

THE  TIMES

## Red-hot virtuosos: meet the new stars of the Proms



From left: Benjamin Grosvenor, Alice Sara Ott and Nicholas Collon Ian Harrison for The Times

Neil Fisher

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### The musicians who will be lighting up the Royal Albert Hall are genre bending, continent crossing, talented and terrifyingly young

When Benjamin Grosvenor decided to spend his life savings on a new piano he began to realise that he was different from his schoolfriends. He was 13 years old. "And none of the other kids could understand why you would spend so much on a piano, when you could get one for £500."

But the one Grosvenor had set his heart on was a Bösendorfer, a premier league instrument on a par with a Steinway. His grandmother lent him £10,000; the rest, some £17,000, came from Grosvenor's competition winnings and fees. He says leaving secondary school a year later, at 14, wasn't a difficult decision. "It was the lack of understanding of what I did. So, no, I didn't really fit in."

He has found a niche now, though. Grosvenor, who turned 19 yesterday, is taking the

spotlight in the most spectacular way. Next week he will become the youngest soloist to perform at the First Night of the BBC Proms, playing Liszt's Piano Concerto No 2 in the glittering opener of a 70-concert festival showcasing classical music's biggest names. And as if that wasn't enough to signify that Grosvenor has come of age, he is also the first British pianist to sign with the London-based musical label Decca for 60 years. His album of Ravel, Liszt and Chopin is out this week, and it's a corker. Then he plays his second Prom of the season with the National Youth Orchestra on August 6.

"It's a busy few months," he concedes, a response that is a good contender for understatement of the year. "It's difficult to maintain the focus. I'm entitled to a break soon, but then I look forward and there isn't really an opportunity."

So, when the call came in to play at the First Night, did he think about saying he wasn't ready for that level of exposure?

"Yeeees," he says, taking a deep breath. "But you don't turn down the First Night of the Proms, do you?"

He cheekily admits that he did ask the Proms whether there was any chance that he could swap repertoires with the world's biggest piano superstar, Lang Lang, who plays the other Liszt Concerto (No 1) on the Last Night. "And he wouldn't swap — what a bastard," he jokes. "But, actually, I've wanted to play No 2 for ages. It's more lyrical, more expansive, and to a certain extent the piano's not so much to the forefront. The most beautiful moment for me is when the cello plays and the piano is merely accompanying it."

That's a mature, self-effacing answer, but it's also a characteristic one. Grosvenor's fast-tracked career may seem typical of the new generation of pianistic dynamos: overpushed and then oversold.

Indeed, a *Times* profile as early as 2005 suggested that he was being pushed too hard, after his prodigious appearance in the BBC Young Musician of the Year final the year before.

"That wasn't a truthful representation of me," he retorts. "It made me out to be a person who was forced to sit at the piano and practise all day and that I didn't have a life other than that."

Grosvenor's first agent described the musician's mother, his first piano teacher and still his most important mentor, as an "over-ambitious parent" in the same *Times* article. But Grosvenor firmly rejects the Tiger Mother allegation. "All my parents wanted," he insists, "was that their children were happy — and they would facilitate that in any way they could." His argument is simply that he wanted to perform. "And if a child really wants to do it themselves, there's no reason why you shouldn't give them the support."

In Grosvenor's case, life on the road still means travelling with his mum in tow. "There will be a time when it stops, but it's good that she's there." He pauses. "And not only because when I'm extremely stressed before a concert she irons my shirts."

Such is life in the Grosvenor clan, prodigy or not. At home in Southend-on-Sea he lives with four older brothers, none of them musicians (there is now talk of some of them starting to pay rent). He shares a bedroom with his brother Jonathan, who has Down's syndrome. "He likes dancing and writing stories. He also loves music, but he likes Westlife

and Girls Aloud and the Black Eyed Peas.” Arguments over their CD player must be lively.

The familial set-up seems to keep the Proms debutant’s feet on the ground. And if this musician has a manifesto, it’s taking the superficial flashiness out of the piano world, rather than adding more. He’s relieved that the BBC Young Musician of the Year was the only competition he needed to enter, “because I hate the way piano has become so competitive, more like a sport than it is about music”. He wants to show off less familiar areas of the repertoire: “I’d fight to show audiences that there’s value in more obscure music.”

Grosvenor also wants to break down the formality of a recital. “We have to think about different ways of making music and reaching audiences. When an audience arrived for a recital by Liszt, he would greet them — he’d shake them by the hand, as if he was the host. So there was a feeling that the audience was your guest and what you did was somehow dictated by them.”

