

John Chen – “Piano Solo” – concert review

Sunday 27th July – 7pm Space Baycourt.

How special to welcome again to Tauranga, Malaysian born New Zealand concert pianist John Chen performing for Tauranga Musica.

In 2004 Chen became the youngest ever winner of the Sydney International Piano Competition at the age of 18. Chen, who now resides in Uganda, studied and gained his Doctorate of Musical Art at Auckland University with Rae de Lisle before further study abroad and enjoying an extensive career as a soloist and chamber musician.

John chose five French composers whose works dated from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries.

Poulenc (1899–1963) “Three Novelette’s”. Poulenc’s piano music is characterised by almost pastoral melodic simplicity often interrupted by rude dissonance, often playful and witty.

Henri Duparc (1848–1933) “Four Melodies”. Duparc studied under Cesar Franck. Inclined to over self-criticism, Duparc destroyed many of his compositions resulting in a limited legacy of his music. The Four Melodies were composed in the first place as songs and were recently transcribed for piano solo by John Chen. These four transcriptions capture the sensitivity of the songs.

Cesar Franck (1822–1890) “Prelude, Chorale and Fugue”. This composition is regarded as an important work in the Romantic repertoire for piano. It is technically demanding and delivers emotional impact especially in the Chorale.

Gabriel Faure (1845–1924) “Theme and Variations”. This is Faure’s largest work for piano, the theme being presented in the style of a solemn march.

Camille Saint Saens (1835–1921) “Six Etudes”. Saint Saens composed extensively for piano and these etudes demand a high degree of technical ability.

John Chen is a gifted pianist and musician who has invested in years of study and practice which in his performance on Sunday evening paid great tribute to the five French composers represented, in a spectacular display of musicianship.

Chen’s technical proficiency was brilliant with finger dexterity executing fast and intricate chromatic passages in thirds for example, with fluency and apparent ease. There was the widest range of dynamics from thin delicate softness to the most the Steinway Grand was capable of giving.

I will always remember this concert by John Chen. I so hope you return to Tauranga again for another concert.

Tauranga Musica’s next concert is quite a contrast to John’s concert and features Saxcess – New Zealand’s premier saxophone group – joined by the magnificent percussionist Jeremy Fitzsimons on Sunday 24 August in Baycourt’s X Space.

Christine Leaf

29th July 2025

