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**THE GREEN PAGES**  
20th Annual Summer  
Music Guide



Gregory Oh

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# EMBRACING FAILURE:

## In conversation with

# GREGORY OH

WENDALYN BARTLEY

In my previous *WholeNote* story, I wrote about the three-day Keyed-Up Festival, produced by Soundstreams, which ran from April 18-20. I was fortunate to attend two of the three concerts, both of which featured captivating displays of multiple keyboards on stage. The April 20 concert was particularly striking, with six grand pianos all lined up to perform works by composers such as Steve Reich, Terry Riley and André Ristic. One performer who navigated with remarkable ease amongst the black and white keys was pianist, music director and concert programmer Gregory Oh.

Among the many concerts taking place over the summer months, especially at various music festivals in Toronto and throughout Ontario, Gregory Oh's August 3 performance at Stratford Summer Music stood out to me for its challenging and provocative description. The performance, titled *Lessons in Failure*, combines spoken word and piano works in a courageous and humorous reveal of the embarrassing moments and disastrous failures he has experienced throughout his career. Not something many performers are eager to admit.

In a delightful and engaging interview, he filled me in on the original roots for this performance. While he was artist in residence with the Soulpepper Theatre Company in 2017, he was asked to create a short performance piece, and came up with a work centred around his experience of auditioning for the keyboard position at the Toronto Symphony. Despite the hundreds of hardworking hours preparing, he knew within the first 30 seconds of the audition he had lost it. What happened? He had chosen, confidently, to play Chopin's *Étude Op.10, No.5* known as the "Black Key Etude" without using the music, as he had been playing it all his life. At the end of the very first phrase, however, "my brain took a wrong turn," he said, as he found himself questioning whether the next note was a C natural or C flat. This humbling moment became the centrepiece of the Soulpepper performance, in which he first took on the role of storyteller before transitioning to piano performer to play the *Étude*. His honesty resulted in audiences being profoundly moved.

Oh believes this was because the topic of failure is not something that is usually addressed, especially in the world of classical music where the focus is more on heroism, success and perfection. But, he feels, "there is a correlation between creativity and failure, and they seem to go hand in hand. That's what I teach my students."



ADAM COISH

From that starting point, Oh began delving into other areas in his life where he has experienced failure, such as in relationships with teachers, family members, and even within the university curriculum. An invitation to perform at the Scotia Festival in Halifax served as a catalyst for beginning to create a long-form performance centred on failure, culminating in a full theatre production, which he is developing with the assistance of a dramaturge, stage director and designer.

Even though music and theatre are different art forms, there's a connection. "As much as we try to deny it and think of music as a pure form, playing a concert is also a piece of theatre. We walk out in a certain way and wear a costume." Collaborating with theatre artists this way will help him bridge the gap between theatre and music, to create a unified experience for the audience.

During *Lessons in Failure*, he will be playing pieces by Lizst, Bach, Brahms and of course the Chopin *Étude*. He's most excited about a piece by Thomas Wiggins, a blind American slave who during the 19th century was one

Blind Tom Wiggins - from the documentary *Blind Tom: slave piano prodigy* ("Into The Music," ABC National Radio, 2012)



of the best-known and successful performing pianists. Wiggins had an incredible capacity to hear a piece once and then play it back. The piece Oh will be performing is one Wiggins wrote at age 16, and, Oh told me, it's nothing like anything people have heard before. "This is the piece that seems to have the biggest impact on people," Oh says. Even though his show will only be performed on one night in Stratford, it will also be played at this year's Sound Symposium in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, and more performances are in the planning stages for the future, including a possible theatre run.

During our conversation, Oh also articulated his broader views about classical music in general, which he says "is all about barriers and elitism. The ideal of classical music is a perfect reproduction, like a photograph. I'm not sure that serves everybody. I'm not sure it's great for the audience, and I know it's not great for the artists." He admitted he prefers listening to student recitals rather than professional performances because "that's where anything can happen. There's a sense of wonder present. If we just allowed people to be imperfect, perhaps classical music would not only be more interesting but more welcoming."

### Summer Music in the Garden



Summer Music in the Garden's co-curator Rebecca Cuddy

This desire to create a welcoming environment is also behind his programming choices as ongoing curator of Harbourfront's Summer Music in the Garden. This year the programming has an additional dimension: the addition of Rebecca Cuddy as co-curator. "Rebecca and I are very different in a lot of ways, which is part of what makes our collaboration so fruitful," he says. "She is dynamically thoughtful, has brought a lot of great programming ideas, and her perspective has helped

me locate some of my blind spots. Sometimes programming can be a single vision, but Summer Music in the Garden is very much a team effort. Rebecca's fingerprints are all over this season, as are those of producer Miriam Schachter and Nathalie Bonjour."

Like the diverse food tents that were once part of the Harbourfront experience, the concerts provide the opportunity for first encounters with music that people may not have had exposure to before, while still feeling at home. "We'd rather show the audience something new



Kondo: Three Songs of the Elderberry Tree / Duo Holz

rather than something they know they like," he says. This is more than including pretty melodies or an easy-to-navigate facility, but rather "a place where you can be comfortable and be yourself. It's also about considering how Toronto can be represented and who better to focus on than the incredible artists that live here?"

The programming will span everything from "IndigiDivas" to Georgian polyphonic music, to African drumming and dancing, to the U of T percussion ensemble, gospel and country music, Arabic jazz, and western classical with the National Youth Orchestra. Two newly commissioned pieces will also be performed during the festival's season. Cellist Rachel Mercer, a past member of the piano quartet Ensemble Made in Canada, will premiere a new work by Halifax-based cellist and composer India Bailey who combines composed and improvised music. The other new commission at Summer Music in the Garden will be performed by Duo Holz, made up of Aysel Taghuzada (violin and viola) and Michael Murphy (percussion and shō) who have made the performing of new Canadian works part of their creative mandate.

### More Summer Music

Ian Cusson: It will be a busy summer season for composer Ian Cusson. Beginning on June 16, his new work for orchestra titled *Ikiru* will be premiered by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and in July, two of his chamber works will be featured in concerts at the Toronto Summer Music Festival. On July 15, the New Orford String quartet will premiere an as yet untitled new work, and on July 30, selections from his 2019 work *Le Récital des Anges* will be