying, she thought once I got over that hump I would really enjoy it.”

No such luck and after the violin was splintered, her parents were out piano shopping.

“From the time I started, I realised the piano really speaks to me.”

It was also an instrument which speaks to Philip Chiu, with whom she formed the Fung-Chiu Duo in 2007 through Jeunesses Musicales Canada. The Quebec-based musicians will bring their passion for the ivories to Aurora next Friday, April 11 at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

Kindred spirits behind the piano, when they started working together, one of their prime objectives was breaking down barriers to classical music and proving that it can actually be fun, accessible, and extraordinary “even as it inspires people.”

“Our major goal is to break down the actual walls between music and people's experience of it,” says Ms. Fung. “These walls were something we encountered even as young pianists! It is embarrassing how many piano recitals I fell asleep during when I was a kid. I don't think it is even because of the music itself. I think that the language just needs to be explained.

“As an artist, you need to take down those barriers so people can understand and experience it in the way we experience it. It informs everything we do. We sit down and imagine, okay, if we wanted to tell a friend who was not a musician what is so awesome about this piece, how would we say it? This is how we talk to the audience.”

Case in point, their upcoming program at the Aurora Cultural Centre includes a piano version of Leonard Bernstein's iconic music from West Side Story, traditional works by Schubert, and their own take on Stravinsky's The Firebird, which they have retooled into

something unique to themselves.

‘Philip tells the story about how it is the first piece that really got him interested in classical music, how as a kid he would put it on the stereo and pretend to conduct,’ she says. ‘We looked around and no arrangement existed, so I turned to him and suggested writing our own. We did, and it is a great way to share with people the music we are really crazy passionate about.’

‘I have been obsessed with West Side Story since I was a little girl. My favourite wish is that I could be on Broadway? but I have a terrible voice, and this is a way for me to be involved with the music in a way that I love.’

Although they may approach traditional classical music in their own unique way, the most important thing to them is that they never compromise the music. They push themselves as artists, she says, constantly studying, learning, and pushing each other as well. They may want to make people see things as a little less traditional, but this is a dialogue they encourage. They even go as far as to encourage written questions they can address during the concert.

They have gone a similar route, route performing ballets on the piano, where one would be at the keys playing and the other narrating the story.

‘Philip was so worried we would offend purists, but we actually got an overwhelmingly positive response,’ says Ms. Fung on a January performance of Petrushka. ‘They really appreciated what we were doing in terms of making it easier for other people to understand.’

It is this sense of understanding which has kept Fung-Chiu enduring and on the road since 2007.

‘We enjoy working together and hanging out with one another,’ she says. ‘We have gone out on tour five or six weeks at a time, just the two of us, so you have to really like the person! Friendship is first, and secondly, it is the musical connection.’

The Fung-Chiu duo is the penultimate concert in the 2014 Great Artists Piano Series, sponsored by Norbert and Bonnie Kraft. Tickets are available from the Cultural Centre. Doors open at 7.30 p.m. for an 8 p.m. concert. The series concludes May 30 with Jane Coop.