
BROWNING



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The Real Life of a Concert Pianist

John Browning talks of hours of practice and the rigors of the road

— along with joy and conviction

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=====WASHINGTON=====

THERE is a scene in the movie "An American in Paris" in which pianist Oscar Levant dreams of himself on stage in a great concert hall, the spotlight gleaming on him in black tie at a grand piano. He is playing a concerto in dramatic, flamboyant style, pleased at what he sees around him in the dream: He is also the conductor, and it is his face behind every instrument. The headiness of the moment is heightened by the fact that, when the audience rises in a standing ovation, he takes all the bows.

That vision of a concert pianist's ultra-glamorous life, basking in the love and applause of thousands, however, is worlds away from the reality of life on the road, says John Browning.

The man Time magazine called "one of the most gifted pianists of his generation" at his debut has been on the road for 30 years as an internationally celebrated artist. In the coming season, he will take bows in London and Wales (March 1990), tour Poland (mid-November), open the Atlanta Symphony season (Sept. 9), and solo with the Cleveland Orchestra (Nov. 30, Dec. 2), among some 40 concert dates.

Any realistic movie about a pianist would be like an Andy Warhol film – several hours long and full of endless takes of practicing, he says. "You'd have to show a day of practicing, as boring as that would be cinematically. I think the thing many people forget is that the most important part of our work is done alone."

Mr. Browning compares it to a ballet dancer working out. "You would have to show a rough session at the barre to show that what we do is exhibit publicly what we work on in private. And it's the private work which, I think, makes or breaks you. So many people, particularly students, are in love with what they think is the glamour. They want to be on the stage, or they want to be applauded, but those things aren't really very important. It's your relationship to the art which you do alone. So it's really a very lonely job."

John Browning is about to hit the road again, following his Kennedy Center concert. It is the morning after, and we are talking in the nearly deserted dining room of his hotel. His medium-sized, well manicured hands, tan and smooth as a child's, look gentle on the white tablecloth. But there is some iron in his supple handshake. Browning is a slender man of medium height with impenetrably dark brown eyes, and a thick head of hair so brown it's almost black. He has packed

his black tie uniform and is dressed for the day in a pink oxford cloth shirt, navy blue plaid jacket, gray trousers, and brown moccasins. There is a thing gold chain around his neck.

He flew into Washington from his home in New York for two days with the Mostly Mozart Orchestra, conducted by Gerard Schwartz. He will be taking an early flight after our interview, following a brilliant performance the previous night of the Mozart Piano Concerto No. 9, which was exciting as lightning, tender as velvet. The Mostly Mozart orchestra will be playing its summer season at New York's Lincoln Center through the end of this month. But Browning is off on another tour swing that includes a glamorous gig: soloist Aug. 24 at the Hollywood Bowl, playing the Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3 with the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Although he's preparing to play Beethoven's Third in Hollywood, it's the composer's Fourth Piano Concerto Browning wants to talk about this morning. IT is his favorite of the Beethoven concertos: "It has the spirituality," he says. "It's a very special piece. We all feel it. It's from somewhere else. It's not an earthbound piece. . . . From the very beginning, it's its own world. But it's also the most difficult to pull off."

"Why? The mood is so illusive. Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't. This is a concerto where you really have to have an orchestra with whom you breathe, and the chemistry works. Because everyone can play very well, and the performance will just not work, if there isn't that feeling of like minds."

At a rehearsal in the crimson depths of the Kennedy Center concert hall the morning before the concert, Browning was playing the third movement of the Mozart Concerto No. 9. He looked relaxed in blue jeans, but his playing was so intense the air seemed charged. When the concerto ended, most of the orchestra, almost as one person, shouted "Wow!" When I ask him about that comment from his peers, he says he didn't hear it. Still wrapped in the music, he was oblivious.

But he stresses the rapport between soloist and orchestra. "I think it's very important. I think all work between soloist and orchestra is basically chamber music, even in the big concerti like Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. I think if there's not good feeling, it enters into the music. And it's just a kind of lack of cohesion that happens.

