

Cleveland Orchestra: a conversation with piano soloist Kirill Gerstein

by Mike Telin



This week the Cleveland Orchestra will kick off 2017 with what is arguably one of the most varied and interesting programs of the season. On Thursday, January 5 at 7:30 pm conductor James Gaffigan and pianist Kirill Gerstein return to Severance Hall for a

performance that will feature Arnold Schoenberg's *Piano Concerto* and the original, jazz band version George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*. The program will also include Bernard Herrmann's *Suite from Psycho* and Béla Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*. Performances continue through Saturday. Check [our concert listings](#) page for additional information.

"I think this is a fantastic program. It's one of my favorite combinations of pieces," Kirill Gerstein said during a recent telephone conversation, noting that although he had entertained the idea of pairing the two piano concertos for some time, James Gaffigan was the first conductor to pick up on the idea. "He liked it, and we've performed it a couple of times now," the pianist said. "It is logical to put the two together. I think there are many who love *Rhapsody in Blue* but may not have explored the Schoenberg *Piano Concerto*. So they will get a chance to hear both and find out that the Schoenberg is a much more user-friendly piece than perhaps they imagine."

If you're wondering what, if any common thread there is between Schoenberg's *Piano Concerto* and the *Rhapsody in Blue*, the answer is, Oscar Levant. "Hopefully there are some people in America who still remember him," Gerstein said. "Aside from his TV appearances, when most people think about Levant they remember him for the playing his friend George Gershwin's music,

particularly the Rhapsody. And there is that wonderful movie from 1945 about Gershwin also called *Rhapsody in Blue*, where Levant plays himself. So aside from Gershwin, Levant was the biggest exponent of the piece.

Oscar Levant also plays a prominent role in the history of the Schoenberg Concerto — not only did he study composition with Arnold Schoenberg at U.C.L.A., but Schoenberg offered him the position of being his teaching assistant, which Levant turned down. “What even fewer people know is that Levant thought that he would honor his composition teacher by commissioning a piano piece from him,” Gerstein said. “I think there was a misunderstanding of what was being commissioned because while Levant meant for it to be a short composition, Schoenberg understood the commission as a *carte blanche*, so he wrote the piano concerto, and charged Levant exorbitant sum of money.”

Levant’s refusal to pay for a full concerto led to a falling out with Schoenberg. Eventually he did pay for the commission, although he never performed the work. The concerto was premiered by Eduard Steuermann, another student of Schoenberg, on February 6, 1944 with the NBC Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Leopold Stokowski.

Gerstein said that there are even more arguments to be made for pairing the two concertos — one of which is that Gershwin and Schoenberg were very good friends and often played tennis together when they lived in California. “There’s a touching [sound recording](#) that Schoenberg made when Gershwin passed away where he speaks about his friend’s musical genius.”

SCHOENBERG: George Gershwin was one of these rare kind of musicians to whom music is not a matter of more or less ability. Music, to him, was the air he breathed, the food which nourished him, the drink that refreshed him. Music was what made him feel and music was the feeling he expressed. Directness of this kind is given only to great men. And there is no doubt that he was a great composer. What he has achieved was not only to the benefit of a national American music but also a contribution to the music of the whole world. In this meaning I want to express the deepest grief for the deplorable loss to music. But may I mention that I lose also a friend whose amiable personality was very dear to me.

Aside from the historical reasons to perform them together, Gerstein believes that when they are presented next to each other skeptical listeners can hear that Schoenberg is not a “scary” composer. “There’s a lot of dance in the concerto.

There're some waltzes, some gavottes, and some marches — really traditional musical references.”

Regarding the *Rhapsody in Blue*, Kirill Gerstein thinks that the original band version performed at its premiere in 1924 allows the work's jazzier side to come through. “You also hear some Klezmer elements, because this is the music Gershwin would have heard in the neighborhoods of Manhattan when he was growing up. So you hear the jazz, the Klezmer, and you hear his aspirations to write serious concert music. And this fusion of different elements is something that the band version makes much more apparent.”

George Gershwin, who improvised some of what he played at the premiere of *Rhapsody in Blue*, did not write out the solo piano part until after the performance. And Kirill Gerstein, himself an accomplished jazz musician, said that playing the solo part requires “finding a balance that's almost Mozart-like. It's not good if the pianist adds too many extra notes, or makes it extra jazzy. On the other hand, if you play just what's on the page without some additions, then to me that feels too strict, and too classical. So I try to look for a certain balance. I don't add massive extra cadenzas, and I don't deviate very far from Gershwin's score, but I wouldn't say that I only play what is on the page.”

Wrapping up our conversation, Gerstein said that the entire program brings up a pertinent subject: immigration and the absorption of new influences. “With the Herrmann, the Bartók, and the Schoenberg on the program you have the new immigrants from Europe who had been transplanted in the United States. And the Gershwin is not only a fusion of the jazz and the classical sides of the coin, but also the influences from his Russian immigrant parents. So I think the history of the movement of people, and the re-settlement and cross-pollination of culture are all very much represented in this program.”

Following Friday evening's concert, Kirill Gerstein will play a solo set in the Grand Foyer. His selections will be announced from the keyboard.

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