

# Making beautiful music together

Laurentian music profs Yoko Hirota and Robert Lemay present an original work tonight

BY ROB O'FLANAGAN  
The Sudbury Star

Yoko Hirota and Robert Lemay make beautiful music together — music the world wants to hear.

The Sudbury couple collaborated on Oiseau de givre (Bird of Frost), a Lemay composition that will be played, with characteristic mastery, by Hirota during a Sudbury Symphony Orchestra concert Saturday night. Tickets for the Victor Sawa-conducted concert are scarce.

"We've been married for 13 years now," said Hirota, whose CD, The Piano Music of Arnold Schoenberg with 17 Fragments, was released last fall and showcases her passion and virtuosity.

"In the beginning, there might have been a little competition between us, but now we feed on each other's inspiration. We mingle ideas together and usually end up with a better project than we originally thought."

This was the case with

and wanted to change a few things. I didn't want to change it."

Over time, however, the couple — both professors in Laurentian University's music department — learned each other's musical language and became expert collaborators, a rarity for artistic couples.

"In this piano concerto, she changed a few little things and the suggestions she made sound better," he said. "Now, after 13 years, there is more communication and more sharing of our aesthetic. She drew me into her creative universe and I helped her discover many things as well."

The symphony has long wanted to perform a Lemay piece, but most of his compositions are too difficult for the group — which is made up mostly of amateur or student musicians. Oiseau de givre is more manageable.

This is Lemay's first project for a Sudbury-based group. He has made music for orchestras in France, Quebec, the United States and elsewhere.

"I was happy to finally be able to do this with the symphony," he said.

But the experience was bittersweet. As he began pondering the concerto, Huntington University announced it was closing the music department. It looked like Lemay's Sudbury piece might be his first and last.

"We thought we would have to quit the city, because we (wouldn't) have jobs," he said.

Around the same time, he



ROB O'FLANAGAN/THE SUDBURY STAR

Pianist Yoko Hirota practises the technically demanding solo in Oiseau de givre, a piece written for the Sudbury Symphony Orchestra by her husband, award-winning composer Robert Lemay.

Oiseau de givre, a one-movement concerto for piano and orchestra that tests Hirota's artistry, challenges the musicianship of symphony members and brings compelling sound to Lemay's intense poetic spirit.

Lemay, the 2003-04 winner of the prestigious Harelbeke Musikstadt composers' competition in Belgium, was commissioned by the symphony to write the piece. The project was funded by the Ontario Arts Council.

"I remember one of the first pieces I wrote for Yoko. It won't say that we fought, but it was a little bit difficult," said Lemay. "She worked on it

**IF YOU WANT TO GO**  
■ Tickets to the concert, which begins at 8 p.m. at Laurentian University's Fraser Auditorium, are \$25. For availability, call the Sudbury Symphony Orchestra at 673-1280.

read an Anne Hebert poem that talked about the pain of being stuck in a foreign city during the winter. He was struck by the line, "bird of frost with broken voice, like glass" and it became the recurring theme in Oiseau de givre.

The opening cord of the piece sounds like the dropping and scattering of coins or ball-bearings on a floor, he said, and the sound of breaking glass or ice is revisited throughout.

The composition, he said, captures some of the chill and harshness he felt when the music program was in jeopardy. Laurentian stepped in to save it.

Hirota was asked to describe her playing of the piece. She said it is acrobatic, technically complex, with a lot of notes.

"Any piano concerto is difficult for the pianist and even the orchestra," she said. "Robert knew when he wrote the piece that I was going to be the soloist, so he put all sorts of technical demands in the piano part. It's a big challenge for me and a lot of practice."

"It's fast and moves from the highest to the lowest range on the keyboard."