Peter Serkin

piano

"In his hands, even the most formidable works are fluid and expressive."

-The New York Times

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PETER SERKIN
PIANO
2019-2020 Full Biography

Peter Serkin holds a singular place among today's classical music artists, admired equally for his performance of established repertoire and as a consummate interpreter of contemporary music. His music-making demonstrates keen understanding of the masterworks of J.S. Bach as well as an exceptional grasp of diverse musical styles, ranging from Stravinsky to Messiaen, Tōru Takemitsu and Oliver Knussen.

Mr. Serkin has performed with the world's major symphony orchestras, led by such eminent conductors as Seiji Ozawa, Daniel Barenboim, Simon Rattle, Herbert Blomstedt, as well as Claudio Abbado, Pierre Boulez, Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos. In chamber music, Serkin has collaborated with Alexander Schneider, Pamela Frank, Yo-Yo Ma, and the Budapest, Guarneri, Orion, Shanghai, and Dover String Quartets, among others. He was a founding member of the TASHI Quartet, with violinist Ida Kavafian, cellist Fred Sherry, and clarinetist Richard Stoltzman.

Mr. Serkin's varied programs and projects during the 2019-20 season epitomize his preeminent career as both a soloist and chamber musician. As part of a Japanese tour, he joins Herbert Blomstedt and the NHK Symphony to perform the Reger Piano Concerto, for which he has long been a champion. He also embarks on a project to perform the complete Bach sonatas for violin and piano with longtime friend and collaborator, Pamela Frank. The U.S. highlights of their multi-city tour of marathon concerts include New York's 92Y, Philadelphia's Kimmel Center and Washington, DC's Kennedy Center. Later in the season, he joins the New York String Orchestra at Carnegie Hall for a performance of Bartok's Piano Concerto No. 3. He has recently completed a series of solo recordings for the Vivace label with music of J.S. Bach and C.P.E. Bach.

An eloquent and persuasive advocate for the music of the 20th and 21st centuries, Peter Serkin has championed the work of Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Stravinsky, Stefan Wolpe, Messiaen, and has given world premieres of works by Luciano Berio, Hans Werner Henze, Alexander Goehr, Leon Kirchner, Oliver Knussen, and Charles Wuorinen. He gave the world premiere performances of Lieberson's three piano concertos, Takemitsu's *riverrun* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Wuorinen's Piano Concerto No. 4 with the Boston Symphony

Orchestra. His extensive discography ranges from a recording featuring six Mozart piano concertos, awarded the Deutsche Schallplattenpreis and acclaimed by *Stereo Review* as Best Recording of the Year, to the complete keyboard works of Schoenberg.

Peter Serkin's musical legacy extends to his grandfather, the distinguished violinist Adolf Busch, who established the Busch Quartet, the Busch Chamber Players, and was a founder of the Marlboro School of Music. Busch was also a notable composer in most every genre—orchestral and choral works, concertos, chamber music, and songs. Peter Serkin has recently made arrangements of Busch's music as well as that of Mozart and Schumann for various chamber ensembles and orchestra. He has also transcribed Brahms's organ Chorale-Preludes for one piano, four-hands. Serkin is the son of the distinguished pianist Rudolf Serkin, who taught at the Curtis Institute of Music and led with distinction the Marlboro School for forty years.

Mr. Serkin currently teaches at Bard College Conservatory of Music.

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"The qualities of mind, fingers and spirit that make him such a supreme interpreter of new and 20th Century music are the qualities that make him so satisfying a Bach and Beethoven pianist too."
– Chicago Tribune

"Peter Serkin is one of the handful of pianists who not only possess a cerebral understanding of the music of our time but the ability to communicate it with feeling. In his hands, even the most formidable works are fluid and expressive."
– The New York Times

"Serkin's playing was breathtaking in its limpidity; the instrumental textures were wonderfully nuanced, and the balance well nigh perfect."
– The Guardian

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Peter Serkin

Critical Acclaim

“Under Serkin’s sharply etched piano touch, the notes moved through the orchestra with a special clarity, as if in their own spotlight, as if the accompaniment were in black and white and the piano were in color, as if he played in 3-D. Each phrase had a geometric, hard-edged, architectural precision and complexity.”

New Yorker

“Peter Serkin gave a fine if pointedly restrained account of Brahms’s Second Piano Concerto (1881). Among the most self-effacing pianists of his generation, Serkin sought from the outset to enfold the solo part into the orchestra so that the opening movement emphasised subtle interplay along with its finely integrated rhetoric, whereas the second movement balanced its fiery *tuttis* with passages of an inward intensity that caught the breath. The Adagio then gave notice of equivocation behind the repose as was daringly to the fore in a Finale which was anything but the blithe run-through it is often assumed to be.”

Classical Source

"The qualities of mind, fingers and spirit that make him such a supreme interpreter of new and 20th Century music are the qualities that make him so satisfying a Bach and Beethoven pianist too."

Chicago Tribune

“It was a performance of delightful deftness, quick intelligence and mastery.”

Sydney Morning Herald

"Serkin is a chameleonic pianist, capable of extraordinary changes of dynamic, articulation, color and character within a single phrase, a gift that serves him well…"

Boston Globe

"Peter Serkin is one of the handful of pianist who not only possess a cerebral understanding of the music of our time but the ability to communicate it with feeling. In his hands, even the most formidable works are fluid and expressive."

New York Times

"Serkin (playing the lower part) and Hsu made the etudes a study in expression. The interpretation had a rare elasticity to it, even rarer that two people achieved it. They played with a single intent, seeming to even breathe together."

San Diego Union-Tribune

"…Pianists Julia Hsu and Peter Serkin unveiled their new four hand team recently at a nearby venue, the Olive Free Library, in a piano series curated by [George] Tsontakis. Evidently the two intend their collaboration to be ongoing, a prospect which delights me. They play with amazing precision, beautiful sound, and excellent musicianship. Their half of the program began with six of Brahms’s Chorale Preludes, organ works transcribed by Serkin. If you don’t know the music you might have trouble identifying it as Brahms, since it shows heavy baroque influence. The arrangements were effective, the playing divine."

Boston Musical Intelligencer

"Peter Serkin's recital... was one of the most thoughtful and exciting of the season. The carefully conceived, fluently executed performance not only revealed the inner workings and beauty of the music, but made fascinating connections...Serkin made everything sound astonishingly fresh and alive."

Washington Post

“No pianist currently before the pubic possesses the blend of intellectual rigor and stainless-steel technique of Serkin, and his powerful, deeply expressive performance of Beethoven’s [*Diabelli* Variations] for the University of Chicago Presents series was one of the highlights of this and recent music seasons.”

Chicago Classical Review

“Serkin's playing was breathtaking in its limpidity; the instrumental textures were wonderfully nuanced, and the balance well nigh perfect.”

The Guardian

“One of the most distinguished pianists of his or any generation and an artist of probing insight, Serkin turned in a performance of tremendous character, one in which his personality and every element of a massive score coalesced perfectly.”

Chautauquan Daily

"The sheer lapidary beauty of his pianism had a breathtaking quality…"

Chicago Tribune

"…what one carries away from a Serkin Brahms performance is of a startling intimacy, expressed on a heroic scale."

Boston Globe

"…Peter Serkin played the stunningly difficult piano part with command, unflagging energy, imagination and, where called for, great delicacy."

New York Times

"Serkin is a great pianist because he is an original musical thinker…Serkin…consistently provided an amazing and illuminating amount of subtle detail; every chord was fascinatingly voiced, every phrase tenderly sculpted, the counterpoint limned a way a great Bach player does."

Boston Globe

"Everyone onstage was obviously possessed by a sense of the specialness of the occasion. Peter Serkin was magnificent and impressively at ease in the piano solos."

New York Times

"Peter Serkin is one of the most perceptive and provocative pianists of his generation, as comfortable exploring the music of the past as he is in some of the most stimulating works of our time."

American Record Guide

"Mr. Serkin's piano recital At Avery Fisher Hall…was not only beautifully played but beautifully planned."

New York Times

Peter Serkin

LISTEN

music & culture

November 2017

It is an arresting and uncommon portrait of a concert pianist, one of the more distinguished examples of musical primogeniture living, eschewing the more conventional tuxedo-pomade axis: mustachioed, open-shirted, sunglasses, a certain style of upmarket hippie standing in front of a graffiti'd wall, presaging decades of the rock-and-roll-album-cover spirit of a Brooklyn–based new-music performer. This is the essence of STEINWAY ARTIST Peter Serkin, one of our premiere pianists, one who has done more than so many to forecast the role of a "classical musician" in a more contemporary, post-classical world. In a preface to a rare interview some years ago, Richard Scheinin holds: "Peter Serkin's longtime fans may remember him as somewhat rebellious and unconventional — a goateed pianist in a hippie tunic, performing in the classical quartet known as Tashi." That was in the 1970s. Peter Serkin brought a whiff of the counterculture — of deep Elvis — to what was otherwise once considered bourgeois music, injecting the proceedings with a soupçon of ersatz psychedelia. In short, he paved the way.

In today's world where playing new music, even mixing genres, is hardly considered an apostasy — consider the careers of such leading lights as Yo-Yo Ma, Emmanuel Ax, or Renee Fleming, all of whom regularly commission and perform new works — but on the complex Planet 1960s, especially when hailing from such a lineage and at the Curtis Institute, it might not have been the easiest path. Yet we are better for it: due to Serkin's enthusiasms, it is fair to say the world is that much different. Of course, this is true for any artist responsible for ushering in the creation of so many new works, but Serkin is also one of a handful who oversaw, in the latter part of history's most complex century, a necessary sloughing off of the forced formality of the conventional concert hall. "I've always been very

interested in music that's being written today," said Serkin, in Scheinin's interview, "and in recent music. That was true even as a child, when that was somewhat discouraged. But it was just a component in me somehow — inquisitive. And so when I get older that doesn't diminish. That's still there. Now I think I'm more inclined to be open to all kinds of music that I might have dismissed as a younger snob. I don't feel as snobbish anymore, and I welcome the chance to learn music, even if it's not the greatest music."

Serkin springs from one of the more distinguished lineages in a lineage-obsessed field. His grandfather was violinist and sometime composer Adolf Busch; his father was Rudolf Serkin (who also doubled as one of young Peter's first teachers). Peter Serkin entered the prestigious Curtis Institute at age eleven, and within a year he was making debuts at the Marlboro Music Festival, soloing with the Philadelphia Orchestra and playing at Carnegie Hall, all before he was a teenager. His technique was solid; his career pointed out. But rather than treading the more conventional path of, say, Alfred Brendel (with no disrespect to that powerful eminence gris), Serkin turned his mind and hands to the music of his time — and what a time it was! It is unsurprising that this charismatic, offbeat pianist is best known for doing new music of his era or the one immediately preceding it, as his recorded catalogue can attest: the Schoenberg Piano Concerto; the two concertos of Bartok; music of Wolpe (an arresting case for this too-little-known eccentric master), Peter Lieberson, Alexander Goeher, Charles Wuronien, and Tōru Takemitsu all feature in his extensive output.

In the 1970s he and a number of other luminaries broke free from the soloist-or-nothing evinced by so many mid-century conservatories (Curtis chief among them) and formed what can only be described as a classical music supergroup called Tashi, which included Serkin, violinist Ida Kavafian, cellist Fred Sherry and clarinetist Richard Stoltzman. This instrumentation is not an accident; it is the scoring of French composer Olivier Messiaen's epoch-making Quartet for the End of Time. Without putting too fine a point on it, as the composer wrote the piece in an internment camp during the Second World War, it has since become a symbol of the uniting, pan-cultural need for freedom: in 1973 Tashi honored this by ridding themselves of many confining notions (both musical and not), thereby unshackling the stage for subsequent generations. All four of those musicians went on to legendary careers in different quarters, but each of them made — separately, collectively — the case for doing things off the beaten track and, by raising the occasional critical or concert-subscribing eyebrow, drawing attention to the vitality and necessity of the work by virtue of their group's very off-the-beaten-track-ness. "In the years since," wrote Anthony Tommasini in the New York Times of their 2008 reunion, "they have all had major careers and maintained their individual commitments to contemporary music. As a fellow member of their generation, who heard Tashi in its heyday, I have to say that they all looked great. Gone are the dashikis, ponytails and love beads. That was then." And, yes, it was then but it is also, even in 2008, even today, very now; the issues of formality versus informality or the larger cultural importance of classical music face no recrudescence because they never disappeared, despite the better efforts of Serkin and company. They had all grown up, but their collective intent played equally.

And yet, the Serkin legacy — thankfully still an in-progress project — is not just the introduction of the new or the abandoning of formality, but rather the performance of this repertoire with rare musicality (not, sadly, always the case amongst the group of dedicated souls who perform it exclusively) because it is, like the pianist himself, of an important

lineage. So while we can thrill to his recordings of those less-than-repertoire composers — those souls that musicians now refer to, not without cheek, as "new-music famous" — we also have a legacy of interpretation of Big Important Works from the Great Western Canon that stand against anyone's: we have his incisive performance of Beethoven's daunting Diabelli Variations; his probing Goldberg Variations (which pay Bach obviously-deserved homage but are also often appropriately rough around the edges); and his masterful tours through Mozart concertos and, even more tantalizingly, his chamber music. We get the chance to hear him as a collaborative partner non pareil accompanying the much-missed Lorraine Hunt Lieberson singing Brahms, Handel, and Debussy. All this is to say Serkin has never played new music at the expense of the old, and as one casts relief onto the other, he has found a way to make a case for the whole canon.

Like many at his height, he gives back not only as an artist but as a teacher. "Peter Serkin," says pianist Simone Dinnerstein, one of his star students at Juilliard, "is an extremely thoughtful and searching musician, and he brought those qualities to his teaching. The lessons were joint explorations into the score, all about asking questions as opposed to giving answers. He really prepared me for becoming an independent person and making my own musical decisions, and I will always be grateful to him for that." Dinnerstein herself has trod Serkin's path to a certain extent, mixing music of living composers with those whose work they admire: Dinnerstein plays Bach masterfully and commissioned Philip Glass to compose a concerto not only built for her sound but also to be played alongside a Bach concerto. A Peter-Serkin-esque move.

"Of course," says Serkin, "as I get older I realize that the music that once was very new for me is no longer new at all." Very true; much of what he donned the non-concert garb to play with Tashi or the work he continues to champion as a soloist is no longer either stylistically or temporally new. The bulk of the composers whose music psychonaut Serkin performed — Messiaen, Wolpe, Takemitsu, Berio, Lieberson — have since passed, leaving closed canons with which his open mind will continue to wrestle. But there are others, those who are young, twenty-first-century artists who have chosen the mantle of these twentieth-century minds at work and opted to take the mantle or not. Serkin's interest remains vivid though perhaps his purview leans to the older "new" music, a right he has earned unquestionably. "I'm interested," he says, referring to the new crop of composers who tend more often than not to reside in the borough of Brooklyn, "but because I don't live in New York, I don't hear as much of it anymore, except what happens to be on the radio. I'm always interested, but I haven't yet found anyone to whom I would attach the kind of importance I would to Wourinen, for instance, or Takemitsu, when he was alive. But that's just because of my limitations, I'm sure. But my antennae are out."

THE MORNING CALL

October 27, 2018

Peter Serkin: Always a rebel, the pianist visits the classics at Bach Choir Gala

By Steve Siegel

Philadelphia's Curtis School of Music has produced some of the world's greatest musical talent, including Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein and Gian Carlo Menotti. Another is pianist Peter Serkin, who holds a singular place among today's classical music artists, admired equally for his performance of established repertoire and also as a consummate interpreter of contemporary music.

Serkin's performances and recordings embrace the music of several centuries, exhibiting a keen understanding of the works of Bach and Mozart as well as an exceptional grasp of diverse musical styles ranging from Stravinsky and Messiaen to Toru Takemitsu and Oliver Knussen.

Son of Rudolph Serkin, one of the recording era's most rigorous interpreters of piano music from the classical age, Serkin has shown equal rigor as a pianist and musical voyageur.

On Nov. 3, Serkin revisits the classics in a recital for the Bach Choir of Bethlehem's 2018 Gala Concert and Fundraiser at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem. On the program is J.S. Bach's "Goldberg Variations," Mozart's Sonata in B Flat Major, K.570 and the Adagio in B Minor, K.540.

Serkin, 71, has performed with the world's major symphony orchestras with such eminent conductors as Seiji Ozawa, Pierre Boulez, Daniel Barenboim, Claudio Abbado, Simon Rattle, James Levine, Herbert Blomstedt and Christoph Eschenbach.

As a dedicated chamber musician, he has collaborated with Alexander Schneider, Pamela Frank, Yo-Yo Ma, and the Budapest, Guarneri and Orion string quartets and TASHI, of which he was a founding member. Serkin lives in western Massachusetts, where he teaches at Bard College

There was always something rebellious and unconventional about Serkin. The first time I heard him at a Carnegie Hall recital in the mid-1960s, he took the stage, amid gasps of disapproval from the audience, in full hippie garb, with shoulder-length hair, granny glasses and a white tunic. His performance, of course, was outstanding, and music critics had to admit that his electric delivery had nothing to do with what he was wearing.

In May 2017, I heard Serkin again with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra at Allentown Symphony Hall, in the Brahms D Minor piano concerto. His father was revered for his interpretation of that piece, and so it was natural to ask him in a recent email interview if he feels his father's presence when he plays such monumental works.

"That piece itself is always thrilling and an adventure. In playing any great work one really needs to be focused on the music itself. At the same time, it is true that I have in my mind and memory my teachers' influences, as well as others' performances as inspiration. And since I always benefited from having had several teachers concurrently, I sense their influence, including my father's," he says.

Serkin's musical legacy extends to his grandfather, the distinguished violinist Adolf Busch, who established the Busch Quartet and the Busch Chamber Players, and was a founder of the Marlboro School of Music.

His father, who taught at the Curtis Institute, was known for carefully researching the works that he tackled, even studying critical response to them.

Serkin makes everything he approaches his own, striking that magical balance between intellect and heart. Yet it would be a big mistake to assume that he ignores previous interpretations of a work, and is any less the scholar than his father.

"You asked whether there was a great difference between my father's scholarly approach to studying music and my own, and I think that in terms of this aspect, no," he says "I too give careful consideration to and study of many different sources and texts, as in my father's and in many other of my teacher's examples."

Arguably the best description of Serkin's approach to music was stated by New York Times chief music critic Anthony Tommasini, who once remarked that Serkin thrives on playing new music with a sense of its history, and old music with a sense of its radicalism. If radicalism means taking risks, Serkin concurs.

"For me it means daring something different, not for the sake in itself of being different from what has been done conventionally, but for the sake of probing deeply into a piece, and trying to touch upon that composer's own bold and original ideas.

"It means not putting blind faith in what may be a conventional approach to a well-known piece, and not accumulating other people's lack of imagination and bad habits," Serkin says. "It's all about taking risks, and being willing to keep trying new things to explore the multiplicity of possibilities in playing older and newer music."

By his early teens, Serkin already was a veteran performer. His performances of the Mozart Double Piano Concerto with his father as keyboard partner under George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra are legendary. But when Serkin began to perform on his own, his repertory took a pronounced turn toward the new and unusual. One of the most productive outcomes of this quest was the contemporary music group Tashi, which he co-founded in the 1970s. Yet in spite of his love for the new and modern, Serkin never lost touch with the standards. "Playing and being so

interested in newer and contemporary music has inspired me, as you say, to try to understand compositionally the new music, making sense of it and hopefully conveying that sense," he says. "At the same time, I've approached older music not only with reverence but also with a sense of adventure and boldness, as one might with new music. The 'old' music is so new."

Certainly the "old" music on Serkin's Gala program will sound new again by his passionate interpretation. The Mozart pieces are almost diametrically opposite in feeling. The Sonata is friendly and all smiles, while the tense, emotional atmosphere of the Adagio has inspired numerous writers to wax poetic about its musical meaning.

Bach's Goldberg Variations, completed around 1741, has become a monument in Western music. On one level, it's simply a beautiful keyboard work, and on another, it's a Rubik's Cube of invention and architecture. Small wonder, then, that it carries such a heavy load of historic baggage, from its apocryphal back story based on a count's sleepless nights, to a breakthrough recording by Glenn Gould, and legendary performances by Bach luminaries Wanda Landowska, Rosalyn Tureck and many others.

Legend has it that Bach wrote the work, originally simply called "Aria," to soothe the sleepless nights of one Count Kaiserling, who asked his private harpsichordist, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, to perform it.

It's unlikely that's true, since Goldberg, apparently a gifted musician who studied under Bach's son Wilhelm Friedemann in Dresden, was only 13 years old at the time. Nevertheless, his name stuck to the music ever since.

Revisiting the Goldberg Variations is always a special experience for Serkin. His debut solo recording was of the piece, at age 18. He's recorded it four times.

"In playing a piece which I have played much of my life, like the Goldberg Variations, you ask whether my interpretation has changed over the years. I can say that it changes each time I play it," he says.

"In fact, I make no effort to solidify any interpretation at all. My study of the piece continually opens up new possibilities, and I love to explore those. In a disciplined and considered way, and genuinely spontaneously, not arbitrarily nor whimsically, the music speaks to me and plays through me, and always differently. It is said that when Bach played, and others, like Chopin, that they played their own music each time very differently. How I wish we could hear them!"

Peter Serkin

Old Friends

Pianist Peter Serkin will perform Bartok's *Piano Concerto No. 3* with the Vermont Symphony Orchestra at the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts.

By Bejamin Pomerance

The concerts in Germany were only a couple of weeks away. The Budapest Radio Orchestra was ready for the soloist to join them on their tour. All of the programs had been printed. All of the publicity materials had been liberally distributed to every location where the ensemble and the featured pianist would perform. And in the midst of the inevitable whirlwind of preparations, Peter Serkin decided that he would start to learn the music.

The composition that had forced him — finally and nonchalantly — into the practice room was Bela Bartok's *Piano Concerto No. 3*. It is a deceptively treacherous work, lyrical and transparent, no place for the soloist to hide within these achingly beautiful waves. It was still new to the party, completed by Bartok only around 15 years earlier. To begin studying it only a couple of weeks before performing it was an unnecessarily reckless task.

And Rudolf Serkin was glad. Finally, his prodigious son was about to meet his musical match. Finally, something was about to challenge the upstart kid who had been accepted into the Curtis Conservatory of Music at the age of 11, who had played at the Marlboro Music Festival and soloed with the Cleveland and Philadelphia orchestras at the age of 12, who was gifted as hell and knew it. Finally, he had tap-danced on the cliff one time too many, relied on his talents a little too much. Finally, Peter was about to learn one long-overdue lesson.

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Photo courtesy of the artist.

"I have never been very ambitious as a musician, in that I have little interest in career or self-promotion of any kind," Serkin says. "My interest is in music for its own sake. My personal ambition is to be a good musician, maybe someone who takes the music itself very seriously while taking myself not too seriously."

But then something unexpected happened when the pianist began his tardy preparation.

"The genuine simplicity, insouciance and gentleness of this work appealed to me then, as it does now, alongside other works more complex, bold, disturbing, which I equally took to," Serkin recalls. "There is something particularly touching about this work and its casual elevatedness, in some of it being scored somewhat similarly to a Mozart concerto, in its meaningful, spiritual slow movement, which includes night music in its middle section, with birds and insects."

Enthralled with his new love, the teenager learned fast. A few days before the first concert in Germany, he offered to play the concerto for his father. Rudolf, the holder of the Presidential Medal of Freedom with more than a hundred solo appearances with the New York Philharmonic under his fingers, naturally accepted. Hoping for the best, he nevertheless suspected the worst. Surely, the boy hadn't mastered such a complex composition in such a short timeframe.