It’s an appealing idea. But it may take Grosvenor quite a while to shake more than 5,000 hands at the Albert Hall. Instead, he will reach out by doing what he knows best. Chewing over thorny questions of interpretation and analysis, the teenager finally comes up with a breezy conclusion. “With every piece,” he concludes winningly, “I just try to find, essentially, how I want it to go.”

*Benjamin Grosvenor plays Liszt with the BBC Symphony Orchestra on Friday, July 15, broadcast from 8pm on BBC Two ([bbc.co.uk/proms](http://bbc.co.uk/proms)). His debut album of Chopin, Liszt and Ravel is out on Decca*

## **Nicholas Collon**

It takes serious nous to scoop up an Arts Council grant at a time when the axe is falling on arts organisations up and down the country. But Nicholas Collon can go into a new concert season this autumn knowing that his brilliant ensemble, the Aurora Orchestra, now has a regular subsidy after six years of living by the skin of its teeth.

“We were absolutely delighted when that decision was made,” the 28-year-old conductor says, “because it acknowledged that we are doing something fairly unique in London, which is hard to achieve.”

Collon says that his family Prom, themed around the wildly popular *Horrible Histories* series, is but another side to their character. “One of our mantras is that we treat all our events in very much the same way: we try to engage with the audience, be they old, young, experienced in the concert hall or not.”

Grown-ups, meanwhile, can take their pick from the Aurora’s programmes across London. At Kings Place they perform more or less traditional chamber repertoire. But in LSO St Luke’s they choose an eclectic mix focusing on different themes or non-classical collaborators. A concert based on the theme of “jealousy” included everything from Mahler to tango and John Lennon.

“The generation of musicians I know is as excited about performing music as anyone has ever been,” Collon says. “It’s a drug to those who know it — we just have to make sure it spreads.”

*Horrible Histories, July 30 (11am, free); Collon also conducts the London Sinfonietta on August 13*

### **Alice Sara Ott**

Even though she was only 5 years old at the time, the 22-year-old pianist Alice Sara Ott can remember her first public recital. “I remember it because when I finished playing and took my bow to the audience they started clapping and shouting ‘bravo’. And that was the moment that I felt everybody was finally listening to me and understood me.”

Perhaps the early desire to be properly understood came from Ott’s dual heritage. She grew up in Munich with a Japanese mother and a German father. “Of course the German bit is dominant, but I never feel native in Germany — if I walk in the street people call me ‘Ching Chang Chong’. Then I’m in Japan and people are shocked when I speak Japanese.” When she found herself jetting between Asia and Germany twice in a week, Ott realised how important a good work-life balance was. “I woke up one morning, I didn’t know where I was, my head was pounding, I was totally confused. So I experienced for the first time in my life my own limit, which was good.”

The Albert Hall is an exciting but not daunting challenge for one who already has a record contract and has twice leapt in as a last-minute replacement for the pianistic titans Murray Perahia and Lang Lang: the latter for a Liszt concerto at the Barbican in which the *Times* critic observed that “she plays with a weight of resonance and authority which belies her years”.

The secret, she says, is to not compare yourself with others. “There’s only one truth in music, but there are millions of ways to find it.”

*Ott plays the Grieg Piano Concerto on August 8*

### **Elias Quartet**

There is no closer relationship in the classical music world than the bonds between the members of a string quartet. “Of course you have your ups and downs when you’re living your life around people that intensely,” the violinist Donald Grant says of the Elias Quartet, “but we all have a deep affection for each other. You couldn’t possibly spend that much time around each other if you didn’t.”

This young group, who make their Proms debut at the Cadogan Hall in a programme that stretches from the 17th century (Purcell fantasias) to the present day (a new String Quartet No 3 from the Scottish composer Sally Beamish), have already put down roots. Those go back to their time at music college, and soon after leaving their studies they were appointed successors to the great Lindsay Quartet at Sheffield’s Music in the Round — “which meant working every day, working through a lot of repertoire”.

And it enabled the Eliases to form a real relationship with their audience. “When we left we missed that and we wanted to think about how we could re-create that personal bond with audiences.” One way is via their next big project, the complete Beethoven quartets, which is being accompanied by a website and blog ([thebeethovenproject.com](http://thebeethovenproject.com)).

*The Elias Quartet play at Cadogan Hall (chamber Prom) on July 25*

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