

The New York Times

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2007

A Star Who Plays Second Fiddle to Music

By ANNE MIDGETTE



Richard Termine for The New York

Times

“I am very shy when it comes to showcasing myself,” said the concert pianist Yefim Bronfman, who will perform at Carnegie Hall on Monday night.

When a star pianist comes into a huge hall wearing a three-piece orange suit, “self-effacing” is not the description that comes to mind. But when Yefim Bronfman lumbered into Grand Central Terminal in October for a free morning concert to benefit the Food Bank for New York City wearing the organization’s colors, he presented a contradictory image: that of a virtuoso making a striking public entrance and that of someone who would have preferred not to be drawing so much attention to himself.

Mr. Bronfman, 49, who will play a recital at Carnegie Hall on Monday night as part of his Perspectives series there, is certainly one of the greatest pianists active today. He also bucks the stereotype of the Russian soloist as merely a technical wizard of large sound and emphatic personality.

He has technique to burn, but he also has a chameleonlike ability to subsume himself in the music. Rather than a cult of personality, his approach is about doing what the composer wants, so much so that his performances sometimes seem understated.

“I don’t want to show me,” Mr. Bronfman said in an interview over breakfast in a restaurant near the Upper West Side apartment where he has lived in since the late 1970s, when he studied at Juilliard. “I am very shy when it comes to showcasing myself. I’d rather be second fiddle in many ways.”

Just as he is steered by the music, he also seems steered by the demands of an unwieldy career. Even finding time to practice can be a challenge. When interviewed on the eve of a tour, he had just

received the music for a new work scheduled for Monday's recital, "XI Humoresken" by Jörg Widmann, and he was not sure how he was going to learn it except by practicing at night, after concerts.

He mentioned the piano concerto that the conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen had written for him, which had its first performance at the New York Philharmonic in February and which, unusually for a new work, he is still performing frequently thanks to considerable demand from leading orchestras.

"Salonen also gave me the score like four, five weeks before the premiere," he said. "It's a great concerto. I'm so excited to have it. But the only way for me to learn it was to finish the recital and then go practice till 2, 3 in the morning."

In the end, Mr. Widmann's piece was postponed to the final Perspectives concert in May, a program that was supposed to focus on Mr. Bronfman's collaborations with other performers. But the piece would also have changed the focus of Monday's recital on "Fantasies" by different composers: shortly before sending it, Mr. Widmann told Mr. Bronfman that the commissioned "Fantasie" had turned into "Humoresques."

"With this Perspectives, I don't have much perspective," Mr. Bronfman said. His orchestral performances at Carnegie this season were also largely in place before the series was planned.

But his self-effacing manner can be misleading. In the case of Perspectives, it seems his artistic dreams were so big that it was impossible to realize them in a mere seven concerts.

"He originally came up with thousands of ideas," said Clive Gillinson, the executive director of Carnegie Hall. "It would have been a takeover of Carnegie." What survived, Mr. Gillinson said, "gives him a chance to show at least a glimpse of all the aspects of his career."

Mr. Bronfman's first teacher was his mother, a pianist. His father, a violinist, gave lessons to his sister, 12 years older. His father's performing career was interrupted by World War II, when he became a German prisoner of war, escaped and walked about 600 miles to Moscow, only to be arrested as a spy and tortured in Russian prisons for eight months before the authorities were convinced of his innocence.

After the war he eventually found work in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where Mr. Bronfman was born. He has not returned there since his family left.

A seminal event in Mr. Bronfman's life was an invitation to the Marlboro Festival in Vermont in 1976, which fostered his love of chamber music (unusual for a Russian piano soloist). He had hoped to study with one of the institute's guiding spirits, Rudolf Serkin, at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. But shortly after Mr. Bronfman got there, Mr. Serkin stopped teaching, and Mr. Bronfman eventually found a new teacher and mentor, Leon Fleisher.

"He has an extraordinary insight into most every style," Mr. Fleisher said recently. "His willingness to use his head as well as his heart always impressed." But within "that mien of seriousness," he added, "there really rests the soul of a clown."

He recalled an evening among friends at the Aspen Music Festival when Mr. Bronfman (known to his friends as Fima), with his customary air of total, serious dedication, gave a ballet performance in a pink tutu and heavy stage makeup.

Personal warmth and deadpan humor are not qualities that tend to be showcased in the life of a concert pianist. Branding an artist is more common than exploring his idiosyncrasies. Sony Classical, long Mr. Bronfman's exclusive record label, pushed him as a Prokofiev specialist from the 1980s on.

21C MEDIA GROUP, INC.

162 WEST 56TH ST, SUITE 201, NEW YORK, NY 10019 • T (212) 245-2110 • F (212) 245-1969 •

INFO@21CMEDIAGROUP.COM

“Recording companies were so powerful when I started recording that they could make you a Prokofiev specialist overnight,” he said. “I didn’t necessarily want to. I actually learned a lot of the repertory just to make recordings. I mean, no complaining. It’s great music.”

Now the former recording giants are far less powerful, and Mr. Bronfman, having recently recorded a fine account of the Brahms violin sonatas with Nikolaj Znaider, and Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto with Mariss Jansons and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, no longer seemed certain that he was still an exclusive Sony artist. But Sony flexed its muscle a few months ago by blocking a release a lot of people would have liked to hear: a live recording of Mr. Bronfman playing Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and its future music director, Gustavo Dudamel, for download from DG Concerts, part of Universal Classics.

“I already chose the takes and everything,” Mr. Bronfman said.

An artist, it turns out, may ultimately have little control over his career. Yet Mr. Bronfman’s personality still comes through in his playing, from the intelligence and sparkle of Salonen to the heavy, shy sweetness of Brahms.

“It’s such a journey to be one of the world’s greatest artists,” Mr. Gillinson said. “There’s a tendency for people to be self-absorbed, but with Fima there’s never any sense of that, as if he just floated to the top through sheer breathtaking talent.”