

With his history-making concert, Racine pianist Wael Farouk speaks to social inequities and is ready to reach higher

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Pianist Wael Farouk

Despite acing his entrance exams, Wael Farouk was rejected from Cairo Conservatory as a young pianist. Why? He was born ... [MORE](#)
(Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

Wael Farouk is a completionist.

The last time the pianist played with the New Philharmonic, in Glen Ellyn, he tackled all five Beethoven concerti in a single concert. Before that, he performed [the complete solo piano catalog of Sergei Rachmaninoff](#) and Johannes Brahms in a series of recitals at the schools at which he teaches, Roosevelt University's Chicago College of Performing Arts and Carthage College in Kenosha.

That makes Farouk's concert of Rachmaninoff's First, Second, and Third Concertos — also alongside the New Philharmonic, and streaming April 17 to June 15 — something of an outlier. Rachmaninoff, after all, wrote a fourth concerto, as well as the concerto-in-all-but-name "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini." But playing all five in one sitting comes out to more than three straight hours of music, with nothing to say of much-needed breaks for soloist, conductor, and orchestra. After consulting with music director [Kirk Muspratt](#), Farouk, 40, decided to perform "just" the first three concerti — a feat so unheard of that it may be the first time a pianist has played all three titanic works on one program.

And yet, while talking about the New Philharmonic concert from his home in Racine, Wisc., Farouk is still looking forward to the day he can play all five pieces in one sitting.



With a painting of Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff hanging in the background, Wael Farouk gives a piano lesson to Youmin Lee at Roosevelt University in Chicago in March 2014. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

“You could say I’m a Rachmaninoff advocate,” Farouk says with characteristic understatement, one of his two prized Rachmaninoff portraits glowering over his shoulder.

The feat is all the more mind-boggling for a musician like Farouk. Raised in Cairo, Egypt, he was born with detached lenses in his eyes, an uncommonly short stature and inflexible hands. (To this day, Farouk cannot form a fist or perform certain dexterous tasks, like opening an envelope.) Doctors prescribed thick glasses — Farouk remembers them constantly sliding down his nose — and



minimal physical activity. Rather than play outside with other children, Farouk glued himself to the keyboard, later spending as many as 16 hours a day practicing. At just 8 years old, he aced the Cairo Conservatory’s entrance exam with flying colors. Proctors tried to hold his family’s Coptic Christian faith against him, but after his father’s lobbying, Farouk was permitted to enroll, if begrudgingly.

“Living in Egypt in the ’80s and ’90s, it was a given that you would be discriminated against for being Christian. [Some instructors] failed me for no reason, and my foreign tours got kiboshed last-minute,” Farouk says. “Add that to two disabilities, and I was always labeled a certain way.”

By the time he was 13, Farouk studied piano in a graduate-level studio with Vselod Demidov, who inspired fear and awe in equal measure among his students. After one lesson, Demidov lent Farouk a cassette of Rachmaninoff’s third concerto, sometimes called “the Mount Everest” of the piano repertoire for its brutal technical demands.



Wael Farouk demonstrates his piano playing after giving a lesson at Roosevelt University in March 2014. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

Farouk was enchanted. He remembers “floating” back to his next lesson and begging to play it. Demidov, usually supportive of his precocious pupil, wouldn’t budge.

“He said it would completely destroy me, because, y’know, Rachmaninoff was six-four with massive hands,” Farouk recalls. Back then, Farouk was still short of his diminutive adult height (about 5 feet tall)

and full handspan (one octave, compared to Rachmaninoff’s octave and a half).

Farouk, however, wouldn't take no for an answer. Two and a half years later, the teenage pianist memorized the third piano concerto start to finish, as he did most repertoire due to his vision challenges. A few years after that, in 2000, Farouk gave the Egyptian premiere of the 1909 work. Afterward, his former teacher called him over the phone to extend his congratulations — and tell him that, secretly, he'd never doubted Farouk for a moment.

