

Virtu(al)oso Piano Competition: Questions for Arseniy Gusev

by Daniel Hathaway



Russian pianist Arseniy Gusev was born in St. Petersburg in 1998, where he studied both piano and composition at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

He came to the U.S. in 2018 to study at the Cleveland Institute of Music — piano with Sergei Babayan, and composition with Keith Fitch.

Gusev will play selections by Schönberg, Schubert, and J.S. Bach in Session 3 of Piano Cleveland's

virtual competition on Saturday, August 1, beginning at 7:00 pm. At his request, we sent him some questions by email, and received delightful and thoughtful responses.

The pandemic has upset everyone's lives. I hope your family in Russia is safe and well. How long has it been since you last saw them?

I am grateful for a chance to see and communicate with my family in my dreams. Even though we are in touch through email and social media, and it's been a lot of months since we saw each other in person, for me the most important bond which helps to keep the family together is to cherish each of the family members in my heart like a treasure. If they are doing the same, we have the most powerful connection despite any distance or time. I believe that many of my compositions would have never come to me if I had lost this connection with people who always live in my mind and my dreams.

How have you spent your time since the lockdown in March? Have you profited from the interruptions by beginning some new projects?

This time has been actually extremely productive! I immediately felt stimulated by the circumstances, being convinced that people need music more than ever in such difficult moments. Art has recently been reobtaining its half-forgotten religious power and many people are seeking salvation and absolution not so much in the church as in art these days. Besides that, almost all the difficult periods in history were walking arm-in-arm with the flowering of art. People are put in a very different situation and it makes them accelerate progress everywhere in the sciences and arts. Hopefully, we are about to see the long-awaited end of the notorious crisis in art.

The “Virtu(al)oso” Competition gives performers the opportunity to craft their own programs with only the restriction that pieces should be varied in style. How did you put your own playlist together? (It’s really interesting!)

It was great to have the freedom of choosing the repertoire for both rounds. Sergei Babayan, who is the most wonderful teacher I could dream of, inspired me by his Chopin recital, where many shorter pieces were placed in an unexpected but very natural order and performed without stopping, creating one story as if it was told in a single breath. It changed my understanding of a recital. The last concerts I played combined pieces from different styles without applause in between so they would give the audience a unique impression in this particular order. It’s similar to montage in cinema but also reminds me of chemistry a little — if one piece, one part of the formula is chosen badly, the reaction is unsuccessful.



What composers and works have influenced you in your own writing?

Recently I’ve been finding a lot of inspiration in other arts, visual arts and cinema in particular. As for music, the pieces which influence me and the pieces I like might be radically different. Sometimes I am not even aware of what influences me, and in what way. I think it is even better to not analyze these processes, but I have to say I’ve always had a great admiration for Bach. Other composers whose music I admire very much are Mahler, Schnittke, Mussorgsky, Gesualdo, and Schubert.

What are a few things that you've learned from your studies in Cleveland with Babayan and Fitch?

I have been learning a lot being in Cleveland, and it is not just a musical but also a life experience. I am endlessly grateful for a chance to study with both of my teachers. Each of them opened for me new ways to listen to music (the nature of sound itself in particular) and to understand it. I also started to appreciate silence much more and to feel the inner breath (or montage) in music and outside of music as well. Maestro Babayan and Dr. Fitch are both extremely devoted to music and with both of them, I feel that any idea they give is constantly growing and expanding in my mind as if it was planted by a wise gardener. It makes every lesson very special and unforgettable.

When you're not practicing or composing, what are some other activities you enjoy doing?

I am always very enthusiastic about chess! When I was six I was even thinking about becoming a professional chess player and was studying in a chess school. I am happy I chose music and grateful to my mother who let me decide on my own and never pushed me anywhere. Having also a big interest in any form of art, I like to think about it as if art was never divided, and music was just a part of a larger mirror (or what is reflected in it).

Let's pretend that you're hosting a dinner party. What three guests — living or dead — would you invite to guarantee some lively conversation, and what favorite Russian dish would you put on the table?

I would be really thrilled to witness a dinner party with Vladimir Nabokov, Peter Greenaway, and Umberto Eco! I think all of them would be excited to see black caviar on the table.

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