

Beethoven celebrated in marathon piano sonata sessions in The City

By Georgia Rowe
Special to *The Examiner*

It's been a Beethoven season for Adam Golka. Last month, the pianist appeared in Walnut Creek to join the California Symphony under music director Donato Cabrera in two thrilling performances of the composer's "Emperor" Concerto. This weekend, he returns to the Bay Area to play Beethoven sonatas in a special event celebrating the iconic composer.

"A Portrait of Beethoven: 32 Sonatas for Piano" features more than a dozen performers playing all 32 of the composer's piano sonatas in four concerts over two days. With two events on Saturday, and two on Sunday, the series will present the sonatas in chronological order, showcasing Beethoven's brilliance even as it illuminates the development and refinement of his compositional technique.

Led by pianist Mari Kodama and conductor Kent Nagano, the Musical Days Productions event runs Oct. 9-10 at the SF JAZZ Center's Miner Auditorium.

Golka, joining pianists including Kodama, Daniel Hsu, Momo Kodama, Stephen Kovacevich, Stephen Prutsman and others, will appear Saturday afternoon to play two Beethoven sonatas: the Opus 2, No. 3 in C Major, and the Op. 10, No. 3 in D Major. He'll return for Saturday evening's concert to perform the Op. 26 in A-flat Major, "Funeral March."

Beethoven is a touchstone for Golka, a Polish American artist who grew up in Houston and is now based in New York. In a recent phone call, he talked about his devotion to the composer's music.

"Beethoven really explored the divide between the emotional and rational sides of humanity," he said. "Some other composers do that, too. But Beethoven always puts the conflict front and center. You can feel him trying to make peace with those two sides. There's so much control and freedom in what he asks us to play."

In concert, sonatas are often encore items. In "A Portrait of Beethoven," they're the main event. For audiences, the chance to hear all 32 Beethoven sonatas in sequence is rare — and instructive, offering

Pianist Adam Golka plays in program showcasing 32 pieces chronologically



COURTESY JÜRGEN FRANK

IF YOU GO

A Portrait of Beethoven: 32 Sonatas for Piano

Where: Miner Auditorium, SF JAZZ Center, 201 Franklin St., S.F.

When: 1 and 7 p.m. Oct. 9, 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Oct. 10

Tickets: \$50 per concert

Contact: (866) 920-5299,

insight into the composer's artistic journey.

Golka, who began studying Beethoven's piano sonatas while still in his teens, said he's always been attracted to the brilliance of the composer's piano music.

But in the last year and a half — a time when live performance was sharply curtailed by the global pandemic — Beethoven began to play "a

central role in my life and study," he said. After delving deeper into the composer's sonatas, he now considers them essential.

"Before COVID, I had committed to playing all 32 sonatas," he explained. "Working on them kept me inspired and hopeful."

In the last year, he played the 11-hour cycle of Beethoven sonatas five times in its entirety, with per-

formances in Florida, Houston and New York City.

He also made a film — or 32 short films — capturing his performances of each Beethoven sonata. Titled "32@32," the series includes lively conversations with some of Golka's favorite artists and thinkers — including two of his mentors, pianists Alfred Brendel and Leon Fleisher, both major influences on Golka's musical life — as well as a NASA astrophysicist, a pair of German folk dancers, and a magician. "32@32" is available for viewing on YouTube.

Golka's recent appearance with the California Symphony clearly demonstrated his affinity for Beethoven's music. His performance of the "Emperor" Concerto was both lithe

and urgent.

Today, he says performing is essential to his life and work — so much so that he continued to give performances throughout the pandemic year. "That was a lifesaver for me," he said. "I was able to focus on a positive struggle during what was such a hard struggle for so many. I thank Mr. Ludwig for that."

What he didn't get last year was the chance to hear others playing Beethoven's music. That's another reason why he was thrilled to be asked to join this weekend's "Portrait of Beethoven."

"I haven't heard another pianist for a year and a half," he said. "So I'm really looking forward to hearing the other performances."