And then he listened. And he listened some more. And by the time Peter got up from the keyboard, Rudolf realized that he didn't have very much that he could say to improve the boy's performance. Later that evening, in a conversation with his wife, far out of Peter's earshot — or so the father believed — the eminent pianist at last found his tongue again. "That asshole actually learned it," Rudolf proclaimed about their son. "And he plays it well."

There was only one problem. Everyone seemed satisfied with what Peter had done — except for Peter himself. For one of the first times in his life, he had discovered a musical puzzle that his deft fingers could not easily solve. He could play the notes, of course, and master the rhythms with golden precision. Yet as he performed the concerto throughout Germany, and then quickly gave a set of concerts stateside with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra, something kept tugging at his sleeves, a nagging sense that he was missing something critical.

Which is why, when Peter Serkin performs this concerto with the Vermont Symphony Orchestra on Sept. 22, the music to the audience members' ears will be different from the music that audiences in Germany and Philadelphia heard from that 14-year-old kid. The perspectives have shifted with the pianist's growing realization that this pestering sense of incompleteness was legitimate, that something indeed was missing from these pages. And from that recognition grew another understanding: the awareness that he could do something about it.

For this is what happens when a genius dies without adding the punctuation marks to his last will and testament. During his final months of life, Bartok crafted two concluding offerings, doing much of the work during his stay at a cabin in the Adirondack community of Saranac Lake. One composition was a concerto for viola and orchestra. The other piece, a birthday gift for his wife, Ditta, was his last piano concerto.

He barely had time enough to finish before death took him. Yet his passing robbed him of any opportunity to edit what he had feverishly created. Enter Serkin, who has by now devoted decades to trying to play not only what Bartok wrote, but also what Bartok likely intended.

"In this special case, it may be a misrepresentation to play this concerto just according to the scant markings by the composer," the pianist explains. "Had he lived a little longer, he surely would have gone through the work diligently himself with all needed markings, as he had with his previous works."

"So, when I play this work, I play it and encourage the conductor and orchestra to play it with more flexibility in tempo fluctuation and rubato than what is, or is not, marked in the score. I also question, and often alter, some dynamic markings provided by its initial editors, Tibor Serly, Gyorgy Sandor and Eugene Ormandy. Knowledgeable and experienced as these musicians were, their choices for this very new piece might not be quite what Bartok himself might have opted for, their choices often being somewhat milder, more cautious and less varied than what Bartok himself might have done with it."

To attempt to enter Bartok's mind, and to step over the declarations of Eugene Ormandy and other classical music royalty, is an audacious move — one that, in the wrong hands, could be career-damaging. For Serkin, though, this is par for a lifelong course.

"I have never been very ambitious as a musician, in that I have little interest in career or self-promotion of any kind," Serkin says. "My interest is in music for its own sake. My personal ambition is to be a good musician, maybe someone who takes the music itself very seriously while taking myself not too seriously."

Yet fame has found Serkin in spite of himself. He has soloed with orchestras led by everyone from Pierre Boulez to Claudio Abbado to Christoph Eschenbach. He has collaborated with everyone from Yo-Yo Ma to Pamela Frank to the Guarneri String Quartet. He has received a Grammy Award nomination for playing concertos by Mozart and earned two more nominations for performing far different music by Olivier Messaien.

Photo courtesy of the artist.

He has taught at Juilliard and at Curtis, and currently maintains a studio at Bard College's Conservatory of Music. In every traditional measure, the spotlight has glibly laughed at this man's reluctance to pursue it.

It would have been far safer, of course, to hang onto those storied coattails of his father, and to walk in the footsteps of his grandfather, the highly influential violinist Adolf Busch. But as his last-minute high-wire act with Bartok's *Concerto No. 3* demonstrated, Serkin never was particularly inclined to travel safer roads. Instead, he chased what was then seen as avant-garde, premiering works by Toru Takemitsu, Oliver Knussen, Peter Lieberson, Stefan Wolpe, and other composers whom many soloists at the time avoided. The music could be bearishly difficult, and the chances of any commercial successes could be slim. Serkin lapped it all up anyway.

Today, he insists that he was not merely trying to separate himself from his father's colossal reputation. Instead, he points out that he has gravitated toward many modern composers because he enjoyed collaborating with them. For Serkin, the ebb and flow of close working relationships adds the spice to keep music from ever becoming dull, starting with introductions made by his father and continuing with a still-ongoing search for artistic companions.

"I cherish the times I had to play with Pablo Casals, Alexander Schneider, the Budapest String Quartet, the Guarneri, Orion, Cleveland, Vermeer, Shanghai, and Dover quartets," he says.

Perhaps most famously of all, there was Tashi, the ensemble that formed to play Messaien's *Quartet for the End of Time* and then kept right on going: Ida Kavafian on violin, Fred Sherry on cello, Richard Stoltzman on clarinet, and Serkin on the keys. Together, they were seen as a counterculture emblem, with reviewers at times devoting an inordinate amount of ink to discussing their attire. Serkin, for instance, became known for sporting a goatee and a tunic. Still, the pianist again emphasizes that he wasn't cultivating an image as a keyboard hippie. Instead, he calls his Tashi years "freeing," a chance for unbridled music making among friends.

Of course, that was then. At the age of 71, the bespectacled Serkin wears neither goatee nor tunic on stage, and has seen the shock value of earlier days retreat into vintage status. Wolpe, Lieberson, Knussen, and especially Takemitsu are far more accepted now — thanks in no small measure to Serkin himself — and the music that was once hair-raising no longer shocks the conscience. The members of Tashi went their separate ways several years ago, and when they came back together for a reunion program in 2008, The New York Times reported on the event using adjectives that are typically reserved for the nostalgia tours of The Rolling Stones.

Yet Serkin, in the greatest indication that he was always searching for more than just the element of surprise, seemingly has not minded time's passage a bit. He still performs music by the composers who no longer seem as deliciously scandalous as they once did, giving crowds a chance to actually pay attention to their artistic value rather than merely hearing the astonishment factor. He still returns to some older chestnuts, too: J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* and even the massive neoclassical concertos of Brahms — but only on his terms, not on the whim of some zealous manager lusting after a box office guarantee.

And then there is a certain composition by Bartok, the one that a 14-year-old savant thought that he could tame in two weeks, only to find in it enough fascinations to bridge a couple of lifetimes.

"The Third Piano Concerto by Bartok is for me like an old friend," Serkin says.

The same can be said for the rest of the pianist's repertoire, Bach to Beethoven to Wolpe to Takemitsu. They have, in many ways, grown together. The world has changed around them, but here they are, still together, at once comforting and challenging. This is what old friends are for.

Peter Serkin performs Bartok's Piano Concerto No. 3 *with the Vermont Symphony Orchestra on September 22 at 7:30 p.m. in the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts. For tickets and more information, call 802.864.5741 or visit www.vso.org.*

Peter Serkin

Yale SCHOOL OF MUSIC

March 13, 2018

YSM appoints Peter Serkin Visiting Professor of Piano

Celebrated pianist to teach at Yale during 2018-2019 academic year

School of Music Dean Robert Blocker recently shared with the YSM community news that pianist Peter Serkin will join the faculty for the 2018-2019 academic year. Below is Dean Blocker's enthusiastic announcement.

I am very pleased to announce the appointment of Peter Serkin as Visiting Professor of Piano for the 2018-2019 academic year. A pianist of prodigious gifts and insights, Mr. Serkin began concertizing with America's renowned orchestras and conductors at age 12, and his internationally celebrated career in the ensuing years has taken him to all corners of the globe. We are fortunate that his calendar permits him to be at Yale during our search for a senior piano professor.

Peter Serkin began his musical studies at the Curtis Institute of Music, where his teachers included the Polish pianist Mieczyslaw Horszowski and the American virtuoso Lee Luvisi, as well as his father, Rudolf Serkin. He graduated in 1965 and the next year, at age 19, was the recipient of the Grammy Award in the Most Promising New Classical Recording Artist category (the award category later named Best New Classical Artist). Three of his recordings have earned Grammy nominations (one of them features six Mozart concerti, and the other two feature the music of Olivier Messiaen) along with other awards. Serkin was the first pianist to receive the Premio Internazionale Musicale Chigiana award, and in 2001, the New England Conservatory presented him with an honorary doctorate degree.

His extensive repertoire and discography reflect a commitment to and advocacy of the music of our time. Along with his musical and intellectual insights into the work of J.S. Bach (four recordings of the "Goldberg" Variations – the first at age 18), Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Chopin, and Dvorak, he has also explored the music of such composers as Reger, Berg, Webern, Schoenberg, Messiaen, Takemitsu, Oliver Knussen, Peter Lieberson, Stefan Wolpe, Elliott Carter, and Charles Wuorinen.

Among prominent virtuosi, Peter Serkin was one of the first to experiment with period fortepianos, and the first to record late Beethoven sonatas on modern pianos and instruments of Beethoven's era. He has collaborated with Yo-Yo Ma, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Pamela Frank, Andras Schiff, the Budapest Quartet, the Guarneri Quartet, and many other leading artists and orchestras. He is a founding member of TASHI (known later as the Tashi Quartet) and records for a variety of labels.

Mr. Serkin teaches master classes throughout the world and has taught at such leading institutions as the Curtis Institute of Music and The Juilliard School. He presently teaches at the Bard College Conservatory of Music. I am delighted that he will join Professor Boris Berman and the YSM piano faculty as a mentor and teacher to our gifted piano students. We look forward to the artistic and intellectual contributions Peter will make to the School of Music and to Yale in the year ahead.

Warmest regards,
Robert Blocker
The Henry and Lucy Moses Dean of Music
Yale School of Music

December 22, 2017

Minnesota's best classical music concerts bubbled with optimism in 2017

By Terry Blain

1. Peter Serkin, the Frederic Chopin Society, Nov. 12: Now 70 and a dean of American classical piano, Serkin's recital at Macalester College paired Mozart with Bach's compendious "Goldberg Variations" for magisterial gravitas and insight.

June 23, 2017

Pianist Peter Serkin talks Beethoven before Del. Symphony performance

By Christine Facciolo

This Sunday the Delaware Symphony Orchestra under the direction of David Amado welcomes eminent pianist Peter Serkin to Longwood Gardens for a performance of Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major in an all-Beethoven program.

Concertgoers of a certain age will remember Serkin as the goateed, tunic-clad pianist of the Tashi Quartet which he helped found back in 1973. Now as he nears 70, he is an elder statesman of classical music.

In this rare interview, conducted via email, he shares his views on family, jazz and Beethoven.

Beethoven's popularity is unparalleled in music history. His compositions are the gold standard by which all Western music is judged. Is popularity in the creative arts a double-edged sword?

Popularity is a fickle and questionable thing in art. I hardly think that the great composers had mass popularity in mind as an ambition when they wrote their works. Certainly they loved to be appreciated by those who understood and took to their music, but in no way were they going to try to bring that about by writing music that they thought would make them popular. Beethoven's own approach was defiant, and in a way his current popularity has in it a risk of diluting the strength of that defiance and outrageousness. But it is wonderful to see that composers can be appreciated many years later. A pity though that during their lifetimes many of them were reviled and under-appreciated.

This concerto is a youthful work and the innovation we normally associate with Beethoven is not immediately evident here. Yet underneath the Mozartean structure we hear glimpses of the mature Beethoven. How would you describe this piece to someone who has never heard it before?

The second piano concerto by Beethoven is a youthful work, that is true, but at the same time it is a strong and innovative piece in its scope and in its fervent expression. It is often described as being somewhat like Haydn and Mozart but for me that is quite misleading. There are bold strokes, such as at the end of the slow movement, the damper pedal held down while the piano extemporizes responses, cadenza-like, to the quiet orchestra's questionings. The great cadenza to the first movement was composed by Beethoven decades after his having written the concerto itself. Coming back years later to it indicates Beethoven's own regard for his early concerto. The cadenza itself is full of energy and wildness, in a way looking ahead to the Sonata Opus 106.

What do you love about this piece?

I love everything about this piece – all that is expressed in it that is so fresh and genuine, and all its musical content and detail. All of the great composers' works seem so impeccable that one could not improve even one note on what they have done so ineffably. About 10 years ago I had the experience of playing the last movement of this concerto with the school band in which

two of my children played. My daughter Maya was among the flutists, and my son Stefan one of the trumpet players. There were so many flutists and clarinetists and saxophonists, trumpets and about 12 tubas! Over 100 players, as I remember it. It made quite a sound and was a lot of fun.

Do you have any favorite passages you would like to highlight for the audience?

All of Beethoven's concerti have in their first movements passages which are tonally far removed from their home keys. In this one there are two passages, pianissimo, the first in D flat major and the second in the recapitulation in G flat major, which seem to lift up off the ground.

What makes Beethoven's way of writing for the piano unique?

Beethoven, like the great composers who preceded him, was a great improviser, and much of what he writes seems to be as if improvised on the spot. He certainly experimented with new techniques, new approaches to playing the piano. He continued to play throughout his life, even when disabled by his deafness. In most of his works for keyboard he invented innovative elements, some of which must have seemed quite outlandish at the time.

I read that you're a big fan of jazz, especially the improvisatory aspect of it. How can classical musicians impart that same sense of spontaneity to their performances?

I am a big fan of jazz. I've had the great fortune of having heard Thelonius Monk, Archie Shepp, Bill Evans, Frank Morgan and others live which made a deep impression on me. I have loved hearing (recordings of) Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Art Tatum, and many others. Hearing great jazz has changed me in some ways. There is a sense of freedom as well as a sense of sureness, and even outrageousness in their playing that is inspiring. In playing classical music one can certainly relate to the music so experientially, that it is born spontaneously, as if made up on the spot.

You are the son and grandson of two internationally renowned musicians. Is there anything from them that lives on in you?

I come from a family of musicians, going back many generations. My father was a wonderful pianist and musician and I learned so much from his example as well as from his teaching. He wisely, I think, always had me study with other teachers concurrently to my studying with him, so as to get a wider view. My grandfather, Adolf Busch, was a great musician, violinist, as soloist and chamber player, and composer. I was five years old when he died but I still remember him. I would like to think that some of their musicality and devotion to music exists somewhat in me, too. But that is wishful thinking - who knows? I would always resist any notion in music of pedigree or credential.

What do you do when you're not practicing, performing or traveling to your next concert?

When not practicing nor playing concerts I might be teaching and coaching music. And I love to listen to music and read good literature.

THE MORNING CALL

May 3, 2017

Curtis Symphony Orchestra with pianist Peter Serkin

By Steve Siegel

Philadelphia's Curtis School of Music has produced some of the world's greatest musical talent, whose ranks include Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, Gian Carlo Menotti and many renowned soloists.

One of them is pianist Peter Serkin, who will join the Curtis Symphony Orchestra as soloist in Brahms' monumental Piano Concerto No. 1 on Saturday at Miller Symphony Hall in Allentown. Also on the program is Barber's Adagio for Strings and Strauss' "Ein Heldenleben."

Hailed as a "collective marvel" by The Philadelphia Inquirer, the Curtis Symphony Orchestra is one of the finest student orchestral ensembles in the world. Curtis conducting fellow Conner Gray Covington will open the program with the Barber, after which Minnesota Orchestra music director Osmo Vanska will conduct the Brahms and Strauss works.

The program is a reunion of sorts, since Serkin, Curtis class of '64, will be rejoining the orchestra in a program that features one of the best-known works of Barber, who graduated from Curtis in 1934.

Barber entered Curtis at age 14, a triple prodigy in composition, voice and piano. Serkin, son of pianist Rudolf Serkin, was himself a prodigy, entering Curtis in 1958 at age 11. While Barber generally played by the rules, Serkin was always something of a rebel.

I recall attending a recital Serkin gave at Carnegie Hall in the mid 1960s. He took the stage, amid gasps of disapproval from the audience, in full hippie garb, with shoulder-length hair, granny glasses and a white tunic. Of course his performance was outstanding, with music critics having to admit that he gave an electric delivery in spite of what he was wearing.

Serkin remains a passionate performer, and is known as one of the most thoughtful and individualistic musicians today. His repertoire spans five centuries, and his performances with symphony orchestras, recital appearances, chamber music collaborations and recordings are respected worldwide.

Serkin has since performed with the world's major symphony orchestras with such eminent conductors as Seiji Ozawa, Pierre Boulez, Daniel Barenboim, Claudio Abbado, Simon Rattle, James Levine, Herbert Blomstedt and Christoph Eschenbach.

As a dedicated chamber musician, he has collaborated with Alexander Schneider, Pamela Frank, Yo-Yo Ma, the Budapest, Guarneri and Orion string quartets, and Tashi, of which he was a founding member. Serkin lives in Massachusetts, where he teaches at Bard College Conservatory of Music and the Longy School of Music.

•**Curtis Symphony Orchestra with pianist Peter Serkin,** 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Miller Symphony Hall, 23 N. Sixth St., Allentown. Tickets: $25, $35; free, students. 610-432-6715, www.millersymphonyhall.org.

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August 12, 2016

A long-awaited sojourn: Pianist Peter Serkin

By Amy Hegarty

World-renowned pianist Peter Serkin is no stranger to Santa Fe. Around 1980, he visited the city during a cross-country road trip with his eldest daughter, and in 1999 he performed here in a solo recital. This week, however, he settles in for his longest stay yet, when he makes his debut with the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival as artist-in-residence.

"[Artistic Director] Marc Neikrug and I have been friendly for a very long time, and I have long respected his musicianship as composer and pianist, but when invited to the festival in the past, I had always declined because, while my children were younger, I wanted to be with them as much and as continuously as possible, especially during the summers," Serkin told *Pasatiempo*. Now, with his five children grown, Serkin joins the festival for its 44th season, and between Sunday, Aug. 14 and Monday, Aug. 22, he appears in five chamber music concerts and one recital, performing works that span the 16th to the 20th centuries.

Chamber music has been a long-standing part of Serkin's robust repertoire, which he's cultivated over the course of a nearly 60-year-long career. Serkin made his professional debut in 1959, at the age of twelve, at the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont, which was founded by legendary musicians in his own family: his father, pianist Rudolf Serkin, and his maternal grandfather, violinist Adolf Busch. This auspicious debut quickly led to solo engagements with the world's leading orchestras, and in 1966, at the age of nineteen, he earned his first Grammy Award. Serkin also famously retired from performing in 1968, and in late 1971, he moved with his family to Mexico. He returned to his profession eight months later, however, after hearing Bach being played on the radio in a neighbor's house. "The experience I had in Mexico of hearing Bach's music unexpectedly was a powerful inspiration for me to get back to playing his music and to playing all sorts of great music," Serkin said.

For Serkin, much of that great music lies within the chamber music repertoire. "Having played chamber music all my life, I actually regard it as not so very different from playing solo, or from playing with an orchestra," Serkin said. "It is often well-served when played in a rather soloistic manner by each individual player in a group, bringing things out boldly and with real presence."

Serkin brings that boldness to the first program of his residency on Aug. 14, when he joins forces with one of his frequent collaborators, the Orion String Quartet, for a performance of Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No. 1 in E major, arranged for piano and string quartet by Anton Webern, a protégé of the composer. Serkin

described this work as “a most beautiful and exciting masterpiece originally written for a large chamber ensemble of strings and winds”; Schoenberg also arranged the work for large orchestra and for piano four-hands. While Sunday’s performance adheres primarily to Webern’s arrangement, it reflects what Serkin described as his own “adjustments in Webern’s score, particularly in its piano part,” which he made years ago while performing in Tashi, an acclaimed, innovative quartet he cofounded in 1973.

“These changes of mine,” Serkin said, “were almost all based very much on how Schoenberg wrote for piano in his own four-hands arrangement. Schoenberg’s piano writing,” he added, “was generally less sparse than Webern’s — richer, more like Brahms’ somehow, with octave couplings and all kinds of differences in details. But mostly this is Webern’s arrangement still, with some changes made by me, discreetly and respectfully.”

Serkin’s next appearance is in a solo recital on Tuesday, Aug. 16, which, he said, “uncharacteristically” for him, “has no contemporary music on it. The closest to that,” he noted, “is Charles Wuorinen’s setting for piano of a motet written in the 15th century by Josquin [des Prez].” Other pieces on the program include “the deeply moving *Pavana Lachrymae* by John Dowland, set for keyboard by William Byrd from its original lute version, as well as Bryd’s own joyous *La Volta*.” These works, in addition to “a chromatic fantasia by Sweelinck” and two pieces by John Bull — “a brief gigue” and “a bold work in which a cantus firmus [fixed song] unfolds in all twelve keys” — weren’t written “with a modern piano in mind, since it hadn’t even been imagined yet,” Serkin said. “But these works can still be played on a piano in a compelling way. It is all wonderful music that we only get to hear too rarely.”

Tuesday’s recital also features three pieces by Max Reger, “in honor of the centenary of Reger’s death,” as well as Beethoven’s Sonata in E major, Op. 109 — a “great work,” Serkin said, that “Brahms also ended some of his solo recitals with.”

On Thursday, Aug. 18, Serkin partners with violinist Ida Kavafian, one of his colleagues from Tashi, for a performance of Schumann’s Sonata in D minor for violin and piano. Serkin’s following two programs feature works that are arguably centerpieces of his appearance at the festival.

“The programs for this residency began with the intention to play with my recent duo-piano partner, Julia Hsu, a marvelous pianist,” Serkin said. Accordingly, on Saturday, Aug. 20, he and Hsu perform J. S. Bach’s Concerto in C major for two pianos, strings, and continuo. On the following evening, they perform Ferruccio Busoni’s two-piano arrangement of his own Fantasia Contrappuntistica, “an audacious work,” Serkin said, “built around, and elaborating on, Bach’s Art of Fugue. This is a piece,” he added, “that I had played with Richard Goode years ago, on which we were coached by my father, who well-remembered hearing Busoni and Egon Petri perform it in London.”

Although Serkin has played works for two pianos and piano four-hands in the past, it wasn’t until he partnered with Hsu that he was “able to really devote much attention to proper work on this repertoire,” he said.

“One of my personal piano teachers was Karl Ulrich Schnabel, who concentrated very much on the great four-hand literature, which he stressed should be prepared very thoroughly and thoughtfully — almost like a string quartet might be — and not treated to the slap-dash approach of two pianists, no matter how able individually, getting together quickly, maybe enjoying themselves, but not giving enough consideration to those issues particular to music written to be played on one piano [by] four hands.” An advantage of performing this kind of music, Serkin noted, is that, “in becoming mindful of the many aspects of playing together

with another pianist, one then comes back to playing by oneself with a somewhat new, more precise, and more flexible perspective. And sitting next to Julia Hsu, observing up-close her gracefulness, beautiful phrasing, relaxed approach, and generally felicitous playing is quite inspiring, to say the least. I can, and have, learned a lot from her."

On Monday, Aug. 22, Serkin closes out both his residency and the festival with a performance of Dvorák's Piano Quintet in A major with the Dover Quartet. Marc Neikrug suggested the pairing of Serkin with Dover, and soon after, both the pianist and the quartet were among the artists performing in a memorial concert at this summer's Tanglewood music festival for Joseph Silverstein, the former concertmaster and assistant conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

The ensemble "played beautifully," Serkin said, "and I was delighted that Marc had put us together for the final concert in Santa Fe."

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL

July 15, 2016

Peter Serkin artist-in-residence for Santa Fe fest

By Kathaleen Roberts

With his luminous lineage, it's easy to assume pianist Peter Serkin was born on a keyboard.

