

Perk Up, pianist! tickles ivories, funny bone

When you interview a classical musician, you might expect names like Chopin, Beethoven or Vivaldi show up on their list of inspirations.

But Florence Foster Jenkins?

That's who came up next to Victor Borge on Sarah Hagen's list of influences.

Florence Foster Jenkins was famous in her time for being rather infamous. Brought to life in a film of the same name by Meryl Streep, her claim to fame was a confident but tone-deaf singing, which she coupled with her wealth to carve out a career on stage.

'It seems weird because I never thought she was so funny,' says Hagen of the singer who became something of a novelty act. 'I know people used to buy her records and listen to her awful singing at home, but I was just amazed that she was so fearless. She wanted to be on stage and she did. She just made it happen. That was really inspiring to me. She made me feel like anything was possible. I could do anything I wanted in life and it didn't matter if there were haters out there.'

This can-do attitude may have bolstered her to take her talent and, following the lead of her primary influence Borge, explore the connection between classical and comedy - and you can see the results next month when Sarah Hagen brings her show, 'Perk Up, pianist!?' to the Aurora Cultural Centre.

'Often referred to as the next Victor Borge, Sarah has transformed her award-winning role as 'concert pianist' into a stand-up, or rather sit-down comedy,' says the Cultural Centre of the March 11 show. 'Pairing anecdotes with music, [she] takes audiences deep inside the world of a classical musician as she shares her earnest efforts to keep her spirits up in the midst of troublesome times.'

The troublesome times started with burnout, she says.

She was playing so many concerts back-to-back, she realized she needed to take at least a year off. Fate had other ideas and, soon after cancelling a string of concerts, she lucked out and found a place in the Toronto Fringe Festival.

'It seemed kind of crazy, fun and adventurous,' she says. 'I went to Toronto but before that I started writing this show, which I had been toying with for quite a long time. Even though burnout seems like a dismal situation, it helped me see the levity of things, and is how I started writing it.'

From its first performance at Fringe, the show has only grown.

It wasn't quite finished when the curtain first rose, and now it is at a place where there is a give and take on both sides of the stage.

'The first half of the show is more anecdotal, sharing stories about touring life, about my dating life, and a play a little bit in the first half,' she says, noting several classical pieces that are interwoven into the anecdotes. 'The second half is about my journey out of burnout and that becomes almost like a recital setting, including Clare de Lune, which is a real favourite with people, along with Chopin, Liszt and De Falla.'

'I always feel like the piano chose me. I started when I was seven years old and I just couldn't stay away from it. My parents loved music and humour and they introduced me to Victor Borge at a young age. I know that was a big influence for me. Half of my life is with this lighter show and the other half is as a hardcore classical pianist.'

Hagen recently released a recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations and, this past Monday it was nominated for an East Coast Music Award, which is 'really exciting.'

?I have been enjoying bringing that to people and I also play a program that celebrates some of the forgotten female composers of Mozart and Chopin's time. I love bringing that program to people talking about all these strong, charismatic women who fought for equal pay and fought to be on stage and change the status quo.?

The Aurora Cultural Centre's Great Artist Music Series presents Perk Up, Pianist! on Friday, March 11 at 7.30 p.m. at Trinity Anglican Church. Tickets are on sale now at \$35 and are available at auroraculturalcentre.ca.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter