Every Good Boy Does Fine

MAGIC ON 88 KEYS by joel martens
To call Jeremy Denk a gifted pianist and musician, is to set unnecessary limitations. Alchemy comes a little closer to describing what happens when he sits down at a keyboard—transmuting long dead composers’ notes into magnificent harmonies—music that seems to slip the bonds of our earthly plane.

Music that is truly transformative is a rarity. When you’re in the presence of that moment, you know it. Not just because you hear beautiful notes played well, but because you are viscerally experiencing the deep structures and meaning behind those notes. The ghosts of the composers’ desire and intent, flow off the page, merging with that of the performer as they both disappear into music’s mystic charm. It’s alchemy, I tell you.

I’m always curious to know when an artist makes their first connection with their particular instrument, in your case, the piano. Do you have a story you’d like to share about that?

I’ve actually been recently writing about that a great deal. The bookshelf and the record shelf were all one sacred zone in our house growing up. It was a very important place for me to sit... In front of that record shelf in my pajamas and flip through the records. I still remember vividly the cover art of each of those records, things like Mahler’s First Symphony, the Organ Symphony of Saint-Saëns’s. I used to dance around the house a lot to Tchaikovsky’s B Flat Piano Concerto. (Laughs)

I’m enjoying that visual very much. I remember LPs as well and listening to them on the HiFi console...And the dancing.

Those records had a very important meaning and they were very important friends to me early on. We also had a little spinet (piano) in the house and I started banging on it at some point and apparently asked for lessons around five. I think I’d have to say that it really started with the records and certain sort of mystical pieces... The Mahler especially. My Dad used to sit me to the couch and we’d listen to Mahler together, which is of course completely inappropriate for a 3-year-old. (Laughs)

Was there a moment at which you understood that the piano was to be your career?

I’d have to say Oberlin [College and Conservatory]. I was studying chemistry and piano at the same time. I went to college when I was very young and it was a little bit of a “deer in the headlights” situation. After a year or two of doing them both, I realized: a) that I really hated chemistry and b) that I fit in to the musical world of Oberlin and that I had something to offer. I knew then it would definitely be my life in some fashion or other.

It’s fascinating that you studied chemistry, such a technical language. Though in many ways, music follows a similar structure and technicality when you break it down.

Absolutely. I do like looking at how a piece of music is put together and sort of reverse engineering it. How the composer assembled it, what are the parts and how do they work together to create such amazing effects. That’s a part of what performers do, whether consciously or subconsciously. They get at the heart of the piece and try to recreate it. I sometimes call it the reanimating of Frankenstein. It’s a terrible image in a way, but you have this piece of music on a piece of paper, sort of dead there and you have to “re-find” it.

In your Every Good Boy Does Fine piece in The New Yorker, you discussed the idea that every lesson and every experience transforms an artist. Is there something that stands out as a major influence for you?

I wrote about Sebök [Hungarian pianist György Sebök from Indiana University] who was quite amazing in terms of that. He changed my whole way of thinking about playing the piano—even more profoundly—about what the point of making music is at all. We talked about the “Zen” of music making, how you surrender to the language of the composer...To sort of vanish into it. It was very beautiful and a very important lesson to me, in the sense of searching after the given truth of a phrase.

I took a tremendous amount from that and then in the end, I needed to get out from under his influences in a way. I began to play and imitate him and that never worked. I had to remove myself from the music and then it took a while to find my own voice again. To see what I really wanted from music for myself, what I wanted to communicate to the audience. Why, 80 percent of the time when you go to a classical concert, do you feel that there was some sort of veil around the music that you love? Then, how do you break that veil?
I really enjoyed reading about your views on breaking down that veil. In my experience that is a rare quality.

I think a lot of people are attached to the varnish of it all, if you know what I mean. They want the painting to look old. (laughs) I don’t want the painting to look old—I want us to get it right now—in the moment. I don’t think that Beethoven wanted his symphony to sound varnished either. Most of the music we all love in the classic tradition was revolutionary for its time, in some way or another. I guess for me, a lot of those revolutions don’t have an expiration date on them, they continue to be that… I think Shakespeare was revolutionary. I remember seeing Ian McKellan in Richard III at the Guthrie in Minneapolis, it completely changed my perspective on Shakespeare.

