MUSIC

ZOFO

For San Francisco duo, it’s four hands, two people and one piano

Editor’s note: Last week, we ran a feature story on the San Francisco duo ZOFO a week earlier than planned with the incorrect date. The concert is in fact this Friday, March 21. As a correction, we present the story again.

By Wallace Baine
wbaine@santacruzensential.com
@wallacebaine on Twitter

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 Zimmermann 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.

Zimmermann 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.

Zimmermann likens playing piano four hands 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 to. But in the end, we work it out pretty well.”

Piano four hands is a rare art form 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 Zimmermann, “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 “Cu-