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Above it all

Krystian Zimerman's reputation for perfectionism may explain why he's one of the world's most admired and in-demand musicians. Jessica Duchen talks with the great Polish pianist

There aren't many pianists today who can be thought of as cult figures, but Krystian Zimerman is one of them. Catapulted to fame on winning the Chopin Competition in Warsaw in 1975, in the days when competitions still counted, Zimerman instantly became one of the hottest properties on the piano scene. And with the years and the decades, his artistry has kept on growing. A recording contract with Deutsche Grammophon found him becoming the only pianist to record with both Herbert von Karajan and Leonard Bernstein (the maestros were notorious arch-rivals) and his recordings of works such as the Chopin ballades, Debussy *préludes* and Ravel concertos are regarded as definitive. Awards, acclaim and adoration seem to follow him wherever he goes.

Many musicians would be content with such stardom. But not Zimerman. His extraordinary personal standards have become ever more demanding - principally upon himself. He has a reputation for perfectionism, but this is rather an understatement. In 1999, the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death, Zimerman's ever-questing approach led him to form his own orchestra with which to tour the two Chopin concertos, conducting from the keyboard. He travels with his own piano, which he always prepares himself - he's an expert technician. As for recitals, his programme planning can be a drawn-out process. When we spoke in mid-January, he was still working out what to play for his May recitals in Manchester and London. Pianophiles, for their part, would turn out to hear him play nursery rhymes.

Even so, don't concert promoters jump up and down gnashing their teeth while they wait for his decision? 'I don't know about the teeth,' Zimerman quips, 'and as for the jumping, it depends... Perhaps my picture is on the floor!' Much laughter. 'I am really looking forward to playing in May,' he assures me. 'I will give the best possible programme I can, and I have been working day and night on it for the past half year.'

The difficulty is, he says, that he's planning programmes up to the end of 2010, taking account of several anniversaries - among them, Chopin, Liszt and Schumann - and trying not to duplicate pieces in locations where he's played frequently, while also catering to halls to which he's relatively new. 'As you can imagine, there is a temptation to use in new venues some of the programmes I have played in the past; but I cannot, because the next concert is a place where I've played more than 60 concerts. I not only have to plan geographically, because of the piano transport, but also programmatically so that the pieces are being used in a sufficiently economic way. For every artist, our repertoire is our capital.'

Zimerman has designed a special van to transport his piano ('it breaks down every half an hour,' he grumbles) and has himself made a number of tools to lift, shift and shunt the three-legged giant. Some listeners are astonished to learn that he's his own technician, but Zimerman gives a verbal shrug: 'It's a wooden box with strings, but it's like a human being: you want to take care of it. Basically the point is to make my life a little easier. I used to play concerts in the 1970s and 1980s on different pianos and I would be fighting with the instruments, wondering why they were like this. As I was already working earlier on making spare parts, and in my free time I was making some money from this to survive, I learned how these parts are being made and how different they can be in various pianos. So when I play certain pieces that I know depend on a particular part of the mechanism, I'm trying to implement in my instrument a mechanism on which I don't have to fight in order to achieve this quality.'

'In the last five years I developed new methods that give me much greater freedom and variety. I am very proud of

my Tokyo recital, which will be on DVD, containing Mozart, Beethoven, Ravel and Gershwin. These are four completely different ways of sound-making, four completely different ways of piano-playing, four completely different personalities, yet I managed to make a keyboard where I could play the whole programme to my own satisfaction.'

A Zimerman recital is always an event - and a comparatively rare one. He has usually limited himself to 45 to 50 concerts per year, and in addition he's had more than his fair share of health troubles. Pollution from the coal mines in his native Silesia left him prone to lung problems, and last year a leg injury forced the cancellation of an American tour. He has, moreover, strong views on the illicit recording of concerts by audience members, and various venues' unwillingness or inability to prevent this has sometimes made him reluctant to return to them. But even if fans are occasionally left frustrated, such feelings evaporate when he does play - one bar in that pure-gold tone, one phrase turned with such wit, tenderness and wisdom.

Without any poses

Zimerman was born in Zabrze, a small mining town near Katowice, in 1956. The only child of an engineer who was a keen amateur musician, as a boy he took the piano for granted; he was startled, he says, 'when I discovered that not every house has a piano'. He had only one teacher: Andrzej Jasinski, who was based at the music school in Katowice. The teenage Zimerman used to commute there by train at unearthly hours of the morning (he has nocturnal tendencies even today). Jasinski, he says, has recently been the subject of a documentary film: 'It shows exactly what he is, so honest and without any poses, very natural.'

At 18, Zimerman became the (then) youngest pianist to win the Chopin Competition, and as a Pole himself - and one who bore more than a passing physical resemblance to Chopin

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- he captured the public imagination immediately. His first recordings, all on LP, included four Mozart sonatas, the Chopin waltzes and the Brahms sonatas and were all critically acclaimed - but he has never authorised their release on CD. Admirers of his white-hot, visionary interpretations of the Chopin sonatas waited with bated breath for the recording. They're still waiting. But Zimerman, who says he's finishing a disc of Szymanowski's music that he began in 1991, drops a loaded hint that among three more CDs he's planning in the years ahead, the longed-for sonatas may yet materialise. 'I think I finally figured out how to do this,' he remarks - adding wryly, 'though I have been supposed to record them since 1975!'

Another great Chopin pianist was a vital influence in Zimerman's life: Arthur Rubinstein. Zimerman would play for him whenever the opportunity arose and says that he's still benefiting from this legendary musician's insights: 'I find myself almost every day profiting from this period in my life and building on it,' he says. 'There were things that I didn't think of at that point as being possible; only now do I come to understand their full potential.'

