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Busoni, and all that jazz

From recording the world's longest piano concerto to premiering the newest, Kirill Gerstein is drawn to open-minded, explorative music-making, writes Jeremy Nicholas

As an international concert pianist, one measure of knowing that you have arrived is when a composer like Thomas Adès writes a piano concerto for you. Kirill Gerstein – Russian-born, American citizen, Berlin resident – is on a flying visit to London for another session with the composer to work on the concerto he will premiere in two months' time. We have met before – the last time was to discuss his world-premiere recording of the Urtext edition of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. Gerstein is convivial company; he loves to talk music, and on this occasion it's about Busoni, whose Piano Concerto is the subject of his latest recording on Myrios.

'I have always been attracted to the figure of Busoni, ever since I was a child,' he reveals. 'First, it's important not to put him in the "piano specialist" category. He is a much greater figure than that. You know there is a Russian connection? He taught in Moscow for two (apparently miserable) years. There's also the Boston

connection because, straight after Moscow, Busoni was invited to teach at the New England Conservatory in Boston.' True, but, as I remind the affable Gerstein, prior to his live recording in March 2017, the accompanying Boston Symphony Orchestra had never played the concerto in its then 136-year history. Nonetheless, Boston was the springboard for Busoni's very successful career in America. He was close to Arthur Nikisch and Karl Muck, both conductors of the Boston orchestra, and it was Muck who went on to conduct the premiere of Busoni's concerto in Berlin in 1904.

There is also a Finnish connection. 'Sakari [Oramo] feels very passionately about the work,' Gerstein enthuses, 'and besides the fact that he is the perfect choice as conductor, Busoni also taught in Helsinki. So for the Finns, Busoni is not part of the "piano specialist" club. They see him as a major foreign composer who became an adopted musical hero. And he ended up marrying a Finnish lady.'

The Busoni concerto is, on every level and in every aspect, an extraordinary creation. It is the longest piano concerto in the repertoire and, as Gerstein avers, also technically the most challenging by some distance. But – and here we both vigorously agree – it is not really a concerto. 'It is often

described as a "monster concerto", a "monumental concerto". No,' says Gerstein. 'It's a monumental symphony. In fact, in later years Busoni referred to it as his "Symphonie italienne". He stopped referring to it as a concerto. It's a sort of Italianate Mahler symphony with the world's most challenging piano part! I had a feeling when I was learning the concerto that there is not a page that comes for free. In every piece, especially if you know the style, there are pages where you can say to yourself "OK, well I know how this is made", but in the Busoni there are so many comments on Lisztian devices and so many elaborations and insider jokes where he seems to say, "OK, now your hand is used to this because you play Chopin and Liszt, but if I shift every third note to the left and every seventh note to the right, then it will be a figuration that will completely

'The Busoni Piano Concerto is a sort of Italianate Mahler symphony with the world's most challenging piano part!'

trick your existing habits." I wouldn't say it was an accompanying part. It's more the part of a commentator. Obviously, the commentator is Busoni. That's why you need a great orchestra and a symphonic conductor because it has to be shaped symphonically. It's not a concerto you can lead from the keyboard. With Rachmaninov's Third the piano makes the thing. In the Busoni, *everything* makes the thing.'

Some people say that the Piano Concerto is overwritten, that it is unnecessarily complicated for the effects Busoni wanted to realise. Gerstein doesn't agree. 'Ferenc Rados, a musician who was a big figure in my life and an amazing mentor, once asked me, when I was playing something, "Do you think the hippopotamus thinks he is too big?" This was a bit random. I said, "No." He asked, "Do you think he thinks he could be smaller?" Again, I said, "No." He said, "Exactly. The hippopotamus is just the size he is." So, yes, the Busoni is monstrous, it has this grandeur, but I enjoy it and it's a very beautiful musical experience. It's the kind of music Liszt would have written post-Wagner, had he lived longer. One other thing – it has this visionary quality, the illusion, the fog, the haze. Tom Adès says that Busoni is like a suitcase with a false bottom. There is always another layer.'

From starting to learn the Busoni concerto, it took Gerstein seven months on and off to be ready to give the first performance with orchestra. What was the audience response?

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'You need a great orchestra and a symphonic conductor because it has to be shaped symphonically': Gerstein and Sakari Oramo perform the Busoni in Boston in 2017

'Wonderful! Nobody said they would not come because it was a long concerto – we paired it with Sibelius's Third Symphony, which made sense because Busoni was a mentor to Sibelius – and the applause was long and enthusiastic. You can hear it on the recording. People knew they weren't just going to hear some piano concerto. They felt it was an event.'

