



Meet Llewellyn, Your Typical Teenage Genius

Elaine Strauss | July 3, 2012

Pianist Llewellyn Sanchez-Werner distinguishes between two sorts of piano performance: performance for competitions, where the goal is perfecting every detail; and performance for an audience, where the goal is communicating with listeners. “Competitions are beneficial because they make you focus and concentrate and improve every single aspect of your playing,” he says. And, having improved your playing, you are in a good position to communicate.



Princeton audiences hear Sanchez-Werner in listener-directed mode when he opens the piano festival associated with the Golandsky Institute’s ninth annual visit to Princeton on Sunday, July 8, at 8 p.m. in McCarter’s Berlind Theater.

The Golandsky Institute is devoted to a physically healthy approach to the keyboard that integrates the musical and the technical. Lectures and master classes are scheduled during the day. Concerts — the Piano Festival — take place in the evening. The Festival this year consists of a succession of performances that range from chamber music to programs with vocalists, from classical compositions to jazz. All events are open to the public.

The Institute’s founder and artistic director is Edna Golandsky. The Golandsky Institute extends the approach to the piano developed by Dorothy Taubman in the 1940s.

All of the performers in the 2012 Golandsky Festival have had extensive experience with the Taubman/Golandsky approach. “Exposure to this work has allowed them to develop their individual voice, which varies from one person to another,” Golandsky explains.

Having studied with Taubman/Golandsky teachers for three years, pianist Sanchez-Werner gives his own reaction to the system. “It improves the way you move and helps

increase your fluidity,” he says. “It helps your sound. You can control every little detail and prevent injury. It helps you decipher the code of the composer.”

Kicking off the Golandsky Festival concert series, he plays a massive program that starts with Ludwig van Beethoven’s “Waldstein” Sonata. Groups of compositions by Lowell Liebermann, Frederic Chopin, and Franz Liszt are included. Sanchez-Werner agrees that the size of his program is enough for two concerts.

“I like to speak to an audience,” he says, “and convey a message. I like to affect the audience in some way. I wanted to show several sides of me and to show who these great composers are. There was nothing I felt I could leave out.”

“I discussed the program with both of my teachers,” Sanchez-Werner says. “I was looking for contrasting styles and textures. Each piece has a vast array of characteristics.”

Sanchez-Werner’s two teachers are Yoheved Kaplinsky, chair of Juilliard’s Piano Department, who studied directly with Dorothy Taubman; and Ilya Itin, winner of the Leeds Competition and performer with an international career, who has learned the Taubman approach from Edna Golandsky and has performed regularly in Princeton. “I owe a lot of who I hope to become as a pianist to both of them,” Sanchez-Werner says. “I’m appreciative for the love and effort they have given me. They bring different things to the table.

“It’s best not to have a single point of view,” he says. “It’s important to have two people giving their ideas, even if they don’t agree.”

Sanchez-Werner tucked our conversation into a busy schedule at the Piano Texas Festival in Fort Worth, where he performed in four master classes and in young artist recitals. One of his pleasures with the Texas festival is the diversity of opinions expressed. “It’s incredible to hear so many people give contrasting opinions on this magnificent and sublime repertoire. It changes you as an artist.”

Sooner or later I shall reveal Sanchez-Werner’s age, though I wish I could simply let what he says speak for itself. His articulateness, his intellect, and his manner would be clear, no matter what his age. They are remarkable considering his youth. I’ll tell it now. He is 15.

Born in Los Angeles, he spent the first two years of his life in Beverly Hills. The family moved to Ventura when Llewellyn was two. “My mom is a brilliant lawyer who went to Stanford and Yale,” he says. His dad is a businessman with international interests. “My name is representative of the melting-pot idea. My mom was born in Mexico, so I have a lot of Mexican heritage. My dad was born in the U.S. His background is Welsh, German, Polish, and Jewish.” Llewellyn is an only child.

