



*Definition-defying
pianist Robin
Spielberg plays
a single
Newburyport date*

ARTS & LEISURE

Soothing sounds

BY GARY FREEMAN

Snuggling by a warm fire on a wintry day ... Gazing at the first daffodils coming up in April ... Watching your child get on the school bus for the first time ... Robin Spielberg is the piano composer for the mood.

Cozy, comfy and content — all adjectives that describe the music of this creative composer who began her first career acting under blinding, hot stage lights, in front of critical audience's eyes, and under pressure to remember lines.

Spielberg changed her focus: she's emerged from her acting cocoon, metamorphosed, and is now spreading her wings on a piano tour over the United States. This year's itinerary includes three concerts in New England: two in Vermont in June and one at Nicholson Hall in Newburyport Friday, May 16.

Her following is loyal. Even when she was just testing the musical waters improvising at the piano for patrons in the

Crystal Fountain Room at Grand Hyatt, or the Plaza's Edwardian Room, or the Marriott Marquis' Clock Lounge in New York in 1987, she accrued compliment after compliment and business card after business card. She kept the 800 business cards, remembered the compliments, borrowed some money and made her first CD, *Heal of the Hand*. Success followed success and she has recently released her sixth CD, *In the Arms of the Wind*.

Hers is not the type of music that rouses the soul, or raises the cockles, or shakes the senses. It's not meant to. It seems to be an ever-present help in times of distress, or a relaxing aid to practice yoga, or a calming background to make unpleasant tasks a little more palatable, but ever so gently.

Spielberg's fan mail includes grateful acknowledgements of the solace her music brought to people frantically studying for the bar exam, recovering from surgery, walking through a garden dedicated to AIDS victims, and even giving birth.

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Her music evokes connotative words like healing, renewal and peace of mind. Nowadays, when car commercials, insurance ads and pre-planned funeral arrangements also aim to bring about peace of mind, Spielberg's music might be thought to be just mood music to placate our nervousness. She claims not to fall into the school of what she calls "wallpaper" music, although *Billboard Magazine* in an article in March this year associates her with some New Age pianists who have popularized "easy-listening." Such music does have its schools, which Spielberg admits aren't of much concern to her. "Music speaks to us when words fail," a statement she makes to demonstrate the variety of ways different types of music provide support for all our different journeys through life.

She believes art is no place for competition and "there's room for everyone." She certainly doesn't begrudge success to greats like Yanni, whose backdrop is the Acropolis reddened under tens of thousands of dollars worth of stage lights, or to John Tesh, who has moved from talking about entertainment, to creating it. But Spielberg's musical style is of similar stature, especially her arrangements with other instruments. You like that melody? Here it is again, but louder. It's a very popular, time-proven technique — witness Pachelbel's Canon in D. Peter Goodrich, vice president of Steinway and Sons, who has claimed Spielberg as a Steinway artist, identifies her music as a sort of common denominator that is popular across the boards: an "accessible style to people who might have very diverse musical tastes."

In *The Arms of the Wind*, a newly released CD that has yet to make a mark on the charts, images appear as programmatic themes that evoke comfortable, pleasant scenes: butterflies fluttering, birds dancing, kittens playing, kids swimming. It's all very nice ... and very similar. If not for the titles and descriptions of the pieces that Spielberg has written in the liner notes, one piece could certainly be confused with another. The opening motives of the pieces may elicit a particular setting, but the melodies' uniqueness is pretty short-lived. One could say that her pleasant images are universal, and by suggesting the title, she reinforces the images.

Spielberg's push toward a musical career was not just fired by her own talent, but her eventual dissatisfaction with the theater. She was the last

to note her own precociousness and thought that everyone had perfect pitch. Just giving the direction of pitches (up or down) in her elementary hearing test bored her, so she identified the actual pitches. The

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hearing specialist wasn't half as startled as NYNEX will be when Spielberg mimics the tones into a touch-tone telephone. She assumed her ability at the age of 7 to accompany her parents and sister at the piano as they all sang show tunes after dinner as less of the actions of a talented child, and more as just taking part in family activities.

"My mother would say I've been acting since I was 2," Spielberg jokes. So it wasn't surprising that she eventually pursued a serious acting career. But it developed serendipitously from her dislike of cold weather. Her parents thought that a liberal education was best. At Michigan State, to the surprise of her many competitors, she landed the part of Anne Frank. She knew about the audition only because she saw a poster inside an unfamiliar building she entered while she was escaping from the biting, winter cold. Encouraging professors urged her to relocate to New York where she enrolled at NYU. After graduating she and some classmates founded the Atlantic Theater Company. Her contacts were impressive: David Mamet, William Macy and Gregory Mosher all helped mold her career. And she made quite a name for herself, running through her courses at the theater in the evening and improvising at the piano in posh restaurants in the afternoons.

Gradually, however, the itch of discontent irritated her. Spielberg had convinced director Bill Macy (who was recently nominated for an Academy Award for his portrayal of the disaffected husband with the pure vowels in "Fargo") into letting her compose the music for Mamet's adaptation of Chekhov's "The Three Sisters," a play that Spielberg counts as one of her major acting endeavors. He agreed, and this was a way Spielberg reconciled her music with her acting. But it still wasn't enough. Her life became a little like that of the Chekhov's characters: an undercurrent of dissatisfaction permeates the play. The characters feel they were meant for better things. Honest work and purpose had to become their focus for the future

Spielberg heard one of George Winston's CDs in a store in 1982, when she was studying at NYU, and likened the music to her own style. She coupled that experience with her need to further her personal journey. Years later she contacted Steve Miller, a sound engineer who, coincidentally, has made CDs for Winston Miller and she made her first CD "Heal the Hand" in one afternoon. "This is what I should be doing," was finally her realization. At the same time she was marketing her CD, she was making decent money starring as the lead actress before a full house. But her musical background was being short-changed. When she single-handedly marketed 2,000 copies, she saw her new future unfold. As much a marketer as a composer, Spielberg put many miles on her car selling "Heal the Hand." She found small, specialty stores to carry it on consignment. If they didn't sell, she promised, she'd take the CDs back. But sell they did, and stores ordered more.

Feeling the need for some marketing help, she approached North Star Music, a Rhode Island label. Her first contacts with the company were unsuccessful. She was met with "It's your 10 bucks," when she offered to send them a copy of "Heal the Hand." But her tenacity paid off. North Star now considers her its top-selling performer. In an interview in *Billboard Magazine* in November 1996, Richard Waterman, president of North Star said, "In the last 24 months Robin has sold between 160,000 to 200,000 CDs, which is an incredible number for a new age concert pianist who's just breaking out." She has reached out to larger chains like The Nature Company, Borders, and Barnes and Noble. But she certainly has not lost the touch to control her own destiny; she books and arranges her own tours. "If someone can do as good a job as I do, they can have their 20 percent." And her music seems to be as popular live as it is on CD; she played at Carnegie Hall in March.

Offers are coming in from publishers who want to market her music in written form, which excites her. She's pleased that her music, current and alive, can be sold alongside that of "dead, male composers." Spielberg doesn't play from written music, however; her melodies are spun directly

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Robin Spielberg performs "An Evening of Solo Piano," Friday, May 16, at 8 p.m., at Nicholson Hall, 7 Harris Street, Newburyport. General Admission is \$15. Tickets are available by mail, Spobs Music Inc., Box 43158, Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043, or by calling 508-463-9246. State Street Candle and Mug, 1-5 State St., Newburyport, is also selling tickets.