

By Angela Covo with translators Doug and Hiromi St

"Nobu fever" coming to San Antonio

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San Antonio. - **Coined "Nobu fever" by Yuki Oda in Time Magazine – the phrase perfectly describes what happens to audiences after hearing 23-year-old concert pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii interpret the world's greatest composers' works. And thanks to ARTS San Antonio, the Japanese super star will perform for one night only here as part of his U.S. tour – just days before his concert date at Carnegie Hall.**

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When he was just 12 years old, Nobuyuki Tsujii played a sonata by Haydn and another piece by Chopin in a small recital hall in New York's Carnegie Hall. The year was 2000.

"I would like to travel and perform all over the world," Tsujii said at that time.

Cynics might say that would be a lofty dream for anyone, particularly a young man who is blind from birth. But they wouldn't be taking into account the dramatic talent and tenacity of the 2009 gold medalist of the Van Cliburn, the prestigious international piano competition that takes place every four years in Fort Worth.

Jurists from the competition described his playing as "magical," the Chicago Tribune praised him for "fearless technical assurance, accuracy and musicality... the rounded tone, suppleness of line and lyrical grace he brought" and there is no question the Japanese artist is a master of the musical phrase.

Nobu, as he is affectionately known, began his formal training at the tender age of four.

Asked how he discovered the world of music in the first place, Tsujii credits his mother Itsuko Tsujii.

"When I was eight months old, my mother noticed I reacted to a Chopin cd -- she said she watched as I moved my legs in perfect rhythm to the music," Tsujii explained.

Later, when he was all of two years old, the family got him a little toy piano. Again, his mother realized that young Nobu could tap out the melodies she was singing to him on the keys of the little piano – exactly.

It turns out that Tsujii has perfect pitch, which allows him to master the more complex works he would be required to play someday, as a professional. In fact, his teacher, Masahiro Kawakami, learned to use Tsujii's skill to teach him more and more. Kawakami would play a part with right hand, and then the left hand, and Tsujii would listen and repeat the work precisely.

While limited copies of Braille sheet music do exist, Tsujii finds the process is very tedious and exhausting. Even today, Tsujii learns pieces by having the music recorded in small parts, including the notations on the music. Each hand is recorded separately and accurately by a team of pianists along with the specific codes and instructions written by the composers, which Tsujii listens to and practices until he learns and perfects each piece.

Using this method, it takes the pianist about a month to master a concerto, but shorter pieces take one to three days, and a sonata about a week. This year, Tsujii graduated from the Ueno Gakuen University of Music in Japan, but he plans to continue to study. So far, the pianist has at least 100 works in his repertoire, and while he says his biggest challenge is increasing that list, he also wishes to continue composing.

He has already written scores for the television and movie industry, and says the focus of future study will be composition, explaining he still feels inadequate and wants to learn more.

We talked about favorite composers (Debussy, Chopin and Beethoven) and important influences in his life – and Tsujii explained his mother opened the doors to the world for him.

"Of course, hearing the great musicians and composers from the time I was a baby was a big influence," Tsujii said.

But what really helped was how his mother would take him to art museums, firework displays and beautiful gardens, and painstakingly describe each work of art, each luminous sparkle, the petals on a flower.

"She distilled the images in my mind so I could experience the beauty," Tsujii said.

From both his parents, the young man developed a penchant for nature, loves long walks and hiking and swimming. He also said he enjoys karaoke, and considers it his hobby.

Humble and easy-going, the soft-spoken Tsujii told La Prensa that winning the Van Cliburn gave him a spot on the starting line and jump-started the career he always hoped for.

First prize came with the Nancy Lee and Perry R. Bass Gold Medal, a cash award of \$20,000, the silver trophy cup, international concert tours and career management for three concert seasons following the competition, a CD recording on the Harmonia Mundi USA label and a contribution toward domestic and international air travel on American Airlines during the three-year tour.

"I was just happy to be in the competition, the rest is like a dream," he said.

He loves to play for others – since he was a little boy, he thrilled at the chance to play for an audience. That desire to share his music is what drives him and motivates him to work so hard to play as well as he possibly can.

"I am excited to have the chance to play in new places, before new audiences," he said.

And while Tsujii got a taste of Texas a couple of years ago in Fort Worth, he can't wait to visit to San Antonio for the first time.



"I am looking forward to Mexican food!"

Arts San Antonio presents "***Nobuyuki Tsujii in Recital***" at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, October 13 at the Ruth Taylor Concert Hall at Trinity University. For tickets or more information, visit [ARTS SA](#) online or call (210) 226-289.