

A CLASSICAL GO-GETTER

Jeffrey Biegel was in love with sound even before he could hear.

As a toddler, he would stare at the vibrating stereo cabinet in his family's Plainview home — but he wouldn't sing along. Instead of talking, he would grunt and point.

The pediatrician pooh-poohed his parents' concerns — even suggesting that their son's muteness could be psychological. “But Jeffrey needed his tonsils out,” his mother, Janet Biegel, 79, recalled, “and when we went to a specialist, his exact words were, ‘Does he talk?’”

The doctor said their 3-year-old didn't talk because he couldn't hear. After surgery on both ears, a new world was opened to the boy. When his older sister, Pamela, had piano lessons, “Jeffrey would listen and then play what he heard,” his mother explained. “He would play by ear . . . and that's how it all started.”

By “all,” she means a career as a concert pianist, performing for audiences across the globe in Tokyo and

Paris and closer to home in places like Dayton, Ohio. A career buoyed by teaching at Brooklyn College's Conservatory of Music and at home. A career forged by talent, hard work and an intense drive to succeed. A career that thrives because he has learned to market himself, creating the brand that is Jeffrey Biegel.

At a time when classical music sales pale in comparison to rock, pop, hip-hop, Latin, and country tunes, Biegel's wide-ranging repertoire may help explain how he's managed to create a performing career when many have not.

Biegel always stood out for his “fierce” drive to succeed, said David Dubal, an internationally known pianist, writer and teacher at Juilliard who hosts “The Piano Matters” on wwf.org. “Jeffrey has the kind of mind that could have done many things, and made a great deal of money, but he was always so in love with the piano and his craft, and I remember him telling me, ‘I vow to stay in music, I'll do

anything.’”

Anything includes taking early advantage of technology and social media. In 1997, he performed the first classical Internet concert from Steinway Hall in Manhattan. More recently, Biegel solicited arrangements for his latest CD, “A Steinway Christmas Album,” from musicians he met on Facebook. He's also raising money for projects through sites such as Kickstarter.com and by giving worldwide piano lessons via Skype.

Biegel, who turned 50 in May, lives in Lynbrook with his wife, Sharon, a piano teacher, and sons

“In the '90s, I started cold-calling orchestras and conductors, saying, ‘I'm the new kid on the block and I'd like to play in your series,’” said Biegel. He's appeared with the Boston Pops and Orchestre de la Suisse Romande in Geneva, at Lincoln Center and at Carnegie Hall, and at venues too numerous to list.

His next gig is local: Tomorrow, he'll give a full recital at Huntington's Cinema Arts Centre — pieces by Vivaldi, Gershwin, Chopin, Bach and more. (See box for details.)

Biegel has given his career continuous momentum by being a

for singer Andrea Bocelli, “Jeffrey suggested that if I ever wrote a piano concerto, he would love to perform it,” Sedaka said in a recent email interview.

In September, Biegel played Sedaka's “Manhattan Intermezzo” with Orchestra Kentucky in Bowling Green. “I thought he gave a bravura performance using his virtuoso pianistic abilities,” Sedaka said.

“Jeffrey has been extremely shrewd in the best sense of the word,” said Dubal, the pianist and wwf.org host. “He's done much better than his generation — in his generation, there are absolutely no concert pianists who are making

a living.” Dubal said that with few exceptions — such as 29-year-old Lang Lang, the Chinese-born rock star of classical pianists — “there may be 15 people now making a big living from the piano, and most of them are now nearing 70.”

Lang Lang aside, Biegel has his own admirers, including Jeanne Rosenberg, 93, of Valley Stream, a retired piano teacher who became a fan more than a quarter century ago after seeing him win a competition. “He makes the piano sing,” she said.

Another is Jud Newborn, special projects curator for the Cinema Arts Centre, who has known him for years. Newborn said he booked the pianist for tomorrow's concert because he wanted “to show him off . . . before he slips off again to concertize in Norway, Turkey or Peru.”

Last month, Biegel performed Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major at Brooklyn College's Conservatory of Music, accompanied by the school's orchestra.

Backstage afterward, student musicians circled Biegel in admiration. “It's such an honor to play with him,” said sophomore Melissa Danas, 20. “I've heard a lot of interpretations of this piece,” added Danas, who plays French horn, “but his interpretation was what my heart wants most.”



Craig, 19, who's studying to be a surgeon in Brooklyn College's B.A.-M.D. program, and Evan, 15, a Lynbrook High School sophomore who favors the drums.

In their spacious home is a music room with two Steinway concert grand pianos. “This one I've had since 1984,” Biegel said, caressing its keys. “It knows me better than anybody else.”

By age 15, Biegel had surpassed his local music teachers and began studying at The Juilliard School in Manhattan with famed pianist Adele Marcus. In 1985, he played at a dinner honoring conductor/composer Leonard Bernstein. In a letter of recommendation, Bernstein called the 24-year-old Biegel “a splendid musician and a brilliant performer.” That letter, now posted on Biegel's website (jeffreymbiegel.com), “helped launch the ship,” he said.

So did winning international competitions in Washington, D.C., Norway and Paris.

kind of matchmaker — persuading composers to write for him and then convincing multiple orchestras to commission the pieces. The first collaboration was in 2000, when he organized a consortium of 25 orchestras to commission “Millennium Fantasy for Piano and Orchestra” by Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, the first woman to receive a Pulitzer Prize in music. The most recent was “Prometheus,” a dramatic piece by another Pulitzer Prize winner, William Bolcom, for which Biegel signed up nine orchestras.

“Jeffrey is very entrepreneurial,” said Bolcom, who has also won the National Medal of Arts and multiple Grammys. “I've never known such a go-getter as Jeffrey in the piano world.”

Pop singer/composer Neil Sedaka met Biegel at a party and they discovered a common mentor — Sedaka also had studied to be a concert pianist with Adele Marcus. Later, at a party