On Zimerman's studio wall hangs a drawing of Rubinstein by Jean Cocteau. 'We went to have coffee in a little bar in Paris near the Avenue Foch and he was talking about many, many things. He was wearing a suit he hadn't used for about 40 years. At some point he put his hand in his pocket to look for a ▶



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handkerchief, found this piece of paper and almost cleaned his mouth with it! Then he unfolded it and said, "Oh, look, Jean drew this". I was really stupid and didn't know who "Jean" was. He said "Jean Cocteau. You can have it," and gave it to me.'

The 25th anniversary of Rubinstein's death fell last December. Zimerman well remembers that tragic evening a quarter of a century ago. 'It was a terrible shock. I had a recital that day – of all pieces, I played the "Funeral March" Sonata of Chopin, and it was one of the best performances I ever did of it. Two days earlier I had spoken to Rubinstein – I telephoned and he invited me to his house. But I had a slight flu and as I wouldn't like to be the one he caught the flu from, I told him that I preferred to speak on the phone and I would come and visit him when I was next in Switzerland. Then, after the recital, someone came back stage and told me Rubinstein had died. I couldn't speak for several hours. It's been 25 years now, but you never really get used to this feeling. I can now think peacefully about it and I am glad he had such a great life. It contained enough to fill several human lives, with sense and with direction. Such a positive life, full of the wonderful joy of giving to people and sharing with them?'

Swiss idyll

In 1981, Zimerman and his wife, Maja, were away on tour when martial law was declared in Poland. They elected not to return and subsequently settled in the Swiss countryside not far from Basel, where they still live today with their two teenage children, Claudia and Ricki. Here Zimerman has built what appears to be an ideal life, home and workplace, with sound-proofed studio, space for his plentiful archive of recordings and books, and panoramic views across the Jura Mountains.

Nevertheless, he still finds travel stimulating. 'You can find, when you go somewhere different, you suddenly have new ideas, you get inspired, you see things from another angle,' he says. He usually spends two months per year in Japan and the same or more in the United States. 'Often I don't go out of my apartment, but the reason for being there is that my brain dares to think differently and I start to solve problems which I can't solve sitting here with the most fantastic facilities.' You're not unlikely to find him whiling away the evening in a late-opening bookshop in New York or Tokyo; he's much saddened by the evaporation of his favourite US record stores due to Internet retailing and other, more pernicious issues.

But after 2009 you may not find him in America at all. He's increasingly reluctant to visit a superpower where he feels much in politics and society has gone badly awry. For a while, he says, he won't plan further tours there, beyond what's already in the diary. 'For the last seven years the political developments in this country have made me less and less motivated to go there.

Maybe something will change in the next years, but at the moment I don't feel comfortable with so many things in the States. I think if you don't have the right motivation to do something, you shouldn't do it. There's an awareness that comes with age: you feel increasingly that you should start to be a grown-up and make a clear stand. I thought I should take the risk and start to act and speak what I feel.

'A lot of people think that when they choose the next president suddenly everything will be forgotten and the world will be fine. No. I think when the damage is done, first you have to undo the damage. You have to face the consequences and try to repair what was destroyed. Thousands of people were killed in a completely unnecessary war that was completely wrong, and it will just not do to change the president and pull out of the process there. It needs much, much more. And so much tension has been created that this will sooner or later break out in the form of terrorism. I'm almost sure that in 20 or 30 years' time we will think of this era not as a time of fighting terrorism, but a time of creating it, and President Bush will definitely be one of the persons, together with Mr Rumsfeld and a few others, who will have to take responsibility for this.'

Zimerman's complex existence fortunately has room for fun as well as hard work and strong convictions. One of his great enthusiasms is ice-diving. What's the attraction? 'For me it's the function of going into another world,' he says. 'It doesn't necessarily have to be terribly interesting. If you see sharks or whales it's fantastic, but that isn't the point. The whole sensation of getting into another physical surrounding where your body functions completely differently, where you have no portable phone and Internet access, it's already paying back the effort.' For many people, I suggest, listening to music has the same effect. 'Exactly!' says Zimerman. 'And maybe that's why it's such a joy for me, maybe that's why I see a parallel here.'

And the fans flocking time and again to Zimerman's concerts are in no doubt that that's what his playing does for them. Zimerman carries us into another universe of sound, on a level that most others can barely imagine. All that perfectionism has only one aim: to produce maximum quality for his audience. Let him play anything, anywhere, under whatever conditions he demands; we'll be there. Hearing him at the Royal Festival Hall in 1980 was one of my own formative experiences; it showed me that music was indeed a world all its own. Without that, I wouldn't be here now, speaking to him. 'What would life be without music?' says Zimerman. 'My god...'

Krystian Zimerman plays at the Bridgewater Hall on Friday 23 May and then at the Royal Festival Hall on 27 May. For concert hall contact details, go to our Concert Highlights on page 78 ■

On disc

■ BARTÓK

Piano Concerto No 1
Chicago Symphony Orchestra/
Pierre Boulez (cond)
DG 477 533-0

■ BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No 1
Berlin Philharmonic/
Simon Rattle (cond)
DG 477 541-3

■ CHOPIN

Piano Concertos Nos 1 & 2
Los Angeles Philharmonic/
Carlo Maria Giulini (cond)
DG 463 662-2

■ DEBUSSY

Préludes Book I & II
DG 435 773-2

■ FRANCK & SZYMANOWSKI

Includes Franck: Violin Sonata;
Szymanowski: *Mythes*
With Kaja Danczowska (vn)
DG 477 590-3

■ RACHMANINOV

Piano Concertos Nos 1 & 2
Boston Symphony Orchestra/
Seiji Ozawa (cond)
DG 459 643-2

■ RAVEL

The Piano Concertos
Cleveland and London symphony
orchestras/Pierre Boulez (cond)
DG 449 213-2

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