

## Kirill Gerstein is captivating on piano as Cleveland Orchestra recital series continues



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By Daniel Hathaway | ClevelandClassical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — There's no dearth of first-class piano performances to enjoy in Northeast Ohio, but Kirill Gerstein's contribution to the collective wealth Wednesday night was extraordinary both in concept and execution.

Playing as part of the [Cleveland Orchestra's ongoing recital series](#) at Severance Music Center, Gerstein wove an overarching narrative from the 21 little masked ball portraits in Robert Schumann's "Carnaval." Then he helped composer Francisco Coll blow up the idea of the waltz in two striking, brand new pieces written for Gerstein and joined Maurice Ravel in redefining that most civilized of dances in a cataclysmic performance of La valse.

That all happened in the first half of a program that concluded with a glorious account of Franz Liszt's "Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude" and his revolutionary, one-movement sonata in b minor, joined on this occasion into a single work.

Schumann acknowledged the two extremes of his personality by inventing the characters of Florestan and Eusebius, and "Carnaval" teems with sudden mood changes that Gerstein adroitly incorporated into his chameleonic performance.

The 21 movements each come with a descriptive title. The opening "Préambule" made a grand announcement of the piece, then its focus shifted to a sneaky "Pierrot," and into a lively "Arlequin." Butterflies floated in "Papillon," the "Chiarina" was passionate, the melody of "Reconnaissance" spirited. The lovely "Valse allemande" morphed into the lively "Paganini intermezzo."

Many movements later, the masquerade party built into the concluding Marche des “Davidsbündler” contre les Philistins, Schumann’s not-so-masked representation of his critics.

Spanish composer Francisco Coll’s publisher [writes](#), “Inspired by Federico García Lorca’s ‘Poet in New York,’ Coll has created a pair of waltzes, both named for poems in the hallucinatory, hard-edged collection. Just as Lorca’s verse teeters on the point of crisis, Coll’s dramatic, colourful music of extremes exists on a knife edge.”

In “Waltzes Toward Civilization,” commissioned by Chamber Music in Napa Valley, the composer has a lot of interesting things to say and challenges the player to make turn-on-a-dime mood swings. Gerstein accepted the challenge.

“Waltz in the Branches” calls for huge, full-keyboard glissandi. At times it’s emotional and sensitive and in the next second angry with explosive, low bursts. Gerstein negotiated the sudden changes beautifully.

“Little Viennese Waltz” features twinkling notes in the highest register of the piano. The work’s relentless three-quarter time foreshadowed the piece that followed.

Ravel’s piano transcription of “La valse” begins with low rumbles and glimpses of the waltz theme, beautifully muted in Gerstein’s performance, and the chain of waltzes that followed — some delicate, others demonic — were tastefully deployed. The huge conclusion was breathtaking.

Liszt’s “Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude” opens with a sense of calm. Gerstein’s playing was stunningly intimate, and he never allowed Liszt’s melodies to get covered.

At the end, the pianist moved directly on to the B-minor piano sonata in which he created a “Beauty and the Beast” scenario but kept the beast in check. The piece never became episodic as Gerstein let the heavens open and all of Liszt’s cascading notes shine. He produced a huge sound that never grew harsh, and his transitions were captivating.

A final single, short low note announced the conclusion of an enthralling program. The week-after-Thanksgiving audience was small but effusive and seemingly heavy on fans who had come especially to hear Gerstein. They gave him several callbacks and were gifted with an encore — yes, a Chopin waltz.

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