

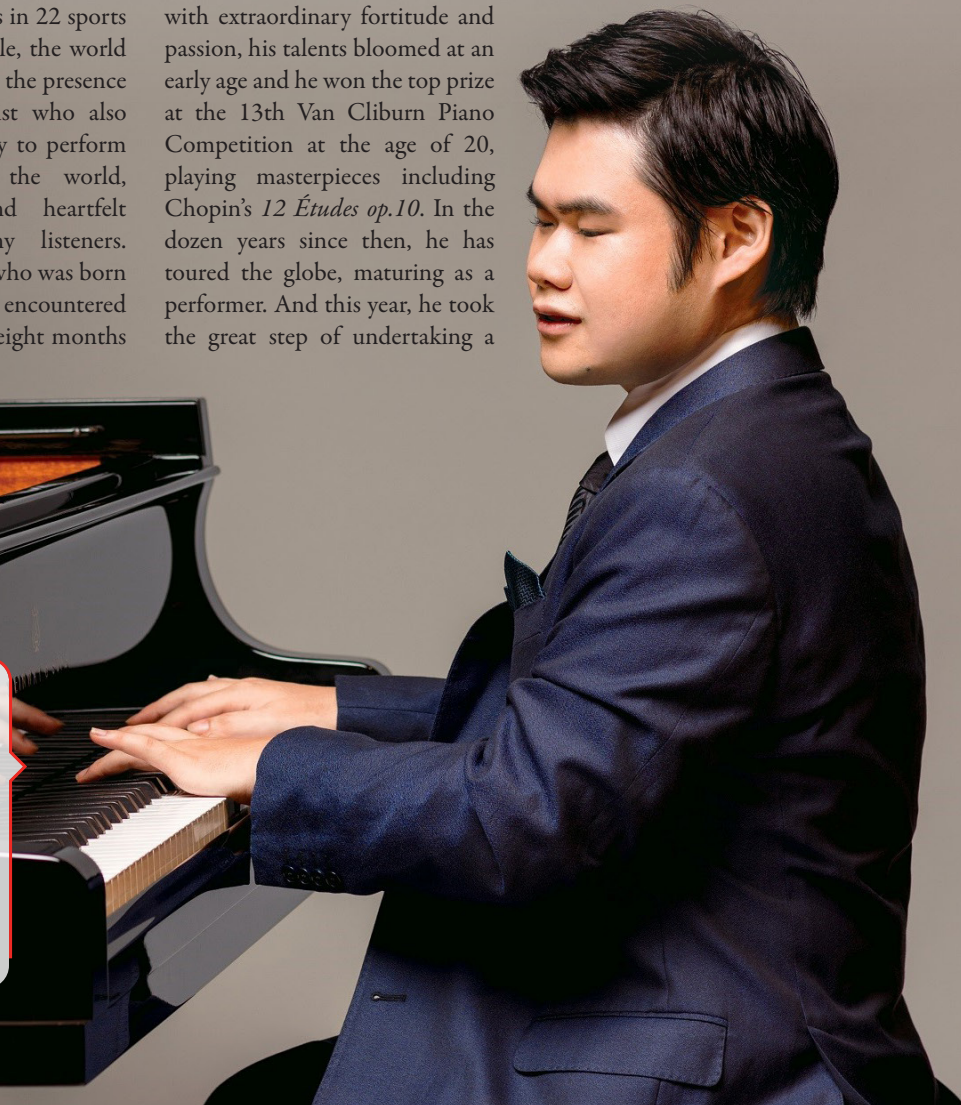
# SHARING HOPE AND THE JOY OF LIVING THROUGH MUSIC

*Pianist TSUJII Nobuyuki has enchanted audiences worldwide ever since his triumph at the 13th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 2009. He also has continued to take on new endeavors in the face of hardships through music.*

The Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games are set to start on August 24. Audiences across the world will watch in fascination as para athletes compete for top honors in 539 events in 22 sports categories. Meanwhile, the world of music is graced by the presence of a Japanese pianist who also overcame a disability to perform in venues across the world, bringing hope and heartfelt moments to many listeners. TSUJII Nobuyuki, who was born blind in 1988, first encountered music when he was eight months

old. His mother noticed that he enjoyed listening to Chopin's "Heroic" Polonaise, and began to play the CD for him every day. Applying himself to music with extraordinary fortitude and passion, his talents bloomed at an early age and he won the top prize at the 13th Van Cliburn Piano Competition at the age of 20, playing masterpieces including Chopin's *12 Études op.10*. In the dozen years since then, he has toured the globe, maturing as a performer. And this year, he took the great step of undertaking a

tour in which he once again played Chopin—this time all 27 of the composer's *Études*, an impressive feat. "It was an enormous challenge. But I decided to take



## TSUJII NOBUYUKI

Born in Tokyo in 1988, Tsujii showed great promise at the piano from an early age despite his disability, and decided at age 10 that he wanted to play professionally. In 2005, he became the youngest person to compete in the International Chopin Piano Competition, where he was granted the critics' award. Since winning the top prize at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 2009, he has performed on stages the world over.



Left: When Tsujii triumphed at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 2009, he received the gold medal from Cliburn himself (left front). The encounter is one of his most treasured memories. ©Van Cliburn Foundation

Right: Many maestros and world-class musicians, including Russian conductor Valery Gergiev (center), have praised Tsujii and opened doors to him as a performer (photo taken in St. Petersburg, Russia, 2012).

advantage of this stasis (imposed by the pandemic) to work on the *Études* more thoroughly than ever," Tsujii reflects.

Tsujii is revered both for the purity and beauty of his notes and for his outstanding playing technique, but rather than allowing his own musical personality to dominate, he faithfully seeks to express the enticing depths and complexities of whatever masterpiece he is playing. More than anything, he finds joy in sharing the music with his audience, and this truly comes across in his performances. This straightforwardness makes him so beloved by audiences of all nations. "I loved to perform for people when I was very young, and that passion has never once wavered. Whenever I play, I try my best to be as one with the audience."

In his programs, Tsujii generally includes well-known pieces that everyone can enjoy,

and experiments eagerly with new ideas, such as concerts that pair music with projections of world-famous masterpiece paintings. This attitude was driven in part by a conversation that he once had with Van Cliburn, the legendary American pianist who gave his name to the competition in which Tsujii won the top prize. "I met with him shortly before he passed away, and he said to me: 'Be a pianist who can draw in an audience of those even without any knowledge or interest in classical music.' That is what I keep in mind every time I play at a concert."

During the decade that Tsujii climbed to the heights as a concert pianist, Japan and the world faced enormous predicaments, such as the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, and the current COVID-19 pandemic. Distressed by these events, Tsujii explored ways to contribute with his music. In 2012, he participated

in the production of "Lights of Japan," a video message to the world regarding Japan's post-earthquake reconstruction. He performed with a piano that had been restored after serious damage from the tsunami. Transmitting hope and determination for the reconstruction, the video message was shown to world leaders assembled at the Davos Forum.

In 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tsujii presented a new composition, entitled "We will smile together again," in hopes of offering comfort to others through music. He has also experimented with new ways to communicate through music, including launching a YouTube channel and giving his first online concerts. "I feel that we need music the most when times are hard. Music knows no national boundaries and has magnificent power. I myself would not be where I am today without it," he says. Keeping these thoughts in mind, Tsujii will continue to meet new challenges. "I will work harder than ever to be a pianist who stays in people's hearts. To always play with joy—that is something I will never forget." ●



Top: A scene from Tsujii's first online concert in 2020. "Through online streaming, people can watch my hands as I play, and they can enjoy music in the comfort of their own homes. These are advantages that live performances lack," he says.

Right: Since 2016, Tsujii has been regularly holding concerts where audiences can enjoy a fine selection of impressionist, ukiyo-e, and other art projected onto giant screens during the performance. ©Hikaru☆

