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HJ profile

Pianist Alexandros Kapelis Follows His Muse

Greek Mythology Inspires Bay Area Debut

By Terry Phillips

The inhabitants of Mount Olympus have been striking a chord with us throughout history. A modern Hellenic musician is doing much the same. Great Zeus!

Internationally acclaimed pianist Alexandros Kapelis has performed in many of the world's great cities: from Athens to London, to New York, to Paris and beyond. Now, he is adding San Francisco to the list.

On March 20, Kapelis will perform a recital program, "The Greek Myth and the Piano," at the renowned Herbst Theatre.

This performance illustrates the importance of Greek history and

The virtuoso keyboard artist says he's especially looking forward to his forthcoming Northern California debut, calling the City by the Bay one of the two cultural capitals in the United States.

"I came to New York for my studies and most of my career was really based in Europe," explains the South America-born Kapelis, now living in Manhattan and Brussels. "But as far as activities and concerts, it's exciting to go to San Francisco."

With the sound of sirens wailing outside, Kapelis describes how he first heard the "Siren call" beckoning him to a life of music. "I don't think I really chose the art. The art chooses you," he says. "Because after a while, it's an imperative."

But unlike those evil creatures of Greek mythology, the "voices" Kapelis heard have drawn him to a happy fate. Rather than crashing on rocks, his career has soared.

Music critics around the world express boundless acclaim for this talent. Despite his youth (Kapelis turns 30 this year), he is called "an artist of indisputable artistic maturity" by *Estia*, "a rarity among his generation" (*International Press Service*) and "a well-schooled performer" by *Diari de Balleras* of Mallorca, Spain.

Regardless of all this high praise, Kapelis manages to maintain enormous humility. He focuses his admiration on the master composers whose work he performs.

"I'm completely irrelevant in this," he insists. "I'm just a bridge of sorts — a nobody next to those composers. What they did was extraordinary...as beautiful today as

it was hundreds of years ago."

Alexandros relates his earliest musical influences.

"There was a piano at home," he recalls. "I had the great advantage that I had perfect pitch." That is the innate ability to hear and identify notes without benefit of an instrument.

Even as young as four years old, Kapelis would listen to a song on TV or in school, and then sit at a piano and play it "by ear."

"I didn't know that was a 'C' or that was an 'A' — I was just reproducing what I heard," he says. "My brain remembered."

also had to study piano.) Alexandros advanced very quickly. By his early teens, it was clear that he had found his Muse — and a permanent place at the keyboard.

"My family was not particularly enthusiastic about it in the sense that it was not a family tradition," he notes with a grin. "It was not their plan to have a classical musician." Then he laughs. "But that's sometimes what happens with children."

Kapelis is the son of a Greek father and a Peruvian mother. Growing up in a bi-cultural home, traveling between Peru and Greece, and speaking five languages, Alexandros has always lived beyond national borders. Nevertheless, he feels a strong connection to his Hellenic

roots — and strong support from the Greek community.

"At the core, I really love Greece," he admits. "I always felt the strongest affinity with the language, with the history, with the power and with the triumph of this period which Greece always represented for me."

The ardor he articulates for that cultural connection is even more passionately exhibited through his music.

"Directly or indirectly, the amazing wealth of the Greek myth has been present in all art and in all ages," says Kapelis. "When opera was created in 1607, people thought

He points out that the vast majority of classical operas — beginning with the very first ones — are based on Greek myths. And while the general public might be unaware of this connection, the influence of Greece on the arts is inescapable.

"Not only the myths," he says, "but what stands behind the myths." Kapelis sees growing interest in the classics. He finds that the younger generation — his generation — is getting tired of fads.

"They want something transcendental...not disposable."

That makes the classics very current.

"With the monuments to remind us of that, with the monumental intellectual capital, with the monumental sensitivities of the Greek

people which is still in the DNA and is still alive — that always spoke to me as an artist."

Of the six composers whose work is represented in his San Francisco repertoire, only two are Greek — Manolis Kalomiris and Yannis Constantinidis. However, upon closer inspection, the influence of Greece is present through the entire program.

The Trojan War inspires a sonata by Muzio Clementi ("Dido Abandoned: Tragic Scene"); Jean-Philippe Rameau tells stories of Greek mythology in several works ("L'Entretien des Muses," "Les Tourby Claude Debussy ("Danseuses de Delphes" and "L'Isle Joyeuse").

"It's all influenced by Greece," explains Kapelis. "It's a very personal choice for me — a very personal program." He adds that fans of classical music will find a measure of variety which is rare in a typical evening of repertoire fare.

Alexandros Kapelis is a Steinway Artist. He has performed in recital and as soloist in Greece, Cyprus, England, France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Malta, the Czech Republic and the Middle East, as well as in Latin America and the United States.

The March 20th Bay Area recital is presented in association with the Consulate General of Greece in San Francisco, and with support



PHOTO BY SAM BASSETT

from the Gina Bachauer Memorial Concerts. The program was recently performed in Paris, Montreal, New York and Washington, D.C.

In May, he is scheduled to begin New York Philharmonic.

Terry Phillips is the Hellenic Journal's Senior Musical Affairs Correspondent. He is also moderator for "Quality of Life" on Valley Public Radio (www.kvpr.org).

**Pianist
Alexandros Kapelis
The Greek Myth
and the Piano**
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