The son of the legendary pianist Rudolf Serkin and the grandson of the violinist and composer Adolf Busch, the younger Serkin is the artist-in-residence for this year's Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival.

Serkin will perform a solo piano recital in the New Mexico Museum of Art's St. Francis Auditorium on Aug. 16. The program will emphasize rarely heard 17th century works, as well as Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109.

Scheduled for six collaborative performances throughout the festival, the pianist also will perform Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony No. 1 with the Orion String Quartet and Dvorák's Piano Quintet in A Major, Op. 81 with the Dover Quartet. See santafechambermusic.com for dates and locations.

Serkin's fingers span five centuries of music. As a child, he grew up immersed in, enveloped and enchanted by the music of both his father and his grandfather. Rudolf Serkin was regarded as one of the greatest Beethoven interpreters of the 20th century.

The younger Serkin says he never intended to become a professional pianist.

"I think it was just a progression," he said in a phone interview from New York, where he teaches at Bard College after stints at both Juilliard and Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music.

"It was my whole life, anyway. I was so in love with and so excited to get to know great music. I actually started with the violin."

He began playing piano at "6 or 7," he said.

His first teacher was his father, Rudolf, who could be something of a taskmaster.

"He could be tough and he could be a little acerbic, too," Serkin acknowledged.

"But that is the nature of being a serious musician, anyway, because it's such a difficult thing to do.

"Even then, it wasn't so much to be a pianist, but a means just to get to know great music."

The exploration never stopped.

Serkin began studying at Curtis at age 11. He won his first Grammy Award at 19. Since then, he has played with the world's greatest symphonies, led by such eminent conductors as Seiji Ozawa, Pierre Boulez, George Szell, Eugene Ormandy, Simon Rattle and James Levine.

He has recently been playing with Julia Hsu, his duet partner. Hsu will perform with him in Santa Fe.

The San Diego
Union-Tribune.

August 19, 2015

Peter Serkin finds a partner

With pianist Julia Hsu, Serkin falling in love with four-hands repertoire all over again
By James Chute

The eminent pianist Peter Serkin has always been attracted to the piano four-hands repertoire, but until relatively recently, he's kept his distance.

"I've been intimidated by the prospect of playing (four hands), even with good players, with very good players," Serkin said. "I used to play with my dad (the celebrated pianist Rudolf Serkin); I played with fine players like Richard Goode and Andras Schiff and Manny Ax. And it's always been problematic. It's always been uncomfortable somehow, playing four hands."

All too often, piano four hands is thrown into a concert series as a crowd-pleasing gimmick. Who doesn't love seeing two pianists on the same bench, or even at different pianos, matching wits? But from a purely musical standpoint, the result is often disappointing.

"One rarely has enough time to work on it as a duo, the way a string quartet might work on something," Serkin said. "To some extent, four-hand music is often just thrown together."

Serkin, however, has found a congenial partner in pianist Julia Hsu, and they've been rehearsing and performing together for more than a year. At La Jolla Music Society SummerFest on Wednesday, they'll play four-hands repertoire by Schumann, Bizet, Mozart, Schubert and Brahms.

"In a sense, it's almost taken over what I do because it's been such an enjoyable experience," Serkin said.

Highly regarded both for his penetrating interpretations of the standard repertoire and for his championing of the most thorny contemporary composers, Serkin is finding the four-hands repertoire a fresh challenge.

"It's music that's so intricate, it really requires a lot of discipline and a lot of hard work, not only to learn how to play ensemble-wise together, but in terms of balancing and proportions and pedaling," he said.

In collaborating with Hsu, but also in his other performances, Serkin is engendering a manner of communication that goes beyond the overt body language that is increasingly common in chamber music performances,

"Trust has to be built," he said. "One learns to breath together, one learns how to feel music together, and trust doesn't require some self-conscious twitch for every note. …

"I've become somewhat averse to too many gestural, choreographed motions. You see it in a lot of string quartets and

different ensembles. I'm trying to go to the opposite extreme."

Although in rehearsal they often switch parts to get a perspective on what the other is playing, in La Jolla Hsu will be playing the primo (the top) part.

"It's interesting to communicate with someone who plays somewhat differently from oneself and yet to find some common language, to meet and to adapt," Serkin said. "There's a (kind) of relaxation in her playing that's not mine, but I'm learning from her playing. It's very good."

Los Angeles Times

February 28, 2014

Critic's Pick: Peter Serkin

By Mark Swed

Pianist Peter Serkin performing with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in 2000.

In the 1960s, Rudolf Serkin, one the world's most revered pianists, used to fret about his hippie son, Peter. There was little question that Peter Serkin, a piano prodigy, had the capacity to follow in his father's famous footsteps. At 19, the younger Serkin already had won a Grammy. But the pianist, who plays a recital at Broad Stage on Sunday afternoon, was clearly headed on his own route.

After dropping out for a few years to find himself, he helped found Tashi, one of the first countercultural classical chamber ensembles. He has gone his own middle way ever since. That has meant respecting his father's tradition of bringing to the Austro-German classics -- particularly Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms – an approach that honors purity. But he also has an expansive repertory, with Chopin a particular specialty.

Serkin, moreover, attends the present. He revered Messiaen, whose "Quartet for the End of Time" became Tashi's calling card. Serkin was close to the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu and best friends with the American Peter Lieberson, and both late composers wrote their finest piano music for him.

Hardly a hippie in appearance any longer – he tends these days to dress like a banker – but he plays with the

attention, care, enlightened reserve and illuminating touch of a Zen master. Still, Serkin can seem a loner, without grand careerist ambition and performing when and where he wants to, reserving much of his time for teaching and his family. But that means that he makes every appearance a matter of devotion.

Sunday's program is typical Peter Serkin. It begins with a capriccio by Dutch Baroque composer Pieterszoon Sweelinck and includes a scherzo by Charles Wuorinen (whose new opera, “Brokeback Mountain,” premiered in Spain in January). The more familiar pieces are a Beethoven piano sonata (“Les Adieux”) and set of late bagatelles (Opus 126), along with Dane Carl Neilsen’s quirky Theme and Variations.

The Mercury News
The Newspaper of Silicon Valley

November 26, 2012

In a rare interview, pianist Peter Serkin talks about his life, family and art

By Richard Scheinin

Peter Serkin's longtime fans may remember him as somewhat rebellious and unconventional -- a goateed pianist in a hippie tunic, performing in the classical quartet known as Tashi. That was in the 1970s. His performances tended to be electric, and it had nothing to do with what he was wearing. Serkin has a way of striking that magical balance between intellect and heart.

Now 65, he is an elder statesman of classical music. On the verge of his Dec. 1-2 performances with Symphony Silicon Valley, this exceptional musician -- the son of legendary pianist Rudolf Serkin, the grandson of the almost as legendary violinist Adolf Busch -- phoned from his home in Western Massachusetts to talk about Brahms' D minor concerto, which he will perform at the California Theatre. He also talked about his father, children, favorite composers, love of jazz and long friendship with George Cleve, who will conduct the D minor in San Jose.

Q Peter, when you play music, do you still feel the presence of your dad?

A I do, and also of my grandfather. I feel this quite strongly -- and maybe particularly my grandfather, though I didn't know him that well. But it still is something that entered my system -- the violin playing of Adolf Busch, whose records are now something I appreciate. And with my dad, too, of course. As I grew up, I heard him play many pieces I now play myself, but at that time I heard him playing them at home. And he really did practice tremendously", and then I'd go to the performances, and I was impressed then -- and I still am.

Q Is there an essence you extracted from those two musicians, from your father and grandfather?

A I think there's a certain honesty of approach in both of them, with respect to the composer and the composition, and a curiosity about each composition being its own world that makes it singular, that makes each individual piece live. My father was quite a scholar, too. When he studied a piece of music he took out the old autographs, the first editions, and any comments the composers might have made in letters.

Q Do you do the same today when preparing to play a piece?

A I do. I've picked up a lot of that in my approach.

Q So now you're preparing Brahms' D minor concerto. These San Jose concerts reunite you with George Cleve. When did you meet?

A I've known George since I was a teenager --- a long, long time! He was still a student at Mannes, and we were friends in New York, at the Casals

Festival in Puerto Rico and at the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont, where he particularly wanted to be around, and learn from, (cellist/conductor) Don Pablo Casals. Later we played Mozart K. 595 together in Winnipeg, where he was music director, and then played together in San Francisco, New York City, Toronto and in San Jose a few times. And I think, if I remember correctly, that we did Brahms' D minor. (They did, on Jan. 18-19, 1986, with the old San Jose Symphony.)

He has such a strong affinity for this music, as he does for Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. But with George it's not the same as just having an obliging conductor who's going to abide by all kinds of details that I might wish. With George it's more that he himself has a very strong conception and intuitive sense for what the piece is, and so much so that one gets swept away by the commitment and the energy that he brings to it. I think he's one of the great conductors.

Q Did you study this concerto as a boy, maybe with your dad?

A I did not study it as a kid. I started with the Brahms concerti a little bit late, and I began with No. 2, which I actually played for the first time in San Francisco with Seiji Ozawa. And then maybe in my late 20s, I started to study the D minor with Karl Ulrich Schnabel, one of my wonderful teachers. And I did play it for my father, but with my dad it was more just playing it through, not really a study.

Q Today, do you play it very differently than you did years ago?

A I think there is some evolution, but it's not a radical difference. But in subtle ways it's different every time. Even with the same orchestra, with the same conductor, from night to night it's going to be different.

Q You're 65. At this stage of your life, what do you find yourself drawn toward musically and in terms of repertory? Are you going back, consolidating? Making new discoveries?

A I've always been very interested in music that's being written today and in recent music. That was true even as a child, when that was somewhat discouraged. But it was just a component in me somehow --- inquisitive. And so when I get older that doesn't diminish. That's still there.

Now I think I'm more inclined to be open to all kinds of music that I might have dismissed as a younger snob. I don't feel as snobbish anymore, and I welcome the chance to learn music, even if it's not the greatest music.

Q Can you give me an example?

A Well, I'd rather not name things that I don't think are great. But here's an example of something that is great: Carl Neilsen wrote a theme with variations that I'm learning, which is a beautiful work, well worth doing, and I don't think it's very often played.

Q How did you get onto it?

A It just happened. Maybe it was in Denmark, actually, hearing some Nielsen, and speaking with maestro (Herbert) Blomstedt, who's very keen on Nielsen and began telling me about the piano works. And then I just sent out for it.

And there's a set of variations by Bizet, "Variations chromatiques," that's also very bold and fascinating to me, though I don't have plans to perform it. But I've taken a great interest in it. And there are some Stravinsky etudes, early works, which are brilliant -- and not often played, which I don't understand. I thought I'd take those on, as well as some pieces by Max Reger that I like very much.

So not recent pieces in those cases, but ones that are a little bit lesser known, and that I'm very keen to play for people.

Q How about brand new composers? Do any interest you?

A There's lots that I'm interested in.

Of course, as I get older I realize that the music that once was very new for me is no longer new at all. And while some of these composers may have died, I'm still very into their work. So when I play a

work by (Olivier) Messiaen or (Toru) Takemitsu, (Stefan) Wolpe or (Luciano) Berio, I first like to take out much of their music -- opera, choral music, orchestral music without piano -- and get some sense of their overall output and how it's reflected in their piano music, as well.

I've also been listening to some (Iannis) Xenakis, which I find remarkable, and playing lots of music by Charles Wuorinen, who is alive, and so that is current.

Q Any plans to learn music by some of the cool young composers in Brooklyn?

A I'm interested, but because I don't live in New York, I don't hear as much of it anymore, except what happens to be on the radio. I'm always interested, but I haven't yet found anyone to whom I would attach the kind of importance I would to Wourinen, for instance, or Takemitsu, when he was alive. But that's just because of my limitations, I'm sure. But my antennae are out.

Q You have five children. Do any of them play music?

A They've all played something or other. Stefan, my oldest son, has played trumpet, jazz trumpet. He graduated from Berklee (College of Music in Boston) last year. And Willie, my youngest son, also plays trumpet in a wonderful jazz band and large concert band at his school.

Q Interesting. Are you a jazz fan?

A Very much so. I used to hear some wonderful players in New York. I'll never forget hearing Thelonious Monk play in the clubs downtown. I heard Monk, and I heard Bill Evans. Heard many of these great saxophonists; I love Archie Shepp in particular. Frank Morgan. And many others.

Somehow I learned so much from them without being able to say exactly what it is. But there was something fundamental about the experience of listening to these guys, particularly Monk. I'll never forget it. I don't play jazz myself, though I've improvised.

Q What's the fundamental thing you pulled away from hearing them?

A I think there's a certain rhythmic energy and wildness and freedom and expression, maybe, if I had to put it into words. And the quality of making something up on the spot, based on a real sense of discipline at the same time, which is something I really admire in classical music performances, too. With all the work that goes into it, and all the considerations of a composer's intentions -- that there should still be that sense of spontaneity, that it's happening right now, on the spot.

Q Let's backtrack. Can you tell me about your other kids?

A Sure. Karina is my oldest, from my first marriage. She's in her 40s now, lives in Colorado and has two beautiful daughters. Elena lives in Germany. She's very connected with horses and equestrian work, and she's living at an equestrian farm in Bavaria. She's 25 now. Then Stefan, who's 23. Then Maya. She's 21, a senior at George Washington University; she's been studying international affairs. Then Willie is the youngest, 14 years old, playing soccer, a freshman in high school.

Q I wonder what you think of the commercialization of the classical music scene, as well as the big publicity apparatus that attaches itself to so many artists and organizations.

A I have something of an aversion to that kind of an approach. There's something that seems to miss the point when there's too much emphasis being put on the individual who's performing the great classic works. If there's so much emphasis put on the performing of it, it seems to detract from the actual conception, the actual experiencing of the music itself. And it can even be a distraction for the performer; performers can start to think of themselves too seriously and start to manufacture performances and interpretations, rather than letting the music lead them.

Q My guess is you've felt this way for a long time.

A Yes. And maybe I was brought up that way, to have tremendous reverence for

the great composers and not to make too great a deal out of those who play the music.

Q Over the years, you've spoken a lot about your dad, who was one of your teachers, sometimes mentioning his withering criticisms. Do you bring that sort of tough love approach into your own teaching? Is it beneficial?

A I think that, in a definite way in my teaching, I channel much of what I learned from all my teachers, though not necessarily even consciously. Things that I learned from (Mieczyslaw) Horszowski, as well as my dad and from Karl Ulrich Schnabel, as well as from other musicians who were not even pianists -- like Marcel Moyse, the flutist, and some of the conductors I was around, from Otto Klemperer to George Szell.

I was so eager to learn that it was almost some kind of implant or transplant. And I just can't help it, in the lessons I give today, to impart some of what they imparted to me. And my father was one of those teachers, no doubt. His very critical style towards his sons, I think, makes it a little more complicated, perhaps. No, I don't try to imitate that. If anything, I try to be more encouraging -- not to smooth over issues. But basically the reason we're together is (for me) to try to be of help, and I think encouragement is a big part of that, because it's kind of an act of bravery to play classical music.

And I'm very open to my students as they're being my teachers, as well.

Q Can you explain what you mean?

A The things they do that may not have occurred to me. That can stimulate ideas, so it really goes both ways.

Q One more question, before you go. I've read about your nervousness as a performer. Do you still have bouts of nerves?

A Yes, it's true. I'm afraid so. But I live with it, and I almost respect it in a certain way. I don't dread it as much as I used to. I can live with it. It's part of the energy of what's going on.

Peter Serkin

The Washington Post

November 2, 2011

Peter Serkin at the Kennedy Center for a night of firsts

By David Mermelstein

Pianist Peter Serkin embarks into new territory Thursday with the National Symphony Orchestra

Peter Serkin freely acknowledges the challenges he faced as a pianist emerging from the shadow of his famous father, the keyboard titan Rudolf Serkin. Yet now, at 64, he is a musical elder statesman in his own right, having embraced many of the same composers his father revered — Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms — while also forging a distinct path in modern music.

This latter interest gets a showcase at the Kennedy Centerfrom Thursday through Saturday, when Serkin appears with the National Symphony Orchestra in performances of Olivier Messiaen's "Le Reveil des Oiseaux" and George Benjamin's "Duet." Composer Oliver Knussen, the pianist's good friend, conducts the program, which also features Sean Shepherd's recent "Wanderlust" and Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite."

Part of the program's excitement comes from Serkin's never having performed these works before. "It's an adventure," he said by phone recently from his home in Richmond, Mass. "I've played quite a few works by Messiaen, but this one I never thought I'd be keen to play, because there's so little counterpoint."

Among Messiaen's trademarks as a composer was his love of birdsong, which he integrated into many of his best-known works. But "Le Reveil des Oiseaux," written in 1953 and revised in 1988, was the first of these — and the only one to rely exclusively on those sounds as it charts avian life from midnight to noon.

"We don't get the Indian and Greek rhythms of Messiaen's 'Oiseaux Exotiques' or the later wild pieces," Serkin said. "But it's still difficult to play, because the birds are so brilliant, and it's hard to match that on the piano. These birds are virtuosos, so I'm practicing quite a bit to prepare. It's also very much in the piano's upper register and poses a problem for one's posture. I'm not really sure where to sit."

Serkin, who last appeared with the National Symphony in 2005, has less of

an association with the work of Benjamin, a London-born composer who was a prized pupil of Messiaen's. Benjamin wrote "Duet" in 2008 for pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard and the Cleveland Orchestra. Ostensibly a piano concerto, it's just 12 minutes long and written for an orchestra without violins.

"I found it very difficult to write," Benjamin said. "When you put a piano next to an orchestra, it's revealed as a percussive instrument. So you have to find a middle ground. I tried to make the orchestra sound like a piano and the piano sound like an orchestra, with the two meeting in the middle. The piano writing is quite melodic and, apart from the beginning and the end, almost non-virtuosic. But by the end, the piano is leaping all over."

The pianist credits Knussen with suggesting the two works. "I trust Olly," Serkin said. "But I love both composers, so he didn't have to convince me. Besides, I love playing with Olly in general. There's a plan for him to write a piece for piano and orchestra for me later this season. I've played many of his solo pieces and was hoping for a work for piano and orchestra for quite a while."

If the pianist's father, Rudolf, dead 20 years now, no longer looms as he once did, he is by no means forgotten. "Both musically and personally, my dad is still a very strong presence in my life and always will be," Serkin said. "In some ways, my studying with him rubbed off on me. There was a certain scholarship on his part that impressed me. He was a stickler for all kinds of details in the text, which I admire. My dad gave me a certain conscience in that regard, to be mindful of a composer's intentions."

Serkin has long been the beneficiary of works written specifically for him. Beyond Knussen, such esteemed composers as Toru Takemitsu, Peter Lieberson, Alexander Goehr, Elliott Carter and Charles Wuorinen have dedicated pieces to him. In recent years, the collaboration with Wuorinen has been particularly fruitful, resulting in major works for piano and orchestra and piano and string quartet. "I think he's written eight or nine pieces for me," Serkin said. "And I've played others as well. In recital programs, I try to include Wuorinen. He's written a new adagio for me, which I'll play at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan in December."

Not surprisingly, Wuorinen has only praise for the pianist. "First, there's his complete mastery of the instrument," the composer said. "It's hard to imagine something that would be technically impossible for him. Then, more than anything else, I'm constantly impressed with his capacity to phrase. He's the equal of anyone. In fact, I don't know anyone who can do it that well. And there's the sheer sound — clear as can be — yet he can also play extremely percussively. But the hallmark of his musicianship is the expressive capacity."

Serkin roots his championing of newer composers in a belief that even the greatest of them may not be receiving their due. "Just because there's a reputation doesn't mean their works are getting heard," Serkin said. "We hear the classics so often — and that can be welcome, when they're played as if they were new — but it would benefit new pieces greatly if we heard them more often. Which is not to say that this music is so obscure and difficult that one can't get much out of it on first hearing. When there's goodwill, attentiveness and curiosity on the part of the audience, something strong can be conveyed. But it becomes deeper and more interesting on further hearings."

For various reasons the pianist has not forged relationships with emerging composers lately. "I don't get to hear as much now that I live in the country," he explained. "And I don't like to join in on fads. I've heard things I liked, but not that I've been really enamored of. But I'm always curious about new music — I don't want to become too old-fashioned."

Peter Serkin

The New York Times

November 22, 1998

Playing the Classics With the Dash Of the Contemporary

By Leslie Kandell

Articles on Peter Serkin often mention his satisfying life, now that he is acknowledged as a pianist unsurpassed in the wide-ranging repertory he embraces and is happily married, with a houseful of children.

His search for serenity, and the need to search, date to his boyhood. His father, the revered pianist Rudolf Serkin, was a legendary interpreter of the traditional literature and naturally wanted to guide his prodigiously gifted son, who made his concert debut at 12, to practice this way, not that way, and to listen to this music, not that.

But the precocious youngster was curious about new works and drawn to sounds of Far Eastern and American music. For him, knowing how to play piano was a way into that world where the answers were, or the questions. It is easy to see him feeling torn and criticized, especially as a teen-ager at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where his father was among his eminent teachers.

Small wonder that in the dashiki-and-beads hippie culture of the 1960's, he would turn on and drop out until he understood that he was too good to run away from himself anymore, and that he had better come back from Mexico and be the superb pianist he already was.

The curiosity never left him, although he shies away from discussing it. Now, as a renowned, idiosyncratic artist of 51, Mr. Serkin can look back as well as forward, in study and performance. He pulls neglected concertos out of the closet and is a persuasive proponent of new and difficult music.

Responsibly commissioning and championing contemporary works, he is also devoted to the heart of darkness -- standard German works -- and even picks up a few passage notes in Brahms that his father might have dropped. He has recorded the Bach Inventions and the enigmatic Duets (for BMG) and, going Glenn Gould one better, recorded the Goldberg Variations three times.

Mr. Serkin's recitals compel a focused quiet that is almost Asian. His best interpretations are strikingly pristine, as if an immense intellect were illuminating notes from the bottom. With his hands, he creates a visible, quixotic vibrato, which he says continues the tone. To say he is lost in his playing does not give the right image: he is found in it.

He once put together an entire concert of commissioned works, which he now drops one by one, like depth charges, into his programs of traditional music. And some of the concertos he totes around are like large species found only in the Galapagos: Reger, Schoenberg, Hindemith, Stravinsky. He approaches them as meaty chamber works, rather than with external Teutonic force.

The span of his journey is reflected in this afternoon's solo recital inaugurating the Classical Music in the Schools

program in Greenport, where his brother and a sister have homes. (His brother, John, is on the town's art and culture committee.) The recital, virtually sold out at press time, includes Mozart and Beethoven (Classical masters); Chopin, Debussy and Messiaen (tracing French pianism); Schoenberg, from the Second Viennese School, and two of his musical descendants, Gyorgy Kurtag and George Benjamin.

Although he is friendly or perhaps has family history with many composers whose work he performs, Mr. Serkin has not met Mr. Kurtag, an eccentric Hungarian who composes small, even fragmented, pieces that are sometimes grouped together by his colleagues. From his "Games," Mr. Serkin chose two he describes as extremely short and playful, about a minute long.

Mr. Benjamin's short "Meditation on the Name of Haydn" is built on connections between notes and letters of Haydn's name. Mr. Serkin has met the composer and sympathizes with his burden of having been a favorite pupil of Messiaen, whose stunning works Mr. Serkin performs with some frequency, considering how complex and difficult they are.

One composer visiting Tanglewood, where Mr. Serkin teaches in the summer, directed that her string quartet be performed the way Beethoven is played.

