

Benjamin Grosvenor: a child prodigy set for the long haul

At 18, the pianist Benjamin Grosvenor is already hailed as a major talent. How does he do it? Hard work, he tells Jessica Duchon.

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Photo: Simon Grosset

Earning his stripes: Benjamin Grosvenor performing in the finals of the BBC's Young Musician of the Year award, aged 11

There are child prodigies, and then there's Benjamin Grosvenor. He first made the headlines when he won the piano section of the 2004 BBC Young Musician of the Year competition aged only 11. As prodigies go, Grosvenor was the real McCoy: he astonished everyone not only with his ability to zip around the instrument, but also with the extraordinary maturity of his musical understanding.

In the end, the competition's top prize went to the violinist Nicola Benedetti, who at 16 was ready for stardom. Grosvenor stayed away from the limelight for a while. He made debuts at the Royal Albert Hall and Carnegie Hall aged all of 13, but avoided the easy route of quick celebrity and burnout that often ambushes excessively gifted children.

Now, though, Grosvenor is 18 and things are happening fast. He is one of the lucky few to be selected to join BBC Radio 3's New Generation Artists this year, a two-year scheme which will give him, as he says with slightly baffled excitement, "a whole new set of opportunities that I haven't had before, especially as so many concerts will be broadcast."

Recordings, too, are on the way. Last year, EMI asked him to record a special CD of Chopin rarities for their Chopin Anniversary boxed set, in which the

result proved a highlight; and his first solo disc, entitled *This and That* (Galton Concert Productions), has drawn phenomenal plaudits. Gramophone's critic declared: "Less modestly it could have been called 'One Marvel after Another' for the performances... exhibit a skill and talent not heard since [Evgeny] Kissin's legendary teenage Russian debut."

Chopin remains perhaps closest to Grosvenor's heart, and he will give an all-Chopin lunchtime recital at LSO St Luke's next week. Two days later, in Malvern, he is presenting the first performance in Britain on a brand new model of Yamaha piano, the CFX. "It has an extraordinary ability to project," he says. "You can play as softly as you like yet still be heard across an orchestra." It's unusual to find a young musician longing to play as quietly as possible, rather than bashing the living daylights out of an instrument, and that inclination speaks volumes about Grosvenor's musicianship.

He started learning the piano at the age of six. His mother was his first teacher and remains a crucial adviser (and driver) during his tours. "I started because all my brothers had played an instrument," he remembers, "but I didn't really fall in love with the piano until I started performing." After that, there was no turning back.

He's the youngest of five brothers - a Benjamin in every sense. Jonathan, the brother closest in age to him, has Down's Syndrome and often travels with Grosvenor and their mother on tour. "I don't think it's always that interesting for him, because most of the time I have to practise," Grosvenor says, apologetically, "but I hope he enjoys other aspects of it. He's studying at a local college and otherwise spends most of his time writing stories or listening to popular music."

Grosvenor is now in his third year of a degree at the Royal Academy of Music and is evidently extremely bright. He's an unworldly youngster with a rather careful, old-fashioned way of expressing himself, though with the newly hedge-dragged look of so many teenagers. During our chat, a venerable gentleman peers round the door of the coffee shop and asks whether there is a barber nearby. "Not that you use one," he quips at Grosvenor. After he's gone, Grosvenor declares laconically, "My hair is styled by wind and gravity."

It's unusual for a student to be accepted into a music college at only 16, but by then Grosvenor had already completed his A levels. He was home-tutored from 14; musical talent and conventional schooling are not always an easy mix.

"At school I never really fitted in," Grosvenor admits. "At primary school I had lots of friends, but when I went to secondary school I didn't get along so well with the other children. There was a bit of aggro after the BBC Young Musician competition from some of the older boys." One senses judicious understatement here.

As for the competition itself, he wasn't disappointed not to win outright, he says: "I didn't even think I would get past the first round, so I had no

expectation of getting the top prize. Actually I seem to recall that there was a torch, a kind of gadget, that I wanted - you know what young boys are like! My mum said 'Well, if you get to the final of Young Musicians you can have it.'" A grin: "I got the torch!"

How does he account for his extraordinary talent? "I work hard," he announces. "It's strange that people find it amazing that I practise eight hours a day. Most people in other jobs work eight hours a day, so I think it's perfectly normal."

Though his devotion to Chopin, Scarlatti, Rachmaninov and the rest can make him seem like a pianist from another era, he also has a fresh, youthful perspective to offer. This summer he performed in *Serenata*, a festival in Dorset that brought the rock-festival experience to classical music and crossover. Some detractors were less than tempted to camp in a muddy field to listen to Russell Watson, but Grosvenor, who was among the more upmarket classical turns, has no truck with snobbery and says he had a wonderful time. "I loved it. The atmosphere was very relaxed and there was loads for kids to do, so people could take their families. I think the audience did get a bit wet, though..."

Personally, I'm convinced that Grosvenor is the most important British pianist to emerge in decades. The key is that he has his own sound, something rare even among well-established names: it is poetic and gently ironic, brilliant yet clear-minded, intelligent but not without humour, all translated through a beautifully clear and singing touch.

He's one in a million - several million. All being well, great things should lie ahead.

Benjamin Grosvenor: LSO St Luke's, London EC1 (020 7638 8891) 14 October, 1pm; Malvern Theatres (01684 892277) 16 October, 7.30pm