TSUJI 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 2009, he became the youngest person to compete in the International Chopin Piano Competition, where he was granted the Études prize 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 a 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 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 playing technique, 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.”