

Spoofting on the classics



Bringing fun to classical

[By Richard Scheinin](#)

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With 25 million YouTube hits, the musical comedy duo Igudesman & Joo is going viral with classical music. Mozart meets the "James Bond Theme" and the Bee Gees. "I Will Survive," the disco hit, gets embellished, shredded, meshed with Tchaikovsky -- and played on the violin with a vibrating cappuccino frother instead of a bow.

"When people ask us to explain our show, we say, 'Mozart meets Monty Python,' " says violinist Aleksey Igudesman, half of the Vienna-based duo, which is in the midst of its first California tour and performs Friday at the Flint Center in Cupertino. "Partly it's because we grew up in a freethinking environment. But mostly it's because we're simply mad -- you know, crazy."

But the duo -- its other half is pianist Hyung-ki Joo -- does more than work karate exhibitions and "Riverdance" routines into its skits. Russian-born Igudesman and British Joo are seriously virtuosic, so much so that classical music heavyweights (pianist Emanuel Ax, violinist Gidon Kremer) vie to perform with them at a time when classical audiences are graying and ticket sales are dipping in the down economy.

Other collaborators include actors John Malkovich and Sir Roger Moore, of James Bond fame. Terry Jones of Monty Python has said the duo "brings surrealism to the concert hall and takes its trousers down."

Literally, as Igudesman often performs in boxer shorts.

That's bound to happen in Cupertino, where I & J will perform "A Little Nightmare Music," its best-known show. And if you don't recognize the title as a play on Mozart (his "Eine kleine Nachtmusik," or "A Little Night Music), don't worry. Building on the tradition of classical music comedians Victor Borge and P.D.Q. Bach, Igudesman and Joo appeal to classical aficionados and newcomers alike, in concerts from Austin, Texas, (the South By Southwest festival) to Istanbul.

Beyond the comedy

As an example, their "I Will Survive" routine mixes Gloria Gaynor's disco anthem with references to Tchaikovsky's fifth symphony, Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto, plus Bach, Vivaldi and Chopin. But one needn't recognize any of that to enjoy the duo's antics: ornamenting the tune a la Chico Marx, singing in a Bee Gees falsetto (Joo) or a thick Russian accent (Igudesman) and whipping up the audience for a singalong.

"They're brilliant musicians and they're hilarious," says Mariya Borozina, 33, a violinist with the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra and the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, where she performs with Igudesman's brother, Leon, also a violinist. "You start watching and you're glued to the screen for three days."

The duo "puts humor together with the seriousness of classical music in a way that anyone, old or young, could enjoy," says Min Keun Park, 17, a cellist and senior at San Jose's Bellarmine College Preparatory school who will go to the Flint concert. "They make sure through comedy that the music is enjoyable for the 21st century."

Igudesman and Joo -- each is 38 -- have busy careers beyond their comedy act. Igudesman composes classically and for film, including portions of the Oscar-nominated soundtrack for 2009's "Sherlock Holmes." Joo has arranged Billy Joel's classical compositions. And, oh, both have performed with the Bee Gees' Robin Gibb.

How it all started

The violinist and the pianist also perform standard classical repertory in recitals. At heart, they say, they are proselytizers for classical music and take pride in bringing new ears to the music through comedy: "People leave Facebook messages on our board, saying, 'Thanks to your show, my son started to learn the clarinet,' " says Joo, "or, 'I gave up the violin 30 years ago, and I've just taken it up again.' "

Igudesman grew up in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), where his mother, Nina, was a pianist, and his father, Mikhail, the concertmaster of the Orchestra of the Maly Theatre, a prominent ensemble. From the start, Igudesman was "a funny little guy," says brother Leon Igudesman. "I mean, he was a normal kid, liked his video games. But he had this quirky sense of humor, very theatrical, kind of a deadpan style."

Joo grew up in Norwich, England, began piano around age 7 and met Igudesman about five years later, in the mid-1980s, at the prestigious Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey, England, named after and then run by the famous violinist. Menuhin wasn't a classical purist. With his freewheeling interests, and his collaborations with Ravi Shankar and jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli, he became a model for Igudesman and Joo.

Retro atmosphere

The youths began hanging out, listening to Mahler and Pink Floyd, discovering Dudley Moore (a talented classical pianist) and Monty Python, whose madcap "Dead Parrot Sketch" helped propel them into comedy.

"We're born of the same pea pod," Joo says.

"And we were so in love with the classical music that we heard and played," Igudesman says. "But sometimes we went to concerts, where the attitude was more like the air of a funeral, not a celebration. The audience would not be allowed to make noise. And the musicians came in somberly, all dressed up. And we thought it was really strange -- and then they would play this ecstatic, incredible music."

The two felt there was a disconnect: great music, terrible presentation.

The remedy? Joo recalls performing one of Igudesman's compositions: "It was called the 'Bastard Sonata,' and we gave the first performance at the age of 14. It was pretty wild."

"But it sounded beautiful," Igudesman says. "You know, back in the 19th century, if you went to a concert, you might hear a movement of Beethoven, and then a magician might come in and do a little trick. That's the atmosphere we're hoping and trying to re-create at our shows. You could say we're going retro, back in time -- even though YouTube is our home."

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069.

Igudesman & Joo

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: Flint Center,
21250 Stevens Creek Blvd., Cupertino

Tickets: \$20 to \$75;

www.ticketmaster.com

(or at the box office)