



Kirill Gerstein tunes up for Wigmore Hall concert with jazz

By Jessica Duchon, May 31, 2012

Once every four years, a gentleman from Kalamazoo, Michigan, approaches a concert pianist and hands over an envelope. Inside it is the Gilmore Award: a cheque for a dizzying \$300,000. And that is just the start: the winner can also expect top-level performing and recording opportunities galore. But its recipients are chosen in secret, with no clue that the prize is coming their way. The most recent award, in 2010, went to the Russian-born pianist Kirill Gerstein.

A couple of years on, the career path of this exceedingly classy musician has moved from good to fabulous. This summer brings the 33-year-old Gerstein twice back to London, a city where he has a strong fanbase. He is giving a recital at the Wigmore Hall next week and will perform Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto at the Proms in July.

While some artists might be fazed by the unexpected pressure of landing a major prize out of the blue, Gerstein has taken the Gilmore Award very much in his stride. He is one of the calmer concert pianists on the scene — laid-back, relaxed and highly intelligent. And he has been taking unexpected things in his stride for most of his life.

One of the more surprising things about Gerstein himself is the fact that he loves to play not only classical repertoire, but also jazz. Increasingly he has been finding ways to combine the two.

He has used some of his Gilmore Prize money to commission new works from leading figures in both genres. A piece written for him by the British composer Oliver Knussen will feature in his Wigmore Hall recital, where it receives its UK premiere. Its title is *Ophelia's Last Dance* and its airing in London will help to celebrate the composer's 60th birthday.

But other composers with whom Gerstein has been working include superstars from the jazz world, notably Chick Corea and Brad Mehldau. The latter has written him a substantial new work called *Variations on a Melancholy Theme* — unusually for these straitened times, it runs to a good 28 minutes.

"We spoke about a commission of eight-12 minutes of music," says Gerstein, "but soon after starting it he wrote to me saying: 'I don't feel like stopping'. It's very

original: there's nothing else quite like it, and it's technically extremely challenging. It navigates the world between classical and jazz in a very grateful way.” Gerstein, who was born in Voronezh, left for the US when he was only 14, heading for the very different world of Berklee College of Music in Boston. He became its youngest-ever student and seized the opportunity to develop his abilities in both classical and jazz piano. Eventually, he had to choose between the two and plumped for classical. This took him first to New York and later to Spain to pursue his studies.

“Arriving in Berklee was amazing,” Gerstein recalls. “I was hungry for information of every kind musically, especially jazz. I had been in a special music school in Russia, but in terms of jazz there was certainly not enough to feed me, so I fought with the difficulties of changing my surroundings because I was so incredibly interested and excited. It was wonderful to study, to play together with other people, to have all these lessons, and to buy as many CDs as I could afford – which wasn't many, but I loved to roam the shelves of a record store for hours. I just soaked it all up.

“On the one hand, I think I left Russia late enough to keep feeling attached to Russian culture and my native language. On the other hand, I left early enough to feel comfortable speaking English and living in the West.

If I'd been a couple of years younger or older, it could have been more problematic. I'm very happy that my Russian stays in active use today.”

Growing up Jewish in what was then the Soviet Union meant, of course, that Gerstein felt he had a distinct national and ethnic identity but not a religious one, which he says would have been “out of the question” for anyone in the USSR.

“The first time I went to Israel was when I entered the Arthur Rubinstein Competition when I was 21,” he says. “I was ready to be sceptical when I arrived, but there's an amazing atmosphere there. A certain energy and buzz in the air and the sun maybe explains why people have been so passionate about this rather small piece of land for so long. So my first visit was really special, not only because of winning the competition, but because of how it felt to be there.” His prize there launched his career in earnest. He has since married an Israeli; the couple divide their time between New York and Stuttgart, where he has a teaching post.

Gerstein will be focusing on classical pieces at the Wigmore Hall but he remains convinced that jazz helps to keep him on his musical toes where classical repertoire is concerned. “I believe it's not possible to be equally accomplished in both styles. Each demands an incredible investment of time and concentration and one of them will end up being short-changed. But now I feel that for my own internal psychological and musical balance it's healthy to do some jazz.

“I'm not trying to have a career in jazz that's the same as my career in classical, but I did do a concert at Berklee recently that had a mixed jazz and classical programme. I played jazz standards, and also Schumann's Carnival. Somehow, when I come back to Carnival, it's fresher and brighter.”

Kirill Gerstein plays at the Wigmore Hall on June 4. Box office: 020 7935 2141

