

10 Questions for Pianist Benjamin Grosvenor

The young British pianist talks about rare repertoire and his suspicion of major competitions

by Jessica Duchen

Wednesday, 21 January 2015

At all of 22, the British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor has already become one of the best-loved solo pianists in the UK, with an international career that spans the globe. A remarkable child prodigy from Southend-on-Sea, he first shot to prominence when he won the piano section of the BBC Young Musician of the Year competition in 2004, aged only 11, amazing audiences with the maturity and sensitivity of his musicianship.

Now, having completed his studies at the Royal Academy of Music in London, he can boast a recording contract with Decca and a track record that includes - among many highlights - having been the youngest soloist ever to appear in the first night of the Proms (in 2013). His latest recording, "Dances", has recently been named Classic FM's Album of the Year 2014 and bears witness to his characteristically warm, mellifluous tone, his irresistible sense of rhythm and the special combination of sense and sensibility that enabled The Independent to term him "one in a million. Several million". Grosvenor is on the road this week with a fascinating and eclectic recital programme, in a tour that culminates at the Barbican in London on Friday.

JESSICA DUCHEN

Benjamin, it looks like you're conquering the world. What have been the highlights of this past year?

BENJAMIN GROSVENOR

It has been quite a busy and exciting time. I suppose the most significant concerts would include my Proms in the summer and debuts with the Cleveland Orchestra and Montreal Symphony, as well as a return concert with the San Francisco symphony in their main series. I have enjoyed a great many performances, but a few stand out, notably my partnership with Gianandrea Noseda at the Prom; a few months before that I was able to tour with the same piece – Chopin's Piano Concerto No.1 with Andrey Boreyko and the Orchestra de Euskadi in Spain. It was great to have the opportunity to play a work a number of times with an orchestra in this way. I also played for the first time last year the Beethoven Triple Concerto, with the Manchester Camerata, which was a lot of fun.

You're touring with a wonderful recital this week, culminating at the Barbican on Friday, and it involves a wide spread of repertoire: Rameau, Bach-Busoni, Chopin, Granados. How and why did you choose the programme?

I've always favoured varied programmes and, as is often the case when planning them, this one started with particular pieces that I wanted to play. I've loved the Franck Prélude, Chorale and Fugue since I heard Alfred Cortot's recording in my teens, and this led me to conceive a baroque-inspired first half. The Rameau Gavotte and Variations acts as a palate-cleanser before the Bach-Busoni Chaconne and the Franck – two quite dark works. Those only familiar with the original Chaconne for solo violin might find this arrangement a little surprising; you could almost imagine it was originally for organ, such are the sonorities it uses. It is almost as if Busoni imagined it first transcribed for that instrument. Busoni wrote so many transcriptions of Bach's music that his wife was once introduced as 'Mrs Bach-Busoni' at a party! This one is probably his most famous. The Franck is a moving, spiritual work, full of great sadness and struggle that is only overcome in the final two pages, where it is transformed to jubilation.

The second half inhabits a different world and is generally more optimistic in nature. I have paired Chopin with Granados – two composers whose soundworlds are both romantic and lyrical, but with contrasting national identities. *Goyescas* is Granados's most complex work - many of the works are without key signatures, including the second one that I will play, the Ballade "Love and Death". It appears at the end of the set and quotes many themes from earlier pieces, but I feel it works well as a stand-alone piece. The climax quotes the theme of "The Maiden and the Nightingale", which I play first. The third work, "El pelele" ("The Straw Man" - Goya's original painting pictured above) is not actually part of the set, but is often included with it, and it makes a light-hearted conclusion.

Some of these pieces - e.g. those from Granados's Goyescas – used to be heard often in recitals, but over the years have become relatively unusual. Ditto for Rameau on the modern piano. Have you consciously set about reviving neglected areas of the repertoire and/or tackling baroque music on the modern piano?

The piano repertoire is enormous and in it are many obscure gems that I do try to explore. I don't know if I'm particularly on top of current trends, though - I wasn't aware that *Goyescas* was relatively little played these days. It is a set of works that I find enormously attractive and, along with *Iberia*, I think it is perhaps the richest music written for piano in this idiom.

