

Music

Browning: Busiest fingers on the keys

By Hillary Hauser

LOVERS OF piano music have a special place in their hearts for John Browning — a lion of pianists — for different reasons.

Some people have high regard for him because he recorded the entire repertoire of Chopin etudes — a rare feat, because the etudes encompass about every technique known to the piano.

Some people remember Browning for performing at the opening of New York's Lincoln Center in 1962 — a gala occasion in which he

premiered the Samuel Barber concerto which the composer had written specifically for him.

Santa Barbarans will have the opportunity to add Browning to their own classical memories, when the pianist gives a recital here Dec. 7.

Browning will play the Mozart sonata in F major, K. 332, the Opus 110 sonata of Beethoven, and the original uncut version of the Rachmaninoff sonata in B-flat minor, Opus 36.

In a telephone interview with Browning at his home in New York, the pianist told the News-Press that the Beethoven sonata he will play here is "a very special piece, one of the last big sonatas."

"It is a very noble work," Browning said. "It is Beethoven at his deepest and most lyrical. The ariosos in the final part, mixed with the fugues, are a special kind of thought. There is nothing quite like it in any other period of music."

Browning, 52, has been called "The Busiest Fingers on the Keys" by Life Magazine, because of the superhuman performance schedule he keeps.

On one occasion, he played in New York and the Spoleto Festival in Italy in the space of 36 hours.

Another time, Browning gave recitals on five consecutive days in five different cities, and in another marathon, he played seven different concertos within five weeks with four major orchestras — the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Denver Symphony.

Earlier this month, he performed the Beethoven fifth piano concerto with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Browning said that even when his road schedule is complicated, he makes arrangements and finds time to practice.

Usually, he practices 6 to 7 hours a day.

"Some people say Rudolf Serkin and I practice more than anyone," Browning said. "Six or seven hours



John Browning

isn't much, when you think about it, because it's joy. I keep my socializing to a minimum, work hard, see a few friends, but I try to take care of myself."

He doesn't like to stay away from the piano for too long.

"It's like athletic discipline," Browning said. "If you're away, you start behaving like a weekend golfer."

As evident by his mastery of the entire collection of Chopin etudes, Browning is a master technician at the keyboard — doing difficult, pyrotechnic things as if he were born with a piano in his hands.

Which may be the case.

Browning made his performing debut at the age of 10, playing Mozart's "Coronation Concerto" with the Denver Symphony.

"My mother was a pianist," Browning said. "I don't remember having specific reasons for playing the piano, I just did it. It was just as automatic as eating or sleeping."

After his Denver debut, word of young Browning's talents spread, and invitations to appear elsewhere in the U.S. poured in.

However, Browning's parents

prevented this potential exploitation of their son by deciding he should be allowed to continue his studies away from the spotlight.

"My parents are both very good musicians," Browning said. "They are intelligent, and they realized that the best thing to do was to delay any kind of child-prodigy concertizing."

In 1956, at age 23, Browning made his adult orchestral debut as soloist with the New York Philharmonic.

After that, his career "just happened," Browning said. "I was not really forced into specializing, and I feel fortunate about that. I prefer not to. I'll play Beethoven, Bach, anything. Eventually, people came to think I can do the bulk of the piano repertoire reasonably well."

He said "natural talent" in pianists is "not really understood."

"Both of my parents were musical, but I don't know that this is it," he said. "People seem to be born with an affinity, a natural capability, but no one really understands it."

It has been said that Browning never approaches his performances matter-of-factly, that there is always a kind of "excited tension" about his playing.

"Tension is really an inner fire," Browning said. "It is the degree of strength of feeling the artist has about the music. If the artist thinks it's nice music, that's the way it will come across. If he thinks of it as an important statement, that's the way it will come across."

For Browning, music is a door to the depths of poetry and feeling, as evidenced by what one New York Times critic said about him: "Mr. Browning can come as close to perfection as one would hope to hear in this world."

Browning's Dec. 7 recital will begin at 8 p.m. at the Santa Barbara High School Performing Arts Center at 700 East Anapamu St. For tickets and information about other Masterseries programs, call 963-0761.