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THEATER

Hershey Felder returns, this time portraying Tchaikovsky

By Sam Hurwitt
Correspondent

When Bay Area theater patrons ponder great composers from Beethoven to Bernstein, it's only natural if they picture all of them looking a bit like Hershey Felder.

The Canadian playwright, actor and musician has carved out a unique theatrical niche for himself with a string of one-man shows about famous composers, all played by himself at the piano. The latest of these, "Our Great Tchaikovsky," makes its Bay Area premiere with TheatreWorks Silicon Valley at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts.

Felder quickly became a fixture at Berkeley Repertory Theatre after the success of his show "George Gershwin Alone" in 2013. Later that same year the theater presented "The Pianist of Willesden Lane," the one-woman show he adapted and directed for performer Mona Golabek based on the book Golabek co-wrote about her mother's escape from Nazi-controlled Austria as a child. That show was such a hit that it returned two years later. In 2014 he brought Berkeley two more of his solo shows, "Hershey Felder as Leonard Bernstein in Maestro" and "Monsieur Chopin."

He first charmed TheatreWorks audiences in 2016 with "Hershey Felder as Irving Berlin" (which played Berkeley Rep the following year), then he returned to TheatreWorks in 2017 with "Hershey Felder: Beethoven." Both shows broke box office records for the company, so his latest is keenly anticipated.

"Our Great Tchaikovsky" debuted at San Diego Rep last January, where it became the highest grossing show in that company's 41-year history.

As a writer and performer and composer Felder does more than just these biographical composer pieces, but the demand for them keeps him busy. He began with the Gershwin piece in 1999, and they soon took on a life of their own.

"You try it and you think this will never go, and it does, and you realize you have a form," Felder says. "And then



HERSHEY FELDER PRESENTS

Hershey Felder has created a cottage industry out of playing famous composers; his latest is Tchaikovsky.

'OUR GREAT TCHAIKOVSKY'

Created and performed by Hershey Felder, presented by TheatreWorks Silicon Valley

Through: Feb. 11

Where: Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St.

Tickets: \$45-\$105; 650-463-1960, www.theatreworks.org

you try your second one and you think, oh my god, I'm repeating the form. I have to change a little bit. And you see the public loves it and they want another one, so you do another one. So is this yet another version of the last one, just a different story? It becomes a very interesting challenge to push the envelope with each story. At the same time, the audience has been very clear. They want to meet the composer and they want his story, and they want me to tell it and play the character. So I've sort of gotten my marching orders."

With Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, beloved for ballets "Swan Lake" and "The Nutcracker" and the booming cannons of the "1812 Overture," Felder had to grapple with how to address the dichotomy of the composer's revered status in his native Russia and

his sexuality that later Soviet censors attempted to erase from history.

"Tchaikovsky is a great Russian hero, arguably Russia's greatest artistic hero," Felder says. "And there is a very powerful anti-LGBT movement in Russia, and it's a very complicated thing to conflate Tchaikovsky's own real life with the anti-gay laws in Russia that are actually active quite currently. I don't think one can do a piece about Tchaikovsky in this day and age and avoid that as a story, especially with how complicated things are getting not only in that country but in this country as well."

Felder is touring with four of his shows this year while creating a couple of unrelated pieces for other performers. As for who we might see him portray next, he does have a Franz Liszt show that still hasn't made it to the Bay Area, but don't expect him to keep showing up as everyone from Mozart to John Cage.

"I've begun work on my final composer piece, which is for Claude Debussy," he says. "Then I'm done. Then I sign off of these."

Contact Sam Hurwitt at shurwitt@gmail.com, and follow him at [Twitter.com/shurwitt](https://twitter.com/shurwitt).