

## Piano's new superstars hit the wrong notes – and gloriously

At last, says Jessica Duchen, the robotic sterility of recitals is being swept away by young artists for whom personality is as important than accuracy

Friday, 14 January 2011

The piano recital might just qualify for inclusion in some future Harry Potter sequel – as a musical phoenix. Just when you begin to think that the genre is well and truly passé, along comes a whole new generation of musicians who make us thrill to the instrument all over again.

Piano stardom is a cult of the individual, by necessity, and has been for nearly 200 years. Ever since 2011's bicentenary boy Franz Liszt set out to become the Paganini of the piano, and was so successful that women would break into his hotel to steal the water he washed in, the star pianist has held a unique place in public consciousness. Mythologies build around pianists as around few other instrumentalists – whether Vladimir Horowitz or Liberace, Lang Lang or David Helfgott, who was immortalised in the movie *Shine*.

The past year has witnessed the rise and rise of James Rhodes, 35, rebel pianist, self-confessed former druggie and image-busting iconoclast. Sold, too, on his sheer affection for the music he plays, he has been signed to Warner Bros records, the mainstream pop label rather than its classical counterpart. Then there's the perennial public fascination for Glenn Gould (1932-1982), who shunned the concert platform and made his strongest musical statements in the recording studio, notably in Bach. A recent documentary, *Genius Within: The Inner Life of Glenn Gould* (2009) explores facets of the Canadian pianist's life that have rarely been probed publicly before – notably his love-life.

The Rhodes phenomenon is especially striking because, compared to today's giants of the concert hall, he's not one of the best. Much has been made of his back-story – drugs, psychiatric treatment, recovery thanks to music. He looks appealingly wild and woolly, and prefers to perform in a T-shirt rather than a tail suit. His performances, though, would probably see him kicked out in the first round of any international piano competition. But – and here's the rub – is that, perhaps, exactly why he is so popular? The notes, after all, are not where the truth in music lies. Music is in the communication between the notes. And Rhodes, however many wrong notes he hits, does communicate, and with tremendous love and enthusiasm for his music. He is the perfect antidote to the great problem of the modern concert pianist, which is that many are perceived as playing like robots.

If piano stardom is a cult of the individual, then pianists should have at least a little individuality. Yet often it sounds as if some of them are undertaking an impersonal quest for technical merit and career glory, but with little to offer by way of fresh, genuine musical response, let alone passion. These players often win competitions, since their playing does

not polarise opinion and can garner the requisite number of "points" from across the spectrum of opinions. The wrong person sometimes wins, and for the wrong reason. Therefore we are growing to distrust competitions, their winners and the careers of those winners. How refreshing to hear Rhodes instead: someone who plays wrong notes, yet loves his music and loves to bring it to an audience he likes.

Meanwhile, Glenn Gould is the ever-resurgent Elvis of the piano. If any pianist has entered the popular mythology of music, it is this Canadian classic crazy genius whose reputation, since his death in 1982, has only grown. Gould rose to fame in the 1950s, his concerts creating a tremendous buzz of excitement wherever he went. In 1957 he toured Russia. At his Moscow recital the hall was only half full at first, but after the interval it was packed out: those present had spent the interval telling their friends and family to drop everything and run to hear the rest. That alone would probably have been enough to ensure Gould's reputation, but there was much more: he elected to retire from the concert platform aged only 32, and instead concentrated his artistry in the recording studio, where he could achieve results closer to his ideals than could be possible in a live concert.

Gould's recordings – and his hyper-intelligence, apparently reclusive tendencies and over-the-top hypochondria, amongst other qualities – have never ceased to fascinate generations of music-lovers. Plenty of films have been made about him before, but the latest focused on one of the most elusive aspects of Gould's existence: his love life. The Gould phenomenon is alive and kicking.