"That's not necessarily conceited, as long as one's Beethoven is bold enough," Mr. Serkin said in an interview at Tanglewood last year. "Schoenberg, for some of us, is like Beethoven, and he asked for his music to be played like Schubert. It's the sense of treating it with the same respect and care."

Some years ago, an eminent composer said that if audiences "won't listen to Bartok, they have no right to listen to Beethoven." "I'm not quite as doctrinaire as that," Mr. Serkin said. "It's only natural to be interested in music of our own time, music written now. But I'd never insist on a quota; it implies that it's something unpleasant to be somehow swallowed. It's a natural continuity from the boldness of older music. Beethoven was shunned as being crazy, and Bach was threatened for his wild improvisations. One can still be in touch with it. Conversely, the music of today requires a relatively spontaneous, open mind."

Mr. Serkin's biggest concern about performing new commissions is that he won't see the music in time to learn it for the concert. Aside from that, "I can't account for players who avoid new music," he said. "I think people are hungry for it. I suspect that the public has a more open mind than it is generally credited with. All one can do is follow one's own path."

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BUD POWELL on the Edge of Tonality

What MOZART Really Wrote

THE INVENTIVE PETER SERKIN

By Jessica Duchen

BACH TO THE FUTURE

PETER SERKIN IS ONE OF TODAY'S MOST ELUSIVE AND uncompromising pianists—a musician of profound intelligence who shuns commercialism and hype in favor of the tougher artistic challenges of Bach, Beethoven and contemporary music. Serkin nevertheless possesses a warmth and joie-de-vivre which shines through on, for instance, his recent recording of Bach's Inventions and Sinfonias (on RCA Red Seal). *The New York Times* recently described the CD as perhaps the most intriguing recording ever of these well-known works: [Serkin] "reveals in the most natural way just how much inventiveness is in these inventions," wrote Anthony Tommasini.

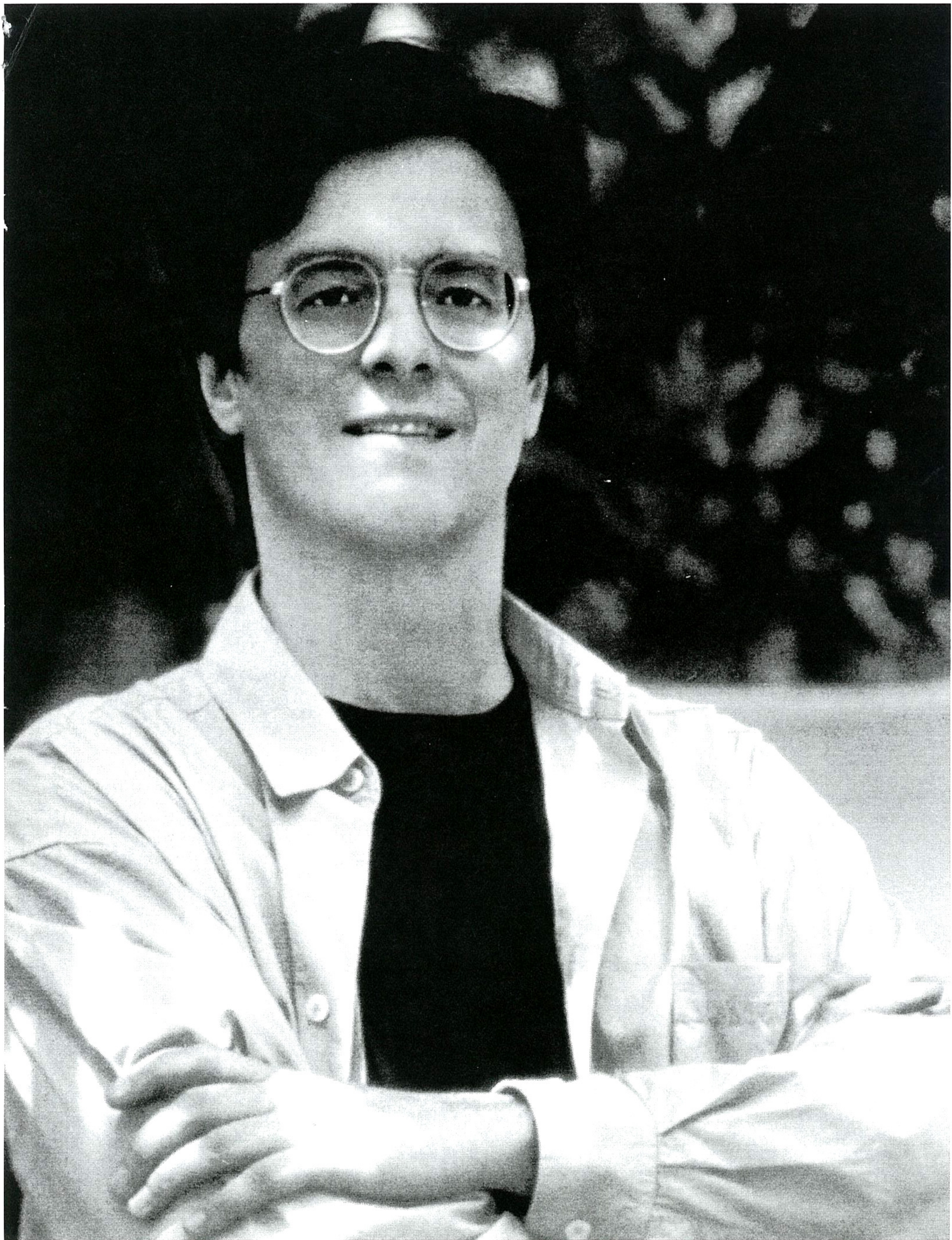
Though he rarely gives interviews, I met Peter Serkin at the Gilmore Festival in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and spent an entire hour with him; one recurring motif emerged: a sense that music and its creators demand more imagination and originality than they are often accorded.

It doesn't take much imagination, though, to recognize that it can't be easy to be the son of Rudolf Serkin and the grandson of Adolf Busch. "I didn't feel any pressure personally, and particularly not from my grandfather—none whatsoever," Peter Serkin insists. "If there's any pressure it would be because of other people's invidious comparisons that ordinarily wouldn't be there. But the relationship between my father and me was very good, and musically too: he was a good friend to talk to, long after I'd stopped studying with him. It's true people fixate on that, and it isn't such a nice feeling, just to be known as the son of Rudolf Serkin." It was worse, he says, when he was a child. "When you're six, eight, twelve years old, you're very sensitive to this kind of thing. But it's not that big a deal at this point."

Serkin's studies at the Curtis Institute were not only with his father but also with Lee Luvisi and Mieczyslaw Horszowski. "I was studying with all three at the same time—I think that was a good balance." Their teaching contrasted quite considerably; especially notable is the contrast between Horszowski's approach and that of Rudolf Serkin. Horszowski, who only in his nineties reached the level of public acclaim that he truly deserved, taught, says Serkin, largely by example. "As I remember his actual piano lessons, he wasn't particularly forceful in his ideas; it was more a kind of exploration. Many times he would sit at the piano and try things—it was almost as if he were there practicing by himself. One could learn a lot from that, observing how carefully he was hearing things, examining the music. I think that I've learned so much from Horszowski, but mainly from hearing him play. Up until his very last years, every chance I had I'd go to his concerts—and I'm not one to go to people's concerts, actually. It takes a lot to drag me out to a performance.

"I think I try to approach music from a composer's mentality."

"He was a remarkable musician, a very great pianist—but quite unknown until his last ten years. Perhaps people weren't sensitive enough or perceptive enough to realize what he was. While they were making fusses over other people who were not so interesting, Horszowski was there; he could have played far more and made many more recordings. Luckily he made a few in his later years. I think his playing was



getting better and better, although there are wonderful tapes of earlier days. I had known him ever since I was a child—I used to hear him at the Casals festival and at Marlboro and I always appreciated him."

Rudolf Serkin, however, was "a much stronger teacher, much more insistent—sometimes quite devastating in his criticisms. Being his son, that was a bit difficult because we'd have to take it home with us. On our walk home from Curtis, and at dinner too, we'd still be very tense because of the way I'd played a Bach fugue, or whatever. But he was a good teacher and he imparted a great sense of scholarship over the texts which he was quite intent on researching—autographed manuscripts, first editions and whatever other sources supervised by the composers—and he spent quite a lot of time preparing this."

But piano teachers were by no means the only influence the young pianist was open to. He often attended seminars given by the flautist Marcel Moyse and cites him as one of his most important mentors. Moyse's approach, significantly, sprang largely from his experience working with great singers such as Caruso. "He could remember the specific breathing points of Caruso; with so many outstanding singers with whom he had worked at the opera, he could remember their specific articulation of the words, the question of the timbre, all sorts of subtleties—as well as his own concept of what singing means and how to achieve some sort of singing approach on an instrument. But I suppose all my teachers had that in common. I love good singing to this day. I love to hear clear pitch and clear diction; it's so important and it's such a lesson for a pianist's sense of articulation as well."

Serkin's repertoire preferences concede little to what many promoters perceive as "popular" pieces. In his initial response to my question about repertoire choice, he in fact referred only to contemporary composers: Peter Lieberson, who has written several works for him, Alexander Goehr, Oliver Knussen and Toru Takemitsu (who also composed piano pieces for Serkin). "And I'm always looking at new music and listening. If I go to concerts it's usually prompted by interesting new works that are being played that one just can't hear otherwise."

"I'm always looking at new music and listening. If I go to concerts it's usually prompted by interesting new works that one just can't hear otherwise."

Doubtless this preference must lead to contradictory pressure from promoters. "Constantly," Serkin confirms, adding that it's not as bad as it used to be. "I don't know if it's got better or if my programs became more conservative, but it doesn't seem to be as problematic now. I used to feel almost in opposition to the commercial side, the presenters, the managers, the record executives. I felt I had to make a special point, even though I don't feel like a crusader at all. Playing new music is not a crusade: it's a love, an interest, and I want to include it in my programs. It seems natural to me. These people who avoid new music entirely, or just do an occasional piece by Bartók—I think are decadent and perverse! To me it's unnatural to be so blind. Bartók is good for people who don't want to play new music but still want to show that they play something from the twentieth century; it's relatively innocuous. But I think one should be a little bolder than that."

What happens if the administrative side has objections to Serkin's ideas? "We try to communicate and work something out and in some cases I adjust the program. If there's a piece of new music that I really believe in, then I can be quite stubborn about it, even to the point of saying, 'OK then, we won't have a project.' With orchestras, one encounters the same problem, though that seems to be getting better, at least in this country. At this point it's also interesting for me to play the classics which I haven't played. To play Beethoven concerti is quite new for me, in a way, so it's still fresh and exciting. Nerve-wracking sometimes, but very gratifying too."

Is it possible that Serkin has avoided certain Viennese classics for so long because his father was so deeply associated with them? "Oh I'm sure, yes," Serkin agrees. "I think I may have been intimidated by that. But it wasn't just that. It's the music world in general that seems stuck in a rut these days, so commercially-minded; each performer is out for his own personal success, so everyone makes a point of not taking chances, trying to please, performing what he or she imagines people want to hear. I think many audiences are surprisingly open-minded and grateful to hear something different. That goes for the manner in which it's played as well. People can be so conventional and imitative of each other, and the music so often calls out for something more outrageous, more full of character."

But Serkin is now approaching pieces that he had left alone for a long time. "There are many pieces that are often played that I've shied away from, but I've decided not to keep boycotting them. I feel that one needs to make choices as a pianist because there's such a tremendous abundance; and personally I prefer to seek out lesser-known works and also have time to learn lots of new music. So I would not go so far as to play pieces I don't believe in. The Liszt works and Rachmaninoff I can do without—it might be nice to listen to as entertainment once in a while, but I'm not so interested in them. That's my opinionated version of things. But," he reiterates, "one needs to make choices. Instead of playing Liszt I'd rather play Schoenberg; instead of Rachmaninoff I'd much rather play Stravinsky—it's really great music."

At the time of our interview, he had been working on the Brahms *Handel Variations* ("I'd never dreamed that I'd want to play them!") and Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata. "It was a great experience to study the *Appassionata*. I was really so moved by the music, which I had never really appreciated that way from hearing it performed. I really had to study it to get inside it. I saw some Schenker graphs of the music which were very illuminating. I think a lot of the intensity of the first movement is in the small note values, the eighth-notes; 12/8 is a very

important element in the allegro assai. The last movement I feel should be on the slow side compared to how one usually hears it—I'm surprised that people play it so fast, as if it's a perpetual mobile. There's more to the music than that."

His outlook on all music is intimately related to his interest in new works. "I think I try to approach music somehow from a composer's mentality. In the case of living composers there can be that communication which can be so interesting, so enlightening and so contradictory often to what one might think, so you can learn a great deal from working with composers. With the classical composers it's not so much a composer's mentality as a compositional sense."

Like his father, he also takes tremendous pains to research his sources carefully, exploring early editions, manuscripts and facsimiles to get as close to the composer's intentions as is humanly possible. Chopin is a case in point—there are often numerous versions, each subtly different, of any one piece. "It may not be as extreme but also in the case of Beethoven, Mozart and Bach, one would be a little surprised at how divergent the so-called Urtext editions are from what the composers themselves wrote. It's not only a question of notes but also of slurs and articulations and expression marks. It's funny how mistakes creep in in the early editions and get repeated. And even these new 'Urtext' editions one has to approach with great skepticism. There are all kinds of presumptions. Many of the editors are addicted to the question of conformity; they will assume that if the composer's giving some indication in one context then it applies in a similar place. Which isn't necessarily the case with great composers. They often had much more imagination than that!"

Bach, too, needs imagination. "It goes against the trend, but I'm in favor of playing all the early music on modern instruments. The question is *how* do you play them? It's not so much a question of simulating a harpsichord, but at the same time it's not a late nineteenth-century approach to the piano. It's some kind of conception of the sound-world before one even starts to play—to play Bach with a growling Lisztian bass and all sorts of perfumed, coloristic effects for their own sake is not the point either."

He used, he says, to feel proud of not touching the pedals in playing Bach, but here he has had a change of heart. "This is silly. It sounds better with judicious use of the pedal—quarter pedals and eighth pedals, changing it often so that it's not blurred but gives a certain color and substance to the tone that otherwise might not be there. I use the una corda pedal sometimes too. I think these composers would have been so interested in these inventions. Look at Mozart's pianos—some of them were audacious in the number of pedals they had, the number of effects—tambourines, drums! We've become so conservative. At least we can use the two or three that we have."

But, he adds, the ear and, above all, the imagination must play the leading role. ■

Serkin on Playing Bach

Peter Serkin's recording of the Bach Inventions—which he insists is just a performance on a particular day, and not intended as a "final" version of his thinking about these pieces—is heavily influenced by his playing of the clavichord he keeps in his home studio. (It had belonged to his teacher, Mieczyslaw Horszowski.) Hence, the sense of intimacy and tenderness he achieves in this music. But there are many more elements that go into producing a view of Bach that *The New York Times* calls elegant, refined and quirky but "something more as well: a wide-eyed, unjaded quality that affectingly captures the essence of this music."

We paid a visit recently to his New York apartment to speak with Peter Serkin about some of the nitty-gritty issues pianists face in approaching Bach. Here are some of his thoughts.

Tempo: "I think of these pieces individually; after all, it's not a set of variations. But the issue of tempo is, in my mind, flexible when it comes to Bach. I don't feel like I'm trying to solidify any decisions about tempi—or about a number of other things, such as dynamics and articulation. It may sound funny, but I have no conclusions, because Bach has indicated so little. So each time I sit down to play these pieces I try to start from square one, and reconsider everything. Therefore, making a recording is a bit of a dilemma. In fact, if I were to re-record the Inventions, I would play the first one at a somewhat faster tempo—I'd like it a little livelier.

"The interesting thing about Bach is that it is possible to love and appreciate the music in many different kinds of performances. With Mozart, of course I might change my mind about how a piece should go, but there is more of an intention of trying to determine specifically what Mozart wanted. With Bach, there is a greater range of what is possible. Don't forget that Bach adapted so much of his music for different combinations. He was constantly re-arranging the music himself."

Dynamics and Pedals: "All kinds of issues come up: whether to play, for example, with 'layered' dynamics, without nuance (which I don't particularly care for, although some attention should be paid to plateaus); and the use of pedals. I've had very mixed feelings about that. Over the years, I've changed my mind. I used to abstain from the use of pedals in Bach—I even crossed my legs to make sure I didn't use them in the Goldberg Variations (some of it is so difficult one is tempted to get a little assistance from the damper pedal sometimes). But now, though I avoid any blurring, I use pedals carefully to produce the kind of resonance a piano has in its natural state. Using quarter pedals and half pedals is essential for this. Actually, I avoid using full pedals in Chopin as well.

"Sometimes the careful use of pedals must be complemented by a special touch on the keyboard. For example, when Beethoven wrote his Fourth Piano Concerto, he called for the gradual shifting of one string to two strings, to three, then back again to one string. This is not possible on the modern piano, so it seems necessary, when trying to approximate the sound of just one string, to use a touch that simulates Beethoven's una corda."

Phrasing: "I think of the music in a very vocal sense, with an emphasis on issues of articulation—where the consonants are; where is the mute syllable (an unarticulated enunciation, such as a feminine ending); where do phrases begin and end; what kind of direction is involved; and especially how the two voices interact. At the same time, I am not one to play with very melodramatic swells. I am very concerned with keeping proper proportions.

"The phrases can be short or long, and short phrases can also sometimes add up to a long one. It might not be a popular notion, especially these days, but I believe in playing Bach in a bold, energetic way—full of life, and full of character. Often, in fact, I think of an organ, rather than a harpsichord sonority, especially when playing the Concertos." *– Stuart Isacoff*

Peter Serkin

BBC music
January 2018

Thrilling ride: Peter Serkin sets off at breakneck speed

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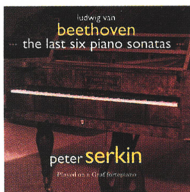

Peter Serkin (piano)
Musical Concepts MC122

In the early 1980s, Peter Serkin, son of pianist Rudolf, recorded the six last Beethoven sonatas on a fortepiano by Conrad Graf, owned by the Schubert Club of St Paul, Minnesota. The microphone placement varied from sonata to sonata, and for the *Hammerklavier* Serkin chose to give us a 'pianist's bench' perspective on the work. Little information about the instrument is provided; some internet research reveals that it has been dated to 1824-5, though its authenticity has been questioned. It's hard to imagine how it could still be standing by the end, and its sound is full of vinegary overtones – but in terms of hair-raising energy and spiritual veracity, Serkin's performance is electrifying from first note to last.

In the opening movement, taking Beethoven at his word about the tempo, as I rather think one should (ignoring it is just too convenient), Serkin sets off like a guided missile. There's nothing polite, pompous or predictable about this playing or the instrument, though the composer's nobility of spirit is there too. Throughout the work the flow is splendidly flexible, while the awareness of overall architecture is ever-present, yet worn lightly.

> The last movement is delivered with irresistible exhilaration and wonder

The countless thoughts flash by with fresh insights in every bar, delivered with a range of tone colours that may come as quite a revelation to fortepiano sceptics. The sense of struggle that is so much a part of the piece seems accentuated by the Graf's vulnerability, rather than being restricted by it. Indeed, it's not what you've got, it's what you do with it; even at the few moments when Serkin and the fortepiano seem perhaps not fully in agreement, the 'authenticity' of this performance lies not in the instrument but in its performer's soul.

The *Scherzo* is manic, its trio gloriously smoky in texture, with Serkin finding extraordinary sounds in the bass and persuading the instrument to growl, roar and snap like a waking dragon. The slow movement takes him 18 minutes and 28 seconds – slow enough to draw out the utmost expression, yet always keeping the flow. The keyboard tone's unevenness sometimes makes itself evident, but Serkin fills the melodic line with such anguished intensity that that scarcely matters. The last movement's opening sounds as if it could have been improvised on the spot and leads into a fugue that unfurls at a tempo that seems bananas – but is delivered with irresistible exhilaration and wonder. Some others play it nearly as fast, yet without half such satisfying substance.

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THE NEW YORKER

April 30, 2014

A SPECIAL, RARE, UNMISSABLE BARTÓK PERFORMANCE

By Richard Brody

A short post on a special event that you have three more chances to catch: Peter Serkin performing Bartók's Third Piano Concerto with the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Pablo Heras-Casado, tonight, tomorrow morning, and Saturday night, at Avery Fisher Hall.

I've written here about Serkin (now sixty-six) before, having seen him perform twice, both times with transformative insights into the music he played. This Bartók concerto—among the last that he composed before his death, in New York, in 1945—is one of my obsessions. I've heard it on record countless times and in concert twice, but never like this. From the very start, Serkin set an unusually measured tempo, striking out his first phrases with an angular intensity that was matched by their rhythmic freedom—a heartbeat

pause with the power of a cymbal clash, which announced to the listener: pay attention, this music is rich, strange, and complex. Under Serkin's sharply etched piano touch, the notes moved through the orchestra with a special clarity, as if in their own spotlight, as if the accompaniment were in black and white and the piano were in color, as if he played in 3-D. Each phrase had a geometric, hard-edged, architectural precision and complexity.

I heard more notes in the piece than I had ever heard before. But, even more important, Serkin's technique was yoked to an imaginative vision that brought out from the music more worlds than I had ever heard in it—Bach-like counterpoint, Gershwinesque swing, Mozartian grace, nostalgic Danubian waltzes; brash urbanity, whirling agitation, rhapsodic nature worship; exquisite humor (one particular quiet, bouncy entrance in the third movement had me giddy), raging against mortal fate, exultation in his inner harmonies. In Serkin's mercurially intricate view, Bartók's concerto flew from long shots of the city to pointillistic close-ups in an instant. And the performance of the slow movement—played with an awe-inspiring, hushed stillness that was even more awesome when it erupted turbulently in the movement's central section—is one of the great concert experiences of a lifetime.

Heras-Casado's sheer ability to keep the orchestra together with Serkin's wildly inventive interpretation is impressive enough, but his artistry was also a delight. The concert opened with Benjamin Britten's "Four Sea Interludes from 'Peter Grimes,' " which is more like a short "Sea Symphony," and the conductor lent it sonorous dramatic amplitude. After intermission, Heras-Casado conducted Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony, and the orchestra sounded superb. Let it never be said that Avery Fisher Hall is unworkable: Heras-Casado is a master blender, and he brought out a full, hearty, grand, yet nuanced sound that shows off the majesty of the city's orchestra. The performance was a little short on the horror, rue, and derision that mark the symphony; it sounded closer in spirit to Tchaikovsky than to Mahler (though the solos, especially one by the concertmaster, Glenn Dicterow, were inflected with bitter irony). Heras-Casado is young (thirty-six) and his interpretations will, doubtless, mature, but his virtuosity, his ear for orchestral textures, and his motivational energy are (on this first hearing) unimpeachable. It's the performance of Bartók's concerto that's special, rare, unmissable.

P.S. In this 2012 interview, Serkin discusses some of his musical influences and enthusiasms. The mention of Thelonious Monk is a revelatory jolt; it makes perfect sense, given Serkin's own angular, rhythmic incisiveness.

CINCINNATI BUSINESS COURIER

March 2, 2019

Conductor Sir Mark Elder charms with Czech program in CSO debut

By Janelle Gelfand

With its brass fanfares calling for 14 trumpets, Janáček's "Sinfonietta" never fails to be a showstopper. In his debut with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra on Friday, British conductor Sir Mark Elder made the most of its drama and power, capping an imaginative program that had many rewards.

Elder, music director of the Hallé Orchestra in Manchester, United Kingdom, and principal artist of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, has a distinguished career that includes a notable, 14-year tenure as music director of the English National Opera.

