

My Beethoven Concerto Project

Yevgeny Sudbin

The young Russian-born virtuoso talks on performing and recording Beethoven's Piano Concertos in Minnesota under Osmo Vänskä, and touches on his other plans for the BIS label which have received wide critical and commercial success.

I first played a Beethoven Concerto when I was at the Purcell School, when I was 16. It was No 1 in C major, and the next one I played was Number 4, and then No 5, the *Emperor*. The Fourth, in G major, was always my favourite, for it is a wonderfully intimate Concerto, musically rather than technically. It has some tremendous moments of intimacy which are actually very rare if you compare it with any of Beethoven's other piano concertos. In that work, you will find music that speaks to you in such an intimate way, which is also incredibly accessible. It is one of Beethoven's most human works. There are only few other pieces by Beethoven where one can find quite so much wit as in the closing movement, and the opening movement contains some of the most affectionate and loving moments. Musically, there is the relationship between keys a third apart and the relationship between soloist and orchestra – the first bars, especially, where the opening is one of the hardest things in any piano concerto for the soloist to get right. Here you have the most delicate beginning, and to phrase it perfectly is almost impossible. It is possibly the most challenging beginning of any piano concerto, and was the source of many discussions between Osmo and me. Which brings me to the other reason why I am particularly excited about this project: I have long searched for a partner and orchestra with whom I can easily communicate and develop my ideas. With the Minnesota Orchestra and Osmo Vänskä as the team, I couldn't have wished for better partners.

I was often told that to avoid attracting criticism, hate-mail and having eggs thrown at you, for a start you should stay away from recording Beethoven concertos. Since I try not to read reviews and I quite like eggs, I am doing it anyway. In reality, recording this Beethoven cycle is a dream come true for me for many reasons. One of them was that I finally had to face the challenge of overcoming my 'love-hate'

relationship with the composer which I had since childhood. It is easy to be afraid of Beethoven. Very afraid. Not only because of the huge legacy of wonderful recordings of the concertos already in existence, but also because from the first day of playing the piano, with Beethoven's music traditions and customs are usually being drilled into one's skull, which are to be observed and religiously followed whatever they are. Nothing wrong with that ... at first. In fact deeply rooted respect (though not necessarily fear) for the composer is the necessary seed from which any individuality and original thought later springs to life I believe. Yet 'true authenticity' I feel is often to be found in some of the more 'unusual' performances. But don't just take my word for it: for example, think of some of the old, historical recordings of the great personalities of the past, such as Moiseiwitsch, Hofmann, Kempff, Edwin Fischer etc. There, we discover that Beethoven was in fact fallible and human, with many traits that I feel have become less pronounced in some of the more contemporary recordings and that I long felt needed much more emphasis. The intimacy and delicate lyricism of the (in my opinion completely wrongly nicknamed) *Emperor* is so important and all too easy to overlook, given the many runs and at times heavy textures; yet by being less direct and less obviously 'grand', it confers on the piece much greater authority.

Whilst I have heard a lot of recordings of the Beethoven Concertos I do not listen to them very often (I do not know whether it is beneficial or not), but one older recording that I do adore of the *Emperor* Concerto, for example, is by Moiseiwitsch [with the LPO under George Szell], which as a performance also finds a lot of intimacy in the music that many people overlook. They think of the *Emperor* as a big, almost macho, piece, but I do not necessarily think that is a good thing if you over-emphasize it. I think that Moiseiwitsch actually brings out fantastic qualities in this

Concerto which I do not hear that much in other versions. It is typical for him to find that intimacy where other people go over the edge.

I do not think that that is necessarily a Russian thing – I would not like to generalise, because the Russian piano School is incredibly diverse – but Gilels' recordings of No 4 and No 5 are also very special; they have some really delicate playing, actually quite sublime, which I like very much. I also admire the live recordings of No 4 by Josef Hofmann; it is a shame that there are not more recordings by him from earlier times.

When I was working on these Concertos I was trying to find, especially in the Fifth, moments for introspection – of course it is all there, but I always think that even in the technically powerful passages in the foreground the music is always melodic, so I hope that when the audience hears my performance they do not leave thinking they have heard a bombastic piece.

The next Concerto we record is Number 3. I have always found Numbers 4 & 5 more accessible, because generally, music from the romantic period is easier for me to digest. No 3 is quite straightforward musically, and I find Beethoven is generally very comfortable in the key of C minor. Beethoven's Third Concerto of course was clearly influenced by Mozart's in C minor, and in No 3 (in which I play Beethoven's own cadenza, of course) we shall be coupling it with Mozart's K 491. But Beethoven's Fourth and Fifth Concertos occupy a completely different world – they are more Romantic, the writing is different, it's more complex, and with those later Concertos a conductor is essential.

I also think that for certain Mozart concertos a conductor is essential; it is important that you have somebody who can keep the whole orchestra together, of course, as one instrument, and I have been lucky in Osmo Vänskä who does an incredible job, and the way BIS record is quite interesting, because the balance between soloist and orchestra enables us to hear individual instruments, so it is almost like making chamber music on a big scale with a conductor.