"Before (Demidov) returned to Russia, he told the rest of my studio, 'If only I had Wael's determination and his nature, I would have been Horowitz by now,'" Farouk says, still visibly moved by the memory. "I remember his words when things aren't going as well as I'd like, and they keep me going."

Farouk has played all three Rachmaninoff concerti several times, but never back-to-back. In the weeks leading up to the concert, he's played daily run-throughs of the program, sometimes twice over, in addition to spotwork. He even told Muspratt that he'd play both hourish-long Brahms piano concerti (sans orchestra, of course) after his Rachmaninoff rehearsals with the New Philharmonic — the No. 1 in D minor after the first run-through, the No. 2 in B-flat major after the second.

"I was serious about that," Farouk says. "It's like running a marathon: If you run 30 miles, then the 26 miles feel easier."



Pianist Wael Farouk performs with the New Philharmonic Orchestra for a taped concert at the College of DuPage's Belushi Performance Hall on April 8, 2021. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

Rehearsing at home, however, presents its own hurdles. There, Farouk balances personal practice with Zoom lessons across five time zones (including students in China, Nigeria, Egypt, and Ukraine) and parenting his two young children with his wife, Amy. The easygoing Farouk doesn't consider these duties "interruptions" — far from it — but the full plate certainly hones his focus just as much as hourslong practice sessions.

"The other day, my daughter came into my room and played this honky-tonk game on her tablet, volume at full blast, while I ran the second and third concertos," Farouk says. "I train by putting myself in, let's say, less-than-convenient scenarios."

None of this answers the million dollar question: *Why* play all three finger-tangling works on a single program? Is it the culmination of a lifelong fixation? Some variation on Everest mountaineer George Mallory's famous rejoinder ("because it's there")?

Yes and no. For Farouk, the real answer is both deeper and more personal. The concert's full title, "Climbing Beyond Everest: 3 Musical Mountains and 3 Systemic Injustices," refers to the interlocking evils of discrimination, oppression, and persecution — forces Farouk is all too familiar with, growing up as a religious minority in Egypt.

"It's exactly what the Statue of Liberty says: 'Give me your tired, your poor ...' And not just the physically tired, or the penniless poor. It's the tired of *that* — the tired of oppression, of persecution, of discrimination," Farouk says.

Farouk's vantage point may have been influenced by his past in Cairo, but with "Climbing Beyond Everest," he fixes his gaze on the U.S.'s future. Farouk has been particularly pained by the past four years of his seven as an American citizen, noting that the Carthage College campus where he teaches is just miles from where Jacob Blake was shot by a Kenosha police officer last August.

"Of course, I have masses of loving, supportive people I know here in the U.S., but things have gone in a similar route as they had for me growing up in Egypt," Farouk says. "I've observed that many would rather not speak against injustice, even though they're protected and it's their responsibility (to do so). It makes me realize that, no matter where you go, there are those who will fight and those who will oppress."



Amy Farouk helps her husband, pianist Wael Farouk, with his buttons as he get dressed for a performance at Roosevelt University's Ganz Hall in March 2014. (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

It may seem lofty to associate Rachmaninoff's most beloved works with ubiquitous systemic injustices. But Farouk views Rachmaninoff as someone who also peered from the margins, despite his present-day popularity — a staunch tonalist during the rise of post-tonalism, an uneasy émigré from tsarist Russia to the United States, a concert soloist who would have rather composed. Moreover, Rachmaninoff's depressive episodes nearly led him to abandon writing music more than once. If he had,

Farouk muses, the works on Saturday's program — the same music that once entranced a slight, beleaguered boy with Coke-bottle glasses — would never have been written.

Farouk's Olympic performance will probe that narrowly avoided absence most of all. Starting Saturday, the silence between the notes may be even louder than the Rachmaninoff's dense chords, as will the years of labor and miraculous circumstances which made Farouk's performance possible.

"These works crystallize struggle and triumph on a grand scale," Farouk says. "Not only do they give me clean air to breathe, and clean energy with which to recharge, but they give me a way of communicating with other people who have experienced the same thing. Without saying a single word, they know what I'm talking about."

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