His program traveled through colorful music by Czech composers Antonín Dvořák, Josef Suk and and Leoš Janáček. Stravinsky's Concerto for Piano and Winds, with Peter Serkin as soloist, offered a dynamic contrast.

Elder charmed the Music Hall audience off the bat with his description of the tale from Czech folklore that inspired Dvořák's little tone poem, "The Midday Witch." It was all vividly depicted in the music that ensued – the cheerful winds of the child playing, the frenzied strings of the arguing mother and child, and the unearthly atmosphere when the witch appeared. Bass clarinetist Ron Aufmann evoked the witch with a wonderfully eerie quality.

For the centerpiece, Serkin made a welcome return to the orchestra – his seventh since 1969 – for the orchestra's first-ever performance of Stravinsky's Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments.

Stravinsky wrote and premiered the concerto in 1924. In a style known as neo-classical, it looks back to the Baroque and Classical periods. But true to 1920s Paris where he lived, it also rebels against the old with pungent harmonies, café tunes and even some jazzy rhythms.

It's also treacherously difficult. But Serkin, a champion of music of the 20th and 21st centuries – and now, just as legendary as his father, the pianist Rudolf Serkin – gave it a brilliant reading.

The first movement was a percussive toccata. Clear and bright, it was dynamic and driving, with explosive accents for the piano. Serkin communicated its playful, tongue-in-cheek quality even as he tackled fistfuls of thorny figures.

The slow movement has been criticized for being too icy, but I found it lyrical and very French. Here, Serkin carried on a lovely dialogue with the horns, and the composer provided a radiant theme for the oboe (Dwight Parry). The pianist approached the finale with a staccato, powerful touch while balancing moments of tuneful charm.

Elder and the orchestra – winds, brass, timpani and string basses – were fine partners, though the opening horn chorale took a moment to settle in.

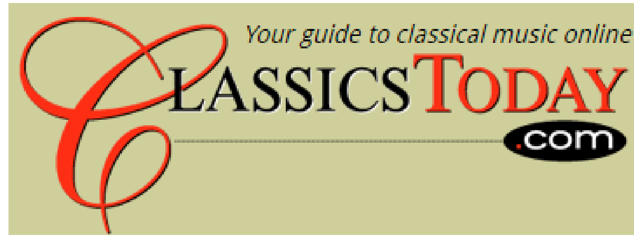
The British conductor opened the program's second half with another CSO premiere: Czech composer Suk's

"Scherzo fantastique." Elder, a leader who communicated the joy of his music-making all evening, made a persuasive case for this little-known orchestral gem. It was colorfully orchestrated (including two harps) and full of folk-like tunes – although its repetitions grew wearisome after a while.

Concluding the evening, Janáček's "Sinfonietta" was worth the wait. On the podium, Elder was an inspired advocate for this piece, arguably Janáček's greatest work for orchestra.

In its dramatic opening, the sonority of the brass fanfares (with the excellent timpanist Patrick Schleker) was something to behold, and it was performed with crisp assurance. In an effective acoustical arrangement, the trumpets, bass trumpets and two tenor tubas stood at the back of the orchestra – but behind the proscenium arch – for their moments in the sun.

Elder led detailed, energized readings of each of its five varied movements before the work concluded in a spectacular counterpoint of fanfares once again. Listeners were on their feet for the third time that evening.



December 4, 2018

Peter Serkin at 71: Still Evolving, Still Surprising

By Jed Distler

Peter Serkin's Mozart interpretations have always stood out for their intimacy, transparency, and classical reserve. These characteristics certainly revealed themselves in the opening half of Serkin's 92nd Street "Y" recital, along with a pronounced freedom and intensification of detail.

Unlike pianists who play the B minor Adagio on a grand dramatic scale, Serkin illuminates the music's fragile aura and extraordinary harmonic daring with subtle tempo modifications and vocally oriented phrasing. Bass lines were not points of gravity, but rather ethereal distant bells. Serkin's conception of the B-flat Sonata K. 570 has grown more internalized and refined since his long-unavailable mid-1980s recording for the Pro-Arte label. Both first-movement themes, for example, were markedly contrasted, while careful scaling of dynamics within a constricted parameter differentiated the slow movement's closely voiced counterpoint. Yet some of the finale's emphatic accents and asymmetric phrase shaping bordered on fussy, as if Serkin was working a little too hard to make points.

Bach's Goldberg Variations dominated the concert's second half. Because the printed program indicated an estimated 70-minute running time, I anticipated that Serkin would observe all of the repeats. As it happened, he ignored many of them, but chose to repeat both A and B sections of the opening Aria. Serkin treated the latter in a far more improvisatory fashion than I've heard him do in concert and on disc, extending certain notes with long ornamental tails, and liberally embellishing along the way. In most of the cross-handed variations (originally intended for two harpsichord manuals), Serkin generated tension by playing quietly, often downplaying the right hand while unearthing commonly hidden melodic fragments in the left, channeling his still-awesome technical mastery toward musical ends. Sometimes the pianist's contrapuntal acumen yielded peculiar results. To cite one instance, he laid heavily upon Variation Three's canonic entrances, emphatically unfolding the two upper voices, while the detached bass line accompaniment quietly murmured in the background.

On the other hand, Variation Fifteen (the canon at the fifth) sang forth so beautifully that it sounded more like a motet than a keyboard piece. The triple-meter Variation Nineteen was a model of control and limpid grace. Serkin saved his most outgoing and energetic pianism of the evening with a brisk, boisterous, and startlingly evocative rendition of the Variation Thirty Quodlibet, followed by a more direct, less ruminative reprise of the Aria (this

time without repeats). It was difficult to ascertain a unifying game plan in Serkin's overall approach to the Goldbergs, although he linked certain variations by way of common tempo relationships. Yet it's perfectly clear that Serkin's more than 50-year relationship with Bach's potentially overplayed masterpiece continues to evolve and surprise.

THE MORNING CALL

November 5, 2018

Pianist Peter Serkin raises Bach's Goldberg Variations to a higher, reverent place

By Steve Siegel

J.S. Bach's enduring Goldberg Variations have been danced to, hummed along with, played romantically, passionately, and with joyful physicality. But it would be hard to imagine an interpretation of Bach's masterpiece performed with as much devotional, prayer-like reverence as pianist Peter Serkin gave it at the 2018 Bach Choir gala concert Saturday afternoon at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem. Serkin raised this music to another, higher place, and most of the audience along with him.

Serkin pretty much let us know where he was going from the first piece on the program, Mozart's sublime and eerie Adagio in B Minor. Hunched over the keyboard, it seemed as if he were channeling Mozart directly, extracting all the sadness and tension in this piece with graceful musical lines. This heartfelt passion extended into Serkin's fingertips, which would quiver as if trying to extract every ounce of tenderness from the keys.

Mozart's Sonata in B-Flat Major, certainly a sunnier piece, was graced with the same gentle touch. Even the dramatic second theme of the opening allegro, with its abrupt intervals of sevenths, was free from the sharp, staccato attacks many pianists give it. The high-kicking finale was all lighthearted charm, with wonderfully delicate trills.

If Serkin seemed to channel Mozart in the program's opening works, he had certainly entered the mind of Bach for the Goldbergs. The opening Aria was rendered with the same tenderness one might give the Ave Maria, and established a contemplative, spiritual

atmosphere that pervaded the entire work.

Serkin's meditative reading of the variations certainly worked for me, but perhaps not for everyone. After all, there is a great deal of motion and physicality here, with many sections dance-inspired, none of which was very obvious from this performance. Yet there was something more rare and precious, I thought, in Serkin's ethereal approach. Call it less of Glenn Gould, and more of Arvo Pärt.

All this made Serkin's performance none the less virtuosic. His flamboyant yet carefully paced runs in variation 20, the acrobatic hand-crossings in variation 28, the rustic playfulness of the quodlibet, were all there. His left hand seemed to be a guide, methodically leading the listener through a religious experience. The lovely variation 25, in fact, evoked the same passion as any of Bach's most heartfelt arias.

No wonder it took Serkin, upon completing the Goldbergs, almost half a minute to decompress before he finally rose from the keyboard. The trance finally broken, the audience broke into well-earned, rapturous applause.

Santa Barbara Independent WHO. WHAT. NOW.

March 7, 2018

Pianist Peter Serkin Plays Mozart, Bach's Goldbergs

By Charles Donelan

The distinguished musician Peter Serkin has been in close communion with an extraordinarily wide range of serious music for his entire life. Born into a family already two generations deep in virtuosos, he famously took a sabbatical from performance in the late 1960s, only to return to the public eye after a pivotal conversion experience upon hearing the music of J. S. Bach. It was Bach that formed the balance of this outstanding recital — the *Goldberg Variations, BWV 988*, one of the towering peaks of the keyboard repertoire. Serkin has recorded it four times.

On Saturday, he prefaced the Goldbergs with a pair of less well known pieces by Mozart, the *Adagio in B Minor, K. 540*, and the *Sonata No. 17 in B-flat Major, K. 570*. He explored each work deliberately, patiently building the pieces phrase by phrase so that their inner structures were laid bare. Submerged angularities and rhythmic anomalies floated to the surface and dissolved in divine Mozartian consonance.

The *Goldberg Variations* are the pianists version of the Torah, about which a wise rabbi once said, "turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it." Serkin's precision, his restraint, and his utter submission to the task at hand all contributed to a transcendent reading in which the music at times seemed to point to something beyond. Perhaps the most striking aspect of his technique is the exquisite rapport he maintains between left and right hands. Together, they brought forth something greater than the sum of their parts, and pointed towards a resolution bigger than any two hands could hold.

Peter Serkin

The New York Times

December 16, 2016

A Diva, Two Pianists and a Pair of 'Messiahs': Classical Music This Week

JUXTAPOSING OLD AND NEW

PETER SERKIN AND ANDREW TYSON

By Anthony Tommasini

It's unlikely that the outstanding young pianist Andrew Tyson had the veteran Peter Serkin specifically in mind when he planned the program of mostly 20th-century pieces he played so excitingly at Weill Recital Hall on Tuesday. Still, some decades ago, among the many adventurous aspects of his artistry, Mr. Serkin, now 69, was a pioneer of unconventional programming that juxtaposed old and new works. He took some heat at the time for his experiments. But he certainly shook up protocols, helping to embolden artists of later generations like Mr. Tyson, who turns 30 on Monday.

Mr. Serkin was at it again, and at his best, in a recital last Saturday at the 92nd Street Y. His program offered several Renaissance keyboard works written well before the invention of the piano and some scores by 20th-century giants, including Wolpe, Takemitsu and Schoenberg. Given the novelty of the program, you might have expected him to speak to the audience about it. That has never been his way. Mr. Serkin prefers to let music speak for itself.

He began with Josquin's "Ave Christie," a four-voice motet, as reset for piano in 1988 by the composer Charles Wuorinen. Unfolding in steady, ruminative contrapuntal lines, this modal music practically invited the audience to settle in and listen. Various Renaissance pieces by Sweelinck, John Bull and William Byrd were juxtaposed with Takemitsu's crystalline "for away" (1973), Oliver Knussen's rhapsodic, modernist Variations (Op. 24, 1989), and Wolpe's "Form IV," aptly subtitled "Broken Sequences." The final work, Schoenberg's landmark Suite, Op. 25, came across in this exhilarating performance like an ingenious, 12-tone homage to Bach.

My. Tyson, presenting the Juilliard School's Leo B. Ruiz Memorial Recital, opened with Henri Dutilleux's Three Preludes for Piano, music of plush colorings and pointillist outbursts. The composer Michel Petrossian, a friend of Mr. Tyson's, came from Paris for this performance of his fantastical "The Raging Battle of Green and Gold." Like the Dutilleux, this piece had such improvisatory and skittish qualities that Scriabin's wild-eyed Piano Sonata No. 3 sounded almost coherent in comparison. Playing six Gershwin selections was another great idea. The arrangements of these songs, with their jazzy harmonies and splashy riffs, set the mood perfectly for Ravel's "Miroirs," a French Impressionist masterpiece given a scintillating yet sensitive performance here. Mr. Tyson is a poetic virtuoso.

Peter Serkin

April 29, 2018

From delicacy to dystopia, DSSO finale thunders to dramatic season ending

By Dennis Kempton

The Duluth Superior Symphony Orchestra presented its final Masterworks concert of the season Saturday night at the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center's Symphony Hall to a full and appreciative audience. Once again under the baton of Music Director Dirk Meyer, the orchestra's program, "Reflections" featured a repertoire that included works from Leonard Bernstein, Beethoven and Mussorgsky.

Composed in 1961, Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from the legendary West Side Story is an aural treat — a suite of orchestral music from the show. At turns playful, swinging, romantic, aggressive and wistful, this amuse-bouche course of the program set a tone that, once again, masterfully encouraged the musicians to pull out all the stops. The challenge of setting the orchestral arrangements is preserving the dramatic tension and the dance atmospherics of the show. The orchestra's vibrant and energetic treatment delighted the audience with the finger-snapping and vocals of the Prologue setting up the hall to feel like a jazz club par excellence. The rhythms were tight and slick. The percussion section got their chance to shine and the DSSO demonstrated its significant chops as a bona fide concert band.

The delicacy of the night's music came on the wings of Beethoven's Piano

Concerto No. 2, featuring guest artist, the incomparable Peter Serkin. This 18th century classical masterpiece, scored for a solo piano, was supported by gorgeous strings, oboes, horns, bassoons and a playful flute. Its juxtaposition between the contemporary coolness of Bernstein and the moody and dramatic Mussorgsky is a genius preservation of its serenity and emotional playfulness as symphonic music.

Virtuoso pianist Peter Serkin comes with a distinguished pedigree. A Grammy winner at the tender age of 19, Serkin knew how to demonstrate ultimate showmanship coupled magnificently with musicianship on the stage with the DSSO. At moments, Serkin's captivating performance floated notes into the air that seemed to be so delicate that the strings and horns were perceived to caress and protect their fragility. Meyer's gentle coaxing and respect for the concerto's subtleties made one capable of believing that classical musicians are interpreters of a divinely inspired message.

The dramatic finale of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition took the hall from heights of delightful fancy to the depths of dystopian despair. Written originally for piano in 1874, the DSSO performed the more widely-known Ravel arrangement from 1922. The suite is almost full-on Kabuki-style drama in the way that only Russian art can pull off. The music was set to an accompanying film produced by the USC School of Cinematic Arts in an animation of the themes and images that inspired the composer's music.

This suite is truly made with a love for trumpets and brass and the DSSO displayed no modesty whatsoever in showing their majesty with those instruments. The childish delights of the Ballet of the Chickens in their Shells as well as the darkness of The Hut on Fowl's Legs took the audience on a full-scale symphonic rollercoaster of emotion, pulled and lifted at turns by strings and percussion and then again, those trumpets. The Great Gate of Kiev and its accompanying visual luminosity and the explosions of instrumentation in the hall overwhelmed so purposefully by the composer that when all came to its thundering concluding notes, the audience rose in sustained, cheering applause worthy of Russian drama.

The DSSO ended its 2017 season in grand style, delivering emotional punches and delicate sumptuousness that made it all priceless beyond the price of admission, carried by musicians that know how to put on a good show in more ways than just with their instruments.

The Millbrook Independent
VOICE OF THE MILLBROOK REGION

April 7, 2018

PETER SERKIN & A TALE WITH STUDENTS

By Kevin McEneany

What's in a tune? Depends upon its history. Ever the historical scholar, Peter Serkin led four students in an amusing lesson, performing "Music for Winds and Piano" on Saturday in the Láslo Z. Bitó Building on the Bard College campus to a packed audience.

Beginning with J.S. Bach's *Oboe Sonata in G minor*, BWV 1030b (c. 1736), a duo between piano and oboe set the table. This is thought to be the reconstructed first version of Bach's sonata for flute and piano, although some conjecture that it may have originally been a violin sonata in G. The opening *Andante* privileges the oboe over the piano; the *Largo e dolce* requires deep emotional feeling which Kim conjured considerable better than the opening which he had played in slightly uncertain manner of just warming up. Having established leadership over the piano, the *Presto* provides a competition, in which after intense struggle, the piano, with its capacity for dexterity and ability to change keys, overwhelms the valiant oboe; James Jihyun Kim's oboe passionately delivered the truculent challenge to the piano, but Serkin's dramatic, flexible finger runs left no doubt as to which instrument was the master.

The stage was set for Mozart to dramatize a similar contest with *Quintet for piano and winds in E-flat major*, K. 452. Having invented the quintet by adding a new instrument to the quartet—the clarinet—Mozart could pit four players against the piano. The opening *Largo-Allegro moderato* showcases the virtues of the bassoon played with adroit sensitivity by Adam Romey, the French horn played with exquisite delicacy by Claire Worsey, the clarinet ably played with clarity by Sangwon Lee, and the ready-to spar-oboe by James Jihyun Kim. All five instruments stake a modest claim to the tune. The *Larghetto* features amiable cooperation between these instruments where they cooperate to create new group sounds never heard before in chamber music. Mozart, in a letter, even boasted that it was the best thing he ever wrote (at the age of 32). The concluding *Allegretto* furnishes the lively competition for alpha instrument. There is no real contest: Serkin unleashes the power of the piano with such fierce, astonishing runs that it is

clear as sunshine the piano remains the only genius standing.

After brief intermission, they tackled Beethoven's *Quintet for piano and winds in E-flat major*, Op. 16. All five instruments compete in the same key as Mozart during the opening *Grave-Allegro ma non troppo* with the result that at the end the piano claims dominance. The other instruments are not convinced of the piano's claim and compete, but they cannot so readily change keys, so the piano wins on points as well as sheer emotive power and range. But the cocky young genius of 25 wants to shout that he is the new man with the keys to outdo Mozart. The concluding *Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo* begins with Mozart's melody stripped naked by the piano. We are taken on satirical, parodic romp of Mozart's tune with peculiar new sounds by the piano mocking Mozart. I must admit that this piano *tour-de-force* was hilarious. Since I never bothered to examine Beethoven's early work, I never knew Beethoven could be so funny.

Serkin's fingering was like lightning. Such a comic end to the lesson offered a warning about ambition, as well as the perils of arrogance, yet it also promoted the message that if you have the talent, flaunt it. All students were up to the mark for this extremely lively caper.

Peter Serkin

November 13, 2017

Piano superstar Peter Serkin delivers 'blissed-out' recital in St. Paul

By Terry Blain

There is a wonderfully time-locked photograph of Peter Serkin taken in the 1970s, when the American pianist was a member of the uber-hip Tashi Quartet. He is wearing a flower-power vest. He sports a neatly clipped goatee and ponytail. One of his fellow quartet members is draped in what looks like a monk's vestment.

Fast forward 40 years, and the hippie trappings have long departed. Serkin, now 70, occupies a revered position as an elder statesman of American pianism. He dressed soberly for his Chopin Society recital Sunday afternoon at Macalester College, wearing a charcoal suit. And then he played canonical works by Bach and Mozart.

Age has only deepened Serkin's intense communion with the music he favors. His recital began with an immensely introspective performance of Mozart's Adagio in B minor, K. 540, one of the composer's most pained utterances.

Employing a slow basic tempo, and a highly flexible approach to rhythm, Serkin exposed the music's raw emotional tendrils for full public inspection. More an autopsy than interpretation, Serkin's was a totally immersive view of the piece, probing deep and on occasions skirting tragedy.

The same seriousness marked Serkin's account of the Adagio movement in Mozart's Sonata in B-flat major, K570. His hypersensitivity to small but consequential harmonic shifts made for unusually disorienting listening — the sense of a journey undertaken without a clear destination in view.

A sweet sadness suffused Serkin's playing of the Adagio, only partly offset by his lightly playful articulation in the Sonata's blithe Allegretto finale.

The program's final work was Bach's monumental "Goldberg Variations," something of a Serkin specialty for many decades (his first recording of it dates to 1965, when Serkin was just 18 years old). He still performs the piece with a fresh, questing outlook and formidable insight.

Serkin's performance of the "Goldbergs" lasted 55 minutes in total. It was a master class in how to lend individual character to each variation, without losing sight of the work's overall balances and architecture.

It was not without blemish. The trills in Variations 7 and 10 were a touch crunchy. And Serkin was occasionally inclined to hum along, off-pitch, to the music — something his great piano-playing father, Rudolf, did before him.

But the revelations were truly special: a deeply beautiful Variation 25, the heart of the cycle. The pearl-like clarity of Serkin's contrapuntal textures. A jubilant enunciation of the Quodlibet as the variations concluded.

Serkin sat a full 30 seconds (or more) after the music ended, head bowed, hands poised over the keyboard as if in meditation. Perhaps he didn't want to leave that special, blissed-out place the "Goldberg Variations" can take to you. His own performance took you there, in a way that only artists of the highest caliber can.

Peter Serkin

Curtis Institute of Music

The Curtis Institute of Music educates and trains exceptionally gifted young musicians to engage a local and global community through the highest level of artistry.

June 7, 2017

Curtis On Tour

By Maria Loudenitch

Ask a handful of students, staff, or faculty members, “what was one of your favorite parts about this tour?” and many of their answers will be along the lines of, “being in such incredible cities and the greatest halls of the world.” And who can argue with that? From the vast yet charming paths of Helsinki to the jaw-dropping beauty of the Konzerthaus in Berlin, we are always left wondering, “is there really something more beautiful?” I have come to learn that indeed, there always is.

But ask *me* what one of my favorite parts was, and I’d say it was when Mr. Serkin saved a fly during his magical, otherworldly interpretation of the Aria from Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, performed as an encore.

But before I get to that, a word about silence. Have you ever heard a silence that made your ears ring? That is what Mr. Serkin, and Maestro Osmo Vänskä achieved in the second movement of the Brahms Piano Concerto No. 1 during our performance in Wroclaw, Poland.

It first started with Mr. Vänskä and our pianissimo. No one else can get a sound like that out of our orchestra. We move through our phrase, guided by his presence on the podium, winding our dynamic down to a stunning nothing. And then comes in Mr. Serkin with the purest tone, one note dissipating brilliantly through the air. It was a drop of musical gold.

We live through the second movement together, and the last note is played. Then silence.

No one dared breathe. The music filled each soul on stage and in the audience. The silence was so loud, it was almost unbearable: 1200 people sitting, each with their own stories, their own problems, their own of happiness and pain, and right there and then, we were all One. Listen to true music making, and you can know peace.

(Keep in mind, that this silence was practically a physical miracle for a good percentage of us sitting on stage, with

colds and other bugs brought on by a whirlwind tour. And still, Brahms healed us all, if only for a moment.)

Fast forward a bit, and the audience is on their feet – clapping wildly. Mr. Serkin comes on stage once, twice, and at the third bow turns to me, "it sounds like they're booing, should I play something?"

I laugh. "What?! Of course, please play, please play!"

And then, the Aria.

I won't say a word about it, because there is no point. The magic was there, and it will always be just there, frozen in that moment.

What I will recall, however, is the fat fly who decided to interrupt the magic. After a few manic seconds buzzing around, it landed on Mr. Serkin's left hand pinky. I could see his eyes peering curiously at the fly. The fly got the memo and buzzed off of the finger and onto the key, dangerously close to the fingertip. The next note he was to play, was with that pinky, on that key. He hesitates, stretching time more than usual, looking intently at the stubborn fly, until the fly kindly buzzes away, after which Mr. Serkin's pinky finally comes down on the key, continuing the phrase which was caught in a gorgeous standstill.

If his finger went down earlier, the fly would have probably been caught in between the keys.

Now, whether or not Mr. Serkin really wanted to save that fly is another story. (Which I will pursue a bit later.)

