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Pianist Nicholas Roth is set to perform in Elkhart Friday.

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By **SCOTT WEISSER**
THE GOSHEN NEWS (<http://goshennews.com>)

ELKHART — Nicholas Roth played his first full piano recital at Elkhart's Ruthmere when he was 14 years old. Suffice it to say the performance went well.

Now an associate professor of piano at Drake University, Roth has performed across the United States and around the world. He's also played at Ruthmere many times since his debut, and the Elkhart native will return there for a show Friday.

Showtime is 7 p.m. for Roth's solo piano recital, the final performance in Ruthmere's Fall Piano Concert Series. The concert will feature pieces by Beethoven and Schumann and contemporary works by Jacob Ter Veldhuis and Mischa Zupko.

Roth started out playing drums and trumpet, and began playing piano when he was around 12 years

old.

“This interest just suddenly arose,” he recalled in a telephone interview with The Goshen News. Roth had friends who studied piano, and he would have them play passages on the keyboard and then imitate them on the instrument.

Roth began taking lessons, and Ray Barbour was his teacher in Elkhart for the first four years of his studies.

“He wanted to keep me interested,” Roth said of Barbour, whom he described as “just a wonderful human being.” “I was working on some really advanced literature right away.”

Roth’s 30-minute lesson a week gave way to an hour-long weekly lesson, and then two hours a week.

“Once I found the piano, I was smitten,” Roth said. “That’s what I did all through high school. It kept me out of trouble.”

“I was just voracious with my appetite for the music,” he later added. “Listening to as much as I could. Learning as much as I could.”

In addition to Barbour, Roth also has high praise for subsequent instructors Ralph Votapek, Elisso Virsaladze, Helmut Deutsch, Edward Auer, Emilio del Rosario and Michel Block. And he points out that music — and education — were central to his own household during his formative years.

Roth’s mother was a dance instructor for 40-plus years. His father was a chemistry teacher at Concord High School for close to 40 years. While supportive of his musical pursuits, his parents didn’t have to force him to practice. It was what he wanted to do.

“There were times when they asked me to stop because it was too late at night — ‘Dad needs to go to sleep,’” Roth recalled with a laugh.

During his senior year in high school, Roth practiced from 5:30 to 7:30 a.m. daily, and also at the close of the day.

“So I was really driven,” he said.

Ruthmere concert

Roth said that all the pieces at Friday’s Ruthmere showcase are representative of his interests. Beethoven is at the core.

“I studied with all these great Beethoven teachers,” he said. “That’s just been part of my life since the beginning.” Likewise, Schumann has always been a love of Roth’s.

The pianist describes “Shunt,” written by Roth’s friend Zupko, as one of the most difficult pieces he’s ever played — very tough and rhythmically complex.

The other contemporary piece was written by Dutch composer Ter Veldhuis. “The Body of Your

Dreams” is inspired by an infomercial touting a weight-loss and muscle-building product, Roth said. The piece is designed to point a finger at the false promises and sensationalism in advertising in American media.

Roth said the text of the ad is part of “Dreams,” along with acoustic piano jazz, funk and classical stylings.

What it takes

Roth has reaped no small success in his music career.

He’s appeared as a soloist with the St. Louis and Indianapolis symphonies, and won first prizes in the chamber music competition of Tortona and Pietra Ligure, Italy. In 2010, Yamaha Corporation of America selected Roth for its Artist in Education program, which recognizes excellence in performance and teaching.

In addition, the Indiana House of Representatives has honored Roth for his “contributions to the performing arts, his accomplishments as a concert pianist, and his inspiration to young musicians.”

“It’s been a nice run,” Roth said of his career thus far. But with the success comes a certain amount of failure.

“It’s a tough road,” he said of the musician’s life. “You just keep going, and playing. And a lot of things work out and several things don’t. But you’re doing what you love to do, and that’s what drives you.”

Roth’s advice to budding professional musicians? Love what they’re doing and be convinced it’s what they need to be doing.

“If we’re talking about being a professional musician, you have to just live it and breathe it,” Roth said. “There’s not another way.”

If you want to go

What: Nicholas Roth piano recital

Where: Ruthmere, 302 E. Beardsley, Elkhart

When: Friday at 7 p.m.

Cost: \$20, or \$10 for Ruthmere members. Call 574-264-0330 ext. 101 to reserve tickets.

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