

IN THE GREEN ROOM

A Feast of Emotion

Yvonne Frindle corresponded with Bernd Glemser, discussing piano music and program making.

Bernd Glemser grew up in a family where music was 'omnipresent'. His father, a mathematics professor, played organ and directed the choir for the local church; his older brother took up the piano at the age of ten. Glemser, who was seven at the time, wanted to play as well – he was so persistent that his parents had to give in. A few years later he realised that music was a central part of his life, and by the time he was 18 or 19 years old and winning international competitions he was determined to be a professional pianist.

While still a student he was approached by two professors of the Saarbrücken Musikhochschule after a recital and offered a teaching post. He needed time to reflect, he says, but he found the idea too tempting. He accepted and became Germany's youngest professor – he hadn't even completed his own exams! 'What a situation,' he reflects, 'teaching students of the same age or even older.'

In 1985, four years before his professorial appointment, Bernd Glemser visited Australia to perform in the Sydney International Piano Competition. He remembers the experience, and the city, with fondness. Sydney concertgoers no doubt remember him too: as well as winning second prize, he received the people's choice award.

Part of Glemser's appeal to audiences is his attitude to performing: 'bringing joy to people wanting to celebrate a musical feast.' But it's not an 'easy or naïve' approach to performing. 'First,' he says, 'one has to get to a deep understanding of the works on a program: character, structure, contents.' And he points out that it's 'in the nature of music that some works may create irritation or thoughtfulness, or even embarrassment. After a performance of Scriabin's Ninth Sonata or Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony it's not really cheerful joy you feel.' Rather, he continues, a concert should be a 'feast of communicating music – be that joy or tears.'

That range of emotion emerges in Glemser's Sydney recital. The preludes and fugues by Bach and Shostakovich, for instance, bring together many different characters and moods. Glemser recognises the influence



Bernd Glemser's greatest inspirations as a student were his teacher, Professor Vitaly Margulis, and music itself: 'I wasn't doing anything else but listening to music. Symphonies, chamber music, sacred music, operas...even piano. I was hooked on music. It was my calling.'

Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* had on Shostakovich's preludes and fugues, but he doesn't weave them together in an academic way. 'I should like to create an "arch" of tension across the styles,' he says. 'In simple words, it is a bow leading from extroversion and glittering brilliance to the inside – you might call it religious – and then all the way back again, ending in grotesque sarcasm.'

A single Bach prelude and fugue 'makes a complete composition' in Glemser's eyes. He is less concerned than some with the modern encyclopaedic approach that would recommend, for example, a complete *Well-Tempered Clavier*. 'Our time,' he says, 'wishes to approach and tackle everything by quantity.' Shostakovich would have agreed. He didn't regard his own Preludes and Fugues as a set that needed to be performed complete in recital, although it wasn't long before pianists rose to the challenge and presented them that way.

Glemser takes great pleasure in creating programs that transcend the conventional 'Little "warm-up" – Classical sonata – interval – Romantic masterpiece' of many modern recitals. He dislikes that pattern and finds it disturbing. Instead his programs are longer and more varied, and he doesn't neglect works that provide easier listening, pointing out that this 'is the kind of counterpoint that great composers consider when writing symphonies or operas'.

The idea of a recital as a feast of emotion becomes apparent in the contrasts of musical personalities in tonight's program, especially in hearing Rachmaninov alongside an almost-contemporary, Shostakovich. They have common roots in the musical tradition of Russia, says Glemser, but they belong to different epochs and their style and expressive intentions were therefore quite different. Rachmaninov was able to 'express human feelings in the most wonderful way, with great honesty and intensity'. Heart on his sleeve, you could say. Shostakovich, on the other hand, was a 'social critical composer' – there is the sarcasm, often disguised, and a sense of 'omnipresent fear', and 'his message and legacy is to be found between the lines'.

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Listening to Rachmaninov

'Quite frankly,' says Glemser, 'I don't find Rachmaninov's piano rolls to be so important as there is a great number of acoustical recordings around, giving much better evidence of his art. There might be some background noise, but these recordings demonstrate his unbelievable art in creating "colours", his genuine capacity of making the piano "sing", and a perfect control of the pedals. Independently of the recording media, his interpretations show us a way of interpretation far away from cheap sentimentality, slimy rubatos and never-ending pretended emotion. His playing is of superb elegance, total command, absolute clearness and stringency of the formal shape, something that allowed him to choose rather fluent (even fast) tempi. He also showed a wonderful and tasteful use of change in tempo and rubato. Still, his way of playing is very romantic. I love and feel devoted to this approach as finding deep honesty, depth and naturalness. No empty pomp, no dishonest posing, but true depth.'