

This Sequim-based musician made the Billboard charts with help from a burning piano and dramatic YouTube videos

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By

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People are used to rock stars destroying musical instruments, but they don't expect it from classical pianists. So it's not surprising that Sequim-based composer/pianist/violinist Jennifer Thomas' latest YouTube music video, which features a piano in flames, had some traditionalists clutching their pearls.

"A lot of people thought we burned one of the \$80,000 Yamahas we played in the video and got very upset. But it was a very old, very broken piano that burned," says Thomas. "It was emotional for me, as well as the epic culmination of the entire theme of this album."

The album is "The Fire Within," Thomas' sixth release, and the theme was finding the internal strength to face personal challenges. Coproduced and orchestrated by Glen Gabriel, and including collaborations with Grammy-nominated cellist Tina Guo, vocalist Eurielle and pianist/composer Kimberly StarKey, "The Fire Within" debuted at No. 3 on the Billboard Classical and No. 2 on the Billboard Classical Crossover charts last October. A homecoming concert in Bellevue on Aug. 24 will wrap up a 20-city tour that was made possible, in part, by the dedicated fan base [Thomas has built on YouTube](#).

"Honestly, I didn't think the piano would burn that fast," says Thomas of the video for "The Fire Within" title track, cowritten with StarKey. In that video, images of the two pianists performing with an orchestra at Seattle's Paramount Theatre are intercut with another performance in which Thomas plays a burning piano in the California desert. The sacrificial piano, a veteran of previous outdoor filming adventures, burned to ash, providing the kind of dramatic imagery Thomas' 25,000 YouTube subscribers crave and garnering 57,000 views on her channel. Some of her other elaborately staged videos, featuring ballet dancers and outdoor settings like the forest or the beach, have topped half-a-million views.

It's not unheard of for classical musicians — especially in the crossover category — to find success online. Superstar violinist [Lindsey Stirling](#) has nearly 12 million YouTube subscribers. But Thomas never set out to become a YouTube star. "I have three boys, who are ages 11, 8 and 5. I started my YouTube channel when they were babies. Making videos was a means of performing without leaving the house," she says.

What started as an expedient substitute evolved into much more. "It was a whole new world of artistic release for me. I love that I can connect my music with visuals." For Thomas, video became another facet of her music, together with composing and

performing. “It’s also a great way for people to discover your music,” she says. As more people discovered her channel, and as she had more resources to devote to her art, the music videos grew in complexity. Now she works with a film team to create them.

“My music has a lot of classical elements. But there is also pop and cinematic,” says Thomas. Regardless of genre, Thomas has always approached her career from the perspective of an independent musician. “I’m very much a hands-on artist,” she says. On tour, she and her husband are stage managers, roadies, promoters and emcees, while their kids work the merch table. Since she can’t bring an orchestra on tour, Thomas remixes live-recorded orchestral tracks to give audiences the full orchestra sound from the album.

Video also allows her to connect with her audience in a way that more traditional classical artists don’t often do. On YouTube she posts behind-the-scenes stories and vlogs, giving fans a peek behind the curtain at life as an independent musician. She also generates extra content on crowdfunding platform [Patreon](#), where she answers questions and posts pictures and videos for supporters who pay \$5 or more per month; as of this writing, she has 85 patrons out of a goal of 150.

“Sometimes people have a misconception about piano music,” Thomas says. “The classical world is seen as having a lot of rules. I want to bring the audience more familiarity and a welcoming attitude.”

“Jennifer Thomas: The Fire Within,” 7 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 24; Resonance at SOMA Towers, 288 106th Ave. N.E., #203, Bellevue; \$30, \$120 VIP; jenniferthomasmusic.com

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