But there's something about the gentleness and generosity with which Mr. Serkin approached all of this that is absolutely encompassing of the entire experience that we have had with him on tour. Someone else in this situation might have forcefully put down the finger or moved quickly to get the fly to fly away faster, but Mr. Serkin used time and patience. The music wasn't going anywhere. The music didn't stop on account of the fly—it kept flowing through him and through us. Time, patience, peace.

We are all caught up in our own worlds, our own desires and complaints. This tour was a great test for all of that. How lucky we are, to have been to all of these places, to have worked with such artists, such soldiers of music! There was no doubt that from the beginning, I would learn so much from Mr. Vänskä. We have all loved him ever since he worked with us two years ago. Without him…well…I'd like to not think what this tour would be without him.

But who knew how grateful I would be for this little golden moment in time with Mr. Serkin and the fly.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

May 23, 2017

Curtis Symphony Orchestra has a whirlwind Tuesday in Berlin

By David Patrick Stearns

The Curtis Symphony Orchestra's arrival in Germany's musical capital on Tuesday was heralded by what might be called a 100-taxicab salute: A lion's share of the city's cab drivers jammed Friedrichstrasse – Berlin's ultra-busy shopping thoroughfare – to protest competition from Uber cabs.

They honked at length, negotiated with police, and generally tied up the city's nerve center for a half-hour, causing a domino effect that added to the hour-plus delay in the orchestra's arrival by bus from Bremen, the previous stop on its European tour. Nobody likes surprises on a day when a terrorist strike is in the news.

In this most democratic of tours, both conductor Osmo Vanska and pianist Peter Serkin arrived on the third and final bus without much decompression time before they were due at the Berlin Konzerthaus. Press interviews and rehearsals were delayed. "It happens sometimes," said Vanska, who believes in expending as little extraneous energy as possible on performance days.

The young players were thrilled to find their hotel keys waiting for them. "Benny! I got a key! Come!" a young musician yelled across the crowd for his roommate. The tour's first day in Helsinki, on Thursday, had a five-hour wait for hotel rooms after an overnight

flight. “We arrived at 10 a.m. Not the normal check-in time,” said trombonist Lyman McBride. “But the hotel was next to a beautiful lake.”
The impact of the Manchester terrorist incident is yet to be seen on Thursday’s scheduled hop to London, which will probably require extra time at security checkpoints. “Even before Manchester, we had our antennas up. It’s something we’re always watching,” said Andy Lane, the director of Curtis on Tour. More tangibly, Curtis staff has access to security alerts from International SOS, a service that sends updates on the latest precautions.
But in the small world of emerging classical musicians, such tragedy seemed distant, as students had noisy reunions in the hotel lobby with old Curtis friends now employed by Berlin’s orchestras, opera companies, and schools. Some students scheduled lessons with members of the Berlin Philharmonic.
Curtis president Roberto Diaz calls Berlin the school’s second home. Some of the musicians requested up to five personal tickets for the night’s concerts. Ticket sales went well – 1,100 were sold in the 1,400-seat hall that once hosted Leonard Bernstein’s famous Beethoven’s *Ninth*, celebrating the fall of the Berlin Wall. And by concert time, the auditorium looked nearly full.
Whether or not the orchestra players owned Berlin, they came to act as though they did. German pedestrians don’t jaywalk or go against lights. But once the orchestra players started heading across the boulevard en route to the Berlin Konzerthaus, they were turning the street into a pedestrian mall before anybody knew it – and were clearly unfazed by a long bus ride that might have violated union rules with professional orchestras.
Backstage in a dinner served to the musicians in the homey Konzerthaus canteen, many of the players were still buzzing about their Sunday and Monday stay in Bremen. While some of them had been to Helsinki and Berlin before, Bremen seemed new to everybody. Facebook had comments such as “I just had lunch at a 600-year-old restaurant,” the Bremen Ratskeller, which dates to 1405 and resembles a wine cellar.
Percussionist Won Suk Lee, a 2016 Curtis grad, was impressed by eating at an establishment frequented by Johannes Brahms, possibly prior to the 1868 premiere of his famous *A German Requiem* at Bremen Cathedral. Lee had to admit that the medieval-bistro cuisine was “preserved rather than evolved.”
Come concert time, the performance started where many end, with Ravel’s sumptuous *Daphnis et Chloe Suite No. 2.* And as impressive as it was, this audience seemed interested in something deeper – and got it with Peter Serkin’s reading of the Brahms *Piano Concerto No. 1*. The 69-year-old pianist now plays every phrase as if he could have written the piece himself.
At rehearsal, one difference of opinion had to do with the pause after the reflective second movement, which Serkin feels is like a requiem and warrants reverent silence before the eruptive final movement. Vanska feared the audience might be too noisy and break the mood.
“This is Berlin, not New York,” said Serkin. “Here, it’s like church.”
In a way, both were right. The Serkin pause was indeed quiet. But at the end of the first movement, the audience erupted into between-movement applause – quite unusual here.
It was that good.

CD HotList

April 10, 2017

CLASSICAL

By Rick Anderson

Peter Wuorinen
Eighth Symphony (Theologoumena); Fourth Piano Concerto
Boston Symphony Orchestra; Peter Serkin / James Levine
Bridge (dist. Albany)
9474
Rick's Pick

All libraries with a collecting interest in contemporary classical music should be quick to acquire this, the first commercial release of two major works by Charles Wuorinen, both commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under conductor James Levine. Wuorinen is one of the last of the great mid-century serialists–although he seems irritated by the term and has explicitly rejected it, there is no question that his approach to composition is deeply rooted in the 12-tone compositional approach, and that lends even his mature works a sense of (paradoxical as this may sound) old-fashioned avant-gardism. The structure is clearly there, and his sense of texture is exquisite, but none of this music is going to send you home humming. This is music for people who want their ears and their brains challenged, and who don't mind working a bit for the experience of beauty. The always-exceptional Peter Serkin shines as a soloist on the concerto, in particular. These recordings were made in concert at the premiere performances of the works, in 2005 and 2007.

Peter Serkin

The Millbrook Independent
VOICE OF THE MILLBROOK REGION

March 5, 2017

MOZART PROJECT FINALE AT BARD

By Kevin T. McEneaney

The fifth and final concert of Peter Serkin's curated Mozart project was held in Bard's Olin Hall. Encouraged by Robert Martin, Serkin began fiddling with some new arrangements of Mozart compositions; thus, the project became enhanced with unexpected direction. Sunday afternoon's concert opened with *Piano Trio (Divertimento) in B-flat Major*, K. 254 played by Peter Serkin on piano, Robert Martin on cello, and Zhen Liu on violin (all in teaser photo). This first piano trio of Mozart (1776) remains more classical than romantic: Zhen Liu (from Inner Mongolia) projected a clear and forceful line, perhaps more classically severe than I have heard before, yet expertly so resonant that his adroit performance was as memorable a treat while Serkin's piano flamed with rhythmic exuberance and Martin held a much-needed steady supporting line for both performers in their dialogue. This was of the caliber, both in length and ferocity, which one might usually associate with a closing number rather than an opener.

Serkin took *Andante and Variations in G Major*, K. 501 and arranged that trio as a sextet. At first Serkin had given the higher lead line to a viola with supporting lower oboe, yet by the manic fifth draft over the past few months he had decided to replace this arrangement with a lead flute and supporting bassoon. These roles were expertly played by Eszter Fiscor on flute and Cathryn Gaylord, my favorite bassoonist at the Bard Conservatory. Their high-low dialogue dynamic was ably supported by Rowan Puig Davis' remarkable pizzicato on bass and Gigi Hsueh's melting, Romantic violin interludes. The sturdy lower line received support from Roman Lewcun on cello while the higher flute was rounded out by Matthew Norman on viola. Chatting with Serkin during intermission, I was surprised by his humble astonishment that this marvelous arrangement was ever heard at all (he never imagined anyone would play it), and he expressed delirious satisfaction at how well the performers had executed the piece, which was evident in the expressions and murmurs of the two hundred audience attendees. I thought it a pity that the performance had not been recorded, yet I hope that day might soon occur.

Soprano Rachel Doehring, with Serkin on piano, sang three Mozart lieder (out of about thirty he had written). Doehring sang with full confidence, power, and expert dramatic phrasing these three charming lyrics; she

endowed each song with their peculiar, charming humor. As a first-year student in the Graduate Vocal Program, she displayed more accomplishment than the usual promise one might find in a student.

The concert concluded with *Serenade in E-flat Major*, K. 375, a popular court sextet (two horns, two bassoons, two clarinets), to which Mozart later added in 1782 two oboes. Jingyu Mao on clarinet performed with notable enthusiasm and finesse, sounding confident of a future career as a soloist. The final fifth movement, an Allegro, of this more extroverted social work, was performed with rollicking gusto.

The Mozart Project received generous financial support from Rosalind Seneca.

May 10, 2016

Family tradition: Peter Serkin's Reger in Dresden

By David Pinedo

For the centennial celebration of Max Reger's passing, American pianist Peter Serkin and Herbert Blomstedt travelled to Saxony, the composer's birthplace, touring orchestras with his *Piano Concerto in F minor*. At the Semperoper, Serkin performed the piece with the Staatskapelle Dresden, whose fiery temperament worked well for Reger. The score reveals an academic and technically challenging, but not particularly musically pleasant, composition. Still, it is always interesting to hear a rarity at least once performed live by a specialist. After the break, Blomstedt indulged the Dresden audience with a vibrant rendition of Beethoven's Seventh that left them cheering with stamping feet.

Besides Blomstedt's performances of the piece during his time at the Gewandhaus, where it premiered under Arthur Nikisch's baton in 1910, the soloist too shares a history with this concerto. With a recording and performances, his father Rudolf was also an ambassador of this work, so Serkin carried forth the family legacy. With his page-turner behind him, Serkin played with extreme focus. Except for a few pleased smiles, and some communicative nods to Blomstedt, the soloist kept a controlled, nearly militant posture. He is not a showman. In fact, he seemed professorial in his suit and tie. With this discipline, he tackled Reger's coarse passages. His fragile solo passages alternated with Reger's heavy orchestral accompaniment.

The first movement *Allegro moderato* opens with stirring timpani and a voluminous surge through which Brahms' symphonic openings greatly resonated. Like a true athlete, Serkin joined in handling the heavy chords with impressive craftsmanship. Blomstedt led his orchestra with great precision, keeping the sections from boiling over. Considered very modern at the time of it première, and therefore not received with open hearts by the audience, Reger composed passages in which syncopated, jazzy premonitions could be heard.

After the immense first movement, Serkin took some time before he continued. In the middle part, *Largo con gran espressione*, Serkin produced the high points in his performance. While before he played with militant execution, here, with eyes closed, he sensitively produced a dreamy calm that led to some surprisingly moving moments, while at other times offering a contemplative mood.

In the *Allegretto con spirito* finale, Serkin let a few smiles escape during the playful passages. As Blomstedt sustained a sweeping momentum in the strings, the soloist's emphatically hit

Peter Serkin

The New York Times

March 18, 2016

Max Reger, an Orphan-Composer Adopted for a Night

By Anthony Tommasini

Describing his approach to programming before Thursday's concert by the American Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, the conductor Leon Botstein said, "We deal in the purgatory department." Throughout history, he explained, some pieces seemed to go directly from their premieres to a lofty place in the heaven of the standard repertory. Others are consigned to hell.

But there are reams of works valued in their time that have fallen into the purgatory of neglect. Championing them has been Mr. Botstein's mission, as in this program, "Giant in the Shadows," focused on the German composer, pianist and organist Max Reger, who died in 1916 at 43.

The centerpiece was a rare performance of Reger's 45-minute Piano Concerto with Peter Serkin as soloist. Composed in 1910, this sprawling piece shows why Reger both fascinated and baffled his contemporaries. The concerto seems an attempt to balance the advanced chromatic language of Wagner with Brahms's feeling for classical structure. In pushing the boundaries of tonality, the music shows Reger as a kindred spirit to Schoenberg.

Rudolf Serkin, Peter's father, championed the Reger concerto in his youth and recorded it in 1959 with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Here his son played the ferociously demanding piano part with impressive command and affecting sensitivity.

I was grateful for this opportunity to hear it performed. Still, the concert, which lasted 2 hours and 40 minutes, also showed the downside of Mr. Botstein's exercises in advocacy by immersion. It opened with Adolf Busch's Three Études for Orchestra, from 1940. Busch, an important German violinist and conductor and a younger colleague of Reger's, became Rudolf Serkin's father-in-law (and therefore Peter's grandfather). Alas, to make a better impression, this 30-minute piece needed a stronger performance than the shaky one Mr. Botstein led. It was not the best setup piece for the concerto.

After intermission Mr. Botstein conducted Reger's Variations and Fugue on a Theme of J. A. Hiller (1907), another long (42 minutes) and demanding work that in this ineffective performance sounded meandering and gloppy. I felt sympathy for the skilled players of this intrepid orchestra who had to grapple with three unfamiliar, challenging scores. It was a lot to ask of an audience as well. Many people headed for the exits at intermission.

That the concerto came across as the strongest piece was because of Mr. Serkin's splendid performance, which inspired the orchestra to its most solid, textured playing. The colossal first movement has moments in which

majestic themes unfold in segmented phrases and episodes where motifs go through complex harmonic sequences. The slow movement is the gem of the piece, with stretches of dreamy, pensive music. The finale shows Reger attempting heavy-footed, dancing Germanic humor.

The untethered harmonic language, along with the developmental approach to form, could easily make the concerto seem long-winded. But Mr. Serkin's involving performance conveyed its searching character and integrity.

notes and seemingly jazzy phrasing led to upbeat vibes. Twinkling passages in the high register of the piano created some surprising contrasts. A soulful intellectual, Serkin highlighted the accessible aspects of this otherwise heavy-handed opus.

Full of energy, Blomstedt made his Beethoven all seem perfectly effortless. He conducted without score or baton. Tiny wrist movements indicated tempi, while swaying arm gestures stimulated the Dresden musicians. During the opening movement, the solo flautist flew elegantly through her passages; as if a chirping bird caught in the thick texture of the strings. The basses impressed with their throbbing undercurrent. With barely a break, he moved on to the *Allegretto* with fast tempi that made it fly by, possibly too fast.

In the Scherzo, Blomstedt continued his grand gestures, generating contagious energy. The strings emerged with some lighthearted effects. In the concluding *Allegro con brio*, the smiling Blomstedt cheered the orchestra along. As the trumpets colourfully punctuated their few notes, the conductor infused his Beethoven with a joyful urgency, while maintaining crisply layered clarity.

The sheer joy and vitality of the 88-year-old Blomstedt proved utterly compelling. And with loud bravi after, the audience at the Semperoper certainly agreed.

Peter Serkin

The Sydney Morning Herald

May 14, 2015

Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Romantic Visions review: Peter Serkin's deft work

By Peter McCallum

Peter Serkin's hands vibrated with quiet intensity as he grounded each chord in the slow movement of Bartok's Third Piano Concerto, as though to enrich the resonance of each carefully graded step.

In one sense such sensitivity is illusory since, by the time the key reaches its bed, the sound has escaped and cannot be altered. In his case the gesture was emblematic of an immaculate musical conception which guided the shape of musical lines and the structure of the whole work through its simple clarity of idea.

The light theme played in unison which begins the first movement rang out with bright freshness over an underlay of quietly energised strings. Serkin's playing avoided heaviness in favour of such colour, infused always with the intimacy of chamber music. After the hymn-like chords of the slow movement the music gives way to Bartok's favourite nocturnal texture – the buzzing and sudden shrieks of night creatures. As the hymn returns on cor anglais, Serkin's decorative filigree was still, luminous and revelatory.

The finale bounded out of this quiet moment with energised vigour, and each return of the main theme culminated in pianistic cascades down to the bass register before passing the last word to emphatic hammered timpani strokes. Bartok leads the music through playful fugues and richly coloured episodes on woodwind and brass, which Serkin guided with powerful musical concentration, concluding a rising flourish as fresh as the opening. It was a performance of delightful deftness, quick intelligence and mastery.

In Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*, which opened the program, conductor Matthias Pintscher resisted any temptation to hurry or push forward, allowing each orchestral player's sound to unfold and find its natural tone like morning sun creeping over streams and fields, the ending dissolving like morning dew.

Arnold Schoenbergclaimed that he arranged Brahms' Piano Quartet G minor Opus 25 because he liked it, it was seldom played, and was always played badly. The latter two reasons are not valid in contemporary Sydney, but hearing Schoenberg colour this serious and intimate work of chamber music with imaginative, sometimes outrageously romantic colours was nevertheless a treat, particularly in the wind delicacy of the second movement, full string sound of the third, and the fiery finale.

THE Daily Telegraph

May 20, 2015

Peter Serkin recital brings out the piano's singing and soulful side

By Steve Moffatt

When he was in his early 20s Peter Serkin, son of the renowned Rudolf and grandson of composer-violinist Adolf Busch, closed the lid on his piano and spent a couple of years away from the concert hall with his wife and small daughter.

Until he heard the Bach coming from next door, that is. "It became clear to me that I should play," he says.

Now 67 and admired for his teaching as well as his playing, Serkin likes to pepper his concerts with the familiar and the unfamiliar, and this was the case when he appeared in the latest of Sydney Symphony Orchestra's International Pianists in Recital series at City Recital Hall Angel Place.

He started in the late Renaissance, playing little pieces made for the virginals and harpsichord with all the delicacy and precision of a cathedral carving. These early works from the 16th and 17th centuries included four works from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book by John Bull, John Dowland and William Byrd.

This was piano playing at its most delicate, the notes almost teased from the keyboard, sweet and clear and with a light use of pedal. This tactile feeling was made even stronger by Serkin's practice of caressing the key like a string player applying vibrato.

Precision and an inner stillness are the two qualities which strike the listener about everything Serkin does. He sits in silence for several seconds before touching the keyboard. When he's finished he suspends the moment before he gives the cue for applause by sitting back.

This backfired somewhat in the final piece, Beethoven's Piano sonata No. 30 when during the transcendent variations that close the piece someone dropped

their bag, the houselights came up prematurely and someone clapped almost before final note sounded, thus breaking the spell.

The other “familiar” work on the program was Mozart’s Rondo in A minor K511. This is not the composer at his most familiar, however, but in an uncharacteristically melancholic mood with a piece that has the singing quality we associate more with Chopin and the Romantics.

Serkin’s penchant for the unusual asserted itself in his other two choices — the Danish composer Carl Nielsen’s Themes with Variations Op 40 and Max Reger’s Three pieces Aus meinem Tagebuch Op 82.

Nielsen’s symphonies are well known but his smaller works are seldom heard in the concert hall. This introspective work avoids the rigid nature of theme and variations by slipping into some unexpected keys which both surprise and delight, before returning to the chorale-like starting point.

By including some Reger, a German composer best known for his organ works, Serkin was following a family tradition. His grandfather Busch knew the composer and his father Rudolf championed his pieces throughout his playing life.

This was a thoughtful and unusual program, made all the more enjoyable by Serkin’s ability to bring out the piano’s singing quality. No mean achievement.

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

June 22, 2015

Maverick at 100

By Leslie Gerber

…Pianists Julia Hsu and Peter Serkin unveiled their new four hand team recently at a nearby venue, the Olive Free Library, in a piano series curated by [George] Tsontakis. Evidently the two intend their collaboration to be ongoing, a prospect which delights me. They play with amazing precision, beautiful sound, and excellent musicianship. Their half of the program began with six of Brahms's Chorale Preludes, organ works transcribed by Serkin. If you don't know the music you might have trouble identifying it as Brahms, since it shows heavy baroque influence. The arrangements were effective, the playing divine.

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

June 28, 2015

True Artists Sharing the Bench

By Patrick Valentino

A true artist can make the ordinary extraordinary, and a great musician understands that all music making is by its nature collaborative. And adventurous pianists know that sometimes, you have to share the bench. That Peter Serkin and Julia Hsu are adventurous pianists, great musicians, and true artists became quickly apparent last night at the Shalin Liu Center.

The concept of having world class pianists play four-hand repertoire may not be novel, but it was interesting and rewarding. To watch two talents, one firmly established and one on the rise, collaborate on that most soloistic of instruments, and to hear rarely performed corners of the repertoire was a treat, and for the most part everything worked out well. The challenge, beyond the obvious chamber music element, was selling music in a genre mainly created for amateur musicians and music students, more at home in a family party than a concert hall.

The first piece on the program suffered a bit from this inherent challenge. The title of Schumann's Six Etudes in the Form of Canons Op. 56 hardly belied its somewhat academic nature. Even for a lover of Schumann, the work fell somewhat flat, arranged as it was from the original for pedal piano, an extinct practice instrument for organists. True, there were many beautiful moments—from the silken threads of the opening movement, seeming to go on forever, to a special *sotto voce* in the second, to the omnipresent counterpoint in all the movements. But the fact that the pieces were not specially composed as four hands works was evident; if it had been played on a pedal piano it would have been more interesting, if only for the curiosity. [note: interesting transcriptions for organ solo and for piano trio exist for this set as well as the similar Four Sketches for Pedal Piano Op. 58]

Luckily, the rest of the program comprised original four-hands works, including selections from Bizet's *Jeux d'Enfants*. Here fingers flew and hands navigated around each other in an elegant but determined dance. The trumpet calls of *Trompette et Tambour* sounded in every register, *Bulles de savon* was a colorful scherzotic ride, and *La Toupie* a breakneck moto perpetuo. Fearlessly executed, the last movement did display how Ms. Hsu (who played primo for the entire evening) and Mr. Serkin have noticeably different touches—something to be expected among any musicians,

but highlighted here as in a concerto for two violins.

This difference was celebrated in Mozart's Sonata in B-flat K.358, which conceived of the two performers as a duet rather than a four handed mutant soloist. Mozart knew that each performer had a right and a left hand, and the spacing of the counterpoint and the development of the melodies in the first movement showed this to be a performers' piece; an expansion rather than a distillation of a great idea. The second movement, likewise a duet, was a complex co-development of a calm, prayerlike incantation in the treble over an undulating bass, threatening storm clouds at all times, until at the end all is unified peacefully.

Any four hands concert must include Schubert, who elevated the genre to an unmatched level of artistry. Serkin and Hsu chose two works, the *Characteristic Allegro in A Minor* D.947 and the *Rondo in A Major* D.951, both written near the end of his life. With these works, the concert finally arrived and the performers hit their stride; it was just a shame it took until the second half to happen. Perhaps if the Mozart were an overture to the Schubert, the Bizet as an encore and perhaps a contemporary composition thrown in, it would provide a more natural arc for the energy of the concert.

But the Schubert works were performed with vigor and grace—the stormy opening of the Allegro melded with whispy arabesques, until the storm returns with double fury. Transparent textures and muscular tuttis contrasted with delicate asides to make this work the highlight of the evening. The Rondo was likewise excellently performed, with a crisp open-air folk tune leading to a romantic take on a *stile antiqua*, before developing further and further, approaching transcendence, and ending a calamity well-earned.

The concluding works, including an encore, were selections from Brahms's Hungarian Dances. Wonderful to hear in their original form, the dances did sometime evince the difficulties of coordination required between two performers usually accustomed to playing solo. This crept into some of the opening Schumann as well, but served more as a reminder of the difficulty of the pianists' tasks rather than a detraction from the musical enjoyment. All in all, on display were many different conceptions and approaches to this seemingly unnatural form of chamber music, and the monumental talents of two great performers to bring it all to life.

