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No 44

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**Moving** on  
**up**



# Give contemporary music a chance, begs François-Frédéric Guy, though the French pianist's next project is to play all of Beethoven's sonatas – in eight consecutive concerts. **Jessica Duchen** meets this Romantic modernist

**F**rançois-Frédéric Guy and I are three-quarters of the way through our interview when a waitress arrives to ask what else we want to eat. 'Espresso, *s'il vous plaît*,' says Guy. 'Wouldn't you like dessert?' she presses. Guy catches my eye and says: 'You see what I mean?'

We've been discussing at some length the commercialism that runs rampant through our society and, not east, our concert halls. 'It's always sell, sell, sell,' Guy remarks, declining the dessert menu – he prefers healthy food in any case. They put on this sweet manner, but they're just trying to sell you things. It never stops.'

Guy was in London to perform the Mozart Piano Concerto in C major K467, with the Philharmonia Orchestra under Philippe Jordan, a favourite partner on the podium. 'Initially I suggested that we play the Schoenberg concerto,' he explains. 'It would have been much more interesting and it would have made programmatic sense with the Mahler Fifth Symphony in the second half.' The box office, though, is scared of Schoenberg. 'Philippe said, "Schoenberg? Of course, what a wonderful idea!" But now we have to do Mozart. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining about Mozart – it's fantastic. But there are other people in the world for a concert of Schoenberg and Mahler, not just the same people who can listen to this Mozart concerto ten times a year anywhere they like.'

What will surprise some listeners even more than Guy's predilection for Schoenberg is that he is a French pianist with such a preference. Even today, there seems to be an overwhelming expectation that French musicians will play French music first and foremost. 'I don't know why,' Guy says, 'because today globalisation is everywhere – and to me the greatest interpreter of Debussy's piano music was Walter Gieseking, who wasn't French at all!'

Guy, in any case, has bigger ideas. Even though his BBC Proms debut two years ago was in that most Gallic of concertos, the Ravel G major (it was televised and is viewable on YouTube), he has essentially made his name through playing music of a very different kind. Those of us who were there will never forget him raising the roof at London's St John's, Smith Square hall in the Liszt 'Dante' Sonata over a decade ago, or thrilling to his power and intelligence in Prokofiev's sonatas and concertos.

Guy first appeared to an unsuspecting public as a truly Byronic Romantic in 1992, blazing a full-blooded pianistic trail that was amply rewarded with a first prize at the Pretoria-Unisa Competition in South Africa that year. Recording contracts followed, first with Harmonia Mundi and later with the distinguished French label Naïve, and a DVD of Liszt entitled *Les pianos de la nuit*, including the B minor Sonata and pieces from *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*. Now approaching the big four-zero, he's transforming from poet to philosopher, with Beethoven looming ever larger in significance. This year he's playing the complete cycle of sonatas for the first time, as well as completing his recording of all five piano concertos with Jordan and the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France. His recent recording of the Beethoven 'Hammerklavier' Sonata garnered huge acclaim, with BBC Radio 3's 'Building a Library' programme declaring it the best available recording of the work.

His musical tastes go back to his early childhood, Guy explains. There's a lesson in there, too: if you want to get a child interested in Brahms, just tell him he mustn't listen to it. 'The first music I heard on CD at home was Beethoven,' he recalls, 'the sonatas played by Wilhelm Kempff and the concertos with

Brendel. But my father hated Brahms! We had a recording of the Second Piano Concerto and he always said to me, "Don't listen to that because Brahms doesn't know how to write for the piano – he just crashes all over the place." Of course, I wanted to listen to it immediately!

'My father loved Russian music – he was and still is very keen on Rachmaninov, and he had the famous recording of Byron Janis playing the Rachmaninov Concerto No 1 and Prokofiev's No 3 conducted by Kirill Kondrashin. Same story – he was always saying "Don't turn over to listen to side B, Prokofiev is crazy music!" So of course I would listen to the Prokofiev, and I liked it better than the Rachmaninov. All these little stories are a joke, but also they go deep, because they conditioned everything I did next. Naturally the first music I recorded was Brahms, Beethoven and Prokofiev!'

## Befriending the librarian

Both of Guy's parents played the piano, though neither professionally, and while the Normandy village where he was born was not short of artistic influences – Giverny, with Monet's house and Japanese garden, was up the road – it had no local piano teacher. François was taken for lessons in the nearby town of Evreux, which boasted a famous cathedral (apparently the only building in the town that was not destroyed in the Second World War) and a fine concert series in which Guy heard, among other things, Messiaen's wife, Yvonne Loriod, performing the *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus*. He asked the composer for an autograph.

