

Returning to Cleveland, pianist Mahani Teave talks about building her island's first music school and fighting the climate crisis

by Jarrett Hoffman



If you had to pick one thing that symbolizes Mahani Teave — pianist, cultural ambassador, and environmental activist — an easy choice would be the Rapa Nui School of Music and the Arts, the first music school on that remote island 2,000 miles off the coast of mainland Chile, with a population of 8,000.

Co-founded by Teave, the school brings together the studies of classical music and of the traditional music of Rapa Nui, also known as Easter Island. It's also a symbol of conservationism, built out of recycled tires, bottles, and cans, and made

self-sustainable thanks to rainwater collectors and solar panels.

It says a lot that when Teave received the attention of just about the entire classical music world in 2021 with her debut album, *Rapa Nui Odyssey*, she found herself not so much overwhelmed by the attention, or basking in the glow of fame, but rather grateful for the opportunity to spread the word about her school and help keep it going — not an easy endeavor.

Now she is in the midst of a North American tour in which she is largely playing selections from that album — and the tour is bringing her back to Northeast Ohio, where she studied at the Cleveland Institute of Music.

On Sunday, October 22 at 2:00 pm at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium, the Tri-C Classical Piano Series will present Mahani Teave in a recital that includes music by Frédéric Chopin, Franz Liszt, and Sergei Rachmaninoff, as well as two works by Chilean composers: an arrangement by José Miguel Tobar of a Rapa Nui traditional, and selections from a new piece by Alejandro Arevalo that was commissioned for this tour. The concert is free, but [tickets](#) are required.

I reached Teave on Zoom and began by asking about those pieces from Tobar and Arevalo.

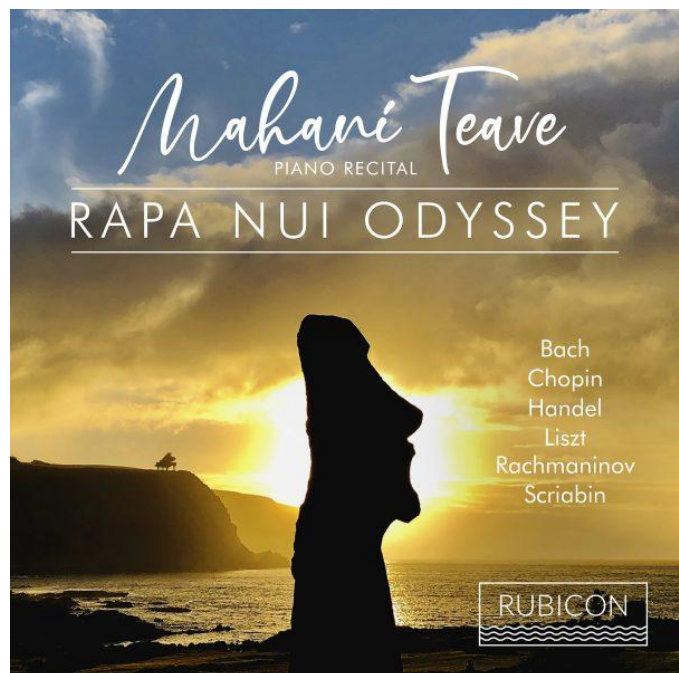
Mahani Teave: The arrangement is of an ancestral chant called *I hē a Hotumatu'a*. This is one of the most important chants of ours — almost like a “national anthem.” José Miguel Tobar made this beautiful arrangement where he varies the accompaniment alongside pretty much a literal quotation of the ancestral chant.

And Alejandro Arevalo's pieces are part of his *Suite Rapa Nui*. They're inspired by ancestral chants, and you can recognize them in places, but it's mostly his own creative material. “E te 'ua Matavai” is a chant for the rain. One of the important figures, like the priests of the older days, would call the rain, sort of to bless us with this water that was so needed for life on the island — we don't have rivers, and we don't have lakes.

The second piece of the suite is about the island's first king, Hotumatu'a, the most beloved king that my people have had. This is the story of his journey from the homeland called Hiva. Curiously, the Tobar piece is also for Hotumatu'a — basically the moment when he's calling to Hiva, to the spirits Kuihi and Kuaha to come and get him to return to his native land, and then basically take him to the next world.

Jarrett Hoffman: Chopin, Liszt, and Rachmaninoff make up the rest of your program, and I know they're also big presences on your debut album. What is it about their music that made you decide to feature them, both there and on the tour?

MT: It was a curious thing the way the album came about. I had always been a bit reluctant to record, just because CDs have to have a certain standard, and that requires editing and that whole process.



In previous years, it was like an existential thing for me where I really preferred concerts, with the real energy right there — the *people* energy. Maybe the result is not perfect, but it's alive, you know?

But I had already started to think that I would actually like to record. I have these pieces which have accompanied me throughout my life, and I wanted to put them on a CD.

It turned out that there was a cruise that went to the island, and the Fulton family [*the family of Seattle-based arts patron and instrument collector David Fulton*] was on this cruise. There was an event at the school, and I performed, and Mr. Fulton asked me, "Do you have a CD?" I said no, I don't. And he said, "How sad, because I really enjoyed your playing and I'd like to hear more of it." He wrote to me a couple months later saying, "Look, how about I finance the production of a CD, and the earnings can go to the school?"