New York CLASSICAL REVIEW

April 3, 2014

Heras-Casado right at home in impressive Philharmonic debut

By George Grella

Pablo Heras-Casado is principal conductor of the Orchestra of St. Luke's, so that makes him as a New York musician. But the paucity of that group's concerts has made him a sub rosa presence in the musical life of the city since his appointment in 2011.

This season, then, has felt something like a slow and impressive awakening, as Heras-Casado made his Metropolitan Opera debut with *Rigoletto,* and took the podium in front of the New York Philharmonic for the first time Wednesday night.

The range and depth of his performances and recordings to this point—including accomplished collaborations with the Ensemble Intercontemporain, ICE, and the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra—demonstrate his excellence as a musician. His winning *Rigoletto* drove that home and Wednesday's Philharmonic performance sealed it. His combination of taste, technique and musical intelligence transforms ordinary-seeming programs into memorable events.

Heras-Casado eschews a baton, and with his simple gestural style, it felt like he and the Philharmonic have been partners for years, moving easy and quickly from gentle phrases to intense power. His beat is utterly clear, and the playing held together all evening, easily and securely, in the trickiest syncopated music.

Overture, concerto, so-called 'evening-length' symphony after intermission all add up to the clichéd modern orchestra concert. But details matter, and in this one the slots were filled with Britten's "Four Sea Interludes" from *Peter Grimes*, the Bartók Piano Concerto No. 3 and Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10. Call it cliché busting.

Peter Serkin and Heras-Casado are an ideal pair, sharing the values of precision and clarity in their music-making, necessities for a coherent performance of Bartók's concerto, one of his strangest and most fascinating orchestral scores.

The bucolic opening Allegro goes against type for the composer, with music full of grace and humor. There are stabs at neo-Baroque gestures and phrases directly descended from the Hungarian and Romanian folk music Bartók collected as an ethnomusicologist.

Bartók, like Shostakovich, resists meaning. But where the Russian composer feints at and evades a specific expression, Bartók is like Buster Keaton—-obdurately stone-faced, leaving listeners on their own to ascribe significance to the music.

The Piano Concerto No. 3 rummages through his musical interests—the second movement is built around the call and response of a simple string line and series of modulating piano chords that sound like Bartók contemplating the Classical era. There is a cadenza that sounds dutiful at first then develops substantial sturm und drang. The cosmopolitan finale, with its Gershwin-esque jauntiness and flourish, is breezy.

Serkin was an excellent protagonist, not just in his hands but in his head. This concerto demands that the soloist handle a lot of ideas, and Serkin moved easily from a light touch to power, presenting the notes with utmost transparency and a real feel for the shape of Bartók's harmonies. He, and Heras-Casado, gave the feeling of providing the right weight on each passage, not rigging the game, and letting the music speak for itself (or rather, letting Bartók gaze coolly at the listener).

The other star musicians of the night were the Philharmonic players. This was easily one of their most beautifully played concerts of recent seasons. Perhaps there is some auditory illusion developing, but the orchestra sounds as if it has discovered its own particular sound, a combination of muscularity and precision.

Britten's "Four Sea Interludes" are as evocative as any scene-setting music in the opera repertoire, standing as pure abstract music that still works as a powerful, condensed narrative of the drama.

Along with the gorgeous harmonies and involving phrases, Britten uses orchestration to evoke mood, from the silvery strings and flutes that reveal the bright clarity of the day, to the bright colors of the borough in action, all the way through the savagery of the storm, and a lament for the tragedy that will come.

The music is less a structure of melody and harmony than a collection of scenes, and the Philharmonic projected the images with rich, complex sound and an organic feeling for how the music moves through time. The weight of the rising sun in the horns and low brass seemed to overflow out of the sea, rising like a wave. *Moonlight* was full of empathy and pathos, the *Storm* fervently violent.

Recent concerts show the Philharmonic has an idiomatic Nielsen sound, and last night they proved they have a tremendous Shostakovich sound as well: musically refined phrases, controlled quiet intensity, overpowering force. The dark, beautiful opening movement had a perfect pace, a broad and sensitive flow of dynamics, and the quietly insistent forward pulse that the music demands. Heras-Casado maintained terrific pianissimos and simply powered through the lack of resonance in the hall in the loud passages, which was viscerally exciting.

The second movement was characterized by fast tempo and razor-sharp rhythms with an intensity so great it was on the very edge of being unhinged. In the third movement, the playing perfectly captured Shostakovich's particularly mysterious expression: the music is full of mockery, but of whom? The recently deceased Stalin? The Composer's Union? Shostakovich himself? The difference between Bartók and Shostakovich is that the former would simply stare in response, while the latter would just say "yes."

The orchestral playing was of the highest order, with the brass section playing fabulously and stellar contributions from flutist Robert Langevin, oboist Liang Wang, clarinetist Stephen Williamson, bassoonist Judith LeClair and principal horn Philip Meyers.

The Boston Globe

November 28, 2013

Two of the three Bs tapped by BSO for Thanksgiving

By Jeremy Eichler

If the Boston Symphony Orchestra's fall concert calendar contains a few repertoire surprises on a given year, you typically won't find them during Thanksgiving week, when the programs tend to be pitched right down the middle. This season is no exception, with popular masterworks by two of the three Bs — Beethoven and Brahms — being offered this week to complement all that turkey and cranberry sauce.

Fortunately there was little sense of routine in Tuesday night's performance of Brahms's fiercely difficult Second Piano Concerto with Peter Serkin as soloist. That's partly because Serkin is still not quite a usual suspect when it comes to big Romantic repertoire. Or to put it another way, Serkin plays modern music, from Stravinsky to Wuorinen, with too much expertise and intellectual penetration to fully escape his reputation as a specialist interpreter of 20th- and 21st-century works. It's also true that, like a brightly colored soup that tints the wooden spoon used to stir it, something of the austerity and angularity of Serkin's go-to modern composers appears to have permanently

colored the sound world he finds in music of composers as distant as Bach.

But on Tuesday Serkin seemed to have no qualms about throwing himself into the smoldering passagework and thrusting lyricism of Brahms's mammoth Second Concerto. His attacks retained their signature flintiness and bite and no one could accuse him of Romantic over-indulgence, but Serkin's alert playing also took nothing for granted in this score, and conveyed much of the bracing excitement and vitality this music must have telegraphed when it was new.

Michael Winter rose to the challenge of the opening horn solo, and the autumnal cello song of the Andante sounded honeyed and full as floated by Jules Eskin. Serkin glided into the slow movement with the sensitivity of the fine chamber musician that he is. At the podium Rafael Frühbeck de Burgos might have mirrored a bit more of Serkin's energy, alertness, and attention to detail, but cumulatively speaking, the performance still hit its mark.

After intermission, in Beethoven's Seventh, Frühbeck de Burgos favored middle-of-the-road tempos and rarely dipped below a mezzo-forte dynamic, but the Allegretto movement showcased the BSO violas to fine effect as well as the beautifully seamless blending of the principal woodwinds. Beethoven marked the finale of the Seventh Allegro con brio, and Frühbeck de Burgos understands that "brio" here is about more than sheer velocity. His pacing was considerably less wild and ebullient than some, but his sure feel for this music's hydraulics, the rhetoric underlying Beethoven's symphonic language, helped this account pack enough punch to send Tuesday's audience out cheering.

After Saturday's reprise of this program, the BSO morphs into the Holiday Pops, returning to its subscription season after the new year with three performances, starting Jan. 9, of Osvaldo Golijov's modern classic, the "St. Mark Passion," under the baton of Robert Spano. This conductor knows a thing or two about this exuberantly polyglot score, having led dozens of performances over the years, including its US premiere with the BSO in 2001.

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August 13, 2013

Prom 26: Oliver Knussen conducts Henze, Stravinsky and Tippett

By Paul Kilbey

Concerts conducted by Oliver Knussen are always impeccably programmed, with surprising connections often teased out between unusual pieces. His 2013 Proms appearance was no exception to this rule, juxtaposing two contrasting works for piano and orchestra by Igor Stravinsky, in between a symphonic sandwich of orchestral pieces by Hans Werner Henze and Michael Tippett. The playing of both the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Proms debutant Peter Serkin was just as impeccable as the programme, and the whole thing served as ample proof that even a less attention-grabbing Prom will often remain a musical occasion of the highest calibre.

Stravinsky's *Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments* dates from 1924, an early work in his "Neoclassical" period. Its intricate contrapuntal passagework and stately, quasi-Baroque gestures fit it snugly into the Neoclassical category: it seems to ape earlier music, but within knowing, affectionate quotation marks which give the music a knotty relationship with irony still somewhat unclear today. The Piano Concerto is at once a tribute to and an emulation of Baroque and Classical styles, as well as a subversion of them. Its central slow movement, all thick, low, murky chords and vague, ponderous melodies, courts but avoids the tender melodism of Mozart. I imagine Stravinsky's own performances of this movement would have been rather dry, but in its wilful avoidance of expectations it is as self-revealing a movement as any he wrote – and Serkin cut straight to its curious, icy heart here. The lighter outer movements had a sweet, Baroque air, though Serkin's more playful approach shone a touch more brightly than the BBC Symphony's playing under Knussen's taut, modernist watch.

Where the 1924 concerto is thickly scored and looks back to music past, *Movements* (1958–59) is lean, neat, and spare. Written using Stravinsky's own version of Schoenberg's serial method of composition, it grants each note a Webernesque degree of significance, yet retains a slightly more expansive, outward-looking perspective. What it

shares with the earlier piece is a certain brittleness: Stravinsky's craft is so delicate that a single misplaced note, somehow, would derail the whole thing. And there were certainly no slips from these players: all the artists here have such strong credentials in music of this nature that its success was no surprise. *Movements* will always be an elusive listen, but Serkin and Knussen gave its perfect, delicate structure the best advocacy. Serkin rounded off his Proms debut with an encore of Takemitsu, *Utau Dake* ("I Just Sing"), perfectly judged, perfectly played, warmly received.

Knussen gave just as strong an advocacy to the pieces either side of the Stravinsky, not only conducting assured performances but holding their scores aloft at the end, directing the applause the way of the compositions themselves. And both seemed deserving, though neither came close to the central Stravinsky. It was a good thing, in fact, that Tippett's Second Symphony (1956–57) was not placed next to the Piano and Winds Concerto, given how substantially its style is indebted to Stravinsky's Neoclassicism, with its strong but ambiguous tonal gestures and plodding sense of drive. As it was, the performance (concluding the programme) certainly demonstrated the heft of the Second Symphony, and some beautiful ensemble playing in the slow movement made a great case for Tippett's gift for colour. Yet the piece still seemed inconsequential; for all its driving rhythms and structural neatness, it lacked the innate sense of purpose that Stravinsky couldn't help but write into his pieces. Every Stravinsky work sounds like a statement; this was just a sentence.

Henze's *Barcarola* (1979), by contrast, was a magisterial opener, full of recognisably Stravinskian gestures but easily different enough to sing its own song. The barcarolle, or Venetian gondolier's song, has a long and strange history, from the gentle miniatures of Mendelssohn to the wild, depraved journeys into the beyond of Liszt in his final years. Swaying gently, Henze's gondola travels somewhere new, the dark dirge of most of it transformed at the end into ethereal, translucent string chords. And here as everywhere, the precision of Knussen and the orchestra lent this piece a graceful, glassy sheen. Four different compositions, then, but common threads galore.

Peter Serkin

The Telegraph

August 2, 2013

Proms 2013: BBC Symphony Orchestra

Legendary American pianist Peter Serkin and conductor Oliver Knussen made the most of the 'Albert Hall Effect'

By Ivan Hewett

The Proms have been overwhelming in recent days; grand mythic masterpieces, played to ecstatic houses in electric performances. It's part of the nature of that vast hall that it suits extremes. Either the grandest or the most intimate things work wonderfully well.

Thursday's Prom offered something at the middle ground; subtle experiences, with unfamiliar music, much of it speaking in a quiet voice. The conductor Oliver Knussen put together a typically intelligent programme of 20th century music, with two large-scale, visionary works enclosing two piano concertos by Stravinsky, both precise and hard as diamonds.

Things began with Hans Werner Henze's Barcarola of 1979. The title promised something sunny and Mediterranean, and here and there one caught little flecks of Italianate melody, beautifully played by the woodwinds. But really this was another of Henze's anguished meditations on his own German identity, in the guise of a memorial piece for the East German composer Paul Dessau. At one point we even heard the single most pain-wracked chord from Wagner's Tristan. It was overwhelming in the moment, but

as often happens with Henze, it seemed like a mirage as soon as it was over.

The final piece, Michael Tippett's 2nd Symphony, seemed so very innocent in comparison, with its drowsy pastoral idyll in the slow movement, and faint echoes of Elizabethan dances in the Scherzo. Knussen directed the piece with his usual care, but its effect seemed muffled, the delicate tracery of harp and piano lost in that huge space.

The Prom's tough kernel, constituted by the two Stravinsky concertos, needed to be clear as a bell to make their effect. But they were also vulnerable to the Albert Hall effect, which may be why Knussen and the pianist Peter Serkin decided to take them at such a deliberate pace. The Concerto for Piano and Winds is tricky anyway, its heavily dignified brass and wind processionals always liable to overwhelm the piano.

This performance lacked the brittle hard-edged brilliance we're usually treated to, and the balance went awry at times. But it had a meditative, beautifully "turned" quality, which for me restored the heart to a piece that can seem heartless. Movements of 1959 was a whole world away, its abstract assemblage of lines and points showing Stravinsky was well able to keep up with the 1950s avant-garde. Again the performance brought out the work's meditative qualities, as well as its balletic grace.

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH
January 26, 2013

Varga leads SLSO in beautifully realized performances

By Sarah Bryan Miller

Gilbert Varga looks like a conductor from central casting, with his flowing silver locks, dramatic gestures and dancelike movements on the podium. The gestures are remarkably effective in communicating with the orchestra, however, making for some highly satisfying music-making.

This weekend, Varga returned to Powell Symphony Hall to conduct the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in a nicely balanced program of Eastern European compositions that concluded with one of the most popular orchestral works of all time.

The opener was the brief Overture to “Ruslan and Lyudmila,” by Mikhail Glinka, given a zippy, energetic and crystal-clear reading. It was a somewhat peculiar choice, in that it was last played by the SLSO in May, but still delightful.

A quick piece (especially in Varga’s hands), it took less time to play than did changing the stage to move in the grand piano immediately afterward. Perhaps in such cases tradition could be overlooked just a tad to have the piano in place before the concert begins.

The British-born Varga is of Hungarian extraction; his father, violinist Tibor Varga, worked with composer Béla Bartók. That gave an extra layer of meaning to the choice of Bartók’s Piano Concerto No. 3, written in the last year of the composer’s life. Pianist Peter Serkin (son of pianist Rudolph Serkin) brought an innate understanding and fine technique to this challenging and frequently beautiful work.

The outer movements are busy, enclosing the often contemplative, sometimes delicate central movement like protective shells. There are folk elements throughout the work, along with powerful statements and some jazzy moments. Serkin played it all with skill, for a thoroughly impressive performance.

Varga and the orchestra collaborated magnificently with the soloist; there was never a suggestion of disconnect, just first-rate music-making all around.

Varga clearly did not take the evening’s warhorse for granted in rehearsal. Modest Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition,” in the familiar Maurice Ravel orchestration, was as clear and solidly together as the Bartók.

Each “picture” was clearly delineated, and most were rendered in ideal shades. The “Ballet of Chicks in Their Shells” was particularly fun. Some of the mass of bells that make the very end of “The Great Gate at Kiev” so viscerally exciting failed to ring out, though; that was the one disappointment of the performance.

There was sterling playing from the orchestra, with the brass section, in particular, in splendid voice. This week’s guest principal trumpet, Andrew Balio, offered fine, clear playing, although his tone could use more richness. Principal trombone Timothy Myers and tuba Michael Sanders provided solid leadership for their colleagues.

To go with “Pictures at an Exhibition” this weekend, the SLSO and Art St. Louis offered “Mussorgsky in Reverse,” a dozen paintings and drawings (and one photograph) inspired by a rehearsal by music director David Robertson and the orchestra last November, placed around the lobby and elsewhere.

Peter Serkin

The New York Times

December 12, 2011

Fluid States of Tension to Celebrate Connections

By Allan Kozinn

Peter Serkin at the 92nd Street Y on Saturday. His recital included works by Stefan Wolpe, Charles Wuorinen and Beethoven.

You might not expect works by Stefan Wolpe, Toru Takemitsu and Charles Wuorinen to share much common ground with Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations, and few pianists would be able to persuade you that they do. But then few pianists would assemble a program that would even raise the question.

Peter Serkin would. He almost always includes surprising juxtapositions in his recital programs, and at the 92nd Street Y on Saturday evening he played Wolpe's pointillistic Toccata in Three Parts, Takemitsu's "For Away," a new Adagio Mr. Wuorinen composed for him and Beethoven's quirky, expansive variation set. And he left you feeling that the connections — expressive as well as technical — between the contemporary scores and the Beethoven were both solid and logical.

That could be because Mr. Serkin's interpretive style is so thoughtful and distinctive that disparate works seem to have similarities in his hands, which might not be apparent otherwise. The light, almost feathery touch he uses in gentle passages, for example, yields a smooth, strikingly transparent texture and conveys a sense of patient exploration, whether the material is couched in Takemitsu's gauzy harmonies or Beethoven's expansions on Classical language. At the other end of the spectrum Mr. Serkin's tightly focused and bright-hued approach to more assertive passages is suited to both new and old styles.

Mr. Serkin also found links among the contemporary works, though their composers wrote in very different languages. In the Wolpe he had little choice but to bring out the sharp edges of the outer fast movements and to play

the closing fugue with exacting clarity. But Wolpe's slow movement — an adagio subtitled "Too Much Suffering in the World" — allowed for a more introspective approach that found resonance in the Takemitsu and the Wuorinen pieces, both slow and rich in delicate tracery.

Mr. Wolpe's 14-minute Adagio uses an alternation of consonance and mild dissonance to create fluid states of tension. Much of the piece is pleasantly meditative, yet a strand of clashing harmonies keeps it from becoming a New Age dreamscape, something unimaginable in Mr. Wuorinen's catalog. Not surprising, perhaps, he gave the more muscular strand the final word. The piece ends with an easygoing, descending single line, followed by a sudden, loud, dissonant yet oddly stable closing chord.

Mr. Serkin's balance and control of contrasting elements were impressive, and in some ways they prefigured the task at hand in the Beethoven, a startling display of what a master composer could do with even the most commonplace theme. Mr. Serkin took an outgoing, celebratory approach to the Diabelli waltz that is the subject of these variations, letting its mundane qualities speak for themselves without stressing them.

Beethoven's responses — from the regal Alla Marcia Maestoso that opens the set to the transformation of the waltz into an elegant Mozartean minuet in the final variation — make that point in any case. But Mr. Serkin was at his best in the group of slow variations near the end, particularly the almost operatic Andante, sempre cantabile, and the Largo, molto espressivo, where his ruminative account recalled his flexible touch in the contemporary works in the first half of the program

Peter Serkin

The Mercury News
The Newspaper of Silicon Valley

December 2, 2012

Review: Peter Serkin gives fresh, compelling performance with Symphony Silicon Valley

By Richard Scheinin

Classical music performances often get criticized for their museum-like fussiness, where the polished and perfect rendering of well-worn pieces is the goal. That's not what Peter Serkin is about.

The distinguished pianist's performance Saturday with Symphony Silicon Valley, conducted by George Cleve at the California Theatre, was personal and persuasive. For most of those attending, it probably wasn't the first time hearing Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor. But to hear such a fresh and compelling interpretation of this warhorse -- this was unexpected, at least for this listener, and beyond satisfying.

The story behind this gigantic work, completed in 1859, is well-known. It's said to reflect young Brahms's tumultuous emotions, his despair over the suicide attempt and, later, the death of his friend and mentor Robert Schumann, not to mention his love for Schumann's wife, Clara. But over time, these details just get tucked away by listeners, cataloged in the Museum of Classical Music Facts.

At Saturday's performance -- the first of two by Serkin and the orchestra -- the pianist, 65, was the picture of studious focus, as if he were considering this challenging work and its inner meanings for the first time. Cleve set a deliberate tempo, and the orchestra traversed Brahms's dark and harmonically unsettling set-up for the piano's entrance.

Serkin embraced and even intensified Cleve's deliberate approach, playing the first theme with gravity and arioso lyricism. By the time he arrived at the development section's bravura passagework -- massive chains of octaves and ten-fingered chords -- one sensed a violent, bell-tolling grief. One might have thought that Schumann was Serkin's personal friend, that he had witnessed Schumann's suicide leap into the Rhine.

A beanpole of a man with huge hands -- the pianist shakes them in the air at the ends of phrases, as if discharging electricity -- Serkin rang out those chords. And not always perfectly: He missed some notes, but he didn't play any false ones. He played the music from the inside out: more jagged and biting -- more truthful -- than seamless and polished.

The famous Adagio was even more gripping. Serkin seemed to wrestle with

each chord and melodic turn in Brahms's love song to Clara Schumann. I don't think I've ever heard the rising trills at the movement's midpoint played with this much softly mysterious luminosity. The delicate contributions from the winds, surrounding this song of praise, were lovely, as was Serkin's pianissimo cadenza.

And then the Rondo: There was a split-second hitch in Serkin's entrance, but he caught himself, then swept through the remainder of the finale with exuberance and grandeur. Despite its rough-hewn moments, the orchestra was swept up by the spirit of this truly Brahmsian performance.

As an encore, Serkin played a Brahms intermezzo, Op. 119, No. 3. It was short, sweet and memorable: a spring song on a rainy winter night. Serkin made it sound easy. He and Cleve -- friends who have performed together for decades -- took more bows. Then this rare performance was over.

It's easy to be carried away by Serkin's unique qualities as a soloist, even though he recently said -- in an interview in this newspaper -- that too much attention is paid to the role of soloists. His point was that the publicity mill can lead performers to take themselves too seriously. They wind up "manufacturing" interpretations, he said, without "letting the music lead them." Needless to say, Serkin is not a manufacturer.

In the program's second half, Cleve took on yet another massive work with its own back story of ardor and suffering: Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 in B minor, "Pathétique."

Cleve drew the orchestra out of the opening Adagio, through the nervous, quickened theme that follows and then onto that first golden melody: rich strings and a cameo for principal flutist Maria Tamburrino. Her plush and expressive sound is unmatched by any other flutist in any other Bay Area orchestra. When will she get to perform another concerto with Symphony Silicon Valley?

There were other highlights: the cellos' radiant song in the second movement; principal clarinet Michael Corner's leading of the scherzo's march-like theme; the mournful dying away of the finale. Even so, this was an erratic performance: blatty horns, overpowering brass, thin second violins and much clunky phrasing, undercutting the pathos of this "Pathétique."

The New York Times
November 13, 2012

Sherpas Lead Way to a Feverish Finish

By Vivien Schweitzer

Shanghai Quartet, with Peter Serkin at piano, performed "Dance Capriccio" on Sunday at the 92nd Street Y.

Even Mozart, the composer of some of the most profound, sublime music ever written, churned out a few works that are merely genial. Like an overlong exchange of pleasantries, his "Hunt" Quartet in B flat (K. 458), almost 30 minutes long, outstays its welcome, even in an excellent performance like that of the Shanghai Quartet on Sunday afternoon at the 92nd Street Y.

The "Hunt" is one of a series of six quartets Mozart dedicated to Haydn. He described them as "the fruit of a long and laborious study," having corrected and altered them numerous times. Though the "Hunt" is certainly playful at times, there is also a rather dutiful, labored element to it.

