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Pianist David Allen Wehr has two simultaneous new releases on the Connoisseur Society label.

keys to SUCCESS

Two pianists with Arkansas ties, Neil Rutman and David Allen Wehr, release CDs of classical music.

BY ERIC E. HARRISON
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Two Arkansas-based pianists — Neil Rutman and David Allen Wehr — have put out new compact discs on the classical music market. Both went to New York to do it.

Rutman, artist in residence at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, collaborated with acclaimed actor Tony Randall on a recording of piano music by 20th-century French composer Francis Poulenc on the Centaur label (CRC 2423).

Randall exuberantly narrates *The Story of Babar the Little Elephant*, which Rutman illustrates musically from the keyboard. Rutman fills out the recording to 53 minutes with eight *Nocturnes* and Poulenc's three-movement *Napoli Suite*.

Wehr, associate professor of music at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, has issued two recordings on the Connoisseur Society label: three Beethoven sonatas (CD 4227) and a collection of piano pieces by 20th-century American jazz/classical composer Joe Utterback (CD 4228).

Rutman and Randall recorded their piece in January 1999 in New York.

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"We did it separately, in one take," Rutman says. "We did a performance in the studio and took it that way."

The CD cover art depicts Rutman and Randall flanking an elephant named Amy, taken at the Big Apple Circus training grounds in upstate New York.

"We didn't have the elephant in the recording studio," Rutman says with a chuckle.

According to Rutman's liner notes, the composer was staying at the home of a friend and, while he was sketching drafts for his *Sonata* for cello and piano, his 4-year-old niece approached and said, "What you are playing is very boring. Why don't you play this?" and plopped onto the piano a copy of the recently published Jan de Brunhoff picture book *The Story of Babar the Little Elephant*."

Poulenc immediately began improvising at the keyboard to musically illustrate the story his niece brought him, later codifying his work into a musical score.

Meryl Streep and Peter Ustinov have recorded narrations to go with Jean Francaix's orchestration of Poulenc's piano piece.

However, "Tony Randall's narration is really impeccable," Rutman says proudly. "He was wonderful to work with.

"He's got a lot of energy for a man 76, 77 years old. The day we recorded this, we had a taping session at 1 p.m.; I put him in a limo at 3 so he could take his wife to the obstetrician, and that night he appeared in *The Sunshine Boys* on Broadway."

The two met through the Astral Foundation, a Philadelphia organization that teams new artists with established ones. The two have performed this piece widely, and also (with a second pianist) Camille Saint-Saens' *Carnival of the Animals*. But Rutman doesn't expect them to collaborate on another recording: "Just not much literature for piano

Rutman has recorded a couple of Mozart piano concertos with a London orchestra for ASV; the recording is still in print in Europe. "I receive a royalty check every few months," he says.

He's touring with a narration-and-music program on the lives of Robert and Clara Schumann; the program is about 80 percent music, and between pieces he quotes extracts from letters, journals and contemporary accounts. The tour brings him to Texarkana on Saturday and Searcy's Harding University on Feb. 3.

Rutman is now working on an all-Faure program for a future Centaur CD; he'll play some of the works in a concert April 30 at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock as part of the Artspree series.

"I haven't set a date for recording [the Faure pieces]," he says. "It'll be when I work them into my fingers more — maybe by the end of 2000."

LISTENING ROOM

Wehr has recorded works by Debussy, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, Griffes, Brahms, Chopin and Delius for Connoisseur Society, some solo and some with collaborators. His recording with pianist Cynthia

Raim of music for two pianos by Rachmaninoff was American Record Guide's 1998 Recording of the Year.

He has been a longtime champion of the music of Utterback.

"I actually went to school with him [at the University of Kansas]," Wehr says. "He's an incredibly talented jazz performer, and I'd been asking him for years to write something for me.

"About 10 years ago, he started writing these [miniatures] for me; they've been a big part of my repertoire."

Among the Utterback works Wehr has played in recent recitals that show up on the 66-minute album — the premiere recording of Utterback's classical output — are *Three Spirituals for Piano in Jazz Style*, *WaltzSong* and *Dr. Joe's Long-Fingered Ragtime Special*.

Other works on the CD include two *Jazz Bagatelles*, *Jazz Suite for Young Pianists*, *Concert Fantasy on George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess*, *Moods & Blues* and *Piano Jazz Starter Set*.

"He got his doctorate in classical piano," Wehr says. "I think you can hear this in his music."

Wehr didn't have to fight with executives of his label to record the seemingly obscure works — it was their idea.

"A producer heard me play some of these pieces in New York five years ago," Wehr says. He got so excited, Wehr explains, that the label signed Utterback himself to a recording contract; Utterback has since produced five jazz CDs for the label.

Wehr recorded the three Beethoven sonatas — the *"Moonlight"* in c-sharp minor, op.27, No. 2; the "Pathetique" in c minor, op.13; and the *"Hammerklavier"* in B-flat major, op.106 — about a month after he wrapped up a two-year, eight-recital cycle of all 32 Beethoven piano sonatas in April 1988 at OBU.

"I picked the most challenging sonata, the *'Hammerklavier,'* and paired it with two of the most popular," he says.

He's working with Raim — with whom he also recently collaborated on a recording of Brahms' *Hungarian Dances* and *Waltzes* for piano, four hands — on a recording of two-piano music by Debussy, which he expects to record in May. He's also planning a solo CD of music by Schumann, including the *Symphonic Etudes* and the *Humoreske*. The label usually releases his albums 12 to 18 months after he records them.

The Schumann disc will also include 10 of Carl Czerny's *Studies in the School of Finger Dexterity*, through which practically every piano student slogs at an early stage in his training.

"Someone thought somebody might want to hear a professional pianist play them," Wehr says. "They're asking several pianists to help out."