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Music: The well-tempered pianist

Francois-Frédéric Guy proves modest about his dazzling career and brave choice of recital works, writes Ian Fox

With most pianists only programming the standard repertoire in their recitals, it is refreshing to find a concert featuring works we rarely hear. For his National Concert Hall programme on Tuesday week, French pianist François-Frédéric Guy has chosen Bach to begin with, playing six of the Preludes and Fugues from The Well-Tempered Clavier, and following it with Bartók's piano sonata.

"I am concentrating on The Well-Tempered Clavier as I intend to play the whole work in two years' time and it makes a marvellous contrast to the Bartók sonata," says Guy.

Bach's monumental work for keyboard consists of two sets of preludes and fugues in every key, a total of 48 compositions. "Well-tempered" refers to the tuning of the instrument and not to the mood of the composer. It took Bach more than 20 years to complete his project, writing it in the early 1700s. The music is widely regarded as among the true masterpieces for the keyboard, but because of its complexity it is seldom heard in concert. Over the next two years Guy intends to perform the entire cycle of the 48 pieces as a group.

Bartók's piano sonata dates from 1926, making it just under 200 years younger. "It may only be 14 minutes long but it is a very big piece."

To open his second half, Guy has chosen a late, rarely heard work by Franz Liszt, *Bénédictions de Dieu dans la Solitude*. This also belongs to a larger set, the *Harmonies Poétiques et Religieuses*, a collection of 10 meditations by Liszt, mixing his religious fervour with his astounding abilities as a pianist. It was written in the 1840s, not long after Liszt's tour of Ireland, when he was treated much as a pop idol would be today; ladies reportedly swooned at his concerts.

Guy is again programming a contrasting work to this, his one popular choice, Beethoven's much loved *Sonata in C*, opus 53, dedicated to his benefactor, Count Waldstein. Guy is preparing for a complete cycle of the 32 Beethoven sonatas at the Monte Carlo festival in 2008. "I will play them in a short space of time, over two weekends and the days in between," says Guy without the slightest sign of apprehension.

A highly successful performer in France, Guy has made a number of records, first for the Harmonia Mundi label and latterly for the French company, Naive. His recent disc of Prokofiev's sixth and eighth sonatas garnered excellent reviews — "a new benchmark, for who could imagine more impressive playing," enthused *The Times*. His recording of Beethoven's monumental *Hammerklavier* sonata was similarly acclaimed, not least because, as one critic noted, pianists are terrified of the demands it makes on memory,

technique and stamina; and Guy's version of the Liszt piano sonata was described by another critic as "out of this world".

Guy has been accompanying cellist Anne Gastinel in recording the Brahms and the Beethoven cello sonatas, while his recording of Brahms' second piano concerto, with the London Philharmonic under Paavo Berglund, awaits release.

Guy has been to Dublin twice before. He came first as a contestant in the second Axa Dublin international piano competition, in 1991, when he made it to the semi-finals. "It was a great experience for me," he says. He returned in 2001 for a solo recital.

The 37-year-old pianist was born in Normandy to parents who were college lecturers, his father in French and his mother in English. "I started lessons around (the age of) seven. My father was not a professional pianist but he could have been; I remember him playing the Grieg and Tchaikovsky piano concertos at home. It all rubbed off on me. My mother taught me the basics, how to read music and all that, when I was about five. Apparently they noticed that I could play very serious stuff just by listening to it."

He was sent to the local conservatory in Normandy and his talent was soon noted. He was fortunate to be assessed for the Paris conservatory by the great teacher Dominique Merlot. Greatly impressed, Merlot took the young Guy on as a private pupil, as he was too young to enter the conservatory, the age limit being 14 at the time. Subsequently he took the entry exam: "And I failed, so I had to come back the next year, when I was successful," he says. "My education was very normal," he claims modestly. "Three years in Paris, first prize at the conservatory and two years in the postgraduate cycle." He undertook some competition work in Dublin and at Leeds, where he again reached the semi-finals.

This led to an invitation to study at the International Academy at Como in Italy — "with the most famous artists coming to teach you — Radu Lupu, Simon Rattle and Murray Perahia." It was a hugely valuable experience and Guy was particularly delighted to work with Karl-Ulrich Schnabel, the son of the legendary German pianist of the 1930s, Artur Schnabel, who helped him greatly with his Beethoven.

In 1999 he was appointed as a BBC New Generation Artist, a two-year stint that brought him to wide attention in the UK. He followed that with participation in a famous Edinburgh Festival concert where they re-created Beethoven's legendary but lengthy concert in Vienna in 1808, including the premieres of the fourth piano concerto, the fifth and sixth symphonies, part of the Mass in C and other works.

National Concert Hall, Dublin, April 11