

Muskingum University's Harsha Abeyaratne headed for Carnegie Hall

NEW CONCORD — The distance from Sri Lanka to New Concord, Ohio, is roughly 8,770 miles, but in some very important ways, Muskingum University's Dr. Harsha Abeyaratne has travelled a lot farther than that. On Friday, Dec. 14, at 8 p.m., he will perform a solo piano concert in the Weill Recital Hall at the legendary Carnegie Hall in New York City.

A native of Sri Lanka, Abeyaratne today is associate professor of music at Muskingum, having joined the faculty there in 2003. In that time, he has not only taught a full schedule of classes, he has worked, as he puts it, "to constantly raise the level of my musicianship — to constantly challenge myself."

The performance in Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall should do the trick. Not only is he putting himself in front of a completely new audience, and one that is likely to be very savvy musically, he is tackling some very tough compositions, featuring Robert Muczynski's Third Piano Sonata and Franz Liszt's Mephisto Waltz.

Liszt's music is Abeyaratne's favorite, but Muczynski is putting one's head in the lion's mouth, musically speaking. Described as one of our country's best composers, Muczynski's works have been performed around the world and have been featured at Lincoln Center, The Kennedy Center, Orchestra Hall in Chicago and Wigmore Hall in London.

As admirable as Abeyaratne's ambition is, the big question is: Why take the chance?

"This is really about taking the music, the playing, to the next level," Abeyaratne explained. "It's important to always challenge yourself and your skills as much as you can, and this represents a significant challenge."

It wouldn't be fair to say that this is Abeyaratne's first "significant challenge." In 2010, he travelled home to perform

as a soloist with the National Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka, and in 2005 he went to New York to perform in a concert with many other musicians to benefit the victims of the tsunami that ravaged his homeland.

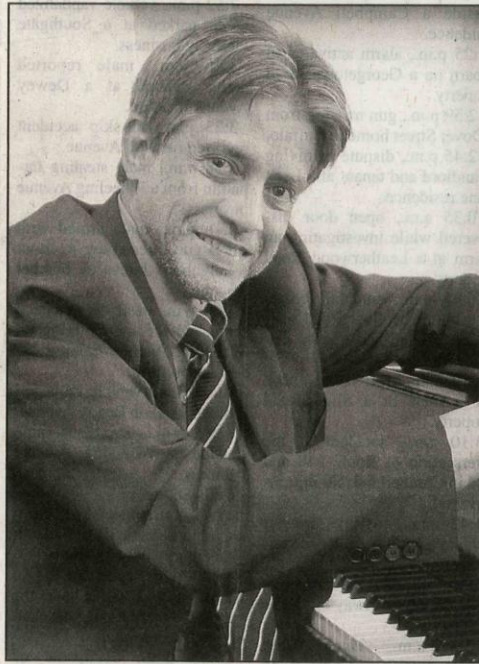
On top of that, Abeyaratne has given collaborative recitals with world-renowned clarinetist Rebecca Rischin and internationally-recognized jazz violinist Randy Sabien. Locally, he has performed Rhapsody in Blue with the Muskingum Valley Symphonic Winds and has appeared at The Ohio State University, Ohio University, Marshall University, and Jacksonville University.

What's surprising is that Abeyaratne didn't originally intend to pursue the life of music, and he made that decision very late in his life, by musical standards.

As a young boy in Sri Lanka, Abeyaratne began playing piano by ear at age four and started taking formal lessons at the age of six, which he continued until the age of 16. At that point in his life, though, his focus changed dramatically and he spent his time vigorously pursuing his studies in the sciences, with an eye toward a career in medicine or research. In fact, from age 16 to 19, he recalled, "I played casually, only for my own enjoyment, but I wasn't following any sort of disciplined path."

That casualness continued when he came to the United States and enrolled in Lewis and Clark College as a chemistry major. However, his music was becoming a bigger part of his life again, and he began taking lessons again with Anne Miller, a teacher who would eventually help him change the course of his life. In his senior year, at the age of 24, Miller told Abeyaratne that he had the talent and the discipline to make music his career.

"It was a scary decision," Abeyaratne said. "I was 24 years old and had a great deal



Dr. Harsha Abeyaratne in his studio at Muskingum University's Otto and Fran Walter Hall.

of time and money tied up in my education in chemistry, but I couldn't resist the pull of the music and the playing." So, he changed his major, which required him to stay at Lewis and Clark for two more years and, he said, "the rest is pretty much history."

Back in Sri Lanka, Abeyaratne said, "My parents were very supportive but concerned. They had always supported my music, and they were pleased

for me, but they knew I was taking a chance."

Since then, though, Abeyaratne said he has never looked back. After earning both a master's and doctoral degree and a two years on the faculty at Marshall University, he came to Muskingum in 2003, as he described it, "very happy to have a good assignment in a good place. I have a wonderful base here, and it's made all the difference in the world."

Now, in preparing for what he describes as "the biggest performance of my life,"

Abeyaratne keeps a rigorous and demanding rehearsal and practice schedule. He practices about four hours a day, and as his Dec. 14 debut in New York draws closer, that schedule will become even more demanding. Right now, he is practicing his entire performance once a day, but by early December he will be doing the whole concert twice a day.

"This is the culmination of so many years of playing and lessons and work that I want to be absolutely certain that I'm as prepared as I can be. I don't want to leave anything to chance," he said.

In addition to all of that rehearsal time, Abeyaratne has also performed this concert five times in front of a variety of audiences, including an Oct. 26 concert at Muskingum's Brown Chapel. "You can practice in the studio all you want," he said, "but there is no substitution for performing in front of a live audience. That's the best way to be as sure as you can be that you're ready."

He will arrive in New York on Thursday, the 13th, but won't have the use of Weill Recital Hall until Friday morning, the day of the concert. "I'll go," he said, "and do the performance in its entirety, perhaps more than once, but I'll also allow myself time to relax and rest. Then, after all the work and rehearsal and thought, when eight o'clock comes, the goal will be to simply to go out and play. It's really not that complicated when the time comes.

You just have to stop thinking about everything else and simply play."

Having made this long musical journey, building toward his solo debut in New York, Abeyaratne looks back on his childhood and his life at home as a major contributor to his career. His mother, Renee, who is now 87, was an accomplished pianist and piano teacher so, Abeyaratne recalled, "Music was always in the house, and my mother and father (Ernest, who is deceased), encouraged a love of all music. I think that's what has always driven me, deep inside."

His mother cannot attend the Carnegie Hall performance, Abeyaratne said, "but she'll be there. As a musician, I have a lot of goals for this concert, but the most personal goal is to make my mother proud."

Anyone interested in seeing Abeyaratne's concert can travel to New York on a bus being chartered by Muskingum's Department of Music. The cost, including a concert ticket, is \$120. The bus will leave from Muskingum's Brown Chapel on Thursday, Dec. 13, at 9 p.m., and arrive in New York the morning of the 14th. The day of the concert will allow time for sightseeing in the city, and the bus will leave New York immediately following Abeyaratne's concert, at roughly 10 p.m.

Seating on the bus is limited to 55 people, and approximately 20 seats are currently taken. To make a reservation, call the Muskingum University Department of Music at 826-8095.