That’s fantastic! It’s very important to me… that whole quality of reinvention. For me, there is no reason to play Beethoven, if it doesn’t sound unsettling. He was the great unsettling. (laughs) Sebők was very good at creating circumstances in which you heard the piece in a totally new way. Sometimes you practice a piece and circle around and around, with the same habits you have known. You try to find a way out, into something that is new. That happens a lot for me and it’s very frustrating. When you know there is something that you’re missing and you don’t know what it is.

You have also talked about finding the humor in music; it was something that really struck me.

Can you talk about that a bit more?

There are so many ways in which humor plays a central role in the classical style; it’s almost criminal to not talk about it. There is a sort of discomfort for irreverence, so I guess it causes people to sometimes forget the concept. It’s what we all want from classical music in a way—a noble experience—we want it to be above the “normal.”

I did a talk at The New Yorker Festival about Seinfeld and Mozart and talked about how certain timings in classical music are very similar to comedic timing and how important that becomes in music. What those jokes do to us as human beings. Through surprise and unexpectedness, they lift us out of normal life and that’s incredibly important.

I’ve enjoyed reading your blog and viewing your master classes. You are very articulate when you communicate. I’m curious, is that a talent that you developed, or has it always been innate?

I looked back at my writing when I was 16 or 17, which of course, was god-awful. (laughs) But, I sure had a lot to say and I really wanted to say it. It was really through a wonderful English teacher at Oberlin that I began to refine the gift. Sort of a “You made a great phrase there, but, do you actually think it’s true?” A really fascinating, really important criterion… (laughs). Does it actually describe the thing that I’m feeling about this poem or what these words do?

It’s very similar to piano playing and practicing too. How does it work—how does a phrase work—why does this note come sooner and this one later? What’s the really surprising note, what’s the most beautiful note? How do you draw that out, how do you make it speak without overdoing it.

The similarities between the way in which you write and interpret music are very apparent.

It’s the same person, one who is looking for epiphany, looking for a connection. Sometimes one tendency will be prevalent, or a composer will suddenly be the one that I want to play more desperately than the other. For a while it was Mozart, there is something about how his music is constantly changeable. There is a wonderful generosity there, but also wit and a kind of childish wonder. Those things are things that I like to have in my life.

Tell us a little bit about your concert in San Diego, you have four dates here and I see that Janáček is on the menu.

Janáček’s Capriccio for Piano (for the Left Hand), a piece that I love… It’s very difficult and very awkward. It’s amazing because you have a pianist with one hand, basically the piece it was composed for lost an arm in the war. Janáček writes the most sublime, weird and desperate music for him to play. The piano struggles against the limitations of itself and then it builds to such outrageous, ecstatic places. I’ve always thought this piece was so beautiful and so impossible at the same time. It is a fascinating work. There are echoes of it in some of Gershwin’s symphonic works.

It’s that late romantic harmony that transitions into jazz harmonies and there is an interesting, weird interface there. They use the same wacko chords (laughs) that sort of modulate everywhere… Janáček loves to do that. It is so haunting when he does and the harmonies turn light or dark depending on what he does with them. That’s what he loved, the sense of the light and the dark, both emotionally and spiritually. He loved to put you on that plane, the place where it was ambiguous and ambivalent… a desperate place torn between two options.

I could discuss this for hours, the motivations and emotion behind the music.

I try my best to talk about those things—sometimes it takes me a while. Especially when I write about music, to find the perfect phrase that doesn’t have any fat in it. When you write about music, there is always the temptation of jargon. To explain it in those terms—which many times doesn’t tell anyone anything. Turning it into something that everyone can understand is the hard part.

Jeremy Denk will be the San Diego Symphony as a part of their Uplight and Grand Piano Festival. He will perform Beethoven’s Piano Concerto No. 5 on Friday, January 15 at the Poway Center for the Performing Arts and again on Saturday and Sunday, January 16 and 17 at Copley Symphony Hall in Downtown San Diego. On Tuesday, January 19, Denk will also perform Janáček’s Capriccio for Piano (for the Left Hand), again with the symphony. For tickets and more information, call 619.233.0804 or go to sandiesgmosymphony.org.