

**The Cleveland Orchestra:  
Kirill Gerstein talks about  
Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto**

by Mike Telin



“I’ve been looking forward to this concert,” pianist Kirill Gerstein said by telephone from his home in Berlin. “This was the piece with which I met The Cleveland Orchestra for the first time at Blossom, and it’s very nice to return with this wonderful concerto and to play it in

Severance Hall.”

On Thursday, November 1 at 7:30 pm, Gerstein will perform Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto with The Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of Matthias Pintscher. The concert also includes the complete ballet suite from Béla Bartók’s *The Wooden Prince*. The program will be repeated on Friday and Saturday at 8:00 pm. Tickets are available [online](#).

Gerstein called the concerto “amazing” and said that while it is famous for its melodic beauty and technical difficulty, its structural inventiveness is often overlooked. “It is incredibly virtuosic, beautiful for the ear, and exciting. But one of the difficulties is that the soloist plays the entire time. There’s also something about needing to play much of it wrapped in what I would call aristocratic elegance, so it’s not just brutal force. While you’re doing all of these challenging things, it still needs to sound elegant.”

The pianist said that while Rachmaninoff is noted for his opulent piano writing, his compositional craftsmanship is often underestimated. “One feature that is overlooked in this concerto is the famous first-movement cadenza. Not only does it show off the

virtuosic pianist, but what is striking is that that's where the recapitulation happens. So in that sense he's borrowing from the Mendelssohn *Violin Concerto* cadenza, and takes it a step further. You have this traditional sonata form, but when it comes time to restate the themes of the exposition, they are stated by the piano alone, both the first theme and the famous grand chords, and then the second theme. This is an original take on something that is very traditional. It is inventive composing that is on-par with everything else."

When asked how his interpretation of the concerto has evolved since he first performed it with the Orchestra, the pianist said that the differences between then and now are a result of the experiences he has had during those intervening years. "For example, having played extensively and then recorded the Liszt *Transcendental Etudes* changed me as a pianist. And playing Rachmaninoff's Fourth and then First Concertos changed my relationship with the Third."

Gerstein likened the experience of revisiting concertos that are "rich in substance" — he mentioned Brahms 2 and Beethoven 5 — to looking at a Rodin sculpture. "If you look from this or that angle, the light is different. For me, the piano or the acoustic is different. You notice different details and make slightly different decisions about how to chart the path of the piece at a particular time of the week and with particular partners. That's what keeps it interesting. These works act like a mirror to those who encounter them — although the piece officially stays the same, one's impression of it changes every time."

When asked about conductor Matthias Pintscher, the pianist said that they worked together for the first time last season in San Diego. "We played Bartók's Third Concerto and it was immediately a pleasant and interesting collaboration for me. There's something so healthy I find about a musician who is both a creator and a performer." (Pintscher's *Transir for flute and orchestra* will receive its U.S. premiere by Joshua Smith during next week's Cleveland Orchestra concerts)

Gerstein noted that while "divisions of labor" have developed during the past century — composers don't play and many don't conduct, and instrumentalists don't compose — he said it is "refreshing when somebody approaches music not first and foremost from a performer's viewpoint but from a composer's viewpoint. I think that people like Matthias or Thomas Adès or Olly Knussen, who suddenly passed away and was very close to The Cleveland Orchestra, bring that to their music-making. If you build houses yourself, when you visit one that somebody else built you look at it with a different eye."

In a 2017 [interview](#) with *The Cross-Eyed Pianist*, Gerstein named Severance Hall as one of his favorite concert venues. I was curious to know why. “First of all, it sounds wonderful,” he said. “But there’s something about it — subjectively, objectively, there is a sonority that comes out in Severance Hall. There’s something about this acoustic that has been populated by the incredible music-making of The Cleveland Orchestra that I find makes all of us try to play better. And I think that in some ways it makes the audience listen better. It’s a place where there is a celebrity to the sound that I think is very special and something that a number of us always look forward to. It’s the kind of thing that is present in Symphony Hall Boston, and a few of these select venues. It’s interesting because the sound of a great hall becomes part of the DNA of the orchestra whose home it is. And even when you hear these orchestras elsewhere on tour, they bring that aural memory with them.”

Are there any newer venues that have the same appeal? “It’s very different,” he said, adding that it’s like comparing an older piano to a newer one. “There are wonderful new pianos, but in some way, the esthetic is quite different from a piano from 1900. There’s a number of modern venues, but I find one has to separate them and say, from the new halls I like these, and from the older halls I like those.”

Gerstein is a person with eclectic tastes in music — so what is he listening to these days? He quickly said that he has been enjoying the Danish String Quartet’s latest recording of Nordic tunes, *Last Leaf*. He said the reissues of Horowitz recordings have been “rewarding listening,” and he has added Gabriel Kahane’s new recording *Book of Travelers* to his recent playlist. The pianist is also a fan of American jazz vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant. “She has a wonderful voice, and I like her new album *The Window* very much.”

All this talk about recordings leads to a discussion about the recording industry and the trumpeting of its demise. “There’s a tremendous number of recordings that are coming out,” he said, “and I think that technology has democratized it. Especially when you think of the number of interesting recordings that don’t come out on major labels.” Gerstein said that with today’s technology and a good engineer it is possible to make a recording that sounds “as good as anything anybody else puts out.”

However, he noted that there is a flip-side to this democratization. “There are a number of recordings that I find totally unnecessary and that contributes to the doom and gloom. When you put out something that nobody buys, it plays into the narrative. I think the problem continues to be curation — in this sea of information, how do we bring to the people the things that are interesting and worth attention? Because the traditional gatekeepers are no longer there. So, that’s something on the list of things to think about.”

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