



Arts

Pianist Abel Likes Romance And Fireworks

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What do you do when you've recorded 11 albums and sold double platinum on the last two, there are more than 10,000 people in your fan club, and your concerts sell out all over the world? Look for a new audience, of course.

That's just what Richard Abel is doing in a Western Canadian tour that brings him to the Orpheum on Sunday (July 25), when the flamboyant pianist opens for the Glenn Miller Orchestra. (Miller may have died back in 1944, but his *band* is still touring.) Although Abel has established himself as one of Quebec's biggest music stars and has made inroads across the globe, he is hardly known in English-speaking parts of this country.

"Everywhere I've played," he says, on the phone from a tour stop in Winnipeg, "they understand my music. I've played in Japan, China, Italy, Turkey. But this is the first time I've travelled across my own country."

It's also the first time Abel has done an interview in English.

"I am nearly 50 and I feel like I am starting over. I've played all the biggest halls in Quebec, but now I get the little dressing rooms, because I am the opening act!"

Sometimes compared to Liberace and Richard Clayderman for his virtuoso technique and MOR sensibilities, Abel says his own brand of showmanship is more organic than the former's ("I don't do costumes, furs, or even jewellery") and more energetic than the latter's easy-listening shtick.

"There are two Richard Abels: soft and romantic on the albums--they are for having dinner and relaxing; on-stage, though, there is another one, more passionate and unpredictable. I'm not a jazz pianist, but it gets pretty lively. I do 'Flight of the Bumblebee' as a boogie-woogie, throw in some Latin music, a bit of [Peter Ilich] Tchaikovsky, and [Aram] Khatchaturian's 'Sabre Dance'. It's a very versatile show but not pretentious. I have a good connection with the public wherever I go: it's just easy for me, for some reason."

Growing up middle-class in Montreal, Abel didn't actually start playing until the age of 14, by which time he was planning to be a doctor. At 20, he dropped out of pre-med to pursue music full-time. "I liked it so much, I decided I could live by my music. Although my father was not so happy."

It wasn't long before he found his crowd-pleasing blend of soft sounds and audio fireworks. "When you play romantic music, you





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have to give people what they want, but I also choose to play something I like. I think there is still some surprise. I am always working at it. You know, I met Liberace once, and he said, 'Richard, put some discipline in your life, and you will achieve a lot.' I don't drink and I don't smoke, but I am mad about water-skiing and crossword puzzles."

He also carries foreign-language tapes whenever he travels. Currently, he's working on his English, of course, and by his next visit to Vancouver, don't be surprised if Abel is tackling the crossword puzzle in the *New York Times*.

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