



Dynamic Duo

Two young soloists provide days of classical gems

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Two dynamic young soloists are headed to Buffalo this weekend. The Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra is featuring a 28-year-old pianist who goes by a single name, Berenika. And the University at Buffalo is welcoming violinist Tim Fain, 33, who will be performing in two concerts and leading a master class.

Both musicians reach easily and enthusiastically across the centuries. They perform new music and old music. (Both, for instance, have performed the music of Philip Glass in addition to Beethoven and Brahms.) And both artists tread proudly in the footsteps of their forerunners. The News talked to them about their passions, and what their lives are like.

In Fain's hands, a violin speaks for the soul

In the words of the New York Times, Tim Fain “plays a mean violin.”

That mean violin is from Buffalo.

The instrument, a Gobetti made in Venice in 1717 and known as the “Moller,” comes to Fain through the intervention of the Stradivarius Society of Chicago. It is owned by Clement and Karen Arrison, the philanthropic Buffalo couple who also own two other historic violins. (The other two are the “Ex Kiesewetter” Stradivarius, now in the hands of Philippe Quint, and the “Mary Portman” Guarneri, once owned by Fritz Kreisler.)

So it will be a kind of homecoming when Fain, the California-born violin virtuoso, comes to town this week for a mini-residency at the University at Buffalo.

He is playing a recital at 7:30 p. m. Saturday in Lippes Hall in Slee Hall on UB’s North Campus, Amherst. At 1 p. m. Sunday, he is giving a master class in Baird Recital Hall, open to the public. And at 7:30 p. m. Tuesday, he joins UB’s Slee Sinfonietta in Slee Hall for John Corigliano’s “Red Violin” Suite, music from the acclaimed art film “The Red Violin.”

Fain has played the Gobetti violin for three years, and loves it.

“It’s been wonderful working with the Arrisons, and one of the best things is they’ve made it so easy,” he says on the phone from the New York City area, where he lives. “To be able to get to know an instrument of this quality on such an intimate level has really changed my performing a lot, I think, for the better.

“Being able to make music on an instrument of this quality, one really feels one’s communing with another soul, another being. The way you get to know the quality, that almost one’s tempted to give an instrument human quality, in the way that it responds, the way it makes a sound on the instrument. It’s almost as if you’re touching another human being, or speaking, in some way.”

Fain’s solo recital includes Beethoven’s “Spring” Sonata, Bach’s

famous “Chaconne,” Faure’s Sonata in A, and two showpieces by the 19th century virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate. And Fain, who likes to mix things up a little, is also throwing in a modern piece, Aaron Jay Kernis’ “Air.”

“Aaron’s piece, the ‘Air,’ is such a gorgeous piece. Who wouldn’t love it?” he exclaims, his enthusiasm charming and catching. “The pieces I relate to often have a really lyrical element.

“The ‘Air’ is also going to be part of a multimedia evening that I’m putting together,” he adds. “It’s a collection of pieces by living American composers, including a new piece Philip Glass has written for me for solo violin.” The UB audience might get to hear the Glass. “I may preview one or two movements from this new suite at some point during the program.”

What about the Gobetti violin, the third collaborator in such endeavors? How does it adapt to music from different eras?

“This is of course a blessing and a curse — you end up sounding like yourself, no matter what,” Fain laughs.

“A great instrument can do what you want it to do. Your own soul, your own personality, begins to come out of the instrument no matter. No matter what, you always end up sounding like yourself. So given the time to get to know a great instrument, there’s going to be repertoire that I play well, some that maybe leave it for other people. I’m a pretty approachable guy, very communicative on stage, I love this connection between the audience and myself. What really excites me is reaching out to people and I often find myself playing the kind of music that reaches out to people.”

Both concerts Fain is giving in Buffalo reflect his love for lyrical music.

“When I look back as a kid, something that drew me to a string instrument is, it felt like singing. It felt like the closest thing to

singing,” he says.

“We all have an instrument built into us. As a kid I loved to sing. I once sang in a choir with John Williams conducting, for ‘The Empire of the Sun.’ It’s a very nice movie. The soundtrack is almost entirely choir,” he says. I wasn’t going to become a singer, but the part of the violin that I loved is, it felt like singing. It was that kind of expressive.”

Music is pianist’s key to life

Berenika Zakrzewski, the pianist coming this weekend to Kleinhans Music Hall, goes by her first name because her last name is too much of a mouthful. At 28, she has created a celebrity that is uniquely her own.

She has been dressed in Halston and photographed by celebrity photographers. Berenika has a graduate degree from Oxford University and an undergraduate degree from Harvard. Performing for a gala in Scotland, she was presented to the Queen of England.

But in a few ways, her life is refreshingly unglamorous.

Berenika is easy to talk to. She laughs a lot on the phone. Asked about stage fright, she admits to a touch of it.

“Everyone gets nervous. You get a general rush, and that’s good. You’re not supposed to relax,” she says cheerfully. “The audience wants that and expects it.”

When Berenika plays Buffalo, her husband will not be able to be there. He is a Marine, deployed in Afghanistan. They met at Oxford.

She keeps busy in his absence. She just joined the Junior League, she mentors kids and she runs a classical concert series in Dana Point, a town in California near San Juan Capistrano.

“I try to tie in music to everything I do,” she says.

Born in Canada, Berenika was a child prodigy and performed with the Sault Symphony Orchestra at the age of 9. She has been steeped in the world of music so long that she can't quite pinpoint what exactly swept her into it.

“What I remember is, I heard Pavarotti in recital,” she says. “There was so much buzz atmosphere. It was really more of an event. I can't remember a specific piece, but it was overwhelming.

“I was lucky growing up, studying, both my teachers and my parents tried to present me with opera. I grew up listening to great masters like Rubinstein and Horowitz. I'd go hear who was in town — Martha Argerich, Murray Perahia, so many different pianists. I would literally go to everything. I can't pin it down very well. The idea was to develop my own sense of style.”

Still developing her own sense of style, Berenika devotes a lot of time to practicing. “I try to maintain a schedule. That helps,” she says. “You're left on your own for hours on end. I'm by myself most of the time. I try to manage my time wisely. It's like a full-time lifestyle, a full-time job.”

Her repertoire is all over the map. Like Fain, Berenika likes the music of Philip Glass. “I was asked to play it by the Fulbright commission. They asked him if that was all right. He liked it. I was so honored. It was very stressful to play for the person who writes the music.”

Her career, too, has been all over the map. She performed at London's Wigmore Hall and New York's Lincoln Center. A tour with the Youth Orchestra of the Americas swung her through South America.

“I enjoyed playing at the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires. It was a very exotic place to me. The hall is beautiful. There were so many great pianists who have performed there. The audience was very warm and excitable, which I like. And it was great. I was doing Rachmaninoff's Second.”

This weekend at Kleinhans Music Hall, Berenika will be playing Chopin's lovely Piano Concerto No. 2. Does her Polish heritage impact her sense of Chopin, whose mother was Polish?

Berenika, gracefully, shrugs off the suggestion.

"It's kind of hard to say because everyone loves Chopin. He's a pianist's favorite. Maybe it affects me subconsciously but not explicitly," she says.

"I don't think about it. I just know I feel it. That's enough for me."