When he was two, he would try to reproduce at the keyboard the melodies and harmonies he heard in his mother’s piano lessons. And he sang melodies. His first piano teacher was Jan Ludwig. “I pronounced her name ‘Ludvig,’ like in Beethoven,” he says. By the time he was three, he could read both prose and music.

At five he became a full-time student at Ventura College, a community college. "At first the administration was a little skeptical," Sanchez-Werner says. "I had to take tests and have interviews. Then they accepted me." During his college days at Ventura Sanchez-Werner took 170 credits; 60 credits is the standard load. "My 'K through 12' was essentially taking those credits at Ventura."

When he was 10 Sanchez-Werner moved to New York to attend Juilliard's pre-college division. He is now at the Juilliard School, where he studies with Kaplinsky. He is the youngest person to have been admitted to Juilliard as a full-time conservatory student.

He treats being the youngest person in a crowd with equanimity. "Everyone has always treated me as a little brother," he says. "I have friends of all ages. Some are my age, some are 10 years older."

"I have an appreciation of what I was able to learn from older, talented colleagues. We always considered ourselves intellectual colleagues. One of the best parts of my experience took place in practice rooms where we have improvisation battles, and listen to and discuss recordings."

Sanchez-Werner wrote his first composition at age five. "I notated it myself, if I remember correctly," he says. "It was a while back."

"It was an experimental piece," he says. "It had to do with sonority, with the range of the piano and with thematic development. It was an experiment in counterpoint, in fugal structures." When he wonders how he knew about counterpoint at age five, he explains, "Music theory was one of the first courses that I took at Ventura." Other pieces followed while Sanchez-Werner was at Ventura, but he no longer remembers them exactly.

Presently, Sanchez-Werner studies composition with Lowell Liebermann. A frequently performed contemporary composer, Liebermann played his own sonata at Carnegie Hall at age 19. Sanchez-Werner has four years' leeway to match that accomplishment.

"The Taubman approach has helped me to be a better composer," Sanchez-Werner says. "It enables me to express my ideas better by clarifying the inner workings and intricate details of playing the piano. It gives me more tools in my toolbox."

Sanchez-Werner does not limit himself to performing and composing. He studies jazz with Frank Kimbrough and conducting with George Stolluto.

He swims. "I grew up next to the beach and was on the swim team in my home town," he says. His favorite stroke is butterfly. "I always found butterfly to be a lot of fun," he says. He now swims in the Olympic size pool in the Manhattan building where he lives. "Swimming helps music the same way it helps to walk in a pastoral meadow or on the busy streets of New York."

He plays chess. "Chess requires an immense amount of strategizing and focus," Sanchez-Werner says. "It's related to music. You have to think long term and know what your next move will be."

In 2010 Sanchez-Werner was the first American soloist to perform with the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra. He has played at the White House and for President Kagame of Rwanda.

Looking to the future, he guesses that 10 years from now he will be working on becoming the best pianist and composer he can be. "I want to make a change in the world," he says.

"Music is a medium that can break down barriers directly. For this reason I went to Baghdad and experienced musicians with extraordinary courage. The conductor carried a pistol when he was conducting. The cases of instrumentalists were searched by bomb-sniffing dogs. The extremists did not like the idea of western music being performed. But the orchestra was able to give back to the community. The other performers and I didn't speak each other's languages, but we were all musicians, all artists with the same goal, laughing and playing together. The audience was Iraqi civilians, U.S. soldiers, and diplomatic representatives. It was a chance to suspend the conflict and engage each other."

Sanchez-Werner names Daniel Barenboim first among his short list of heroes. Barenboim's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, consisting of musicians from Israeli, Palestinian territories, and Arab countries, says this very young, but very mature, artist, is "a perfect example of putting down barriers and joining in common musical respect."

Llewellyn Sanchez-Werner, Golandsky Piano Festival, Berlind Theater, 91 University Place, Princeton. Sunday, July 8, 8 p.m. \$20, \$15 students and seniors. For tickets: 609-258-2787, www.mccarter.org or www.golandskyinstitute.org.