

Mirabelle Kajenjeri goes back to her roots for Piano Days program

by Stephanie Manning



The participants in the Cleveland International Piano Competition (CIPC) aren't just expected to perform well — they need to speak articulately about their music making, too. So when the jury sat down with the 2024 contestants for individual interviews, they asked: what's one project you would like to do?

"I said that it would be great to launch a program that features my different origins and musical influences," said Mirabelle Kajenjeri, who lives

in France and traces her heritage to Ukraine and Burundi. The team at Piano Cleveland remembered that — and this year, they invited her back to make that idea a reality.

On Thursday, July 24 at 7:30 pm, Kajenjeri will present "Resonating Roots: My Story Through Sound" as part of the 2025 Piano Days series. The concert in the Cleveland Institute of Music's Mixon Hall brings together pieces by Ukrainian and French composers, plus the pianist's improvisations on traditional Burundian songs. Tickets are available [online](#).

The 2024 CIPC Semi-Finalist spent her early childhood in Ukraine, so the first section of her recital focuses on that country's composers. "It's sad to say, but the war in Ukraine was a starting point for us musicians with Ukrainian origins to dig even deeper into the repertoire," Kajenjeri said. That's how she discovered Viktor Kosenko's *Études Op. 8, No. 8 in f-sharp minor* and Ihor Shamo's *Ukrainian Suite*.

Both pieces are "incredibly beautiful," she said, "and very easy for the audience, because they're from the beginning or middle of the 20th century — all Romantic and very sensitive music."

Next comes Frédéric Chopin's *Ballade No. 3 in A-flat*. "We moved to France when I was eight, so this piece represents the French influence in my life," she said. This selection is more lighthearted than some of Chopin's serious, melancholic pieces. "I see light, I see hope. I also hear nostalgia, of course."

That makes it a natural segue into a selection by Maurice Ravel, another huge influence on French music. The movement "Une barque sur l'océan" from *Miroirs* translates to "a boat on the ocean, which can represent my travel from Ukraine to France," she said. And Sergei Rachmaninoff's arrangement of Fritz Kreisler's *Liebesfreud*, originally for violin, is a nod to her violin training.

To showcase Burundian music, Kajenjeri wrote down some traditional and popular songs by ear. She will close the concert by improvising on the selections "Vyagira muribeza" and "Kubeza inyambo."

"This is a side of mine that I still have to discover, because it's a country I've never seen with my own eyes," she said. But she's planning on changing that soon, by going to East Africa and visiting Burundi herself.

Her involvement with Piano Days doesn't stop with her recital. On Friday, July 25 in the same venue, she will lead a free masterclass with local pianists that is open to the public. And on Wednesday, July 23, she will appear on the Wade Oval Wednesdays series with students and faculty from the Hryhory Kytasty Cleveland School of Bandura.

The pianist remembers seeing the bandura — a large folk instrument resembling a lute and a harp — during her childhood in Ukraine. "I never played it, but I think I sang with it, because when I was a kid, I sang in a choir. And we had an orchestra in the school with all national instruments."

Cleveland's strong connection to Ukrainian immigrant communities made this collaboration possible, despite being so far from home. "This concept is so, so special to me on a personal level," she said. "It's quite amazing that I get to bring this project to life in the United States. It's unreal."

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