

Preview

Tuesday Musical: a conversation with pianist Jeremy Denk

by Daniel Hautzinger



Jeremy Denk disproves the theory that all men are created equal. He is a classical pianist who was named *Musical America's* 2014 Instrumentalist of the Year, received a MacArthur Genius Grant in 2013, writes an engaging blog as well as having been published in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times Review of Books*, wrote a libretto for a new opera, has a contract to pen a memoir for Random House, and received two de-

grees upon graduating from Oberlin (young, no less), in chemistry and music. Is there anything he can't do? "I'm not good at washing the dishes," he said in a phone conversation. "Or many other real life things."

That self-deprecating humor underlies much of his work, and how he thinks about music. "It really is an important part of my worldview," he said. Take for example the program he will perform on Feb. 4 at EJ Thomas Hall in Akron, as part of the Tuesday Musical Concert Series. "In this program there is a strong obsession with humor." It features Mozart's Piano Sonata K. 533/494, three Ligeti etudes, and Schumann's *Dauids-bündlertänze* and *Carnaval*. "These are dances but also satires of dances, with an incredible sense of wit and mockery of the Philistines," he said of *Carnaval*. They're co-opting these really bourgeois forms, waltzes, and doing these subversive things to them and then coming up with these incredible masterpieces. In Ligeti there's a kind of devilish audacity. And Mozart: obviously, endless wit, elegant wit."

Denk's own wit takes on Mozart in Denk's libretto for Steven Stucky's upcoming opera buffa, *The Classical Style*. The work will premiere in June at California's Ojai Music Festival, of which Denk is Music Director for 2014. It takes its title from the late pianist and theorist Charles Rosen's esteemed book of the same name, and includes among its characters Rosen, Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, and "a nemesis of Charles, a dastardly musicologist who's always over-analyzing everything, even when he's dragged down to hell at the end."

The opera combines multiple sides of Denk: his humor, his joy in analysis as explored on his blog, and his writing. "I get a weird, nerdy thrill out of figuring out how to describe complex musical things in ways that people will understand. I love Charles's book, and I think it's full of the most incredible insights. But there's so much fun to be had at the ex-

pense of all this,” he said. Fittingly for such an irreverent work, it originated comically. “I brought up the idea as a joke, then [Ojai Artistic Director] Tom Morris took it seriously.” Approaching hallowed figures such as Mozart and Beethoven with some frivolity is essential to Denk. “The whole classical style is basically founded on the comic opera style, the surprise, the unexpected shifts, and all kinds of things that are derived from joke-telling,” he said. “It’s not that I think everything is trivial. I think that some of the most amazing music is about this mixture of the profound and the trivial. Or it’s incredibly elevated and yet at the same time it’s aware of the ironic under-possibilities around the elevated emotion.”

With all his recent immersion in classical period music, Denk is planning a recording to be titled *The Classical Style* (a sort of spinoff from the opera) focusing on Mozart and Haydn especially, as well as Beethoven, with “considerable video liner notes,” like the ones included on a DVD with his recent recording of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*. A recording of Bach and Stravinsky is also “hopefully” forthcoming, while his memoir has a deadline of August 2015.

And he now has the \$625,000 MacArthur grant to fund other projects. “I’ve been so consumed with playing and writing that I haven’t given myself enough space to think about what it is that I want to do with the MacArthur money, what are the freedoms that I want it to give me,” he said. “Maybe it will help to explore certain technological possibilities of what I’m doing that I haven’t had the time or energy to do before. I’m still puzzling that one out.”

Whatever he decides to do with the money, it’s sure to be fascinating, innovative, profound, and a riot, just like the music he loves.

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