On the night of the concert, Browning walked briskly out on stage, sat down on a bench nearly as low as Glenn Gould's, and, facing the orchestra, listened to its opening notes. Again at the beginning of the second movement, he turned to face the orchestra. Then his right hand softly pawed the air for a moment before he

launched into his solo passage. No showboat, he kept his back to the audience during the first part of the concerto. But his graceful, almost balletic arms and hands swooped like wings down on the music. His hands alighted like seagulls on the keyboard, and the music flew up.

"Mr. Browning can come as close to perfection as one would hope to hear in this world," the New York Times has written. Critic Pamela Sommers of the Washington Post has observed, "Browning holds music up to the light and compels his audiences to pay rapt attention to each nuance, each breath." And Albert Goldberg of the Los Angeles Times has noted, "By dint of unremitting application and a vast reserve of talent, he has built one of the most enduring careers of any American pianist solely on merit, with invariable dignity, without the slightest recourse to ballyhoo and banality."

Browning began performing in the '50s, one of the young lions roaring through the musical world as concert pianists. He had won the Steinway Centennial Award and the Leventritt Award. He made his New York debut in 1956 with the New York Philharmonic, then won the prized Gold Medal Award of the Queen Elisabeth International Piano Competition in Belgium. The golden generation of young pianists he was part of included Van Cliburn, Leon Fleisher, Gary Graffman, and Eugene Istomin. But only a couple of them, like Browning, have stayed the course against the adversities of concert life.

"I think every artist goes through something in their 40s," he says. "Maybe it's a little bit equivalent to burnout. ... There's a shift. There are certain things that work automatically for you when you're very young."

But around 40, he suggests, "you realize the things you traded on unconsciously you cannot do any more. And there is a big adjustment that has to be made.... There's a funny point if the shift does work, where, bit by bit, you get a feeling of inner conviction, where you don't really care whether people agree with you or disagree with you in what you're doing. It's not arrogance; it's that this is something you have to say, and you have to say it your way, and if they don't like it, it's too bad. ... When you're younger, you can be pushed here; you can be pushed there; you can be persuaded. But when that kind of thing takes over, then I think the course becomes clear for the rest of your life."

One of the things that's become clearer for Browning is the influence of chamber music on his life. This is a pianist who was born into music, who teathed on string quartets as the son of professional musicians. His father was a violinist and his mother a pianist.

Born in Denver, Colo., Browning started playing piano at age 2. He began lessons at 5 and made his concert debut at 10 with the Mozart "Coronation" Concerto, No. 26 in D, with his father conducting members of the Denver Symphony. He always knew he wanted to be a concert pianist. "It never occurred to me to do anything else," he says. His parents didn't push. They had a "deadly fear of professional schools" and enrolled him in public schools in both Denver and Los Angeles where they later moved.

After two years at Occidental College, with a triple major of English literature, philosophy, and Oriental art, he took off for New York to study piano at the Juilliard School with the legendary teacher Rosina Lhevinne.

The most important thing she taught him, says Browning, was integrity. "She would catch any fudging. And she would say 'You know, that's dishonest, dear, to do that.' If she thought you were lazy, she would call up at seven in the morning, clearing her voice: 'Time to get up, dear. Are you feet on the floor? Get to the piano.'"

He got to the piano, alright, even premiering the Pulitzer-winning Barber Piano Concerto, which the composer wrote for him, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra at the opening of Philharmonic Hall in Lincoln Center. He has since played it over 500 times, including a 25th-anniversary concert with the St. Louis Symphony at Carnegie Hall in 1987.

This fall he'll play it again, with Leonard Slatkin conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra both in London and in Cardiff, Wales. Over the years, he has also performed nearly 43 piano concertos, almost the entire standard repertoire of piano concertos, from Mozart to Prokofiev.

Of Mozart he says, "There's the funny thing that Mozart does to performers. There's an inner bubble that you don't get from anybody else. ... Part of it is that Mozart never engages in heart-on-sleeve; he never says, 'Dahling, let me tell you about the troubles I've had today.' It's always distilled. He shows only a certain amount of the pain that's there. But it's fundamentally that there's so much play. ... The music is the most elegant, sophisticated ... highest kind of playing."

