

Peter Serkin: Always a rebel, the pianist visits the classics at Bach Choir Gala

Steve Siegel

Special to The Morning Call

Philadelphia's Curtis School of Music has produced some of the world's greatest musical talent, including Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein and Gian Carlo Menotti. Another is pianist Peter Serkin, who holds a singular place among today's classical music artists, admired equally for his performance of established repertoire and also as a consummate interpreter of contemporary music.

Serkin's performances and recordings embrace the music of several centuries, exhibiting a keen understanding of the works of Bach and Mozart as well as an exceptional grasp of diverse musical styles ranging from Stravinsky and Messiaen to Toru Takemitsu and Oliver Knussen.

Son of Rudolph Serkin, one of the recording era's most rigorous interpreters of piano music from the classical age, Serkin has shown equal rigor as a pianist and musical voyageur.

On Nov. 3, Serkin revisits the classics in a recital for the Bach Choir of Bethlehem's 2018 Gala Concert and Fundraiser at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem. On the program is J.S. Bach's "Goldberg Variations," Mozart's Sonata in B Flat Major, K.570 and the Adagio in B Minor, K.540.

Serkin, 71, has performed with the world's major symphony orchestras with such eminent conductors as Seiji Ozawa, Pierre Boulez, Daniel Barenboim, Claudio Abbado, Simon Rattle, James Levine, Herbert Blomstedt and Christoph Eschenbach.

As a dedicated chamber musician, he has collaborated with Alexander Schneider, Pamela Frank, Yo-Yo Ma, and the Budapest, Guarneri and Orion string quartets and TASHI, of which he was a founding member. Serkin lives in western Massachusetts, where he teaches at Bard College Conservatory of Music and the Longy School of Music.



There was always something rebellious and unconventional about Serkin. The first time I heard him at a Carnegie Hall recital in the mid-1960s, he took the stage, amid gasps of disapproval from the audience, in full hippie garb, with shoulder-length hair, granny glasses and a white tunic. His performance, of course, was outstanding, and music critics had to admit that his electric delivery had nothing to do with what he was wearing.

In May 2017, I heard Serkin again with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra at Allentown Symphony Hall, in the Brahms D Minor piano concerto. His father was revered for his interpretation of that piece, and so it was natural to ask him in a recent email interview if he feels his father's presence when he plays such monumental works.

“That piece itself is always thrilling and an adventure. In playing any great work one really needs to be focused on the music itself. At the same time, it is true that I have in my mind and memory my teachers' influences, as well as others' performances as inspiration. And since I always benefited from having had several teachers concurrently, I sense their influence, including my father's,” he says.

Serkin's musical legacy extends to his grandfather, the distinguished violinist Adolf Busch, who established the Busch Quartet and the Busch Chamber Players, and was a founder of the Marlboro School of Music.

His father, who taught at the Curtis Institute, was known for carefully researching the works that he tackled, even studying critical response to them.

Serkin makes everything he approaches his own, striking that magical balance between intellect and heart. Yet it would be a big mistake to assume that he ignores previous interpretations of a work, and is any less the scholar than his father.

“You asked whether there was a great difference between my father's scholarly approach to studying music and my own, and I think that in terms of this aspect, no,” he says “I too give careful consideration to and study of many different sources and texts, as in my father's and in many other of my teacher's examples.”

Arguably the best description of Serkin's approach to music was stated by New York Times chief music critic Anthony Tommasini, who once remarked that Serkin thrives on playing new music with a sense of its history, and old music with a sense of its radicalism. If radicalism means taking risks, Serkin concurs.

“For me it means daring something different, not for the sake in itself of being different from what has been done conventionally, but for the sake of probing deeply into a piece, and trying to touch upon that composer's own bold and original ideas.

“It means not putting blind faith in what may be a conventional approach to a well-known piece, and not accumulating other people's lack of imagination and bad habits,” Serkin says. “It's all about taking risks, and being willing to keep trying new things to explore the multiplicity of possibilities in playing older and newer music.”

By his early teens, Serkin already was a veteran performer. His performances of the Mozart Double Piano Concerto with his father as keyboard partner under George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra are legendary. But when Serkin began to perform on his own, his repertory took a pronounced turn toward the new and unusual. One of the most productive outcomes of this quest was the contemporary music group Tashi, which he co-founded in the 1970s.

Yet in spite of his love for the new and modern, Serkin never lost touch with the standards. “Playing and being so interested in newer and contemporary music has inspired me, as you say, to try to understand compositionally the new music, making sense of it and hopefully conveying that sense,” he says. “At the same time, I've approached older music not only with reverence but also with a sense of adventure and boldness, as one might with new music. The 'old' music is so new.”

Certainly the “old” music on Serkin's Gala program will sound new again by his passionate interpretation. The Mozart pieces are almost diametrically opposite in feeling. The Sonata is friendly and all smiles, while the tense, emotional atmosphere of the Adagio has inspired numerous writers to wax poetic about its musical meaning.

Bach's Goldberg Variations, completed around 1741, has become a monument in Western music. On one level, it's simply a beautiful keyboard work, and on another, it's a Rubik's Cube of invention and architecture. Small wonder, then, that it carries such a heavy load of historic baggage, from its apocryphal back story based on a count's sleepless nights, to a breakthrough

recording by Glenn Gould, and legendary performances by Bach luminaries Wanda Landowska, Rosalyn Tureck and many others.

Legend has it that Bach wrote the work, originally simply called “Aria,” to soothe the sleepless nights of one Count Kaiserling, who asked his private harpsichordist, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, to perform it.

It’s unlikely that’s true, since Goldberg, apparently a gifted musician who studied under Bach’s son Wilhelm Friedemann in Dresden, was only 13 years old at the time. Nevertheless, his name stuck to the music ever since.

Revisiting the Goldberg Variations is always a special experience for Serkin. His debut solo recording was of the piece, at age 18. He’s recorded it four times.

“In playing a piece which I have played much of my life, like the Goldberg Variations, you ask whether my interpretation has changed over the years. I can say that it changes each time I play it,” he says.

“In fact, I make no effort to solidify any interpretation at all. My study of the piece continually opens up new possibilities, and I love to explore those. In a disciplined and considered way, and genuinely spontaneously, not arbitrarily nor whimsically, the music speaks to me and plays through me, and always differently. It is said that when Bach played, and others, like Chopin, that they played their own music each time very differently. How I wish we could hear them!”

DETAILS

Peter Serkin

What: Distinguished American pianist Peter Serkin to present recital of works by Bach and Mozart at 2018 Bach Choir of Bethlehem Gala

When: 4 p.m. Saturday, November 3

Where: Central Moravian Church, 73 W Church St., Bethlehem

How much: \$40; \$9, students

Info: 610-866-4382, bach.org

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