By now immersed in piano music, Guy entered the Paris Conservatoire where he studied with two of its most famous

Playing all the Beethoven sonatas was 'like crossing the Pacific Ocean alone on a boat, seeing a hurricane, but with no radio to get help'

professors, Dominique Merlet and Christian Ivaldi. But he discovered that the music he most wanted to listen to wasn't for the piano at all. He took to Bruckner, Strauss, Wagner and Mahler in the biggest possible way, and his approach to learning their works was not remotely cavalier – he'd borrow more than a dozen recordings every week from the library and follow them intently with the score ('I became very good friends with the librarian!'). Something of their power, sweep, romantic aesthetic and orchestral richness of tone has undoubtedly rubbed off on his approach to piano playing.

Meanwhile the piano staked its claim on his time and his heart. Though he didn't much enjoy competitions, he landed the Unisa prize quickly, and the following year, 1993, he headed for Leeds. He only got as far as the semi-finals, but this proved crucial as the radio broadcast of his recital attracted the attention of a number of important musicians, among them Fou Ts'ong, Murray Perahia, Simon Rattle and Radu Lupu, all of whom provided vital encouragement. Fou Ts'ong pointed Guy in the direction of a remarkable organisation in Italy, the International Piano Foundation, based in a villa on the shores of Lake Como. ▶

If you were...

...a fictional or historical character, who would you be?

The Count of Monte Cristo

...a book?

*Dr Faustus* by Thomas Mann

...a piece of music?

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony

...a type of food?

Sashimi – it's healthy, exciting and original!

...a wine?

A good burgundy from Louis Jadot

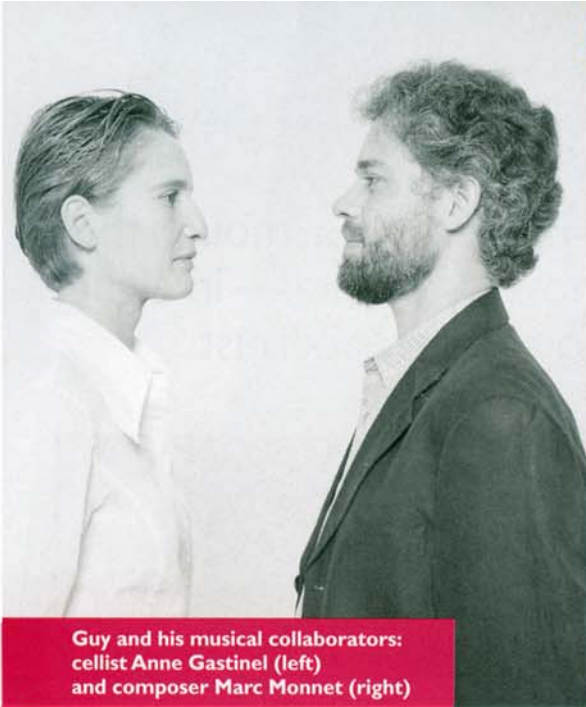
...a quality?

Enthusiasm

...a fault?

Over-enthusiasm





Guy and his musical collaborators: cellist Anne Gastinel (left) and composer Marc Monnet (right)



Guy became one of a select handful of budding pianists resident in the house for a year, developing under the guidance of a series of visiting artists – among them Ts'ong, Perahia, Karl Ulrich Schnabel, Leon Fleisher and Charles Rosen. I visited the foundation in 1994-5 and watched Perahia coaching some of the most gifted youngsters of their generation in the principles of Schenkerian analysis as applied to piano performance: besides Guy, the youthful pianists included Piotr Anderszewski and Sergio Tiempo. If it was unforgettable for a visiting journalist, one can only imagine how it must have felt to be one of the students. 'To meet such people, great artists, to have them as teachers, this was a real way to open my mind,' Guy agrees, modestly.

It was an excellent bridge into the profession. From 1995 he became a regular performer at the famed La Roque d'Anthéron piano festival, and those concerts and broadcasts led on to his first recording for Harmonia Mundi – tellingly, also the 'Hammerklavier'. This in turn began to open even more doors.

## 32 sonatas, 8 days, 1 pianist

Now the ultimate Beethoven challenge is with him: the complete sonatas. Having already played them in Monaco, he's taking them to the Cité de la Musique in Paris in October. Though a number of pianists have been presenting the 32 sonatas to high acclaim recently – notably András Schiff, Daniel Barenboim and Paul Lewis – Guy's approach has a crucial difference: he's doing the whole lot in eight days flat from Friday to Friday, in chronological order, with the sonatas arrayed through ten concerts (two recitals per day over the weekend).