I repeat to Gerstein something I found that he had said elsewhere: 'It is morally and aesthetically unacceptable to keep playing the same pieces on and on.' He laughs. 'Oh, I'm glad I said that because I believe it!' Currently, Gerstein has nearly 50 works for piano and orchestra in his active repertoire.

As you would expect, they include all five Beethoven concertos (plus the Triple Concerto), the three by Tchaikovsky, and all the Brahms, Mendelssohn and Liszt concertos. But the list also contains several shorter-than-concerto pieces, such as Schoenberg's *Ode to Napoleon* and Weber's *Konzertstück*.

Unusually, he enjoys pairing these in concert. For instance, he might couple Busoni's *Romanza e scherzoso* with Richard Strauss's *Burleske* or Liszt's *Totentanz* (the latter in a conflation of Busoni and Gerstein's own versions which yields an extra three minutes of music derived from an early draft of the work); he'll play Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (in Ferde Grofé's original jazz-band version) paired with Schoenberg's Piano Concerto or *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* by Rachmaninov. Imaginative. Different. Thinking outside the box. 'I think the conventional concert format of overture, concerto, symphony is a bit boring. Not every piece these composers wrote is the length of a concerto, and to turn up and just play *Konzertstück* is a bit short, so I like to pair things as they did in concerts of yesteryear.'

This month Gerstein adds the Adés concerto to his repertoire. In 2010 he was the recipient of a Gilmore Artist Award, and he used part of the \$300,000 prize to commission works from Timo Andres, Chick Corea, Alexander Goehr, Oliver Knussen and Brad Mehldau. Did he commission Adés in the same way? 'Well, not exactly – but it's a nice story. I've known Tom for quite a while, and in 2012 I was playing his excellent piece for piano and orchestra *In Seven Days*, paired, at

Tom's suggestion, with Prokofiev First Piano Concerto. This was in Boston, and we were in this room working on *In Seven Days*. Having won the Gilmore, I said to him, "I know I have to stand in a long line but I would like to get in line right now and hope that you will write a piece for me when my turn comes." Now, Tom is this genius, this grand person, but at the same time he has these moments of modesty and intimacy, and he said, rather shyly, "Does it have to be a solo piece?" And I said, "Tom, you are the composer. It can be whatever the hell you say it's going to be." Then he said, "I think I'd like to write a proper piano concerto." A few days later at Boston Symphony Hall, I was speaking to Tony Fogg, the great administrator of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and I said to him, "Tom, over there, says he wants to write a proper piano concerto." There followed the shortest commissioning conversation ever when Tony just said, "OK. We're commissioning it." And I rather naively said, "Well, I thought I might perhaps have a European partner and I have this Gilmore money..." And Tony kinda looked at me and said, "Yeah. We're commissioning it." Completed in 2018, it became the next major work Adés wrote after his opera *The Exterminating Angel*.

'I can tell you', Gerstein continues, 'and I don't think I am exaggerating – I don't think we have had such a piano concerto in the literature since Prokofiev and Ravel. I really think it's a masterpiece. It's quite concise. It does what a piano concerto should do – it has octaves, a cadenza, a slow movement of gravitas. He references these traditional models, but you never think he is doing something derivative. You never think, "This is just a pastiche, or an *bonnage* or an imitation."'

The premiere (on March 7) is played by the Boston Symphony Orchestra with the composer conducting. The pairing for the occasion – the concert opener – is the orchestral version of Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz* No 1. Again – different, unconventional, imaginative, and fired by this pianist's innate and insatiable curiosity. The European premiere of Adés's concerto, meanwhile, is to be performed by the Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig on April 25.

Gerstein was born in 1979 in Voronezh, in the south-western region of the former Soviet Union. How, I wonder, has his Jewish ancestry informed his music-making? 'First, I did not grow up with the religion. There was no chance to do this in the Soviet Union. It's much more an ethnic, cultural thing for me than a religious one. But for Jewish people through the millennia there has been this sense of being an outsider, which can make you feel all alone. In Russia, you were not Russian – you were Jewish. It was written in the Soviet passport. I feel a connection to Russian culture, to the Russian language, but I am not "Russian" Russian. I came to America to study. I feel very

comfortable in English. I feel quite comfortable within American society. But I am not American. I live in Germany, I speak German very comfortably. I teach in Germany. But I am not German. So there is that – this loneliness. But I think it gives you the chance to have an eclectic point of view and perhaps, sometimes, an independent one.'