Mozart, he says, "is never heavy, never gets repetitive, never boring. It's always like the most fascinating person you were ever with...."

(Excerpt missing)

The Barber connection continues to this day, most notably celebrated in the 1991 Grammy Award for Browning's recording of the concerto – with Leonard

Slatkin and the St. Louis Symphony – to which the pianist brings the maturity gained over a lifetime of experience.

“Browning is not an overtly emotional player,” says Jennifer Taylor, general manager of Music Toronto.

“He has control and distance. On the other hand, what he’s playing; he gets inside the music and what the audience hears is the composer’s intention and not a superficial layering by the pianist.”

When the TSO called Browning in to replace ailing guest soloist Murray Perahia in 1992, Taylor overheard a revealing conversation as she stood in line for a ticket.

“A lady wanted her money back because Perahia wasn’t playing and the kid at the box office told her, ‘Browning might not have the name, but you’ll probably hear better playing.’ The lady went to the concert.”

WIDE REPERTOIRE

TSO artistic administrator Loie Fallis points out that this engagement is Browning’s 10th with the orchestra since 1969 and that he has been requested as a soloist by all the TSO’s conductors during that time – Seiji Ozawa, Karel Ancerl, Andrew David and Herbig.

Says Fallis: “Conductors enjoy him because he’s such a versatile artist who offers a wide repertoire. He has never specialized in any one period.”

Fallis also believes Browning has never had the publicity his career deserves. Nonetheless, she points out that over the years the pianist has built up a loyal following in Toronto and single-ticket sales are brisk.

Several factors seem to have conspired to keep Browning from becoming a household name.

In the beginning, he was overshadowed by Van Cliburn, the Texan who won the 1958 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow to become an American hero in the middle of the Cold War.

Then the ‘70’s gave rise to a new generation of bright young European pianists whose dazzling technique captured the imagination of the public.

In his early 40’s, Browning went through a mid-life crisis, suffering burn-out from the grind of playing 100 concerts a year. He temporarily accepted fewer engagements while regrouping his energies.

A RENAISSANCE

Since bounding back onto the scene full-force in the 80’s, Browning has been going through something of a renaissance and is being discovered all over again.

In fact, his recent three-concerto series in New York garnered reviews younger pianists would kill for.

Browning attributes his ability to bring a broad perspective to his music to the fact that he was not treated as a child prodigy even though he took to the piano at age 5.

Born in Denver to professional-musician parents, he was raised in Los Angeles from age 12, leading a normal life and playing the usual games with neighborhood children.

“I was careful with my hands,” Browning recalls, “but not too careful.”

Clearly a candidate for Juilliard, the young pianist opted to spend two years at an academic college before entering the famed conservatory because he wanted to make himself better-rounded, knowing that once music became his career it would be relentless.

“You’re only as good as your last performance,” says Browning, who practices five or six hours a day, even when on tour.

“You have to keep the equipment in shape and take nothing for granted. If you don’t practice, your critical sense gets dull.

“It’s important to suffer from what Martha Graham called ‘the divine dissatisfaction’ – the belief that you can always be better.

“A serious artist’s life is built around his daily work, not what happens on stage.”

From the start, Browning’s teachers insisted he master the piano works when he was young; he could then spend a lifetime going back and deepening the pieces interpretively.

Browning credits the great Artur Schnabel with telling time “to always ask why the composer wrote a piece *that way*.”

“He must have had an image and we have to find something close to that image to play the work. Digging for that image is hard work because you have to keep throwing out anything that isn’t worthy of the music. It’s like getting rid of the junk of life and getting down to the things that really matter. It’s painful to dig.

“It’s psychological.”

Browning admits he doesn’t wear his heart on his sleeve when he plays. Nor, however, is he over-intellectual.

“Serkin told me a career does get easier as you get older. For one thing, you don’t feel the need to impress. You can say, ‘This is the way I feel about the piece and I hope you like it,’ as opposed to, ‘What can I do to make people like the piece more?’

“I want the audience to feel satisfied. It’s like enjoying a good meal and saying, ‘This is the way everything ought to taste.’ ”