

21C ARTISTS TO WATCH

PROFILE: On the Road with Pianist Kirill Gerstein

For Kirill Gerstein, life as a professional musician is a multifaceted journey: from early studies in jazz to performing at the classical music world's most prestigious venues; from student to teacher; and from country to country. Born in Voronezh, in southwestern Russia, Gerstein studied jazz at an early age. At 14, he became the youngest student ever admitted to the Berklee College of Music in Boston. By 20, he had earned Bachelors and Masters degrees in classical piano at the Manhattan School of Music, and by 27 he was a professor at the Musikhochschule in Stuttgart, Germany.

Now 29, Gerstein sports a datebook featuring top orchestras and conductors, recitals in starry halls, and prestigious awards – including first prize at the Arthur Rubinstein Piano Competition in Tel Aviv, a Gilmore Young Artist Award, and a Carnegie Hall “Rising Star.”

The Russian pianist's busy concert schedule is an airline company's dream. In July and August alone, Gerstein played, in order, a Mendelssohn concerto in Tel Aviv; chamber music in Colmar, France; Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* in Saarbrücken, Germany; more chamber music at the Aix-en-Provence and Verbier festivals in France and Switzerland; a recital at Verbier; Bernstein's “Age of Anxiety” in Caracas, Venezuela with Gustavo Dudamel and the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra; and chamber music at the Salon-de-Provence in France, the Delft Festival in Holland, and the Lucerne Festival in Switzerland. He closed the Philadelphia Orchestra's summer season at New York's Saratoga Festival, performing chamber music and Rachmaninoff's “Paganini Variations”, followed by concerts at the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival.

Gerstein is a passionate young man with myriad interests and talents. 21C Media Group's Wende Persons caught up with him in New York City as he prepared for his October debut with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

WP: *Kirill, by my count, this summer you played over a dozen different programs in seven countries in two months. How do you do it all?*

KG: Yes, it's a lot of repertoire, but all these different pieces always contain universal musical and pianistic expressions. Practicing a certain passage in a Brahms concerto helps the Rachmaninoff “Corelli Variations”, and a turn of phrase in a Beethoven violin sonata suggests a possible direction in a piece by Bartók.

WP: *A name that appears regularly in your list of engagements is Charles Dutoit. What role is he playing in your career?*

KG: Yes, the maestro has been a very important figure to me, both musically and personally. I have been fortunate to work with him regularly since our first meeting in 2004, in a lot of varied repertory, from the Russians to the Berg Chamber Concerto. My first time was Rachmaninoff's "Paganini Rhapsody" on tour in Germany in 2004 and then he invited me to make my Philadelphia Orchestra debut with him at Saratoga. We've also played together in Japan and China. This season we're together with the NHK Symphony and he'll conduct my Chicago Symphony debut. I so admire his musical and cultural erudition, and value his artistic and personal advice. I am really grateful to him.

WP: *Another conductor with whom you've worked a lot is one of classical music's hottest commodities, so to speak: Gustavo Dudamel.*

KG: My friendship with Gustavo began several years ago, relatively near the beginning of our careers. I have had a great time playing with him in various cities in the U.S. and Europe. Very special for me are the times I have visited Venezuela to work with his youth orchestra there, to feel the passion of the young people both in the orchestra and, very importantly, in the audience. I really get the feeling there that people (young and old) feel that classical music is a living, exciting, "cool" thing. In addition to the pride and enthusiasm they naturally have for Gustavo, the orchestra, and the music education system, I have felt true enthusiasm and gratitude for hearing the classical repertoire played live. And of course, there are the after-concert parties where we play Latin music and jazz until the crack of dawn... I can't forget playing tangos with Gustavo at 4am and then meeting at a matinee concert the following morning and doing Bernstein's "Age of Anxiety".

WP: *You took on a piano professorship a couple of years ago at the Hochschule für Musik in Stuttgart. Why spend time teaching at a point when your career is really taking off?*

KG: I always felt an attraction to teaching, to this process of interacting and sharing information about the subject I am passionate about. For me, teaching and learning are more or less two sides of the same coin, and teaching certainly helps me grow as a performing musician. I learn so much from the process, both from seeing what students do well and what doesn't make such good results. I've had very good luck with teachers who took care and gave me information that wasn't readily available everywhere. So it feels only natural to give back some of what I've been given.

