

Grand piano enlivens the desert playa at Summer Lake



Hunter Noack and his nine-foot Steinway grand piano came to Playa in Summer Lake for an outdoor concert.

PHOTO BY TL BROWN

By T. Lee Brown
Correspondent

It's not unusual to hear music outside. Guitars and ukuleles pop up around campfires. String quartets cluster on lawns at outdoor weddings. What's more unusual: a classical piano concert en plein air.

A recent performance of pianist Hunter Noack and the "In a Landscape" project brought this experience to the Playa residency site in Summer Lake. Along a desert lakebed, at the foot of a stern desert mountain, Playa offered an oasis.

Audiences, complete with kids and picnic baskets, sprawled out on lush lawns. In front of a picturesque pond stood a flatbed truck trailer. Upon the flatbed stood a Steinway grand piano.

Audience members were given wireless headphones. Noack invited people to walk around the grounds and promenade alongside the vast desert playa, carrying the music with them.

He opened with Chopin's "Grand Polonaise," its liquid grace interplaying with the rustling of a strong breeze through trees and cattails (for those who left their headphones off). The audience was encouraged to sit by the pond during a water-inspired piece, with the music trickling and burbling. During Frederic Rzewski's "Winnsboro Cotton

Mill Blues," Noack invited folks to stretch out underneath the piano.

Noack is from Central Oregon. He grew up in Sunriver, though he went away to attend boarding school at Interlochen Arts Academy. At home, he said, "I would go fly-fishing with my dad, duck-hunting; we did most of our hunting and fishing along the Deschutes and in the Cascades."

He spent eight years living in cities including London, where he earned his master's degree at Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Noack said, "When I came back to Oregon, I wasn't planning on staying. I was only here waiting for my visa to go back to England."

Instead, "I fell back in love with Oregon and these landscapes." Now based in Portland, Noack enjoys traveling the whole state for performances. "I still hunt and fish, and try to get out as much as I can."

Noack played fluidly, selecting compositions that ranged the whole keyboard and showcased his nimble fingers and responsive instrument. Halfway through the evening, guest vocalist Katie Harman Ebner from Klamath Falls animated the stage with song. In a friendly way, she contextualized each piece, educating the roving listeners and rapt picnickers alike.

She started with an intriguing piece by Amy Beach, the acclaimed early American composer and pianist. Next, Debussy's "C'est l'extase" rolled sensually over the undulating grasses. Ebner's set closed with the dramatic "Les chemins de l'amour" by Poulenc, punctuated by wild geese flying close, as though choreographed into the performance.

Headphones were necessary to hear vocals and announcements, but optional for the piano alone. "When I first started, I wasn't sure about the technology; I thought it was maybe gimmicky or something," Noack said. He has grown to appreciate the sense of intimacy they can bring.

See PIANO on page 25

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Paulina Springs Books Author Presentation with Sam Reinhart 6:30 p.m. The author will present from his book, "Aligning Your Financial Goals with Your Values." For more info call 541-549-0866 or go to paulinasprings.com.

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998 E. Black Butte Ave. Seed to Table Farm Dinner 4:30 to 8 p.m. Featuring Chef James Fink of Wild Oregon Foods. Tickets & info at SeedToTableOregon.org/events.

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Sisters Saloon Karaoke Night 9 p.m. to midnight. Every Thursday, no cover! For additional information call 541-549-7427 or go to sistersaloon.net.

SEPT 20 FRI
Paulina Springs Books Author Presentation with Norma Holmes 6:30 p.m. The author will present from her art book, "Land Escapes." For more info call 541-549-0866 or go to paulinasprings.com.

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