ZOFO
San Francisco duo a leader in the unusual art form of four-handed piano

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Usually in a concert of piano duets, audiences know what to expect – two performers, two pianos. When it comes to the San Francisco-based duet known as ZOFO, the math works out a little differently – two performers, one piano.
ZOFO is Eva-Maria Zimmerman and Keisuke Nakagoshi and they specialize in what is called “piano four hands” or “piano four.” And it is exactly what it sounds like, two players (four hands) on the same piano keyboard.
Zimmerman and Nakagoshi will perform live Friday at the Cabrillo Samper Recital Hall at Cabrillo College, demonstrating their unusual art form that balances music and, inevitably, choreography.
ZOFO is a kind of portmanteau term to describe exactly what the two pianists do together. The “ZO” part is meant to approximate the number “20.” And the “FO” part is an abbreviation for “finger orchestra.” Get it? Twenty-finger orchestra.
Zimmerman likens playing piano four to figure skating. “We work very close to each other, and if you do something unusual or just a bit off, the other person could be thrown off too. But in the end, we work it out pretty well.”

Piano four hands is a rare art today, but that hasn’t always been the case. In the era before sound recording and broadcasting, the piano was the focus of entertainment in the home and piano four was a common method for playing in the home, particularly in the 19th century. It was even a common part of courtship rituals, one of the few socially sanctioned activities that young men and women could do together. Once the phonograph came into the family home, piano four hands largely disappeared.
“It’s always been a great method for teaching,” said Nakagoshi, “and it’s still widely used for that, for a teacher accompanying a student. I think that’s where it originally came from.”
As a result of the widespread use of piano four in the home, many of the great orchestral compositions in classical music were widely available in arrangements for four-handed piano. “There was a lot available, particularly in the 19th century,” said Zimmerman, “Schubert, Brahms, Mozart, Beethoven.”
“There are quite a lot of pieces out there that are already arranged for piano four,” said Nakagoshi.
Among the pieces that ZOFO will perform on Friday will be Gershwin’s “Cuban Overture,” Holst’s “The Planets” and a contemporary piece by Italian composer Francesco di Fiore inspired by landmarks of Northern California. The two will release their third recording, titled “Zoforbit: A Space Odyssey,” this spring.
The two players in piano four hands take on two separate roles while performing, known as “primo” and “secondo.” The primo player is the one on the right side of the keyboard – the higher notes – and the secondo player plays the lower notes on the left side of the keyboard. Zimmerman and Nakagoshi say that they trade off on the primo and secondo roles in roughly equal measure.
Often, one player will have to reach over the other to play the far side of the keyboard and many times, the two players’ hands become intertwined while playing, giving the performance a visual element. But, said Zimmerman, none of that is done for its own sake.
“It’s all to serve the music,” she said, pointing to the example of Stravinsky’s immortal “Rite of Spring” for piano four. “Sometimes, our inner arms are crossed, but it all makes rhythmic sense in the context of the piece. I like it when it looks nice, but it’s not our highest priority. It’s not just for show. It all makes musical sense.”