

Buchbinder to Play Beethoven Sonatas

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ST. PETERSBURG — The ability to perform every one of Ludwig van Beethoven’s 32 sonatas puts a pianist in a special club. No connections will open its doors; talent and skill are the only criteria.

Austrian pianist Rudolf Buchbinder became a member many years ago. His renditions of Beethoven sonatas stand out for the remarkable intensity of their interpretation and purity of sound.

This month, the pianist comes to St. Petersburg for a unique series of concerts in which he will perform all of Beethoven’s piano sonatas during the course of seven evenings. The concerts will take place June 24, 25 and 25 and July 6, 7, 9 and 10 at the Mariinsky Theater Concert Hall as part of the annual “Stars of the White Nights” festival.

Buchbinder has gained worldwide recognition for his Beethoven interpretations, both in the concert hall and on record. The musician has recorded more than 100 releases, including the complete Beethoven sonatas, as well as works by Brahms, Mozart and Haydn. This year, he is

releasing the complete Beethoven piano sonatas on CD and complete Beethoven piano concertos with the Vienna Philharmonic on DVD — both recorded live.

Buchbinder's personal connection with Beethoven goes back many decades, when as a 5-year-old prodigy he performed Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1 at the world-renowned Musikverein concert hall in Vienna. "I still do not know exactly how I managed it; the whole experience felt like something completely surreal," he recalls.

At the same tender age, he became the youngest student in history to be admitted to the prestigious Vienna Music Academy (Vienna Musikhochschule). Today, the distinguished musician performs alongside some of the world's leading orchestras in the caliber of the Berlin Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Orchestre National de France and London Philharmonic Orchestra. He collaborates with the most sought-after conductors, including Claudio Abbado, Zubin Mehta, Lorin Maazel and Kurt Masur. Since 2007, the musician has been the artistic director of his own classical music festival in Grafenegg, Austria.

Read a typical biography of Buchbinder, and you will inevitably learn that the artist's core repertoire is the so-called Viennese classics — a term that usually encompasses Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn. Speak to the musician himself, and he will tell you that he thoroughly detests the phrase "Viennese classics" and cannot stomach it.

"I cannot stand this utterly stupid phrase," he explains. "It is absolutely nonsensical and was seemingly invented by some kind of music bureaucrat who researches music but fails to see the heart and soul behind the score. They have simply assigned the title of 'classic' composers to these very different composers and put them in a group."

For Buchbinder, the core element of Mozart's art is drama, while the music of Beethoven is synonymous with lyricism and delicacy. "Beethoven is the only composer in the history of music who writes 'espressivo' followed by 'a tempo' — it's in his Piano Sonata, Opus 109. This is the epitome of Romantic playing."

Buchbinder devotes attention to the intensely scrupulous study of musical scores and the musical material that he performs. The musician has an impressive collection of rare editions of Beethoven's sonatas, as well as autographed scores, first editions, and original documents.

"The more knowledge you acquire about a piece of music you are going to perform, the more liberty it gives you," Buchbinder believes. "Research helps you to get closer to the composer, his feelings and ideas, his motivation and his life itself at that moment."

Buchbinder's approach to music is anything but mechanical or monotonous.

"Only once in my career did I play the Beethoven sonatas in chronological order; then, having listened to the cycles performed by the world's best interpreters of his sonatas, I saw that they all create their own structure of the series," Buchbinder said. "Indeed, it is more exciting for the audiences to compare within one concert the different periods of Beethoven's work. A pianist can thus create the atmosphere of a confrontation on stage. As for the chronological approach, that is plain boring."

“In Beethoven’s time, his most popular piece was the ‘Moonlight Sonata.’ As ridiculous and paradoxical as this may be, the character of this particular work has nothing to do with Beethoven as a composer — it does not communicate much about him,” Buchbinder said. “The truth is that the popularity of the ‘Moonlight’ made Beethoven furious, as he felt that audiences were missing the point of his art.”

In Buchbinder’s opinion, it is the composer’s tour de force sonatas that convey the genuine Beethoven spirit. To understand what Beethoven’s piano music is really about, one needs to listen to the “Appassionata Sonata” with its amazing contrasts of forte and piano, or the “Sonata Pathetique” with its tragic sonorities, Buchbinder feels.

The pianist is a regular with the International Beethoven Festival that is held every year in the composer’s birthplace, Bonn. The city successfully markets Beethoven as its top “brand,” as do the festival’s heavyweight sponsors, allowing the festival to run for a month, featuring dozens of concerts by some of the world’s most distinguished musicians. Russia has not yet used the opportunity to create an annual international festival built around the figure of a Russian composer of global importance, and one idea that Buchbinder personally finds worth exploring is a Sergei Rachmaninov festival.

“There is such a wealth of Rachmaninov’s masterpieces that are hardly ever performed: For example, how often do you get to listen to the composer’s magnificent romances?” Buchbinder said. “This Russian composer left a stunning and remarkably diverse legacy, from choral music to piano concertos to symphonies to songs that I admire. I would be honored to attend a Rachmaninov festival — if such a project is ever conceived.”

Rudolf Buchbinder will perform the Beethoven Sonatas Cycle on June 24, 25 and 25 and July 6, 7, 9 and 10 at the Mariinsky Theater Concert Hall, 37 Ulitsa Dekabristov. St. Petersburg. Tel. +7 (812) 326-4141. www.mariinsky.ru.

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