WP: *How young were you when you became interested in music? Were your parents musicians?*

KG: My mother is a musician and so I was around music ever since I can remember. As a matter of fact, I am sure that my first "lessons" at the age of three were a way for me to enjoy my mother's attention. It just so happened that the vehicle was music. I started out studying classical piano, but my parents had a lot of jazz recordings and very soon I was attracted to this other sound as well. For quite some time I did both. For example, my first classical piano competition brought an invitation to perform with orchestra, but also got me to a jazz piano workshop where I met professors from Berklee College. One thing led to another...

WP: *With jazz or classical piano?*

KG: Both. When I was a teenager, I met Gary Burton, the jazz vibraphonist, who brought me to America and became my teacher at Berklee. While I was there I also continued my classical studies and spent two summers in Boston University's program at Tanglewood. At that time I decided for my personal development that I needed to focus on one genre – and thus I decided to concentrate on classical piano. To continue combining both at the time was simply too much.

I still love jazz, of course, and nowadays toy with the idea of doing more exploration in that area again. I am particularly interested in finding ways to illustrate how near the two styles are to each other and am generally fascinated with the similarities between the ways we, humans, express ourselves – be it through various musical genres, art, dance, or cooking.

WP: *There's a perception that jazz and classical are very different species.*

KG: They're closer than people think. The feeling and freedom of time are elements that listeners respond to nearly universally in any musical genre. I met Spike Lee in Caracas. He was giving a film master class and we had dinner. We were talking about classical music and jazz and he said, "Classical, you just play the notes that are there. Where's the freedom there?"

I said, "It's like Shakespeare. Even the same actor cannot read it with the exact same inflection twice. And each personality projects a different thing."

Jazz is also more structured and regulated and prepared than we're led to believe. Gary Burton recently compared it to stand-up comedy. The comedian tells his stories somewhat differently every time, but altogether there's a set of thoughts and directions he's going to bring to life in a particular period. It's not like he's pulling his act out of thin air every time. Of course, there are also those moments in any performance when one has the courage to go off in a completely unexplored direction. This is a "sighting" of inspiration.

WP: *You like to play "combo programs" of two concertos in one evening. From my side of the proscenium it's a great chance to get to know an artist better through two different works. What drives you to do these combos?*

KG: It's interesting to see how the pieces are expectedly or unexpectedly related or to juxtapose them and let their respective shadows illuminate each other. For example, I often play the *Rhapsody in Blue* with the Ravel G-major Concerto. It's the most classical Gershwin ever got and the jazziest for Ravel. The Liszt *Totentanz* and Rachmaninoff "Paganini Variations" are connected musically by the "Dies Irae" Gregorian chant.

WP: *You were born in Russia, you teach in Germany, and now you're an American citizen. Where's home?*

KG: I am lucky to feel quite at home both in Europe and the U.S. The Russian language is "home" to my thoughts, but I also love speaking English. I have done more teaching in German, so home is a multi-layered feeling. The piano as an instrument and my passion

for music are the consistent elements that give me the feeling of rootedness in all my travels.

WP: *You remind me of something Goethe wrote: “Ich hab’ mein Haus auf nichts gestellt. Deshalb gehört mir die ganze Welt,” which is basically, “I don’t have a house anywhere, so the whole world belongs to me.”*

KG: Yes, that’s in the direction of I’m saying, but Mr. Goethe’s words are nicer. I feel there is an advantage to being somewhat of an outsider wherever I go, as it affords a certain kind of independence and at the same time allows me to feel comfortable in many places. Of course, this means that I need to make an extra effort and be creative about my feeling of “home.”

WP: *Wherever you’re with your music.*

KG: Always!

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For more information, contact Wende Persons on wpersons@21cmediagroup.com, or visit the artist’s web site at www.kirillgerstein.com.

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