The classic comparison for the Beethoven sonatas cycle, of course, is climbing Mount Everest; but there were times, says Guy, when the prospect felt even more daunting: 'It was like crossing the Pacific Ocean alone on a small boat, seeing the hurricane coming along, with no radio to ask for help!' Still, he adds, 'People seemed to trust me to do it, so I accepted and I worked like *crazy*.' Last January he retreated to a country cottage in Ireland and spent two weeks on his own in a state of total immersion. It worked wonders, he says: 'Now I feel so excited!'

Along with the Beethoven piano concerto recordings, the sonatas are Guy's first venture into the pianistic cycle lane. But they probably won't be the last. 'Now my idea is perhaps to do the complete Brahms,' he reflects. And here we come back to the problem of box office demands versus artistic ones. The Beethoven sonatas, he points out, are more than tried and tested: as a concert series, they work perfectly and draw enthusiastic audiences. Other composers may not be so easy. 'I don't know all the works yet, I still have to learn pieces like his Schumann Variations, but last year I very much enjoyed performing the First Piano Sonata and getting to grips with the Handel Variations, which is a great, great piece. I wanted to play it at the Wigmore Hall, but they wanted the Schubert A major Sonata instead.'

If one of Brahms's most technically challenging piano works is too risky to programme at a top London recital hall, what about the other music that Guy has set out to champion – not only Schoenberg, but the music of today? 'The idea of mixing modern music with classical is hugely important to me,' he affirms. Among his favourite composers of today are Tristan Murail and Hugues Dufourt – he will be giving an entire programme of the latter's music in Marseilles in November. 'When I had my recital debut at the Berlin Philharmonie, the programme was Prokofiev Sixth Sonata, a piece by Murail and the Schubert A major Sonata. After the Murail piece, it was crazy, I had to come back six times! The music was so poetic, so new, so far removed from all the clichés of modern music that people think they know.'

'I know that the box office is vital, I know they have to make money, but I think this commercialism is the biggest disease today. Everybody reacts about the market – "how much can we earn with this?" So people don't want to take the risk with something different. It's the same problem as the Schoenberg Piano Concerto, which is not even modern music as it is nearly 90 years old. Yes, it's difficult for the audience, but it's rewarding if you give it a chance.'

'I have never thought – and please don't misunderstand me – that contemporary music was necessarily *meant* to be shared by thousands of people. It never has been, not even in Beethoven's times. At the first performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, they were laughing. Today we have all these composers who try to write tonal music just in order to be heard by a big audience – but that's not my approach. I understand that the really radical new music is difficult, but not more than other things, except in the way that the human brain has to process the sounds in real time. For instance, how can you really understand on first hearing a work like Mahler's Ninth? It's too complicated.'

Mahler himself isn't the issue; Guy wants to play Stockhausen. 'Stockhausen's music is absolutely phenomenal; I think he was one of the most important composers of the 20th century. Not all the music is good, but about 80 per cent is, which is a lot. And people like it each time I play it.'

Perhaps it's not surprising if Guy's diary currently contains more Beethoven and Brahms than Murail and Stockhausen. But even if he longs for a little more open-mindedness, it's hard to imagine a musician less willing to grumble about his lot. Never mind the popular cliché of the tortured, suffering artist: Guy, who is married to the Radio France producer Anne-Marie Revy and has two teenage stepchildren, radiates not only classic French charm, but also an air of contentment and gratitude that everything has turned out so well. He has only one thing to add when I ask him for any concluding thoughts. 'I'm so lucky to have the chance to do what I love the most, to be loved by a fantastic woman, and that this life is possible. It's not so common these days that someone can wake up in the morning and say that. I'm so lucky.' I assure him that he deserves it. 'I hope so,' Guy says, beaming. ■

## On disc

NEW

### ■ BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No 4; plus Piano Quintet op 16  
Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France/Philippe Jordan (cond)  
Naïve V5148  
Release date: 27 October 2008

### ■ BEETHOVEN

Piano Concertos Nos 1 & 5  
Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France/Philippe Jordan (cond)  
Naïve V5084

### ■ BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas: No 29 op 106;  
No 8 op 13; No 19 op 49 no 1  
Naïve V5023

### ■ BEETHOVEN

Cello & Piano Sonatas Nos 1 & 3  
With Anne Gastinel (vc)  
Naïve V4995

### ■ BEETHOVEN

Cello & Piano Sonatas Nos 2, 4 & 5  
With Anne Gastinel (vc)  
Naïve V4927

### ■ BRAHMS

Piano Concerto No 2  
London Philharmonic Orchestra/  
Paavo Berglund (cond)  
Naïve V4944

### ■ PROKOFIEV

Sonatas No 6 & 8  
Naïve V4898

## In concert

François-Frédéric Guy performs all the Beethoven sonatas at the Cité de la Musique, Paris, (10-17 October). For more details about his concerts and recordings, visit [www.ffguy.com](http://www.ffguy.com)