

# LARA DOWNES

## Pianist

### Teacher's Guide

Dear Teachers:

We hope you will find this Teacher's Guide helpful in preparing your students for what they will see and hear at the lecture demonstration by pianist Lara Downes. The Guide provides background information on the artist and her instrument, a glossary of musical terms that may be used in the presentation, and some rules about concert etiquette to help your students enjoy the performance.

Ms. Downes' presentation, which is specially designed for student audiences, will feature a range of classical music for solo piano, and will profile this charismatic and communicative young American pianist, whom critics acclaim for her "delightful mix of musicianship and showmanship".



## ARTIST PROFILE: LARA DOWNES

Steinway Concert Artist Lara Downes has attracted attention as one of the most exciting and communicative young pianists of today's generation, cited by critics for her "breathtaking virtuosity" and called "a most delightful artist, with a unique blend of musicianship and showmanship" by National Public Radio.

Lara was born in San Francisco and began studying the piano at age 4. She made her public debut at age 6. At age 7 she composed an opera based on Charlotte's Web, which was performed at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Lara studied in Northern California until her early teens, and then moved with her mother and her two sisters, a cellist and a pianist, to Europe, where she studied in Vienna with Hans Graf and in Basel with Rudolph Buchbinder.

Since making noteworthy concert debuts at Queen Elizabeth Hall London, the Vienna Konzerthaus and Carnegie Hall, Lara has performed throughout Europe and the United States, winning over audiences at some of the world's most prestigious concert venues. Recent appearances have included concerts at the Kennedy Center, San Francisco Performances, the University of Vermont Lane Series, the American Academy in Rome, the El Paso Pro Musica Festival, and the Festival International de Musica in Costa Rica. Other highlights include performances at the Edgewise Festival in California with the Kronos Quartet and

Philip Glass, and the world premiere at New York's Lincoln Center of a solo concert work written for her by legendary jazz composer Benny Golson.

Ms. Downes' chamber music appearances have included collaborations with the Alexander String Quartet, the Miami String Quartet, cellist Zuill Bailey, violinist Lara St. John, and violinist Nicholas Kitchen. Commissions and premieres of new works for Lara include composers Aaron Jay Kernis, David Sanford, Eve Beglarian, Benny Golson, Dan Coleman, Jonathan Russell, and Laurie San Martin.

Ms. Downes has been heard on National Public Radio's *Performance Today*, WNYC's *New Sounds*, and WBGO's *Jazz Set*, and she will be featured in an upcoming documentary produced by WQXR.

Ms. Downes is currently Artist in Residence at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts at the University of California at Davis.

Ms. Downes' busy performance career is strongly impacted by her commitment to expanding and developing new audiences for the arts. She is the Founder and President of the 88 KEYS® Foundation, a non-profit organization that fosters opportunities for music experiences and learning in America's public schools by providing pianos and music education programming in K-12 classrooms. Lara is also the Founder and Artistic Director of the Rising Stars of California program, a statewide initiative that showcases California's most gifted young musicians in main-stage concerts and community outreach performances.

In addition to the excitement Ms. Downes brings to the concert stage, her commercial recordings have been met with tremendous critical and popular acclaim. Her debut CD, *Invitation to the Dance*, was called "a magical little recording" by NPR, and her CD *American Ballads* was ranked by Amazon.com among the four best recordings of American music ever made.

Lara Downes is a Steinway Artist.

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## THE PIANO

The piano, or pianoforte, is a musical instrument whose sound is produced by vibrating strings struck by felt hammers that are controlled from a keyboard. The first piano was made c.1709 by Bartolomeo Cristofori (1655–1731), a Florentine maker of harpsichords, who called his instrument *gravicembalo col piano e forte*. (One of the two existing Cristofori pianos is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y.C.) It differed from the harpsichord in that by varying the touch one could vary the volume and duration of tone. This expressive quality was shared by the clavichord, but the latter was far more delicate in tone. During the 18th century, changes in musical taste gradually favored the piano's greater volume and expressiveness, and the instrument had largely supplanted the harpsichord and clavichord by 1800.

Bach, Mozart, Haydn, and Clementi were the first major composers to write for

the piano. The main body of its enormous literature, from the 19th century, includes the works of Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Franck, Tchaikovsky, and Liszt. Debussy and Ravel used the special effects peculiar to the piano in highly original ways. In the 20th century, some composers, notably Bartók, have emphasized the instrument's percussive qualities.

The piano was originally built in the shape of a harpsichord, and this style, the grand piano, has always been the standard form. It was greatly improved by the 19th century innovation of an iron framework, best applied by the Steinways of New York City. The square piano, with strings parallel to the keys, was the most popular domestic piano until the early 19th century perfection, in Philadelphia, of the upright piano. The English piano maker John Broadwood (1732–1812) was the first to develop the present heavier, more sonorous instrument. In 1810 the double-action striking mechanism, which permits rapid repetition of a tone, was perfected.

