



## **Alpin Hong: Classical for the 'iPod generation'**

**BY ANTHONY VIOLANTI**

**STAR-BANNER**

The classical pianist is a skater boy.

Alpin Hong is a 31-year-old self-described "normal dude" who can rip through a Beethoven piano concerto with the same passion as launching skateboard grinds or blasting through video games.

He's a long-haired Peter Pan mixed with Elvis, Mozart, Victor Borge and Billy Joel. This dude refuses to grow up and - when he wants - he can rock out.

"A lot of people think you go to a classical music concert to sit and be respectful; I think you want to have a good time," said Hong. And so it will be when Hong performs at the Marion Theatre Saturday night.

"The artist's job is to entertain and make the music relevant to the audiences of today," Hong added. "Elvis, Frank Sinatra and Jerry Lee Lewis and U2 understood there is a visual aspect to performing. I have a different avenue of communication than rock stars, but I want to reach the iPod generation."

Don't get the wrong idea. Hong didn't just walk out of garage band and onto the classical stage. His life, like his art, has been filled with challenge, heartbreak and accomplishment.

Hong was a child prodigy who was 3 when he began taking piano lessons; he debuted with a symphony orchestra at 10.

At age 12, everything changed. Both of his parents were killed in an automobile accident, and Hong, along with a younger brother, moved from Michigan to California.

"As a young person, I felt betrayed by the world," Hong said. "When my parents died it was a seminal moment, and my conception of the world changed. Art gives you a place to go when life isn't good."

Music, he said, saved his life.

That's a lesson Hong tries to teach young people today, as he plays for students.

## **Ed Keane** Associates

"If you start doing something you love when you are young, it can turn into magic," Hong said. "When you do what you love, it's amazing what it can mean to other people. It can change your life."

The piano became a refuge for Hong.

"As a teenager I was short and dorky, but I had a thing about piano," he said. "It gave me confidence."

Hong also had other interests. He studied medicine at UCLA so he could get a high-paying job and take care of his brother. "But," he said, "I was missing performance and music."

Eventually, after winning numerous piano competitions, Hong earned a master's degree in music from The Juilliard School. In 2005, he released his first self-titled CD and this year came out with one called "friendtaskmasterteacher." Both discs earned strong reviews.

In concert, Hong is "a pianistic firebrand, unfazed by the difficulties of new music," wrote Allan Kozinn of The New York Times. "Mr. Hong kept the voltage consistently high, but energy was not all he had to offer. His ideas about the works at hand were clear and persuasive, and as hard driven as his readings were, it was clear that he kept stylistic distinctions firmly in mind."

One critic described Hong as evoking "a kind of Beatlemania on stage," with his showmanship and dramatic flair. Fact is, Hong's theatrical approach is part of the way he sees classical-music performance.

"I have reverence and respect for the music, but I want to interact with the audience," said Hong, who hopes to compose a soundtrack for a video game. "One time I got a negative review for playing too loud. That's what I wanted to do - show the explosion, power and ferocity of the piece. I do go to extremes."

Make no mistake, he has the time of his life playing music for a living.

"Like most people in their 30s, I feel like I'm 16," he said. "People get old when they lose the ability to do what they love. I love what I do, and I feel like a kid."