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CLASSICAL MUSIC

Yefim Bronfman's fingers of history



Carolyn Cole, Los Angeles Times

MOVING IN: This week's Disney Hall concerts will mark the beginning of a season-long L.A. residency by Yefim Bronfman.

When the piano virtuoso plays with the Philharmonic this week, he'll weld a key link with colleague Esa-Pekka Salonen.

By David Mermelstein, Special to The Times

NEW YORK – When pianist Yefim Bronfman steps onto the Walt Disney Concert Hall stage Thursday night for the first of four consecutive concerts with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the moment will be weighted with musical history. And that's saying something for a man who was a protégé of Isaac Stern, studied with Rudolf Serkin and Leon Fleisher, roomed with Yo-Yo Ma and made his first major orchestral appearances in the U.S. under the baton of Leonard Bernstein.

Those performances were when Bronfman was 18. Now, at 50, he is famous throughout the world. But the Philharmonic concerts, at which he will perform Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, will be his last Disney Hall dates with Salonen as the orchestra's music director. They will precede a series of concerts he is to play with the Philharmonic in Asia later this month – Salonen's final tour with the ensemble he has led for 16 seasons. And they will mark the beginning of a season-long residency here by the pianist, who will return to Disney Hall on Nov. 12 for a duo recital with fellow pianist Emanuel Ax and in May to perform Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3.

Bronfman's connection to the Philharmonic runs deep – all the way back to 1977, when Zubin Mehta was music director. Mehta had come to know him in Israel, where Bronfman and his family had immigrated from the Soviet Union in 1973. (He was born in Tashkent, capital of the now-independent Uzbekistan.)

“I hope people don't get sick and tired of me,” Bronfman said jocularly last weekend over lunch at his Upper West Side apartment, his residence since he moved to New York in 1978. “If so, I'm sorry. But the Philharmonic was one of the first orchestras to engage me, and I've been going back ever since.”

The relationship has not flagged since that initial engagement, at which he played Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto under Mehta in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. But although he appeared regularly at the Hollywood Bowl through the 1980s, Bronfman never performed with Carlo Maria Giulini or André Previn, Mehta's successors.

Only when Salonen arrived in 1992 was Bronfman fully embraced, and he has appeared with the conductor regularly since. Indeed, the bond between the two men, which predates Salonen's appointment as music director, is so strong that rarely does anyone but Salonen lead the Philharmonic when Bronfman is on the bill.

The pianist's appeal among audiences is rooted in technical prowess and unforced showmanship, but he possesses other musical virtues as well. “I'm bowled over by his abilities in Russian repertoire -- the panache, the command, the complete intensity,” says Ax, a friend of more than three decades. “But he's a complete pianist, so it's hard to pick out strengths.”

Salonen also finds almost too much to praise. “It's a long list,” the conductor says. “There's this boundless technique, of course, and stylistic versatility and all that. But there's also a selflessness in his playing. Not that he's anonymous – not at all – but he never puts himself ahead of the music, which is kind of refreshing. No matter what he plays, it's always about the music and how can he best do justice to the score and realize the composer's intentions. It's never about him playing the piano. I think he can be relaxed about it because he can play better than most other people on the planet.”

Bronfman returns the conductor's affection. And, in addition to their work performing repertory warhorses in live performances and on recordings, he champions Salonen's music. That advocacy began when he discovered “Dichotomie” for solo piano from 2000. By the composer's count, Bronfman has performed it about 30 times. But this aspect of their relationship was cemented by the commissioning of Salonen's first piano concerto, which Bronfman premiered in February 2007.

“We were having dinner in 2000, and Fima started talking about a piano concerto, and that was the first time it was mentioned,” Salonen recalls, referring to Bronfman by his nickname. “We slotted it in a few years later, but for scheduling reasons it was postponed – I couldn't even start the piece, I was so behind in my composing. And then the New York Philharmonic approached me and suggested I write it for them, and I thought that might be a good moment to do it.”

After its New York premiere, the 35-minute piece was first performed by Bronfman and the L.A. Philharmonic at the end of last season. It has been well received critically, and Bronfman has been universally praised. But he acknowledges that mastering it didn't come easily.

“It was tough preparing it for New York,” he said, “because I only had the music for five or six weeks. That was a nightmare. After concerts in Europe, I'd stay in the hall till 2 or 3 in the morning rehearsing it. I got the second and third movements in Boston, and I remember thinking, ‘What the hell am I going to do with this? I don't understand a single note.’ But I did it. The secret is to learn the language of the music, separate from the notes. Having played ‘Dichotomie’ really helped me understand what Esa-Pekka was after.”

A Deutsche Grammophon recording of the concerto is currently scheduled to be released in Europe in November and in the U.S. in June, to mark the conclusion of Salonen's tenure with the Philharmonic.

Bronfman's commitment to new music – works by Bright Sheng, Marc-André Dalbavie, Jörg Widmann and Magnus Lindberg have also recently been commissioned for him – may strike some as unusual for an artist who made his name with Russian music, but the pianist bristles at pigeonholing.

"I'm really against being labeled or stereotyped," he said. "People assume that because I come from Russia, I must be a specialist in Russian music, which is, of course, ridiculous in many ways. I'm not sure the borders in which you are born make you a specialist in that music."

As if to prove the point, he revealed that he just recently discovered the Tchaikovsky concerto he will perform at Disney Hall. "I played the piano concerto for the first time only five years ago," he said of the repertory staple. "And it was by accident, when Mariss Jansons said to come play it with him in Pittsburgh. I love the piece now. Somehow, I didn't think I would, but it's a masterpiece. I've only played it a dozen times since then, so it's fresh."

When told of Ax's remark about his being a "complete" pianist, Bronfman appeared nonplused.

"I feel very incomplete," he said, "because there is so much repertory I still haven't played. And the older I get, the more I feel I'm running out of time. Yet I'm determined to make it happen.

"But let's face it: You'd need five lifetimes to play all the repertory you want to. What keeps me going is the new repertory. Learning new pieces and commissioning new works is what I enjoy most."

Los Angeles Philharmonic, Walt Disney Concert Hall, 111 S. Grand Ave., L.A. 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. \$42 to \$147. (323) 850-2000 or www.laphil.com.

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