



Aleksandra Kasman, 23, plays a Bösendorfer 280 Vienna Concert Series concert grand piano during a Chapel Hill Piano Salon.

in harmony

Chapel Hill Piano Salon provides a local venue for premier talent

By Michael Venutolo-Mantovani | Photography by Beth Mann

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he sun shined through the high windows of **Ken Gorfkle's** modernist living room, splashing warm light onto the 30 or so classical music lovers, arranged in a semicircle around the hulking grand piano. Some looked on with studied intent as if the soloist's playing might reveal the secrets of Medtner and Rachmaninoff. Others sat content with eyes closed, allowing themselves to be enveloped by the sounds of Ken's world-class Bösendorfer 280 Vienna Concert Series concert grand piano.

"I felt like I was bathing in sound in that room," says 23-year-old pianist Aleksandra Kasman at the most recent iteration of Ken's living room concert series, the **Chapel Hill Piano Salon**. ▶



Aleksandra praises the piano, which, she says, was as much of a draw for the attendees as her.

"It's a special piano," Aleksandra says, explaining that, in her travels through the world of classical piano, it was an instrument she had heard a lot about.

"This model?" I ask.

"No. This specific piano," she says.

MUSIC TO HIS EARS

Ken's love of classical piano has been a lifelong pursuit. He has been playing piano since he was a young boy. He appeared as a teenager with the Seattle Symphony and currently practices as many as three hours a day.

When constructing his home, Ken - who works in real estate development, though he recently earned a Ph.D. in romance languages at **UNC** - wanted his piano, then a 7-foot Kawai, to be the home's focus. Working with Chapel Hill-based architect **Lyn McClay** of **DesignSpec Inc.**, Ken decided on a 22-by-32 living room, highlighted by an 18-foot ceiling, where his Kawai would reside.

"You could say the house was built around the piano," Ken says. It wasn't until a few years later that the singular Bösendorfer would become the centerpiece of his home and eventually the impetus for the Chapel Hill Piano Salon.

It was in late 2017, on a regular visit to his sister in Seattle, that Ken popped into a local piano dealer. Content with his Kawai, he had no intention of purchasing a new piano. That is, until the salesman instructed him to the bench of the Bösendorfer, where Ken lost himself in play for more than three hours on the showroom's floor.

"I had never heard anything like it," he says, noting how the instrument's rarity combined with its sound and playability is what has made these pianos arguably the most sought-after on Earth.

Currently, there are roughly 90 Bösendorfer Vienna Concert Series pianos in the world, most of which reside in Europe and Asia. Ken's is one of about 25



Aleksandra with Ken Gorfkle, who bought the Bösendorfer piano in 2017, and soon began holding concerts in his living room. "This piano is just too much for only one person to enjoy," he says.

in the United States. It was the piano that led Ken to begin hosting the now-beloved home concert series.

After a month of playing the Bösendorfer alone in his living room, it dawned on Ken that he needed to share his instrument with his piano-loving friends, many of whom comprise the local **Presto** piano group, something of a meetup of intermediate-to-advanced recreational classical pianists.

"This piano is just too much for only one person to enjoy," Ken says, noting how, due to the high cost of a Bösendorfer, most of them end up cloistered in private homes.

The Chapel Hill Piano Salon, where fans and friends can see and hear a world-class instrument played by world-class musicians, are Ken's form of giving back to his community.

Aleksandra's appearance was the sixth iteration of the Chapel Hill Piano Salon, which began in May 2018 with a performance by Marina Lomazov, then-faculty member of the University of South Carolina School of Music.

Soon after that initial recital, Marina connected Ken with Greenville-based international concert and festival promoter John Holloway, who has been instrumental in helping fill the Chapel Hill Piano Salon's roster with renowned pianists like Alexander Kobrin, Eric Lu, Anna Han and, of course, Aleksandra.

With attendees traveling from as close as **Governors Club** and as far as Maryland, and a cadre of local teenage classical students in attendance, Ken's recent Piano Salon is evidence of the significant regional draw for lovers of classical piano set in an intimate venue.

Terry Melville, an expatriated New Yorker who lives in Chapel Hill and has helped Ken promote and publicize his Piano Salons, sees these home recitals as a way to bring world-class talent to the humble and leafy environs of Chapel Hill.

"Here we are in this beautiful home in Chapel Hill, yet it's an international stage with international talent," she says. "It's just so incredibly special." **CHM**

Send Ken a note at kgorfkle@bellsouth.net to receive emails about upcoming concerts.