

Duo empowers audiences with gospel sounds

By SALI McSHERRY

When pianist-composers Sharon Brown Cheston and Drene Ivy join to play traditional hymns such as "Praise the Name of Jesus" and "How Great Thou Art," they develop rich layers of musical texture that stir the soul.

The Woodmere-based team, Ivy-Cheston Duo and their "Two Piano Praise" brought the house down at Bethel Church of Cleveland Heights earlier this summer. And they are in the midst of rehearsing for more concerts this coming year.

Dr. Cheston, who received her doctorate in music education from Case Western Reserve University, is worship director at Bethel Church. She serves on the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music and is owner of Tiamoyo Arts and Education. It is a "multi-dimensional company that provides inspiration and education products for children and adults the use of the musical arts and various educational methods, including live performances, workshops, presentations and published materials," she said. She also teaches Suzuki piano and theory.

Mr. Ivy, who began playing the piano at age 4 and began his formal training at 5, was playing classical compositions by Beethoven at the age of 8. He has released his third compact disc, "With These Hands," and will re-release his Christmas compact disc, "We Reverence Your Name."

He began recording at age 16 and by age 21 had performed on six albums. He has composed over 150 songs in a wide range of genres, including inspirational, gospel, classical, easy listening, jazz and Latin jazz.

Mr. Ivy's composition "Worship the King" was selected last year and presented at the Gospel Music Workshop of America Convention in Milwaukee. In 2004 he was guest clinician at the Edwin Hawkins and Walter Hawkins



Photo by Itamar Gat

Woodmere-based Pianist-composers Drene Ivy (left) and Sharon Brown Cheston performed for a packed house recently at Bethel Church.

Music and Arts Love Fellowship Conference. Most recently he was musical director for local recording artists at Playhouse Square's Ohio Theater.

Dr. Cheston said, "I'm Drene's biggest fan. I am so honored to play with him." She is a couple of years younger than Mr. Ivy and grew up in

the same area but didn't really know him. Mr. Ivy was a friend of her older brother's, she said, and she remembers that at a young age she was awestruck by his musical talent.

Last March, when she asked a former student if knew the answer to a musical question she had, he referred her to Mr. Ivy. She said that was the beginning of

their friendship, and within a week they had planned on working as a duo.

The two have developed playing arrangements for two piano, four hands and double piano concerto-orchestra venues.

In Dr. Cheston's one-room studio behind her house, where the pair rehearses, uplifting gospel music fills the neighborhood.

The innovative arrangements of traditional gospel music they play are mostly created by Mr. Ivy, she said. "Drene is a master at improvisation, and he can weave in and out of any style."

When they play together, seated at two grand pianos in a concert hall, it becomes an exercise in memory, she said. The arrangements are not written down.

"It's a conversation between our keyboards," Mr. Ivy said. The pair takes melodies that audience members are familiar with, which gives them something to hold on to, and then they take it to another level, full of embellishments that merge with the classical traditions.

Currently, they are working on arrangements for future concerts and hope to play freedom songs for Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations next winter. Dr. Cheston's commissioned piece "Freedom Medley" was premiered at the 2002 Martin Luther King Jr. celebration in Oberlin.

She also has composed music scores for productions at Playhouse Square, including "Chicken Little," which received the Cleveland Critics Circle Carolyn Reid Award for Educational Theater.

The duo is available for African-American history programs, gospel performances, lectures, commissioned compositions and concerts and more. For more information about the Ivy-Cheston Duo, call (216) 798-4488.