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TOP STORY

Ahwatukee's Rice Brothers balance technique and emotion

By David M. Brown, AFN Contributor Jan 18, 2018 Updated Jan 18, 2018



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John and Chris Rice are brothers whose musical talent makes the score.

“When they play their piano or cello, the listener feels their personal connection to that instrument. They are also wonderful at entertaining the audience with inspiring stories about the composers and their music,” said Carolyn Broe, director of the Four Seasons Orchestra in Scottsdale. “Their personal touch empowers the audience and gives them a sense of ownership about what they are hearing.”

The Ahwatukee brothers will display their talent this weekend. Johnny, 32, and Chris, 29, will perform as soloists during the Mozart & Friends Concert at 1 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 20, at La Casa de Cristo Lutheran Church, 6300 E. Bell Road, Scottsdale.

Ahwatukee natives and residents, the Polish-American musicians will each play piano and cello during the concert, which begins with Mozart's *Impresario Overture*.

First, the brothers will present Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola*, scored by the great 18th-century Austrian composer for violin, viola and orchestra and transcribed for two cellos by the Rices.

Then, each will perform one of Chopin's piano concertos. Johnny will play the first movement of the 19-century Polish master's *Piano Concerto No. 1* and Chris will perform Chopin's *Piano Concerto No. 2*.

In addition, the concert will present three Mozart & Friends Concerto Competition winners as part of the orchestra's Young Artists Concerts. They will be performing works by Mozart and his German contemporary, Franz Anton Hoffmeister. The performers are violist Audrey Wang, Scottsdale 15, a sophomore at Pinnacle High School in Phoenix; Tempe violinist Rina Kubota, 16, a junior at Corona del Sol High School; and clarinetist Tyler Clifton-Armenta, 23, of Mesa, who is working on his masters in clarinet at ASU's Herberger School of Music.

“What sets Chris and Johnny above other soloists is their unique balance of technical brilliance with a deep spiritual and emotional relationship with their music,” said Broe, who has a doctorate in music from Arizona State University. Since the orchestra's founding in 1991, she has been the conductor and artistic director of the group, which includes players from Tempe, Mesa, Chandler and Gilbert.

She met the Rices when they were 15 and 16 – she was coaching chamber music through Mesa Community College – and was astonished by their skills.

Since birth, the Rices have lived in the same Ahwatukee home with parents John and Jean.

Johnny began piano at 4 and cello at 7. "When I was 4, the family went to Disneyland in Anaheim and I met a ragtime player, Johnny Hodges, who performed there. This was an early inspiration."

As a result of this early encounter, the brothers maintain a diverse repertoire, including classical music, boogie-woogie, gospel and jazz.

At 7, Johnny was at a bat mitzvah where a chamber group was playing, including cellist Taki Atsumi, professor of cello at ASU.

"I was drawn to melodic expressiveness of the cello," he said. "Many consider it the instrument whose timbre is the closest equivalent to that of a human voice."

At the event, he confidently approached Atsumi, who made him a student.

At age 2, Chris, followed his brother and started piano lessons. Next were violin lessons with Nancy Atsumi, Taki's daughter, who was in high school. Later, Taki himself agreed to teach him cello.

Because of their early musical interests, the brothers were home schooled for academics through the college level. Their musical education and mentoring have been extensive, including many years with Chandler resident, Robert Hamilton, a Steinway artist and ASU faculty member since 1980.

"Chris and Johnny are unique talents, set apart from many of their peers by playing both piano and cello at professional levels," Hamilton said.

In part because of their Polish background, they have felt deep connection with Chopin. "Chopin has always been a favorite composer for both us," Johnny said. "We find the history of his time engrossing and his letters and, of course, the great music."

The Rices' great-grandparents emigrated from Lodz, Poland, early in the 20th century, first to New York, then to Ohio and Michigan, where the family was in the textiles business.

Their father moved to Arizona in 1970 to attend ASU's law school and has since done mediation and teaching, and their mother has been an attorney for the Maricopa County Attorney's Office for years.

They have studied Polish and traveled and performed in Poland and at Polish-American celebrations in the United States.

At the Kraków Conservatory, for instance, they studied with Stefan Wojtas, and in 2015, the Rice family received the Polish Heritage Award from the Polish American Congress Arizona Division. The Polish consulate in Los Angeles also partially sponsored the upcoming Scottsdale concert.

The Rices have performed extensively, in New York City, including their Carnegie Hall debut in 2014, and in Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles and at home with the Phoenix, Scottsdale, and Mesa symphonies and The Symphony of the Southwest.

Overseas, they have played in Warsaw, where they were the featured artists at the June 2014 World Music Day celebration; Vienna and Salzburg, Austria; Munich, Germany; and Budapest, Hungary.

The Rice Brothers have won concerto competitions in Phoenix, national competitions, and were gold medal winners at the International Chopin Competition in Corpus Christi, Texas. They have released three CDs.

One of their distinguished teachers, Johannes Kropfisch, director of piano at The Vienna Conservatory, asked them in the summer of 2014 while they were in Austria to perform the American premiere of his Cello Sonata.

In Ahwatukee, they are continuing the teaching tradition, guiding cello and piano students in their private teaching studio.

“We have been fortunate to have had amazing teachers, and we feel fortunate to pass on our passion to young people and adults,” said Chris, noting that they are accepting new students.

The benefits and beauty of great music for individuals and community is also important for them, so they are furthering these goals through The Beautiful Music Possibility. And they are founding a nonprofit corporation, Young Musicians in Service to America, which will emphasize musical excellence and service.

“Music is such a universal language, a means of reaching out and sharing our passion with the audience,” Johnny said.

“It’s a blessing for both of us,” Chris added.

In 2000, Russian émigré Mstislav Rostropovich, on most cards the premier cellist of the 20th century, was in Phoenix to perform with the Phoenix Symphony and offer master classes in his casita at the Arizona Biltmore. He met the Rices, then 14 and 11.

“Even though he was exhausted from a six-day tour,” Chris recalled, “he came over to our dad after hearing us and told him, ‘They are massively talented.’”

The Jan. 20 concert is free, with festival seating: first come, first served. The church has wheelchair access. VIP tickets are \$15 for reserved seating in the front of the sanctuary.

Information: 602-923-0300, fourseasonsorchestra.org or info@fourseasonsorchestra.org.