The nickname, not Mozart's, refers to the first movement's opening fanfare. The Shanghai musicians — Weigang Li and Yi-Wen Jiang, violinists; Honggang Li, violist; and Nicholas Tzavaras, cellist — played throughout with rhythmic vitality and a crisply defined phasing that highlighted the work's lighthearted aspects.

The pianist Peter Serkin joined the ensemble for the New York premiere of Bright Sheng's "Dance Capriccio," for piano and string quartet, in a committed, passionate performance. The Shanghai-born Mr. Sheng, who attended the concert, often meshes Asian and Western influences in his music.

The Sherpas of western Nepal inspired this engaging work, written for Mr. Serkin and the Shanghai players, who gave the premiere in February. The piece reflects the contrasting characteristics — fast, exuberant, tender and wild — of traditional Sherpa dance music, elements that were elegantly woven together in one movement.

Piano octaves echoed gently against the strings in the mystical opening passages. A raucous middle section unfolded with folk-tinged melodies and string pizzicati that clashed against a rambunctious piano part. A wistful, sparsely textured interlude led to the frenzied finale.

The program concluded with a terrific rendition of Dvorak's popular Piano Quartet in A (Op. 81), with Mr. Serkin a passionate and sensitive partner to the fine playing of the strings. Mr. Tzavaras's cello contributions were especially beautifully nuanced.

The audience was so eager to show its appreciation that the applause began during the final few measures of the virtuosic finale.

September 30, 2012

Pianist Peter Serkin helps kick off Springfield Symphony Orchestra season opener

By Clifton Noble Jr.

SPRINGFIELD - Peter Serkin's sparkling account of Bela Bartok's Third Piano Concerto crowned the opening night of the Springfield Symphony Orchestra's 2012-2013 season Saturday evening in Symphony Hall.

Since 2003, when he played Brahms' First Concerto with Maestro Kevin Rhodes and the SSO, Serkin has returned to Springfield several times, both as concerto soloist and recitalist. His relationship with the orchestra is a warm one, fueled by mutual respect and by dedication to great performances of great music.

Saturday's Bartok performance was one of the finest this relationship has produced. Serkin's quirky manner and surgical intellect were a perfect match for the Hungarian master's mercurial, piquant invention.

Serkin pressed into service a vast range of pianistic color. Bright red, dexterously defined tone brought richly decorated melodies in octaves leaping out of the harmonic cloud on which they soared. Misty, damped sonorities enshrouded the piano when Serkin wished to accompany the orchestra's responses to his expositional gambits. He played in a way that suggested that "thinking" the sound was sufficient to producing it – his brain-to-hand connection was fully electrified.

Bartok's sprightly opening Allegretto bubbled up from orchestra and piano, alive with trills as a meadow full of birds, with chains of melodic thirds snaking through the individual, yet ever compelling and appealing tonal landscape.

The second movement, marked "Adagio religioso," was a veritable glimpse of heaven, at least at its outer limits. The center portion of the movement contains some of the most arresting "night-music" ever penned. It is as if the bird-drenched meadow of the first movement is now bathed in starlight, and the insects of the dark are in full swing, crickets sawing away at their spiny legs, chill breezes laying the grasses flat, and

untethered spirits capering in the stark light of the moon.

At the movement's opening, Serkin declaimed the solemn piano chorale, a silver thread of melody buoyed up on glowing chords, as if it were a matter of life and death, as the orchestral strings responded with gentle waves of canonic counterpoint. Then the light failed (as it were) and night held sway, but morning was not far away, returning the opening the chorale in the winds as the piano festooned their chords with elegant, pearly phrases.

A sudden juicy shift from C Major to E Major, which had been shimmering in the air since Beethoven employed it in his "Waldstein" Sonata 150 years before, catapulted Bartok, Serkin, Rhodes, and company into a leaping, loping ride through the "Allegro vivace" finale, not at all the sort of music that one associates at all with a composer in the final days of his life, as Bartok was when he wrote this work.

The precision with which Rhodes and the SSO musicians negotiated Bartok's music spoke of meticulous rehearsal. The ease with which they presented it, and the chamber-music style of intimacy they shared with Serkin at the keyboard spoke of a high level of musical sophistication and understanding of the sort that produces truly magnificent performances. Serkin's bow to the orchestra during his second curtain call was a treasured acknowledgement of this endeavor. The standing ovation that rewarded all concerned for their efforts said all else that needed to be said.

Rhodes and the orchestra returned after intermission with a rough-and-ready, yet thrilling rendition of Brahms' First Symphony, replete with warm, dark string playing, lovely woodwind work (particularly from the first oboe in the "Andante,"). There are few melodies in Western music that touch the heart as deeply as the big C-Major tune in the final movement of Brahms First, and Rhodes and his colleagues drove it home, bringing all 1,651 concert-goers once again to their feet. Liszt's unremarkable tone poem "Festklaenge" opened the concert.

The Chautauquan Daily

July 2, 2012

CSO, with Serkin, takes place as center of the action in season-opening performance

By Zachary Lewis

Guest pianist Peter Serkin accompanies the Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra under the baton of guest conductor Roberto Minczuk in the CSO's season-opening performance Saturday evening in the Amphitheater.

The Chautauqua Symphony Orchestra had much to celebrate Saturday night, and it did so in resplendent fashion.

Playing in the Amphitheater on a pleasant evening, the orchestra and guest conductor Roberto Minczuk sounded even hotter than the air outside as they launched the 2012 Season, welcomed a renowned pianist and even hinted at the upcoming Independence Day with the year's first performance of the national anthem. No wonder the concert was broadcast live on Buffalo radio.

But it wasn't the many occasions — including the start of longstanding principal cellist Chaim Zemach's final season, or even the ensemble itself — that commanded the lion's share of the attention. No, beyond question, that honor fell to pianist Peter Serkin, the soloist in Brahms' titanic Piano Concerto No. 1.

One of the most distinguished pianists of his or any generation and an artist of probing insight, Serkin turned in a performance of tremendous character, one in which his personality and every

element of a massive score coalesced perfectly.

His was an uneven performance, in the best possible sense. Even, in this case, meaning flat, smooth or uneventful.

In the first movement, for instance, a starker boundary between the two principal domains would have been hard to imagine. The secondary, more rhapsodic theme enjoyed lavish, almost excessive space, as Serkin spun out its melodies with tremendous feeling at a pace best described as stately. With the principal theme and its development, however, the pianist rained down chords with thrilling, torrential force.

Likewise, his Rondo was no mad, single-minded dash to the finish, as it so often is with other, less mature artists. Explosive, fiery energy abounded, to be sure, but with Serkin, there were also peaceful interludes along the way, patches of sheer joy to be savored.

One might call Serkin's reading of the central Adagio "even," in that it was constantly, unfailingly expressive. Opting again for a slower tempo, a choice that ruled his entire performance, the pianist set about achieving total serenity and partnering to scintillating effect with his woodwind colleagues.

As for the matter of tuning — explained in the weekend *Daily* article previewing the concert — that too was uneven, in that it wasn't what most artists use or prefer in concert. But neither did the slight tang it produced grate the ears, or even stand out terribly. If anything, it gave Serkin a certain and helpful tonal edge over the orchestra behind him, in a work where murkiness can be a problem.

Next to the Brahms, Beethoven's generally lighter Symphony No. 8 stood in sharp but welcome contrast. What's more, the performance by the CSO under Minczuk, music director of Canada's Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra and principal conductor of the Brazilian Symphony Orchestra, accentuated everything that makes the work attractive.

In addition to the usual grace and liveliness almost every performance of the Eighth evinces, Minczuk's Saturday with the men and women in white bore the rarer elements of drive, raw zest and dramatic intensity, illustrating how much potential drama resides in Beethoven's lesser-known symphonies and those of a purely abstract nature.

Sharp attacks and crisp textures were ever-present, but in the hands of Minczuk and the CSO, the music also benefited from strong melodic profiles, thoughtful shading, and charming contributions from the horns, woodwinds and timpani. The conductor wasn't just interested in dynamism, after all. He also recognized the need for delicacy and subtlety. It was the opposite of a dull, one-dimensional account.

Also featured on Saturday's program: another popular work by Brahms, the "Academic Festival Overture," an artful conglomeration of tunes sung by university students that had earned its composer an honorary degree. Here, though, for once, the work fulfilled its original function, serving as an overture to a true academic festival, namely the 2012 Season.

Once again, Minczuk declined to give a casual, offhand performance. On the contrary, his reading Saturday night was robust and patently well-conceived, with melodies emerging from the sumptuous texture of the strings in bold, fetching relief.

The same might now be said of the CSO. As July begins and a new season at the Institution gains momentum, the orchestra has taken its place at the center of the action.

Peter Serkin

The Washington Post

May 18, 2012

Music: Peter Serkin, Shanghai Quartet

By Joe Banno

It's interesting how often folk music from one country can suggest an unlikely kinship with folk music from other, far-flung regions of the world. The more I listened to Bright Sheng's Dance Capriccio for Piano and String Quartet on Thursday at the Freer Gallery — where it was given a handsomely played Washington premiere by pianist Peter Serkin and the Shanghai Quartet (the musicians for whom the piece was composed) — the more I heard echoes of Janacek and Bartok.

Even the most resourceful ethnomusicologist would be hard-pressed to find links between the folk music of the Sharpa people of western Tibet (which Sheng uses as the foundation for this piece) and the Czech and Hungarian folk music employed, respectively, by Janacek and Bartok. Yet the angular fragments of melody and primal, syncopated dance rhythms in the Dance Capriccio kept conjuring those earlier masters' more pungent chamberworks. Sheng's way of alternating ethereal string figures with furious counterpoint in the strings and pulverizing attacks on the keyboard also suggested a link among these disparate composers.

Mozart's String Quartet No. 17 ("The Hunt") received an elegant, buoyant treatment from the Shanghai players that emphasized the score's rhythmic lilt. But it was the performance of Dvorak's glorious Piano Quintet in A, Op. 81, that challenged their reading of the Sheng piece for emotive firepower. Serkin's uncommonly forceful delivery of the piano part, together with the Shanghai's vibrato-rich mix of silvery, intense upper strings and fat-toned viola and cello, projected Dvorak's own take on Czech folk material with thrilling abandon.

Peter Serkin

The New York Times

March 3, 2012

What Do Beethoven and Stravinsky Have in Common? Listen Closely

New York Philharmonic in the Modern Beethoven Festival

By Allan Kozinn

The New York Philharmonic is devoting most of March to the Modern Beethoven, a festival with two potentially illuminating, if not particularly novel, goals. One is to explore the connections among Beethoven's symphonies and three worthy but less traveled 20th-century works. The other is to make the Beethoven symphonies sound fresh, even to listeners who have been hearing them their whole lives.

That is probably the taller order, if only because every ensemble that plays these works has (and announces) similar aspirations. You just don't hear orchestras proclaiming their coming Beethoven performances as the same old same old, even when the odds are that they will be.

But so far, the Philharmonic has made good on its promise. David Zinman, on loan from the Tonhalle Orchestra of Zurich, where he is artistic director, is presiding over the full series, and at Avery Fisher Hall on Thursday evening, he led brisk, texturally transparent and deeply considered interpretations of two symphonies: No. 2 in D and No. 7 in A. Between them, the pianist Peter Serkin was the soloist in Stravinsky's Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra.

Mr. Zinman has made a specialty of getting to the high-energy heart of Beethoven. In 1988, early in his tenure as music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, he brought that ensemble to Carnegie Hall for a revelatory Beethoven series, and more recently he recorded the Beethoven symphonies with his Swiss orchestra.

He was among the first to draw on ideas about tempo and balance proposed by period-instrument groups without abandoning the timbres or, for the most part, the heft of the modern orchestra, and his accounts of the Second and Seventh Symphonies suggest that his approach has not changed radically.

He prizes a trim sound that clarifies inner lines without overemphasizing them but unhesitatingly demands a muscular, weighty sound when Beethoven's gestures are broader and grander. At both extremes, the Philharmonic played magnificently, but then, in this music you would expect no less.

In the Second Symphony, that meant delicate, light-hued Classicism tempered with tensile strength and given to sudden, emphatic shifts into high gear. In the Seventh, the Allegretto was, for once, phrased less like a funeral march than like an invigorating walk. And if Mr. Zinman's account of the finale at first lacked the wild, thrashing quality that listeners as far back as Berlioz prized, it grew steadily richer, sharper-edged and more assertive.

Stravinsky's links to Beethoven are tenuous; his influences were elsewhere. The opening of the Capriccio is couched in decidedly Beethovenian gestures, but that connection is brief. Stravinsky quickly slips into his Neo-Classical style, actually more neo-Baroque here, to create a concerto grosso in which orchestral soloists regularly wrest the spotlight from the piano line.

As Stravinsky goes, this is unusually cheerful music, and both Mr. Serkin and the Philharmonic played it with the warmth and suppleness you expect in Beethoven but hear too rarely in performances of Stravinsky.

The program is repeated Saturday and Tuesday evenings. The Modern Beethoven festival runs through March 20 at Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center; (212) 875-5656, nyphil.org.

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April 21, 2012

Scottish Chamber Orchestra: A Cold Spring

By Alan Coady

It must be heart-warming for a young composer, sharing the bill with Beethoven and Stravinsky, to know that the programme has been named after her piece. The clear, confident writing in Helen Grime's *A Cold Spring* (2009) effectively conveyed the visual contrast offered by sharp-edged, bright days at this time of year. Judicious use of harp in this imaginatively scored dectet clinched the crisp sound suggested by the title. Also featured, in the slow central movement, was the outstanding horn playing of Alec Frank-Gemmill. I found the shape-shifting sound world of this short work very engaging on a first listening and I look forward to discovering more music by this multiple-award-winning composer.

Preceding this work were Oliver Knussen's *Two Organa* (1994). These two short, lively works employ the compositional technique of 'organum' favoured by the 12th-century Parisian 'Notre Dame School' – harmony and counterpoint based on notes four or five steps apart. That said, no-one present could possibly have perceived these works as anything other than recent. It seemed to me a feature of this convincing programme that the individuality of each composer shone through, whichever compositional means they employed in any given piece. As explained in Knussen's own programme note, the plainchant served as a core around which much more energetic figures danced. The first of the organa – using only diatonic notes – brimmed with childlike innocence. The fully chromatic follow-up was a much more tangled affair. These two very appealing openers, economically conducted by the composer, were wonderfully performed by the SCO.

Knussen returned to the stage with the evening's featured soloist, American pianist Peter Serkin, for a performance of Hindemith's *Kammermusik no. 2 for Piano and Orchestra* (1924), and what a performance it was! A no-nonsense beginning quickly revealed Hindemith's trademark ingredient – lively counterpoint based on motifs of such clarity and simplicity that rhythmic

dictation by a keen school-pupil would be possible. Serkin's calm demeanour belies his energy. Much of this work requires great dynamism. Some of the tension in this music I felt to come from Hindemith's approach to tonality. While others around him were abandoning the system, he retained an attachment to key centres while undermining other ingredients which might make make tonal music sound old-fashioned. Somehow, the idea of harmonic gravity being threatened, rather than simply missing, seems to lend the music an edge. This was nowhere more keenly felt than in the beautifully-played slow movement, where the phrases' journeys enjoyed a magical cocktail of purpose and struggle. I couldn't help feeling that Serkin was completely at home in this all-too-infrequently heard musical language.

Jo Kirkbride's excellent programme note on Stravinsky's 1959 *Movements for Piano and Orchestra* highlighted the composer's claim that music is powerless to express anything other than itself – and that such a view would allow a composer to change style as radically as he did on more than one occasion. This – his first completely serial work – appealed to me greatly on first hearing. I have to confess, however, that while the orchestral writing reminded me of Stravinsky, the piano writing was much less identifiable. A contributory factor to the enjoyable orchestration was the SCO's brilliant feel for – and balance of – pointillistic textures. A much more contained work than the Hindemith, I felt that this was sensitively and precisely conveyed by Serkin and the SCO.

The closing work, Beethoven's *Symphony no. 8*, (1812) shared one feature with the Stravinsky: accusations of brevity at the time of composition. In Stravinsky's case this resulted in the addition of extra transitional material, between movements, to pacify the commissioner. Typically, Beethoven retorted that his symphony's quality lay in its compactness. "The little one," as he once referred to this work, is almost a symphony without a slow movement. In contrast to the explosiveness of the other movements, the Allegretto scherzando is relatively calm – but scarcely slow. In this regard, this symphony is the perfect finisher, particularly when played with the verve and unconfined joy of this excellent orchestra.

If one were prone to a flutter, it would have been a safe bet that an Edinburgh audience for a programme where 80% of the works were recent would fall short of a full house. However, as I'm sure Beethoven and Stravinsky would agree, when it comes to quality of musical communication, size isn't everything.

Peter Serkin

April 21, 2012

Classical review: Scottish Chamber Orchestra, City Halls, Glasgow

By Kenneth Walton

Oliver Knussen was present and correct last night to conduct the SCO, but his scheduled new composition, commissioned as part of a varied and mainly modern programme, wasn't. In its place was Hindemith's Kammermusik No 2, effectively a small piano concerto, with American Peter Serkin as soloist.

If we were left without the buzz of a brand new work, Knussen did at least open the concert with a couple of his earlier works, the Two Organa of 1994. The small ensemble harvested the fruits of their deliciously ripe sonorities, the ecstatic bells and whistles of the first, against the dense freneticism of the second.

The rest of the evening was awash with its own extreme juxtapositions of style. In Helen Grime's A Cold Spring", nods to Messiaen dominated a work that neatly counterbalances wild excitement with slow-moving melodic threads that weave through its occasionally soulless textures.

Serkin's Hindemith – for all he looked business-like in his city gent suit – revealed the soul that actually lurks under this surface-dry Germanic music, colouring the second movement with a hauntingly austere charm. He was back in the second half in Stravinsky's Movements for Piano and Orchestra, offering a side to the composer – his late serialist phase – that we rarely get to hear, and doing it with shimmering perspicacity.

Knussen's precision conducting was less convincing in Beethoven's explosive Eighth Symphony.

Peter Serkin

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

February 5, 2012

Serkin masterfully scales the summit of Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations

By Lawrence A. Johnson

If asked to name the summit of Beethoven's achievements, some would point to the Ninth Symphony or the *Missa Solemnis,* others the Violin Concerto, and many the late string quartets.

But listening to Peter Serkin perform the *Thirty-Three Variations on a Waltz by Anton Diabelli* Friday night at Mandel Hall, one might justifiably point to this composition as the work that most strikingly manifests Beethoven's genius.

In 1819, the music publisher Diabelli invited fifty composers to each write a variation on his innocuous dance tune. Beethoven dismissed the idea calling Diabelli's theme a "cobbler's patch." But over time as a kind of personal challenge—and a break from completing the *Missa Solemnis*—Beethoven worked out twenty variations, returning to the score three years later to add thirteen more.

The vast riches that Beethoven mined from Diabelli's ditzy little waltz are staggering, even set against the composer's multitude of masterpieces. Spanning an hour, the set morphs the theme's harmonic structure for an astounding variety of expression: first ironic and angry–seemingly ridiculing the base material–to improving it, spinning off variations of his own variations, and ultimately elevating the theme to a supremely eloquent, even sublime level of expression.

No pianist currently before the pubic possesses the blend of intellectual rigor and stainless-steel technique of Serkin, and his powerful, deeply expressive performance of Beethoven's monumental work for the University of Chicago Presents series was one of the highlights of this and recent music seasons.

At times Serkin's tense, thrusting style may have sacrificed some of Beethoven's quirky humor and charm. But the pianist had a sure feel for the work's vast architecture and scale, from the mock grandeur of the first variation through to the jarring bursts of hectic bravura and abrupt modulations. Serkin brought refined feeling and depth to the ruminative 15th variation and rose to

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the challenge of the final pages in supreme style, achieving a kind of transfigured spiritual eloquence at the summit of Beethoven’ s keyboard edifice.

He was rewarded with a vociferous and prolonged ovation–not a regular occurrence at Mandel Hall. Most pianists would have gone to their dressing room to soak their hands in water after tackling such a demanding work. But after four curtain calls, Serkin returned for an apt encore: the opening Aria from Bach’s *Goldberg Variations,* rendered with a simple, valedictory feeling that felt just right.

On the first half Serkin offered a bracing prelude to the Beethoven epic with three 20th-century works.

Stefan Wolpe’s *Toccata in Three Parts* led off the evening. Wolpe fled the Nazis in 1933, eventually settling in the U.S. where he enjoyed a long and distinguished teaching career. This thorny 1941 work reflects the unsettled times and Serkin nervy virtuosity fully conveyed the tense, spiky angularity of the score.

No pianist has provided greater advocacy for the music of Toru Takemitsu than Serkin. In his *For Away,* Serkin was fully in synch with the Japanese composer’s delicate soft-hued impressionism, with its pensive filigree at times erupting into percussive outbursts.

Charles Wuorinen’s *Adagio* was written for and dedicated to Serkin. The pianist’s gift for highly concentrated playing was manifest in this somber 12-minute meditation, Serkin conveying the spare, searching expression of the widely spaced notes and steep extremes with tensile strength and subtly calibrated dynamics.

Peter Serkin

StarTribune

January 16, 2012

Serkin channels genius of Brahms

Guest soloist Peter Serkin gave a masterful performance of the Piano Concerto No. 1 with the Minnesota Orchestra.

By Larry Fruchsberg

Friday evening's program in the Minnesota Orchestra's current Brahms festival offered two sharply contrasting yet nearly contemporaneous pieces: the path breaking D-minor Piano Concerto, Op. 15 (1854-58) -- the crowning work of the composer's early period, and the first indisputable evidence of his genius -- and the backward-looking but hardly unambitious D-major Serenade, Op. 11 (1857-60).

Each score had a complex genesis; the concerto began as a symphony modeled on Beethoven's Ninth, the serenade as an octet or nonet. And on Friday, both were given consummate performances that mocked my store of superlatives.

It's hard to imagine how unsettling this concerto must have been for its early

audiences. Conceived on a vast scale -- it's longer than any of Brahms' symphonies -- the piece runs the gamut of emotions from blind fury to wounded tenderness. The opening Maestoso is seismic, elemental, roiling; the not-altogether-serene Adagio, said by Brahms to be a "gentle portrait" of Clara Schumann, seems to probe their intricate intimacy; the ecstasies and affirmations of the concluding Rondo are hard-won and perhaps a bit tentative.

Friday's account of this incendiary music, by soloist Peter Serkin, conductor Osmo Vänskä and a white-hot orchestra, was overwhelming. Serkin -- son of one legendary Brahmsian, pianist Rudolf Serkin, and grandson of another, violinist Adolf Busch -- has this music in his blood; his way with Brahms' rhythms (which can sound square in lesser hands) is unexcelled, as is his ability to knit together the extremes of expansiveness and tension.

A youthful 64, Serkin is his own man: for some minutes before Friday's concert he sat center stage, seemingly unaware of the bustle around him, quietly communing with the piano. This public reverie, rare behavior for a soloist, seemed to bear fruit in the subsequent performance, in passages where the pianist appeared to channel music from another sphere.

Serkin returns to the festival Thursday and Saturday (Jan. 19 and 21) in Brahms' B-flat concerto. We ought to hear much more from him in the future.

The six-movement serenade, often reminiscent of Haydn and Mozart, operates at a temperature lower than the D-minor concerto's. Its chamber-music origins remain audible. But it responded gratefully to Vänskä's high-wattage, unabashedly symphonic treatment, which dealt adroitly with Brahms' sometimes problematic orchestration. The conductor's animation in dancelike passages was especially endearing. And the Adagio was revealed as one of Brahms' great slow movements.