

From:



YEFIM BRONFMAN

Jessica Duchon

Yefim Bronfman is a heavyweight virtuoso: a musical force of nature whom Philip Roth described in *The Human Stain*, rather remarkably, as “Bronfman the Brontosaur” and “Mr Fortissimo”. The powerhouse pianist is now set to take the Proms by storm, joining the Berlin Philharmonic and its conductor Sir Simon Rattle for Brahms’s Piano Concerto No.2. One of the biggest works in the concerto repertoire, it seems an appropriately Olympian choice for the year in which the Proms have become a vital part of the London 2012 Festival.

Despite Roth’s comparisons, Bronfman – ‘Fima’ for short – is soft-spoken and reflective as he talks to me from his home in New York. “I personally feel this is one of the hardest pieces to play,” he comments of the Brahms. “It presents musical and technical challenges like no other concerto: one has to overcome a lot of physical issues to perform it in such a way that the audience will not feel its difficulty. One has to make it seem effortless. At the same time, it’s such a fantastic piece of music with so many subtleties, wonderful harmonies and great, great moments. And in spite of its size – 45-50 minutes – it forms one wonderful long line from the first note to the last, which is a remarkable feat for the pianist to achieve.”

Bronfman’s story began in Tashkent, where he was born into a musical Jewish family in 1958. Both his parents were pianists and his sister is a violinist. Inevitably, this being the Soviet Union, practising Judaism was not feasible in the religious sense, but Bronfman has always identified strongly with his background in terms of cultural context.

He speaks with remarkable positivity of his childhood in the USSR. “Life was very nice for us in Tashkent,” he recalls. “I had a very good school, the musical scene was excellent and the town was full of colourful architecture and historic sites. One could go to Samarkand or Bukhara for the day.

“There was a large Jewish community in Tashkent at the time I was growing up – a population of about 50,000. There was an old community called Bukhara Jews who have lived in that region for centuries. I believe most of them have now left Tashkent and settled in Israel, and a lot of them I sometimes see in America and around Europe.” His own family, though, had moved to Tashkent only after the war when his father was offered a job; and

when he was 15, they emigrated to Israel to join his mother's parents, who had settled there after leaving Poland.

Moving to Israel was a step into the unknown for the teenaged musician: "There was an element of uncertainty – at the time there was no computer, so one couldn't gather information and be prepared the way one can now. But we were very fortunate. At the time we came to Israel, in the Seventies, many great musicians would play there regularly: famous conductors and soloists like Arthur Rubinstein, Leonard Bernstein, Isaac Stern, Pablo Casals. It was incredible."

Fate struck when he had an opportunity to audition for Stern, who provided invaluable guidance at the start of his training. Later the pair made numerous sonata and chamber music recordings together. "He was a man who truly cared about young musicians," says Bronfman, "and he set an example for future generations to care about them too, and to give them the guidance that they need. For me as a young musician it was a tremendously opportunity to play with him. I learned from him not only a lot about music, but also that it's important to form yourself as a person. You have to live life to the full so that you can express your music in a way that you can't if you just practise and do nothing else."

Aged 18, Bronfman emigrated again, this time to the US to study with the piano pedagogue Leon Fleisher. Pianists are often 'citizens of the world' in terms of style and influence, and Bronfman is convinced that the existence of a particular 'Russian school' or 'American school' of pianism is not feasible today – and, moreover, probably it never was. "So many Russian teachers and famous musicians left Russia in the Seventies and began teaching in the west," he remarks. "Generations of pianists growing up in America had Russian teachers, so they have taken on some of that approach. But think of the famous teacher in Russia, Heinrich Neuhaus [1888-1964]: he was half German and half Polish, he came from the school of western Europe and he taught many of the great Russian pianists. He created a Russian school – but he brought it from Europe.

"I don't think the idea of 'schools' is relevant. But I do think that French music requires one type of sound and Russian music another. Sometimes there are similarities: when you play Prokofiev you can feel the French influence in his music and you have to reflect that in your sound. But I think there is a school for each different composer, and you learn from the composer himself how to apply it."

Increasingly Bronfman has been finding special rewards in performing the music of living composers, commissioning new works himself on occasion. His recording of Esa-Pekka Salonen's Piano Concerto won him a Grammy (the latest of several) three years ago "There are so many great talents out there," he says, "so many wonderful young composers, and I think it's important to be involved in this. Everybody is a little different; everyone has his or her own language. Some are only just forming their own voices. It's work in progress, but it's alive – that's what's fascinating." He recently

premiered a new concerto by Magnus Lindberg and has projects coming up with Marc-André Dabalvie, Salonen and Jörg Widmann, to name a few.

“Music evolves all the time,” he adds. “And it’s a rewarding combination: we evolve, then we go back and look at something with a new perspective. In a way, Beethoven is still the most modern composer I’ve ever played! He was so much ahead of his time.”

Bronfman has plenty of musical activity through which to keep on evolving. He gives on average more than 80 concerts each year – highlights for the rest of 2012 include a tour with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and a performance in London at the Royal Festival Hall with the Philharmonia in October – and he has at least 24 recordings to his name, with more on the way. When I ask how he likes to relax, he says that he does so at the keyboard: “Even when I don’t do concerts I enjoy playing music, listening to music and exploring music that I don’t necessarily perform on stage, but study at home for my own pleasure.” Admittedly, he has a certain reputation as a “foodie” – he has even appeared on American TV as a judge in a cookery show – but now he downplays this little excursion. “I was invited and I did the show a couple of times,” he shrugs. “But really, I like to work.”

Given his packed schedule, that is probably just as well.

Yefim Bronfman performs Brahms’s Piano Concerto No.2 with the Berlin Philharmonic and Sir Simon Rattle at the Proms on 31 August. Box office: 0845 401 5040