So I found that that kind of gave purpose to making a CD. But it was within a few months that it was going to happen, so I chose a program of pieces that were really close to me, even though it meant a mix of different things. But for me, in a way, they still have a cohesion because they represent different moments of my life. So that's what I put on the CD — basically some old friends.

When this tour came about, it was basically going to be the CD tour, but we had to postpone because of COVID, and the island was locked down for a long time as well. Most of the places on the tour wanted to hear the CD, so that's mostly what the program is about.

JH: That album brought you a huge amount of attention — an "avalanche of international media profiles and broadcasts," as your press materials aptly describe it. There was even a [documentary](#) that was made about you. What was it like to have your life change so suddenly?

MT: Well, I've been dedicating the last ten years to bringing forth the project of the music school. And it's been such a struggle to keep it going. We're permanently having to apply for grants — sometimes we win, sometimes we don't. Donations — sometimes they come, sometimes they don't.

So when this avalanche of things came, I was actually really happy, less so for my sake than for the fact that it also gave lots of exposure to the school. It meant that more people would know about it, and philanthropists might be interested in helping. It also helped with donations coming in — maybe not so many or so big, but

something constant because people read about the school, or they see it in a documentary, or they bump into something related to me, and then they research a little and find out.

And I was also happy that people liked the CD. That made me very, very happy.

JH: Of course, this tour is bringing you back to Cleveland. I know that you studied at CIM, and that you won the CIM Concerto Competition back in the day as a student of Sergei Babayan. What's it like to be coming back?

MT: I have really great memories of Cleveland. It was amazing studying in those years with Sergei. I felt like I joined a family when I got into his studio, and that was very important for me because it was my first time away from home. The fact that he's such an amazing musician and so inspiring — that in itself was worth everything, but more so the fact that I could also join this family full of love. He was so caring, the classmates I had were so nice, and the Institute also was wonderful. I learned a lot and met lots of really nice people. In fact, I'm staying right now in San Francisco with a friend from CIM, from my first year. She's a violinist and one of my best friends.



JH: After your studies in Cleveland and at Hanns Eisler in Berlin, you decided to return to Rapa Nui and found the music school. Did it feel like there was a risk involved, that you would be putting your performing career on hold?

MT: For me, it was combining both things: continuing to give concerts, and being able to promote the school and give it life. In no moment did I think one would replace the other. And it was a gradual thing. In 2008 there were no pianos on the island — we managed to get those first two pianos there in 2011. And this dream that there would someday be a music school on the island slowly started to take shape.

When these pianos came, we thought, ‘Wow, now is the time, we have to make it happen.’ We formed an NGO, Toki, with some other Rapa Nui young people who had studied in different areas with the dream that they could help the island. It’s the concept of, ‘To help the world, you start with your home’ — not with something so big and abstract.

The music classes started in different places, but we needed to build something, so then came the fundraising — but we didn’t want to build just anything. We thought we should build something that contributes to our society: that might serve as inspiration, or to help propose solutions to the current environmental problems, like the lack of water, lack of energy, excess garbage.

So we built this completely self-sustainable “Earthship,” a concept which the architect Michael Reynolds created about 50 years ago. He came with his team and helped us in the first part of the building process. Another of the founders of Toki, Enrique Icka, donated his land, and he’s a construction engineer, so he also was the leader of the construction project.

Time-wise, it has been really demanding. But if we didn’t do it — if our small team didn’t spend those countless hours looking for donations, looking for instruments — then it wasn’t going to happen. We’re in the middle of nowhere, so it’s really hard just to get materials, or instruments, or even people to help fix instruments or tune them. So it’s been a big challenge, but very rewarding too, which is what keeps me going.

For many of the kids, music has been a life-changing experience. You see them come in with certain problems, and then you see how the music works through that, and how it gives them perspective on things, how it changes their emotional world and their relationships with the other kids. It’s powerful.

We still dream of having an endowment so that we can have a stable base. At this moment, it’s like, either we win these grants that we apply for, or simply the school will stop existing.



JH: It was beautiful to see the school through your NPR Tiny Desk [concert](#). But getting back to the tour, I know you have been using the opportunity to also talk about environmental issues.

MT: That's one of the big motivations for the tour. The climate crisis is sort of kept under the rug, so it's important to talk about these things, to try to create awareness. We need to start doing, each one of us, a small part — like not wasting so much energy with the AC, or with excessive heating in winter. It's okay to put on a sweater — you don't need to be wearing a tank top inside when it's minus something outside.

And recycling, or simply not generating so much garbage. On the island, we're in a vortex of garbage. The currents of different parts of the world come to our shores, so the beautiful white sand that I grew up with now is a beach of microplastics. And we don't generate that amount — we know where our garbage dump is. When you don't know where your garbage goes, you assume it sort of disappears or goes into some kind of limbo land. But it doesn't. The planet is not such a big place, and it's a contained place. There's no plan B, no *plan-et* B.

The island is a small place where you can see the things that are happening, so it creates awareness. Maybe I'm lucky because I get to see it and realize the urgency of things. This is not something where we have to wait for governments to change, because it'll take them a long time. Hopefully some companies can make changes a

bit faster. But it's urgent to make changes in our lives. These are uncomfortable changes, but this discomfort is necessary to make life possible.

We may think, 'Really, what difference do I make?' But small, plus small, plus small — actually adds up.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 18, 2023.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)