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15 concertos learned – only 150 to go...

What's it like to be a young concert pianist facing the challenge of learning and playing the great piano concertos? JOHN EVANS asks 18-year-old Benjamin Grosvenor

The Schumann, the Brahms, the Tchaikovsky... they're a rite of passage. They stand like a mountain range daring all young, aspiring concert pianists to cross.

And cross them all pianists must if they are to have long, successful careers. So does 18-year-old British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor, who won the piano finals of the BBC Young Musician of the Year aged 11, wake up at night terrified by the prospect of conquering his instrument's Himalayan ranges?

He looks at me as if I'm mad: 'No, I don't lie awake scared of concertos. I don't think of them; I think only of the music I'm learning at the moment.'

Come on, surely Rachmaninov's Third, the concerto that broke David Helfgott in the film *Shine*, makes his hair turn white? He shakes his loose brown locks. It's not the reaction I was looking for. So does he worry about how he's going to impress his personality on pieces performed and recorded so often that even the most casual classical music lover can hum extracts from them?

'You must never seek to deliberately impose yourself on the score like this [he plays the opening chords of the Tchaikovsky, becoming quieter rather than maintaining the volume and power]. But if your own ideas emerge from the music and they are truthful to the music, that's fine.'

He's telling me this from the controls of a Yamaha CFX grand piano, the company's brand-new flagship instrument. It's a piano Benjamin will be encountering in many concerto performances to come. Like Barenboim before him, his first public concerto performance, at the age of 10, was Mozart (No.21 in C major). He quickly followed this with his professional debut playing Ravel's Piano Concerto in G major.

'If you want a lot of concertos, you have to learn a lot of concertos, at least all of the major ones,' he says. To his Mozart and Ravel Benjamin has since added Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, Chopin 1 and 2, Grieg and Schumann. He later returns to update the list (funny how you can forget the odd concerto) with Beethoven No.3, three more Mozarts and Liszt No.1. He thinks that's it. 'I'd like to play the Miasokovsky one day, though I know it's probably not every concert programmers' first choice, as well as Beethoven No.4 and Rachmaninov No.3.'

He's currently learning Saint-Saëns Piano Concerto No.2 for a concert with the Ulster Orchestra in Belfast on 11 March. There's no secret to getting a concerto under your fingers, he says – you just sit down and get on with it, but listening to other recordings helps. While learning Rachmaninov No.2 Benjamin discovered William Kappell's recording, now his favourite: 'he does some very interesting things.' He also studies the score, checking for interplay between the piano and soloists. He's picking up playing tips all the time.

Chief among them is that with a full

orchestra behind you, you can't understate things. 'One pianist showed me how at one point in the Schumann the right-hand melody line is also scored, less obviously, in the left hand. Play out both and you double its projection.'

In the very early days of his career conductors would 'patronise' him: 'They'd say "not too much rubato here, Benjamin." Now most of them say "just do what you want and we'll follow you."

'The rubato in the Chopin concertos can be a problem. It's more a solo work with orchestral accompaniment so you need a good conductor, one who shares your musical instincts, to hold everything together. Rachmaninov No.2 is a different beast; the lead is constantly moving from the piano, to soloists, to full orchestra, back to the piano...'

The rehearsal is when you resolve those nerve-jangling details such as exactly when the orchestra comes in at the top of a virtuosic solo flight up the keys. 'Agree a number of beats for the run so that the orchestra comes in bang on cue,' says Benjamin.

And don't forget those 80 individuals who make up the orchestra. Benjamin aims to get them on side as quickly as possible by convincing them he has something musical to say.

It sounds like this apparently unflappable 18-year-old pianist has the piano's Himalayas in his grasp. He's now in his third year at the Royal Academy of Music, so there are plenty more opportunities to learn. But there's one person in particular he'd like a few more concerto tips from: Daniel Barenboim. 'He's a great pianist and conductor – I could learn so much from him,' he says. No worries Benjamin – allow us to introduce you... ■

With special thanks to Yamaha and Chappell of Bond Street, London

Hear Benjamin live

He's celebrating his 18th birthday with a series of recitals

- 11 MARCH
Ulster Orchestra, Ulster Hall, Belfast
- 20 MAY
Newbury Spring Festival
- 20 JUNE
Wigmore Hall, London
- 14 JULY
City of London Festival

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