

# Chicago

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CLASSICAL MUSIC

## **Beauty and the Beat**

**Jade Simmons** Part of Ravinia's Rising Stars series. February 29th at 8 p.m. \$20. Bennett-Gordon Hall, Ravinia Park, Lake Cook Road at Green Bay Road, Highland Park. 847-266-5100.

JADE SIMMONS'S LIFE IS AS MULTI-faceted as the rubies in the crown she almost won at the Miss America Pageant in 2000. "The hardest thing in the world was being the runner-up," says the 30-year-old pianist. "It would be great to have that crown on my mantel. But the experiences I've had instead? I could never put those on a mantel."

What Simmons, who was named Miss Illinois during her junior year at Northwestern, humbly calls "experiences" reads like an overachiever's dream: cofounding Northwestern's acclaimed student-run percussion and dance ensemble Boomshaka, earning a master's degree from Rice University's prestigious Shepherd School of Music, launching and running a concert series geared toward jump-starting the careers of other young pianists, speaking to students regularly about suicide prevention (a cause she embraced during her beauty queen days), being named one of *Ebony's* "30 young leaders under 30" in 2007, giving birth to her first baby, and—first, if not foremost—playing the piano. For Simmons, the latter is more than a pageant talent in the same way she's more than a pretty face: *Artforum* writer Susie Ibarra called her 2005 concert of works by the Cuban composer Tania León with Ursula Oppens one of the year's best musical events.

Simmons took up the piano at eight, along with the clarinet, the viola, and the drums. The piano stuck: "It had the most to say and gave me the most to work on," she explains. But she continues to march to the beat of an inner drummer and plans her recitals accordingly: "Rhythm is the neglected aspect of classical music, but people love to hear complex rhythms," she says. "It's a dream of mine to be an advocate for new music that can reach people this way, through rhythm." For her February concert at Ravinia, that means a program beginning with



works by John Corigliano—a former composer in residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra who values strong pulses and percussive tones—alongside repertoire giants such as Chopin, Barber, and Rachmaninoff. (Simmons will return to town March 30th and 31st for two dates with the Chicago Sinfonietta, for which she'll tackle once again the rhythmic complexities of a concerto by Tania León, who will also conduct.)

Oh, and one more accomplishment to add to that résumé: Simmons designs her own concert gowns. "I never found anything I liked on the rack, and pianists hate straps, which fall down, or sleeveless dresses, which can slip," she says. So she took inspiration from a Corigliano concerto and rendered the music in shades of red and orange matte jersey, in keeping with the composer's instruction to "play with fire." Listeners are likely to agree that she's hot stuff.

—KATHERINE MILLETT