Pianist to pay tribute to Chopin, Liszt at Cabrillo

By NADIA DRAKE
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On Sunday, the delicate harmonies and twinkling melodies of Franz Liszt and Frederic Chopin will flow through the fingertips of virtuoso pianist Andrew von Oeyen during a solo concert at the Cabrillo College Music Recital Hall. Von Oeyen will be playing in Aptos for the first time.

A native of Southern California, von Oeyen debuted with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra at age 16, then went on to graduate from Columbia University and the Juilliard School in New York City. He splits his time between Paris and New York, and has played in places like New York’s Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and in London, Tokyo, Hanoi and Bucharest. After leaving Aptos, von Oeyen will tour Japan with the Chopin/Liszt program.

Von Oeyen said he designed this program to honor the bicentennials of the two composers’ births. Chopin was born in Poland in 1810; Liszt, a year later in Hungary. The two contemporaries were friends, and Liszt wrote the first biography of Chopin, who died in Paris at age 39. Liszt lived until 1886 and reportedly suffered from depression in his later years.

One of the Liszt pieces on the program, “Nuages Gris,” from 1881, is thought to reflect the aging composer’s reported disillusionment and sense of isolation in his divergent harmonies. “This piece is very advanced harmonically, and has been cited by music critics as the first quasiatonal piece,” von Oeyen said.

Lisz played with harmonies in many of his compositions, and would modify or “paraphrase” the works of other composers. In these re-writes, he added layers of harmony or extended the original melodies. Von Oeyen’s program includes two of Liszt’s adaptations, both reorganizations of operatic compositions for solo piano: a scene from Wagner’s “Lohengrin,” and a paraphrase of Verdi’s “Rigoletto,” which von Oeyen described as “a dessert piece, very virtuosic.”

Also on the program are two classical works of a different type: ballades, or compositions based on narrative. “The term ‘ballade’ originally referred to a kind of form of French poetry of the 14th and 15th centuries,” von Oeyen said. “Ballade” later described narrative poetry during the 18th-century’s Romantic period, and Chopin was perhaps the first to apply the form to instrumental musical composition.

Von Oeyen selected a ballade by each of the featured composers. “Chopin and Liszt’s ballades are highly poetic in a musical sense and contain some kind of dramatic narrative, though the exact inspiration for each one is unclear,” von Oeyen said. Some suspect Liszt’s ballade might be based on the myth of ‘Hero and Leander’, which ends in watery tragedy.

The Chopin ballade has been featured in movies like 2002’s Oscar-winning “The Pianist,” and begins quietly, then progresses into fury before resuming the same, more atmospheric tone of its first notes. “It takes you on a kind of journey, in those ten minutes,” von Oeyen said.

Von Oeyen said he goes on a different, more frenetic journey while playing Chopin’s “24 Preludes,” which is also on Sunday’s program. “For each prelude you have to shift moods, very quickly,” he said. “You move from slow and introspective to stormy and extroverted.” And because many of the preludes are quite short, those shifts are rapid.

The preludes really represent the best of Chopin,” said von Oeyen, “his deepest writing, his most poetic. I am particularly fascinated by them and excited by them.”

PRESENTED BY: Cabrillo College Distinguished Artists
WHEN: 3 p.m. Sunday
WHERE: The Music Recital Hall on the campus of Cabrillo College
COST: $14 to $25
DETAILS: 479-6331 or www.TicketGuys.com

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Pianist Andrew von Oeyen debuted at the age of 16 with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.