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MASTER IN THE WORKS: Cliburn medal in hand, Park U student to make KC recital debut



By Paul Horsley

The making of every great musician involves natural talent, assiduous practice and, perhaps most important of all, teachers whose influences mold an artist through intelligence, caring attention and a deep understanding both of music and of career-building.

When Kansas City resident and Park University graduate student Kenneth Broberg won the Silver Medal this June at the 15th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, the world's most prestigious keyboard competition, it was no fluke. It was the result of years

of strong focus, hard work and superlative teaching: most recently with Park's Artistic Director and Piano Professor Stanislav Ioudenitch, who himself won the Gold Medal at the 11th Van Cliburn Competition in 2001.

Along with the Silver Medal comes \$25,000 in cash, three years of concert management and recording with the Universal Music Group. Kansas Citians will have a chance to hear Kenny (as he prefers to be called) on September 10th at the Folly Theater, where he will play a sampling of music from his Cliburn repertoire: Bach (Toccatina in C minor), Franck (Prelude, Fugue and Variation), Barber (Piano Sonata, Op. 26) and Liszt (B-minor Sonata).



Kenny performed his Cliburn Competition Preliminary Round recital on May 27th, with music of Bach, Franck, Barber and Marc-Andre Hamelin / Photo by Ralph Lauer

"It's a collaboration," Kenny said recently of his year of study with "Stasik" Ioudenitch, who helped build Park's International Center for Music into a world-renowned force. "Stasik absolutely treats you like an individual, like an artist, like a peer, rather than just some student." Still, anyone who knows Stasik knows he is seldom shy about telling you what he thinks. "He's very discriminating," Kenny said. "He's not going to sugar-coat things for you, which I appreciate. He's going to give you his impression, but he has a way of doing that without being unnecessarily harsh."

All of those qualities were critical leading up to the final round of the Cliburn Competition, when Stasik flew in at the last minute from Vienna (where he'd been judging another competition). Mind you, by this time Kenny had already advanced from the hundreds of applicants from around the world to the final cut of 30 contestants, and had been chosen as one of the six finalists to compete for Gold, Silver and Bronze.

His final performance of Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* with the Fort Worth Symphony was going to be a make-or-break moment. "I was playing it for him the day of the performance, and he told me I sounded like an old tired man," Kenny said. "And it was true. That helped me to wake up and make things fresher, to lighten up a bit."



The audience at Bass Hall erupted with enthusiasm after Kenny's final-round performance of Rachmaninoff's Paganini Rhapsody on June 9th, with Leonard Slatkin and the Fort Worth Symphony / Photo by Ralph Lauer

Indeed, his final-round Rachmaninoff, watched by a live audience at Fort Worth's Bass Hall (and webcast to millions worldwide), was nothing short of brilliant, and was the final puzzle-piece that clinched the Silver.

Kenny is tough: He has learned to take criticism from those he trusts. "Stasik doesn't tear down my confidence at all: In fact my confidence has grown exponentially since starting to study with him." But he is also eager to give credit to the remarkable teachers that came before: Nancy Weems of the University of Houston and Joseph Zins, who taught him from childhood in his native Minneapolis.

Credit must also go to years of performing onstage, and to major victories at other competitions: First Prizes at London (Hastings) and Dallas and medals at Sydney, Seattle, New Orleans, and Shreveport (Wideman). His medal at the Sydney International Competition resulted in a CD on the Universal Music Group label, and he has also performed with several major orchestras and on NPR and ABC (Australian) Radio.

None of that compares, of course, to the deluge of concerts that will now come his way for the next three years as a result of the Cliburn victory. For the current season he already has some 30 concerts booked, both recitals and concerto engagements, a number that is likely to go up. "I already have concerts booked into 2019," he said with a laugh.



After his final-round Rachmaninoff performance, Kenny was congratulated by two of his teachers, Park University's Stanislav Ioudenitch and the University of Houston's Nancy Weems / Photo by Carolyn Cruz

And there's no hint of sour grapes when both Stasik and Kenny assert that the Silver Medal was the right thing at the right time for the 23-year-old. "It's the best thing," Kenny said, adding that although he can't really evaluate the relative quality of playing (as he didn't listen to the other competitors) he knows that the Silver is right for *him* at this point in his career. "It's a little bit less attention, which honestly for me is nice because I'm still growing." The person who wins Gold at Cliburn, as Stasik well knows, is immediately jammed into a strait-jacket of performing 80 to 100 concerts a year whether he or she wants to or not.

Kenny first met Stasik at the Summer Piano School of Lake Como's International Piano Academy, where Ioudenitch and other prominent pianists teach each year. "I sat down and played for him in this hot little room in the middle of the summer," Kenny said of their first encounter. "I was on a grand piano and he was on this terrible upright piano, and I played through the (Chopin) Fourth Ballade for him. And I remember: about 10 seconds into him demonstrating on this horrible upright piano how it might be played ... I knew this was my teacher."



Kenneth Broberg / Photo courtesy of Park University

But establishing a relationship took time, and Kenny agrees that he was a tad resistant to change initially. “It takes a while for me to develop trust in a teacher, because it’s such a close kind of relationship. . . . As I’ve gotten to know him better now, I have complete trust in what he’s telling me to do: in what his goals are, in what our goals are together.”

Among Kenny’s gifts, in addition to a wide palette of colors and textures, is an extraordinary analytic sense. He brings clarity to the most demanding of textures. It was no coincidence that several of the works he chose for his Cliburn repertoire end in *fugues*: that most complex of musical forms, in which three, four or sometimes five distinct melodic lines are sounding at the same time. “It’s kind of a ‘concept,’ ” Kenny said of the thematic manner in which he formed his Cliburn selections. Fugues seem to come naturally to him, perhaps, because much of his practice at the keyboard “is geared toward trying to bring out different voices,” he added, “taking things apart and putting them back together.”



Kenneth Broberg, Yekwon Sunwoo and Daniel Hsu / Photo by Ralph Lauer

Still, this was a daring concept for a major competition. “His mind is amazing,” Stasik said. “Fugues are the most dangerous of pieces. This is the trickiest program you could ever put in a competition.” The Franck, Bach, Barber and Liszt works, all of which appear on the Folly Theater program, all include fugues. “Fugues are demanding and cerebral,” Stasik added. “People try to avoid them!”

Stasik sees in Kenny no less than “the hope for a continuous development of the American piano school, and I’m glad that I’m part of that. He is a truly *American* pianist.” Seemingly just “a boy from Minnesota,” he added with a laugh. “Yet he’s an extraordinary talent. ... It’s *remarkable* what he produces onstage, really remarkable.”

Tickets for the September 10th recital are on sale beginning August 1st. Call 816-474-4444 or go to follytheater.org.

Hear Kenny’s competition performances at cliburn2017.medici.tv/en/artist/kenneth-broberg.

Photo at top, by Ralph Lauer: Cliburn medalists Yekwon Sunwoo of South Korea (Gold), Kenneth Broberg of the United States (Silver) and Daniel Hsu (Bronze) answer questions during the post-competition press conference.

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