As to Rameau, I have heard Grigory Sokolov play a number of his works, and I first became aware of this particular piece through a live recording of Shura Cherkassky at Wigmore Hall. I enjoy playing baroque music on the modern piano and I do try to use the full potential of the instrument. In a piece like the Gavotte, we have the ability to access sonorities that remind us not just of one baroque instrument, but of many. One can at times imitate a clavichord – perhaps in the theme with the *una corda*; a harpsichord (there are a few places where, by doubling the theme in octaves, one can intimate stops); and at the climax, the organ.

Tell us something about your life at the moment. Do you still live at home with your family? How do you deal with the stresses of travelling and performing? And do you feel you've got a good work-life balance?

I spend a lot of time travelling, but my base is still with my family in Essex – though I hope to move later in the year. I've no defined recipe for dealing with the stresses of concert touring, but I think it is important to stay as healthy as one can physically, which can be hard when on the road. Good diet and exercise are key. The early stages of any career can be a busy time, and as you learn more about your processes and preferences, and how much you can cope with, you can find more of a balance.

Which pianists – or other musicians – do you most like to listen to, and why?

I have a strong interest in pianists of the older generation, both for the absolute merits of their playing and because one is exposed to musical devices that are not so often used these days. I love listening to pianists like Vladimir Horowitz, Alfred Cortot and Shura Cherkassky, who all had such unique voices at the piano. Among conductors, Wilhelm Furtwängler stands out; his organic approach – with a pulse of great plasticity – is sculpted to bring out an extraordinary narrative. I enjoy the playing of many current musicians too, but I'd prefer not to list some for fear of leaving out others!

What pianos do you prefer and what qualities do you like to find in an instrument?

I find that I generally prefer Steinway – but this is not always the case. For example, I have occasionally played some poor Steinways and some fantastic Yamahas. Given that my recitals nearly always feature a wide range of music, I like a versatile instrument with a wide range of colours, a rich bass, not too brittle and bright a treble, and with a golden, rounded, singing tone

What are you most looking forward to in 2015?

I have a few exciting concerts involving repertoire new to me. I am performing a number of times both of the Shostakovich concerti with the Hallé Orchestra in May. I'm visiting a couple of places for the first time – I'll be making my debut in Beijing, and in Seoul in April, and I have a lengthy tour of Australia in the autumn. Of chamber music partnerships to look forward to, I am giving a duo recital with the Korean violinist Hyeyoon Park, and concerts in Europe in the autumn with the Escher Quartet.

What would you most like to do more of?

I very much enjoy playing chamber music and would love to do more of that.

Next year is a humdinger for the piano world, with four high-profile international competitions falling within a few months of each other: Dublin, Leeds, Chopin and Tchaikovsky. You've not taken part in such events – it seems you've not needed to – but were you ever tempted? Why did you steer clear? What would you say are their pros and cons?

The last competition I entered was the BBC Young Musician when I was 11. Perhaps that was the ideal time to enter a competition, as at that age I was really too young to feel the pressures that might skew your playing. I think competitions can bring, and have brought, great talent to the fore, starting some very good careers, but I don't

think there should be any element of gladiatorial combat to music making and I'm uncomfortable with comments that seem to reduce what we do to a form of sport. It does concern me that competitions can have a distorting effect on the minds of young musicians, some of whom may try to hone their playing to the competition circuit they expect to join shortly. Musical aims can be subordinated along the way, if certain other purposes – to be successful in competitions – are too dominant in students' minds. I think I felt that this world was just not for me. I couldn't imagine myself thriving in the environment of a competition. I tried to make my way without it, and I was lucky in that it worked for me.

Do you have any more advice for (even) young(er) pianists on how best to approach starting their careers?

I feel I'm still rather too young myself to be giving such advice!

Benjamin Grosvenor in recital: Birmingham Town Hall (21 Jan), St John the Evangelist, Oxford (22 Jan), Barbican, London (23 Jan)