

Q&A with pianist Kirill Gerstein



© Marco Borggreve

Hester Lacey

‘I find it puzzling that people finish studying. One should be an eternal learner’

Kirill Gerstein, 39, has won many accolades for his piano playing, including the 2010 Gilmore Artist Award, presented every four years to an exceptional pianist. His repertoire spans Bach to Adès.

What was your childhood or earliest ambition?

To direct street traffic. I had it all worked out. It was going to be at the large crossroads not far from our house — I thought it would be very convenient for my mum to bring me sandwiches.

Private school or state school? University or straight into work?

From pre-school I went to music school in Voronezh [in Russia]. After I finished eighth grade, I had this very enticing offer from Berklee College of Music in Boston, the world’s foremost jazz school, to study on a full scholarship — the youngest pupil they’d had. Then Manhattan School of Music. When I was 20, I went to a small private school in Spain, Queen Sofia, as I wanted to study with the renowned professor Bashkirov. Then I went to the piano academy at Lake Como, then studied in Budapest. That was a long time studying, but I find it puzzling that people finish studying. I don’t mean one should be an eternal student in a school — but one should be an eternal learner.

Who was or still is your mentor?

If I had to single out one, it would be [pianist and professor] Ferenc Rados. He’s been a very impactful influence.

How physically fit are you?

My hands and arms are very, very fit. My brain hopefully as well. Generally, being a travelling musician, running through airports with a suitcase, as well as being a father and lifting children, has made me fitter.

Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?

Both are necessary and in the best circumstances they are very closely aligned. A really true ambition to do something well, let’s say play music, or make art, if it’s not in the cause of vanity, is a talent in itself.

How politically committed are you?

I’m intensely fascinated. As a spectacle of the human condition, politics is very instructive.

What would you like to own that you don’t currently possess?

More pianos. But I resist. A small statuette by Rodin would be marvellous! The things I’d like to possess truly are internal: more patience, more wisdom. But in both of those cases, one should be very careful what one wishes for.

What’s your biggest extravagance?

That in our world it is socially, culturally and economically possible for a musician to make sounds for the audience is the greatest extravagance that I can imagine. With all the problems we have, there is this thing that doesn’t serve any essential function other than giving aesthetic pleasure.

In what place are you happiest?

With my wife and children. And when I feel that I am learning and developing. That takes place often at the keyboard.

What ambitions do you still have?

To continue learning and developing. I’ll be

evastated when that stops.

What drives you on?

Curiosity. Some fundamental self-dissatisfaction. The feeling of learning and changing, not standing on one spot, gives me the encouragement to continue.

What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?

I’m far too busy living my life to tally it up.

What do you find most irritating in other people?

A lack of comprehension: the lack of will to try to understand others.

If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would he think?

He would recognise himself — but, nevertheless, he would be surprised.

Which object that you’ve lost do you wish you still had?

There are no objects I miss. I like my things but they’re just things.

What is the greatest challenge of our time?

Climate change and the destruction of our environment.

Do you believe in an afterlife?

Who knows? Literally. I’m not postponing anything in this life on the account of that possibility.

If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?

I am innumerosly satisfied.

Kirill Gerstein performs the UK premiere of Thomas Adès’s ‘Berceuse’ at Wigmore Hall, London, on February 24. His recording of Busoni’s Piano Concerto is out now on Myrios Classics; myrioscassics.com

K I R I L L
G E R S T E I N

