

“I think remembering not to take yourself too seriously is a really useful thing”



David Kettle

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Read any review of US pianist Jonathan Biss – who jets into Glasgow to perform with the BBC Scottish Symphony on 28 January – and the adjective that comes up again and again is “intellectual”. It’s probably understandable, given his eyebrow-raising current list of activities: still only in his mid-30s, he’s not only a respected soloist in demand across the world (and part-way through a nine-year project to record the complete Beethoven sonatas), but also a writer of books on Beethoven and Schumann, a piano teacher, and a lecturer at Philadelphia’s prestigious Curtis Institute of Music.

But “intellectual” is also just one side of the story. The other is a mischievous sense of fun, epitomised in a tongue-in-cheek “official” biography on his website that describes a pre-natal first performance and nods to Woody Allen-style obsessions, neuroses and failings. It’s an intelligent humour that should find an ideal outlet in his Glasgow gig.

“There’s no question that if somebody asked me to say in one word what I am and what I do, I’d say I’m a pianist,” Biss explains. “But I’m interested in making my relationship with music and with the piano as broad as possible. On a purely selfish level I learn a huge amount from teaching and from writing – from being forced to put my complicated, abstract thoughts into words.”

What’s really brought Biss into the lives of thousands, however, is a remarkable online video course, in conjunction with the Curtis Institute, in which he explores the piano sonatas of Beethoven (it’s available to all at www.coursera.org/learn/beethoven-piano-sonatas). “If Curtis is famous for anything, it’s for being small and elite,” he says. “But the point of this course is that it’s open to anyone. An amusing statistic is that more people have now taken the Beethoven course than have gone to Curtis in its entire history.”

Beethoven has long been a key figure in his life, Biss admits: he explored his relationship with



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the composer in his 2011 ebook *Beethoven’s Shadow*, and he’s now embarking on a new project to work with five international composers, including Scottish-based Sally Beamish, in new responses to Beethoven’s five piano concertos. “I’ve been playing those concertos for years, so I thought it would be interesting to take five composers who are as different as possible from one another, and without giving them any specific instructions, ask them to write something that takes Beethoven as a starting point, and just see what happens.” It’s still early days for Beamish’s new concerto, due to be unveiled next season, and although the overall project is a partnership

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with the St Paul Chamber Orchestra in Minnesota, Biss says a Scottish performance is likely. “I met up with Sally in London last time I was over, but I’ll get to see her this time as well, now in her natural habitat.”

It’s not Beethoven he’s bringing to Glasgow, however, but Mozart, and the Ninth Piano Concerto, a relatively youthful work. “Obviously Beethoven is central to my life,” Biss explains, “but set against his obsessiveness and bloody-mindedness, the incredible theatricality and balance of human emotions in Mozart is actually a sheer joy. There are days when I

think I could play nothing but Mozart forever and probably be entirely fulfilled as a musician.”

The particular Concerto Biss he is performing is perhaps not as well known as Mozart’s later masterpieces in the genre, but for Biss, it’s second to none. “Everything that makes me love Mozart is in this concerto – the sense of theatre, and of play, and real tragedy in the slow movement.” And it’s Mozart’s sense of fun that Biss responds particularly strongly to, in a concerto where the composer constantly sets out to surprise the listener with unprecipitated twists and turns, the pianist nudging a sly comment into the normally orchestra-only introduction, and swerving the frenetic finale sideways into an unexpectedly elegant courtly dance. “I find that Mozart is so often winking at the listener, and there’s a lot of that in this piece.”

How important does he think humour is for musicians? “Oh my God, I think it’s vital to have a sense of humour. It drives me absolutely crazy that the side to music that’s not just funny but actually silly is so underplayed and under-represented. And it’s very hard work being a musician – we do tend to be neurotic and obsessive, probably necessarily – so I think remembering not to take yourself too seriously is a really useful thing.” Intellectual? Well, maybe – but with a bristling combination of intelligence and humour. ■

Jonathan Biss plays Mozart with the BBC SSO at the City Halls, Glasgow, 28 January