

Risk-taking and adventure

BY HILLARY HAUSER

In Mozart's day a lot of "non-professional" music-makers regularly performed in public right alongside the professionals. They loved music enough to study a chosen instrument seriously, but couldn't or didn't devote an entire lifetime or career to it. Still, they organized recitals to share their love with anyone who would listen. Many great composers (including Mozart) in fact wrote some of their greatest compositions at the particular request of royal folk who were ardent amateur musicians wanting something unique to play.

Hannes Keller and Theo Lieven are European pianists who play in this spirit — for love and for the fun of it. They will perform Mozart's concerto in E flat major

The concert is designed to inspire the young of mind and heart to perform for the public whatever they feel like performing.

(K.365) for Two Pianos and Orchestra with Mehli Mehta and the American Youth Symphony at 7 p.m. Sunday at the Arlington Theater. It is a special concert being offered by the Community Arts Music Association as its 75th anniversary gift to Santa Barbara. It is a rare event in the annals of classical music performance because it is a combination of musical risk-taking and adventure, designed to inspire the young of mind and heart to perform for the public whatever they feel like performing. With this in mind, CAMA is offering with every ticket two free admissions for students under 18 years of age.

Mehli Mehta, the celebrated conductor (for 29 years) of the American Youth Symphony in Los Angeles, is a perfect leader for this unusual performance, in that he relishes big and unusual challenges. He is also a fiery, adventurous musician who has inspired countless generations of young musicians to pursue their art (including his son, Zubin), and at 85, he leads with the vigor and enthusiasm of a conductor one-third his age. His orchestra's performances at UCLA's Royce Hall are

noted for leaving audiences roaring at the end; the AYS tour of Italy this past summer was a resounding success that had Italian critics singing particularly high praise — of the orchestra and of Mehta's "enviable vitality."

In addition to the Mozart concerto, Mehta's Santa Barbara program will include the Roman Carnival overture by Hector Berlioz, and Modest Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition."

Lieven and Keller, whose hard-working professional lives are in the computer business (Lieven in Germany and Keller in Switzerland), are quick to explain there are things in their piano playing critics have probably never heard before. But they take their performances seriously, along with all the studying, practicing and rehearsals that go into them. They have made a CD under the label "Vive les amateurs du piano," with the idea that perhaps it will help promote art that is being done for love instead of money. It is not an adversarial position against professional musicians, for whom they have great admiration (and whom they promote financially), but rather it is an encouragement for non-professional musi-

cians to organize their own performances as far as they can without worrying about the opinions of critics.

"It's like the farmer's wife who plants flowers in front of the house, to collect nice comments from people who pass by," Keller said. "Who would say, 'The orchids in the store are nicer?' Amateur art is like the flowers of the farmer, maybe too flashy, too bright, too much crescendo and crash, but look at those flowers!"

Keller, who lives in Zurich and who will soon celebrate his 60th birthday, is a Swiss version of George Plimpton, putting his hand to everything, the more adventurous and wild the better. His formal education is in mathematics and philosophy, but his fame is in deep-ocean exploration. In the 1960s he began to test various scientific formulas for getting humans to unheard-of depths, making epic dives to the bottom of various lakes in Europe while all the world watched. Oil companies wanting to expand their offshore capabilities were particularly interested, and often sponsored Keller's dives.

In 1961 Keller made an experimental dive to 728 feet in Lake Maggiore, an event

that was chronicled by Life magazine, and the following year he dove to the incredible depth of 1,000 feet off Catalina Island. A side result of the California dive was that Keller had set a world deep-diving record, a title he retained for 13 years, and undersea exploration was revolutionized.

Thereafter, Keller turned his attention to artificial intelligence — computers. His Zurich-based company, Witch Systems, produces unusual programs that do everything but clean the kitchen sink.

During all of these phases, Keller has continued practicing, studying and playing his piano — Brahms, Beethoven, Chopin, all of the composers he loves. On the side he has organized public concerts in Europe for a number of promising pianists, boosting their careers, and he also formed a recording company, Media Records, to promote them.

Meanwhile in Germany, Theo Lieven



YVONNE BAUMANN

Theo Lieven, left, and Hannes Keller are European pianists who play for the love and fun of it.

met over computer business matters. Also naturally, they soon discovered their mutual passion for piano and their mutual penchant for risk-taking. It followed that at an international computer press conference they staged in June 1992 at the Palais Schwarzenberg in Vienna, they would present convention attendees a program of their piano playing.

"We did it before lunch," Keller recalled. "These people had to listen to us, or they didn't get to eat."

The program they ardently prepared for included Schumann's Andante and Variation (Op. 46) for two pianos, which calls for accompaniment by a horn and two cellos. Keller hired instrumentalists from the Vienna Symphony to do this work. Keller recalls with great humor what happened. One of the cellists discovered the two pianists were amateurs and called Keller's office to cancel. Keller was out, but as his secretary took the cellist's message that they "just could not do it," she replied, "Oh, but Mr. Keller will think your playing is just fine!"

Keller said the cellist got such a case of the giggles he decided to go ahead with it.

The Swiss pianist describes performing in public as scarier than diving to 1,000 feet. Who knows what can happen? As he played a Brahms ballade at the press conference (which he described as "fighting with the devil in the black box"), a bird flew in through the window and began singing around the room. As Keller's tempo began to vary (mostly to good effect) he found himself hoping the bird would fly over the head of a visiting critic and "take care of him."

Nevertheless the program went over big with the audience, and a "Vive les amateurs" CD recording was endorsed by the great pianist Alexis Weissenberg, who writes in the explanatory booklet, "You do not do anything fundamentally wrong if you permit yourself to enjoy this record."

Soon after the Vienna event, Lieven and Keller snagged a date to play in the United States

— with the Lake Charles Symphony Orchestra of Lake Charles, La. The conductor, William Kushner, requested that they play the Mozart two-piano concerto. The pianists had about a year to learn the piece.

Which they did — with serious coaching from serious teachers, and with serious rehearsals with serious symphony orchestras. After staging trial performances in Bern and Vienna, Lieven and Keller traveled to Louisiana in October and made their U.S. debut with great success.

"But ah! this Mozart put us through hell!" Keller said. "All this work, we needed to perform it more than once."

Which is where Mehli Mehta entered the picture. The maestro was more than happy to work

with enthusiastic musicians willing to go to such great lengths to put on a show.

After the CAMA event in Santa Barbara, the two pianists will repeat the performance with the American Youth Symphony at Royce Hall on Dec. 12, and then they will return to Europe to cook up their next plans. Lieven and Keller are working on ideas for a world congress of music critics at the piano foundation in Lake Como. And, Keller will go to Russia, where he'll take a course in fighter piloting; they fly a MIG.

And then, who knows? "Bach wrote some great two-piano concerti," Keller said. "Ah, there are three-piano pieces. Can you play the piano?"

(For concert tickets call (805) 966-4324.)

BARBARA MUSELMAN