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Benjamin Grosvenor: 'I'm not that talented'

Pianist Grosvenor is about to become the Proms' youngest ever soloist, at the age of 18. And yet, he was no child prodigy

**Tom Service**

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Impressive expression ... pianist Benjamin Grosvenor. Photograph: Laurie Lewis/Press Office

Eighteen-year-old Benjamin Grosvenor, a finalist in the BBC Young Musician of the Year aged just 11, set to become the youngest-ever soloist in the history of the Proms when he plays Liszt's Second Piano Concerto on the opening night, and who has just signed a deal with Decca as their youngest-ever artist, has just stunned me. "I'm not that talented, musically. I obviously have some kind of gift for interpreting music, but really otherwise, I'm not that talented."

There's modesty, and then there's stratospheric self-deprecation. Coming from a half-decent amateur pianist, you could understand this comment, but from someone who started playing the piano aged six, and who was playing Grade 8-standard pieces just 18 months later, Grosvenor's assessment of his musicality seems ludicrously low-key.

But he's serious. As with everything else this reflective and intelligent 18-year-old says, Grosvenor means it. Because although he is prodigiously talented – whatever his protestations – he is no child prodigy. "I wasn't one of those prodigies you read about who went to the piano and could just pick out tunes. My mother tried to start me when I was five, but I couldn't be bothered. I only began practising seriously when my friends at school started to play, and I thought, 'they're not going to get better than me!'"

Grosvenor's mother, a piano teacher, taught him until he was nine, and is still one of his biggest musical influences. "She realised I had a gift for music when I was eight and I could play a Chopin waltz with more of a feeling for conveying emotion in the music than her 17- or 18-year-old pupils. But I don't have any particular early memories of the piano."

Grosvenor talks of his early years as if he's a seasoned professional looking back on the

sins of his youth. But he's talking about 2004. "Listening back to the Chopin D Flat Major Nocturne I did when I was 12" (it's on his website, www.benjamin-grosvenor.co.uk) – "I think it's really interesting, some of the expressive things I do, like the asynchronisation of the hands." That's a technique where the left hand plays a microsecond before the right, something associated with pianists of an earlier age, such as Alfred Cortot and Artur Schnabel, and frowned on by today's virtuosos. "I don't really know where that came from; I hadn't heard any of those early 20th-century recordings by then."

It must have been instinct. And Grosvenor's musical intuition made him a fully fledged musician even at the age of 11, rather than merely a precocious prestidigitator. As you can see on YouTube in his [performances from the Young Musician](#) competition, it's not his technique that impresses the most, but how he communicates the emotional landscape of music by Scarlatti, Ravel, or Carl Vine. A few years later on his first CD, a compilation of some of the heights of pianistic possibility by Kapustin, Chopin, and Moszkowski, it's the colours he creates, and the range of expression he finds, that potentially puts him right up there with some giants of the piano.

The question is where his unerring feeling for music came from. A semi-detached house in Southend is the literal answer, where Grosvenor still lives with his parents and four elder brothers, and where his piano practice still upsets his neighbours. He shares a bedroom with his brother Jonathan, who has Down's syndrome, and whose obsession with Westlife can drive him up the wall: "Those modulations at the end of the songs! They've sung it all already, and then to create a greater emotional effect, they put it up a tone." He shakes his head in disbelief at the musical crudity.

His relationship with his mother is central. "She has shaped me musically. She knows what I'm trying to do. Sometimes she makes a comment about my playing that makes me think, 'what are you saying, Mum?' – only to discover hours later that she's right. Which is annoying."

Grosvenor is now at London's Royal Academy of Music, studying for a degree. He goes out drinking with friends there, even if he says he has no time for a partner, and still less to go to many concerts. He does, though, do a lot of listening and talking with one of the academy professors, pianist Daniel-Ben Pienaar. "He has opened my ears to different ways of playing and thinking about everything," Grosvenor says. Together they fine-tune his interpretations, discuss old recordings, and delve deep into music's expressive world. "Listening to other recordings can help, but really what it's about is finding what I want in the piece, how I'm going to say it. It sounds egocentric, but that's the approach."

Grosvenor's main inspirations do not come from today's pianists. "I've become disillusioned with how people play [classical music](#) these days. If you compare the way people perform Mozart now with, say, Lili Kraus's recordings, or Schnabel's Beethoven with today's players – today, things are so much blander and more boring. They were each so unique back then." Does he have a favourite? "Probably Horowitz, but there are so many: Cziffra, Rosenthal, Cortot, Cherkassky, Moiseiwitsch. Maybe it's because of recording and the pressure to make things note-perfect, or the influence of competitions, but we've lost touch with that tradition of playing, with its imagination and expression."

I know what Grosvenor means. He's too polite to name names; reading between the lines, neither the conscientious Alfred Brendel approach nor the flashy Lang Lang brand of pianism would excite him as much as the older generation. He admits to being jealous of Chinese sensation Yuja Wang's repeated octave-runs, but if he's

competing with anyone "it's with the old dead guys" of the so-called golden age. Their fearlessness is what he aspires to, even if it means doing things the composer didn't write. "If you presented any composer with their music in a completely different way from what they wrote, but it was incredibly effective, they would be flattered. And with most of the composers I play, there's even less of an obligation, because they're dead. They're not ever going to hear it."

There's a glint in Grosvenor's eye; he knows he's going against the grain of the genuflection of so much classical-music culture. But if anyone can bring back a new golden age, it could be Grosvenor. He has the intelligence, the technique, the instinct, and the confidence. All he needs now is to put it all together on a big stage – and they don't come bigger than the Proms.

Benjamin Grosvenor plays the First Night of the Proms, Royal Albert Hall, 15 July. [Tickets here](#). His first release on Decca will be out in July.

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