In the late 19th century, a mechanical player piano was developed. A perforated paper roll was passed over a cylinder containing apertures connected to tubes that were in turn connected to the piano action. When a hole in the paper passed over an aperture, a current of air passed through a tube and caused the corresponding hammer to strike the string. The electric piano was developed in the 1930s. In the 1980s computer and compact disc technology made possible the invention of a “reproducing piano,” an instrument designed to recreate a pianist's playing, accurately capturing the nuances of the performance. Innovative developments of the 1990s include the Disklavier, a computerized grand piano that uses optical sensors to produce sound, and the two-lid piano, which opens from the top and bottom to better project sound.

# GLOSSARY OF MUSICAL TERMS

**Accelerando** - Getting gradually quicker.

**Accent** - An emphasis on a particular note.

**Accompaniment** – An accompaniment is an additional part for a performer of any kind that is less important than another, which it serves to support and enhance. The piano is often used to provide an accompaniment to a solo singer.

**Adagio** - Slow in tempo.

**Allegro** - Lively in style and tempo.

**Andante** - Walking speed, or medium tempo.

**Baroque Period** - The period c. 1600-1750.

**Beat** – The beat or pulse in a piece of music is the regular rhythmic pattern of the music. Each measure starts with a strong beat and ends with a weak beat. These are called the down-beat (strong, at the beginning of a measure) and the up-beat (weak, at the end of a measure).

**Classical Period** - The period c. 1770-1825.

**Chord** - The simultaneous sounding of two or more notes.

**Composer** – A person who writes music.

**Crescendo** - A dynamic marking that instructs the musician to get gradually louder.

**Diminuendo/Decrescendo** - A dynamic marking that instructs the musician to get gradually softer.

**Dynamics** - Degrees of loudness and softness. The musician is instructed to play softly when (s)he sees the Italian word *piano*. *Forte* signals the musician to play loudly. Medium loud or medium soft is marked by adding *mezzo* to the dynamic, such as *mezzo forte*.

**Harmony** - The simultaneous sounding of two or more notes to form chords, and the technique for building and arranging chords in a succession .

**Largo** - Broad and slow in tempo, dignified in style.

**Lento** - Slow in tempo.

**Measure** –A group of beats containing a primary accent and one or more secondary accents, indicated by the placement of bar lines on the staff.

**Melody** – A succession of musical tones. It represents the linear or horizontal aspect of music.

**Movement** - The primary, self-contained sections of a large composition, such as a sonata. Each movement usually has a separate tempo indication. Usually there is a silent pause between each movement.

**Presto** - Quick in tempo, very fast.

**Recital** – A performance by one or more performers.

**Rhythm** - Rhythm, an essential element in music in one way or another, is the arrangement of notes according to their relative duration and relative accentuation.

**Romantic Period** - The period c. 1825-1900.

**Soloist** - A musician who performs alone.

**Sonata** - An instrumental composition for piano or piano and another instrument, usually in several movements or sections.

**Suite** - A piece of instrumental music made up of several movements, often in dance-style.

**Tempo** - The speed at which a piece of music is performed.

**Theme** - The main succession of notes, or the subject of a piece of music.

**Variation** - Variation form involves the repetition of a theme in changed versions. It is possible to vary the melody, its rhythm and its harmony, or to add new musical elements.

## THINK ABOUT IT!

Talking with your teacher, friends, and family about a performance after attending a concert is part of the experience. When you share what you saw and felt you learn more about the performance. You can now compare ideas and ask questions and find out how to learn even more.

Here are some questions to think about:

- 1) What feelings did you have while you listened to the music and observed pianist Lara Downes during her visit?
- 2) Pretend you're a reporter for the *Seattle Times* newspaper. Write a review of the presentation for the *Arts* section. Describe the concert: music and musician, with as much detail as you can remember. Then discuss what you liked best about the performance and why.
- 3) What talent would you like to teach and demonstrate to students all over the world? Why and how would you do this?
- 4) What did you like best about the performance and why? Was the program different from what you expected? How?

# ATTENDING A CONCERT

## Rules for being a good audience member at a concert:

- **Refrain from talking:** The first and greatest rule. It also includes whispering during the music.
- **No singing, tapping fingers or feet:** The musicians don't need your help, and your neighbors need silence. Learn to tap your toes quietly inside your shoes– it's a good exercise for keeping your toes in shape!
- **Show your appreciation:** The artist is offering you her best work – show your appreciation by applauding at the appropriate times.
- **Please have nothing in your mouth, besides your teeth and tongue:** Chewing gum is annoying, even if you are chewing in time to the beat!
- **Don't wear watches with alarms, jangle your jewelry, or rip open your Velcro wallet:** If the composer wanted extra chimes and percussion, he/she could have written them into the music!
- **MOST IMPORTANT - Turn off the extra noise in your mind:** Who cares if you have lots of homework to finish or a big test tomorrow? Enjoy the music!
  - Observe the power, beauty, strangeness, and/or familiarity of the music.
  - Think about how the music makes you feel.
  - Ask yourself, "Does this remind me of anything in my own life?"
  - Create a storyline to the music if you like.
  - Find relationships among pieces or movements on the program.
  - Ask yourself "Where will the music go next?" Can you predict the direction the music will take, or is it ambiguous?
  - Drift! Let your imagination take you someplace new and unforgettable.