

Thomas Adès and Kirill Gerstein interview: 'Overpraise is not particularly helpful'

By Ben Lawrence



Thomas Adès and Kirill Gerstein CREDIT: MARCO BORGGREVE

An audience with Thomas Adès and Kirill Gerstein might seem intimidating. Adès – freely regarded as the greatest British composer of his generation, and the Russian-born Gerstein – the most versatile of piano virtuosos – are a musical power couple whose long-term collaboration can be witnessed tonight in the UK premiere of Adès's Piano Concerto at the South Bank. Actually, the reality of meeting them results in a sort of sparky but undaunting intellectualism. Adès wrote the piece specifically for Gerstein which, of course, prompts me to ask whether he is his muse. Adès lets out a hearty laugh. "We shall have you painted in oil, Kirill," he says silkily.

In fact, the relationship is clearly collaborative, with Gerstein's ability to bridge ancient and modern perfectly complementing this piece, which although full of dazzling drama is rooted in traditionalism. "It is fantastic because I know that Kirill is going to play differently every night. But it is always a blisteringly accurate performance. With a concerto of this type there is always a latitude for freedom. "I mean, it is always my piece, but there is something in the sinews and the muscles of the music which is alive, and I think it changes in Kirill's hands."

A work by Adès always causes ripples of excitement and when the Piano Concerto premiered in Boston, Gerstein says that "it recaptured the 18th and 19th-century buzz from concert life which is now missing. The excitement came from what was being played rather than who was playing it. Pieces are incredible creatures, they are the most interesting thing."

If this sounds rather self-deprecating of Gerstein (who turns 40 today), it also makes you sad that there are not more new classical works which have the same effect. We know that premieres of new pieces are often *dernieres*, too (think of all those promising Proms commissions that disappear into the ether). Says Gerstein: "Often you have this nice thing which is 10-minutes long and doesn't offend anyone. But in this case the Boston Symphony Orchestra commissioned it. Even before we had performed it, people said 'we want this piece'. We are now up to 40 performances and so there is optimism. It shows there is a hunger to perform something new."

For Adès, 48, this must be particularly heartening. Having composed his first opus, *Five Eliot Landscapes*, at the age of 19, he went on to have a retrospective at the Barbican when he was only 34. One wonders if that early success was rather daunting, prompting a fear of peaking too soon perhaps. He sees it differently.

"That was so silly. And what is odd is that as you get older the juvenilia applies to pieces which I wrote up to my 30s and so everything becomes a complete embarrassment. I might sometimes look at things I did when I was a student [he was awarded a double-starred first from Cambridge] and they are still occasionally played, and to be kind to myself I say that I can see that these are fumbling first steps towards the adult I have become." Inevitably he was labelled a wunderkind. He says now: "Overpraise is not particularly helpful. You have got to take it for what it is. I never felt like a wunderkind. At 18, I felt like a very old man. Now I feel like a baby!"

"One doesn't need labels for identification," interjects Gerstein. "No, and one can't allow oneself to be pinned down," adds Adès. "Because then people start expecting one thing or another so you have to just ignore it."

Gerstein believes that Stravinsky and Picasso had the right approach. "They were always recognisably themselves, but were also doing the unexpected." Certainly Gerstein's own career has resisted any level of predictability. Born in Russia, educated in America, now living in Germany, he is the living embodiment of a rootless musician. "I'm not quite Russian, not quite American, not quite European, not quite Jewish in the religious sense. I feel comfortable in many places."

Though he started on a conventional classical route, playing the piano from the age of three, it was an interest in jazz (fuelled by listening to his parents' record collection), that got him out of Russia and he won a scholarship to the Berklee College of Music in his mid-teens.

This early exposure to different forms set him on a course which has been anything but straight and narrow. "I think we can agree that classical music is a terrible term," he says. Boundaries in music, he believes, are limiting. "They are a desperate attempt to organise the vast disorder of the universe. If we draw lines in the sand we feel comfortable."

His fight against rigidity in the industry is two-fold. Improvisation is crucial, but also education. "I have been teaching since my 20s and it makes me a better musician. I am taken with this idea in martial arts where they say a student cannot progress beyond a certain level if they don't teach. Pretty much all of us understand the substance better if we help one another."

I wonder briefly if there is a teacher/pupil relationship between Adès and Gerstein, although it seems unlikely. Adès has described music in its purest form as like "sitting down with friends". Gerstein proffers the idea that "music is a science, but its goal is a pleasure."

"I try to think of things in a scientific way," says Adès. "And with Kirill you just work on it and find the perfect solution. I was so grateful for the collaboration" Gerstein retorts: "Actually, I am a test animal that talks back." An unorthodox relationship, then. But clearly it works.

Thomas Adès's Piano Concerto receives its UK premiere this evening at the Royal Festival Hall at 7.30pm. Tickets: southbankcentre.co.uk

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