Gerstein's father is a mathematician, his mother a musician who specialises in seeking ways to involve children in music, so Gerstein's earliest musical experiences were with her – beginning at the age of two, when he started playing the piano. Until he was 10, he was not at all sure about becoming a pianist. He was not one of those prodigies who practised relentlessly from the age of five. What he *was* sure about was his love of music. He also found out he could play by ear, something that, unusually, was encouraged,

both by his mother and by the music school for gifted children in Voronezh where he was studying. For Gerstein, jazz and improvising are not additions to his classical training and career but merely natural components of being a musician. He has no truck with the exclusive divisions of labour in the musical world where performers perform, teachers teach and people who improvise don't play from a score, and vice versa. 'Look at people like Liszt,' he says. 'They were great improvisers. And they didn't think that because they were the greatest performers of all time they shouldn't teach. No. Teaching was simply another way to interact with musical substance.'

And speaking of great performers who are also teachers, in 1991, when Gerstein was 11, he won first prize at the International Bach Competition in Gorzów, Poland, and then attended a jazz workshop in Puławy, also in Poland. The following year an extraordinary – and maybe unique – thing happened to him at a jazz festival in St Petersburg. By chance, he acted as an interpreter for the American jazz vibraphone player Gary Burton, who was also vice president of his alma mater, the Berkeley College of Music in Boston (at that time a mainly non-classical college but now merged with the Boston Conservatory). Burton asked Gerstein to send him a recording of his playing. The result was Gerstein moving to the US at 14 and becoming the youngest ever student to attend Berkeley.



Gerstein is constantly reinventing himself and thinking outside the box

As his focus turned towards the classical repertoire, Gerstein furthered his studies with Solomon Mikowsky in New York, Dmitri Bashkirov in Madrid and Ferenc Rados in Budapest. He rates the Hungarian Rados (teacher of András Schiff, Zoltán Kocsis and Dezső Ránki, among others) as the mentor who altered his views on everything: 'What I feel I have been able to do is reinvent myself several times. For instance, before I went to Bashkirov (I was 20) I thought I could play the piano – albeit with a degree of self-doubt. When I got to Madrid, I said, "Wow! There is so much to do." In 2001, I won first prize in the Arthur Rubinstein competition.

Then I played for Rados. Like my first encounter with Bashkirov, it was a bloodbath. Both men had completely destroyed me. Bashkirov had said, "If you play the piano like that you should perhaps consider whether this is what you really want to concentrate on." It hurt. And then Rados (this was at Prussia Cove) – he really took it apart. That hurt. It was my ego. But in both cases, I felt, "This hurts, but the information that they have and the things they are operating with are not within my reach." I wanted to learn what these people were busy with. So at 25 I began to ask questions I'd never asked before. And if you ask an amazing mentor questions, you get great answers. So that was another reinvention. The most

'I am not "Russian" Russian. I am not American. I am not German. But that allows you to have an eclectic point of view'

important thing for me is to continue changing. I am content when something doesn't yet work musically or otherwise. I think standing in one place is the most anxiety-inducing thing.'

On his last CD, a Gershwin celebration featuring the Piano Concerto and *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gerstein invited Burton to play on the only non-Gershwin-related track: an arrangement of the song 'Blame it on my youth' by the pianist Oscar Levant, friend of Gershwin and arguably his finest interpreter. 'I first heard it about the time I met Gary, in one of the versions by Keith Jarrett. I adored the tune before I knew what it was or who wrote it.' Connections. Relationships. Pairings. This is Gerstein's thing. 'Do you know it was Levant who commissioned the Schoenberg Piano Concerto? And that Gershwin paid for the recording of Schoenberg's Third String Quartet? And did you know there's this correspondence between Schoenberg and Busoni? Because he would be out of town for the official premiere of *Pierre Lanauire*, Busoni organised a private first performance of the work to be in his apartment in Berlin.'

We're back where we began – and it's time for Gerstein to fly home. But he's still keen to talk. 'Busoni is underappreciated as the thinking centre of the current and future of music at his time. I would compare him to James Joyce in literature. He had such a command of Western music and Western culture that he could reference it.' It's hardly surprising that a musician who combines a razor-sharp intellect with music-making from the heart should have such a strong connection with Busoni. **©**

► Read Gramophone's review of Gerstein's Busoni Piano Concerto on page 37

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