Shifting attitudes in the music world also help the piano recital to stay afloat. In the past 20 years recitals have been reinvigorated by the admission that virtuosity is not such a bad thing after all. Through the post-war decades, the word seemed tainted with associations of bad taste. We weren't really allowed to enjoy ourselves when listening to piano music. We had to minister to the lofty ideals of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven; Liszt's fantasias on operatic themes, or the dazzling display pieces created by Horowitz, attracted widespread disdain. But with the rise of pianists such as Arcadi Volodos and Marc-André Hamelin, who can play the most technically challenging piano works ever written faultlessly and with perfectly good taste, purist attitudes slunk quietly out of the back door. They are not missed.

Today there is room for everyone. On the one hand, we flock to ultra-serious musical feasts such as Daniel Barenboim performing Beethoven, Paul Lewis playing Schubert and Maurizio Pollini playing virtually everything. On the other hand, Lang Lang – the Chinese former child prodigy and new piano giant – is never far away. Love or loathe his flamboyant technique and rock-star persona, he has probably done more than anyone else to reinvent and popularise the piano for a new century and, in China itself, for a new superpower.

And now a new generation of pianists is coming to the fore. Above is a selection of the hottest young talents of the piano today, who are shaking up preconceptions and engaging audiences anew with their passion for music-making – even if some have also won a competition or two.

Rising scale: The pianists to watch

Behzod Abduraimov

Age 20

Nationality Uzbekistani

Big break Winner of London International Piano Competition 2009

From Tashkent, currently studying in Kansas City, he caused a sensation at the London International Piano Competition, where he brought the house down with an enthralling, adrenalin-charged account of Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto. "Could this fresh-faced child be a new Horowitz?" said 'The Independent' critic. A competition winner who deserved his prize.

Nareh Arghamanyan

Age 21

Nationality Armenian

Big break 2008 Winner of Montreal International Music Competition

Picked out by "Musical America" as "a major, major talent", Arghamanyan's playing is compulsive, emotional yet remarkably "complete" for such a young musician – sensitive, unaffected, genuine. She has declared that her inspiration comes from Glenn Gould in Bach, but that generally "It's from God. He gave me the talent and I use it for His glory."

Evgeni Bozhanov

Age 26

Nationality Bulgarian

Big break Fourth prize in the Chopin International Piano Competition, Warsaw, 2010

Bozhanov has made waves by not winning a competition. Though hot favourite for the Chopin Competition in Warsaw last year, he was placed only fourth, causing outrage among his growing cult following. He's a musician of tremendous intensity and power, even if he does pull some spectacular faces in the process.

Lara Omeroglu

Age 17

Nationality British

Big break Winner of BBC Young Musician of the Year 2010

Born in London to Turkish parents, Omeroglu studies at the Purcell School. She became the first pianist since Freddy Kempf to win the BBC Young Musician Competition outright when, last year, her enchantingly fresh and dazzlingly accomplished performance of Saint-Saëns's Piano Concerto No 2 captured everyone's imagination. A lovely, natural personality.

Khatia Buniatishvili

Age 23

Nationality Georgian

Big break Selected for BBC New Generation Artists 2010

Listening to Buniatishvili is like watching a high-wire artist with no safety net. She divides audiences because she takes so many risks, sometimes choosing tempi which prove impossible or volumes that send the piano out of tune. But her more lyrical playing is peerless; increased discipline will make her into an extraordinary musician.

Benjamin Grosvenor

Age 18

Nationality British

Big break Piano finalist of BBC Young Musician of the Year 2004, aged 11

A true child prodigy with musical maturity way beyond his years, Grosvenor, an unpretentious lad from Essex, astonished viewers with his performance in the BBC Young Musician final. Has an instinctive imagination for sound, colour and phrasing, plus delicious virtuosity which he clearly enjoys. Now a BBC New Generation Artist. He should have a brilliant future.

Yuja Wang

Age 23

Nationality Chinese

Big break Standing in for Martha Argerich in Boston, 2007

A compelling, energetic performer with heaps of charisma. Has a recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon. Hailed in some quarters as the successor to Lang Lang, she studied in the USA and combines ferociously copious virtuosity with a relatively unusual ability to explore different sound-worlds for each composer she plays.