

Interview: David Greilsammer

The virtuoso Israeli pianist and conductor has a radical new approach to classical music.



By Jessica Duchen, May 27, 2010



David Greilsammer has broken free of the classical establishment by forming his own orchestra of young talents

Every so often, along comes a recording that stays alive in your mind long after you have heard it. One that arrived recently was a CD of Mozart's piano concertos, played and conducted by the young Israeli pianist David Greilsammer, with an orchestra mysteriously named Ensemble Suedama. The strength of purpose of Greilsammer's interpretations made the disc stand out as something out of the ordinary.

And Greilsammer himself is an artist out of the ordinary. At only 32, he has several highly acclaimed recordings to his name - he has just been appointed music director and conductor of the Geneva Chamber Orchestra, and next season will see his debuts with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and the Salzburg Mozarteum Orchestra, among others. First, though, London audiences can hear him in recital at Wigmore Hall next week. His first appearance there last year was hailed by one critic as "among the most authoritative British debuts in years".

A soft-spoken Israeli with a hybrid accent - he lived in New York for nine years and is now based in Paris - Greilsammer admits, if slightly sheepishly, that he felt destined to become a musician because his mother had decided this for him before he was born.

"The family has always been very artistic," he says. "My mother had this mindset that her first son would be a pianist, so she bought an upright Yamaha piano while she was pregnant with me." He is the eldest of four brothers, all of whom are artists and musicians. "My parents had a strong belief that education goes through culture, so you have to have culture and art in a household. It wasn't until much later that I understood how much this meant to me."

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Growing up in Jerusalem, the piano was part of everyday life. "I was studying, I'd been giving concerts as a teenager, and it was important to me - but eventually I had a moment of truth when I realised I could not live without it." It was the start of his Israeli army service that forced the issue.

"I knew that was coming because everyone has to do it, but it was still a terrible shock. I literally could not touch a piano, and the first few months I really freaked out. There's a cliché that it's only when something's taken away from you that you realise how good it was; this is what happened to me. I suddenly found myself in this situation and I had to rethink my entire life."

Later he was able to use that understanding to calm himself down: "By then I knew that, whatever happened, at some point I'd come back to it. This perspective was extremely useful."

Greilsammer got out of the army and straight on a plane to America. In New York he spent six years studying piano at the Juilliard School of Music; he was able to take conducting lessons as well, and later studied privately with the great pianist Richard Goode, renowned for his profoundly cultured approach to music.

"Richard Goode really opened my eyes," Greilsammer enthuses. "These lessons were unlike any I'd had before. They'd last three to four hours, and you'd play and play, and discuss books, paintings, programming... It was exactly what I'd been dreaming of."

Greilsammer's acclaimed CDs of Mozart concertos came about through a determination to follow a path of his own, rather than one dictated by the occasionally creaky workings of the music industry. The name of Ensemble Suedama, of course, is "Amadeus" backwards - he formed the orchestra himself.

"I have some problems with the ways things are sometimes done in the classical world," Greilsammer says. "I wanted to do a first project my own way - something new and fresh. So I decided to surround myself with a completely new orchestra, made up of enthusiastic young soloists who had the same affinities and trains of thought that I had. We made two discs of Mozart concertos - they are all well-known works that have been recorded by all the great masters, but we wanted to approach them as if it were the first time. I'm a little obsessed with not being influenced by the past."

"The problem with classical music is that essentially it's an art form that's completely focused on the past," he continues.

"We play mostly pieces by dead composers, and we worship their scores. We spend our days looking at music that was written up to 400 years ago and that's where we take our inspiration and life-force as classical musicians. This is where the problem begins - in an art that's so preoccupied with the past, it's very difficult to make it live today."

Greilsammer makes a point of commissioning a couple of new works from young composers every year, and includes contemporary or recent music in his concert programmes whenever possible.

The same resolve is evident in his Wigmore Hall recital, though the programme is, for him, relatively conservative. "I've been focusing on programmes that have something to offer beyond just playing beautiful music," he says. "This one is not my craziest - the pieces are all well known and there's no world premiere - but the concept has an adventurous side. The idea is to try to find connections between worlds that seem very far apart. That's what I love the most, and it's a concept I apply to much in life, not only music."

He has chosen pairs of forms - two sets of variations, two sonatas and two collections of six short pieces - that match works by Haydn, Mozart and Schubert with ones by Webern, Berg and Schoenberg. "I've tried to go deeper into certain questions about what really makes these pieces these composers' ideas, what gives them the same flavour, the same colours, the same thoughts, but a hundred years apart."

More explorations will follow - in the autumn Greilsammer will be back in London for a concert at King's Place of sonatas by Scarlatti and, on "prepared piano", John Cage. That will mark the launch of his next CD; a world premiere recordings of works for piano and orchestra by Alexander Tansman and Nadia Boulanger, plus the more familiar Rhapsody in Blue by Gershwin.

His exclusive contract with the French record label Naïve has made Paris his ideal home ("though I don't expect living in Paris will last forever," he adds, rather ruefully), and he spends much time in Geneva with his orchestra there. He is enjoying his activities as conductor, but the piano, he says, will always remain his first love. Destiny? Perhaps it really is.

David Greilsammer performs at Wigmore Hall, London W1, on Tuesday June 1. Tel: 020 7935 2141