clevelandclassical•com reprints

Piano Days:

Natalie Tenenbaum at the Hanna (Aug. 2)

Piano bars are popular again, declared the *New York Post* in 2022, and Northeast Ohio got in on the trend earlier this month courtesy of Piano Cleveland.

For the final concert of the presenter's annual Piano Days series on Saturday, Aug. 2, New York-based performer Natalie Tenenbaum took over Playhouse Square's intimate Hanna Theatre with a swanky soundtrack that ranged from Frédéric Chopin to Michael Jackson.

The evening, titled "The Piano // Re-Imagined," felt like a lounge set on steroids, combining genres to crowd-pleasing effect. The only thing missing was cocktail chatter — Tenenbaum held the audience rapt, recital-style, with her tremendous technique at the keyboard.

Today's classical musicians have to be able to do it all, and Tenenbaum makes this look easy. A 2007 graduate of The Juilliard School, she's since worked on Broadway, in television, and as an arranger for everyone from Lang Lang to Tina Fey. Versatility is what's required of a virtuoso in the 21st century, as Tenenbaum's 2024 album *Standard Repertoire, Vol. 1* attests.

Selections from that recording opened Saturday's performance, immersing listeners in a 20-minute introduction where the bass line from Jackson's "Beat It" led naturally to J.S. Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*. The mashup then took off with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee" (in the fiendish arrangement by Georges Cziffra) before concluding with Chopin's "Revolutionary" Etude.

Aside from a couple of brief pauses for applause, Tenenbaum played the entire initial sequence without break. Seated at a Steinway grand center stage, she toggled between

the piano keys and a surrounding electronic setup of synthesizers, looping pedals, microphone, and computer, crafting a seamless soundscape as both performer and producer.

The extra effects weren't always necessary, and Tenenbaum switched off the gadgets for the next few pieces, which provided plenty of their own pyrotechnics. She adapted Claude Debussy's brilliant *Reflets dans l'eau* as the basis for an improvisation, linking the score's impressionistic language to the moody world of jazz. Immediately returning to up-tempo, she busted out an original composition, *Stride Etude*, that dazzled with style and showmanship.

"We're going to continue with this acoustic moment," the pianist said, settling into the singer-songwriter portion of her program. With vocals shading between the smoky sound of Norah Jones and the sustained belt of Sara Bareilles, Tenenbaum shared her own tune, "2019," followed by a cover of Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game" that gently brought back the looping effects.

Added electronics didn't especially enhance *Lux Ex Umbra*, another of the pianist's recent compositions, which she premiered with orchestra last year and refashioned in order to play it solo. The Steinway alone proved more successful in conveying a symphonic sweep, as Tenenbaum demonstrated in an audacious finale — a suite of themes from *West Side Story* that she transformed into a spectacular showpiece.

This isn't to say that bigger is automatically better at the keys, and Tenenbaum suggested as much with her encore, a heartfelt rendition of Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind" that honored the pop legend — himself no stranger to piano bars.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com *Aug. 14, 2025*

Click here for a printable copy of this article

Return to the Front Page.