

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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INTERVIEW WITH KRISTIAN BEZUIDENHOUT

By Pamela Hickman



Kristian Bezuidenhout
Photo by Marco Borggreve

On 12 July 2017 I spoke to keyboard player Kristian Bezuidenhout, who was in Melbourne, Australia on a concert tour with the Australian Chamber Orchestra. Born in South Africa and raised on the Gold Coast in Australia, Bezuidenhout has been referred to as "the finest living exponent of the fortepiano" (The Herald, UK) with De Telegraaf (Netherlands) lauding him as "Mozart reincarnated." Kristian Bezuidenhout today makes his home in London, UK.

H&F: Kristian Bezuidenhout, as I understand, the fortepiano is YOU.

KB: That's an interesting comment. The more I think about it, it is a question of somehow finding the right thing at the right time with instruments. I was on the path of playing the modern piano and going down that route and, I think, feeling despondent about the lack of light at the end of the tunnel. And then, I started taking the fortepiano seriously when I was an undergraduate at the Eastman School of Music. Some kind of key or door was unlocked by this instrument, in the sense that I could imagine a career devoted to really playing solo music. In the case of the fortepiano, the music I wanted to unlock was that of Mozart. I think it was just one of those happy accidents, a "*felix culpa*", in that I found an instrument that could allow me to be myself, in a sense. I had never felt like that on the Steinway...not playing that repertoire on it, at least. (Playing other music, it was fine.) I always felt this barrier about the music that I cherished so much - that of Mozart -

and that it was never really possible for me psychologically on the Steinway. It was the fortepiano that enabled it.

H&F: How have audiences reacted to this specific approach?

KB: Incredibly positively...with 100 per cent enthusiasm and open arms. That is a combination of various factors: one of them is that we have so many fantastic, world-class instruments in various venues and countries around the world, which makes presenting a united front for the quality of these instruments much easier than it was even 15 years ago, I would say. So, we have got that and we have artists who are really keen on presenting the best possible fortepiano concerts they can, meaning that concert organizers are willing to go the extra mile and spend the money to hire those good-quality instruments.

H&F: But you, yourself, have a real mission regarding the fortepiano.

KB: I think it very fair to say that when I started working on these instruments, I very much wanted to present a kind of level of professionalism and polish that would appeal not only to the so-called "mad, sandal-wearing early music experts" but also just to a general concert-going audience of people who might not necessarily go to a fortepiano concert. So, my whole quest, in a sense, was to present recordings of the instruments that

speak not just to the early music expert but also to the everyday listener who might just put on the radio and hear a Mozart sonata played on the fortepiano and think “Maybe it really is time for me to reconsider my idea about this instrument.” That was very much my combined strategy with recordings and concerts and trying to bring them up to a level that I felt represented me, a level with which I was happy and comfortable.

H&F: Are you happy with your playing of the fortepiano?

KB: It becomes harder and harder to please oneself, in a sense, and I hope that is a very strong thing...that one's standards are constantly higher and higher and that the demands you set yourself are more intense with each passing year.

H&F: And the different fortepianos you play?

KB: There are various types of fortepiano, from the five-octave Mozart-style instrument to the Erard and Streicher pianos from the mid-19th century, for later repertoire, as well. I like to think that it is very helpful, technically speaking, to be confronted with different pieces of equipment, as they really hone your ability to change your technique to create a different sound. That's what I like about having to play on so many different keyboards in my life.

H&F: Do you perform on other instruments?

KB: Absolutely. For the last month, I have been doing a big tour with the Australian Chamber Orchestra on the Steinway. And I absolutely adore playing the harpsichord. To be honest, the harpsichord was the first early keyboard I really investigated seriously. I don't get the

chance to play it as much as I would like, but am trying to address that issue at the moment.

H&F: Let's go back in time. As a child, what was your earliest musical experience?

KB: There was doodling around on recorders and that sort of thing and hitting the piano keys once in a while just for fun. But probably one of the earliest things I remember very distinctly is hearing Mozart's big G-Minor Symphony for the first time when I was around nine or ten, which is around the time I started the piano. Reconnecting with the piece my parents had listened to a lot when I was growing up, and somehow knowing this music — it was “in my system” — I thought to myself: “Wow, wouldn't it be amazing to have this music be a part of your life all the time!” I became fascinated by Mozart. Then, very quickly after discovering Mozart's orchestral music, came things like Bach cantatas and Handel oratorios. Coming to music was very much a listening experience for me. Filling in the blanks of playing came much later.

H&F: And your early musical training?

KB: It was the very normal, traditional way: my parents decided that I should have piano lessons. I had a few lessons in South Africa before we left, but that didn't go anywhere. Then I took a break when we got to Australia. However, when I was around nine, I started with a very, very brilliant teacher at my local Lutheran primary school. She was just a genius - incredibly tough with very high standards. She had a wonderful small piano studio at my school. I remember thinking I was not going to be a professional pianist and wondering why she was so demanding. It kind-of flummoxed me. I had imagined I would just collect records, love music and

play piano for fun. But I think she instilled in me a very strong sense of striving for a very high level, that you do your best and it should always be better the next time. Then, at about the age of 13, I started playing the flute, and because I was so passionate about the instrument, I learned it very quickly, giving me a huge sense of positive reinforcement. Consequently, my own piano-playing got a lot better after that when I discovered that hard work really does pay off. Getting to know the instrument just requires thousands of hours of being at it and getting to know it. I then took the piano and flute very, very seriously.

H&F: What was the turning point for you in branching out to earlier keyboard instruments?

KB: It came in 1996 when I went to Upstate New York to meet Rebecca Penneys, who was a professor at the Eastman School of Music. That was one of those moments that completely changed the whole narrative timeline. I just clicked with her aesthetically in such a major way: she was so encouraging about the idea of exploring early keyboards. That was very important to me; I needed someone who would "allow" me to be in that world, even though I had never played a fortepiano or harpsichord. She encouraged me to apply to the school. That was the beginning of a whole new chapter. I just devoured all this Mozart, Bach and Haydn with her; not so much later music, and she never forced me into that. I would play fortepiano and harpsichord. I really owe so much to her sense of just creating no boundaries, creating no straightjackets, no little lines in the sand about what you "must and must not do". I am very thankful for that. So, then I really went crazy playing fortepiano and harpsichord all the time.

H&F: Were you also studying ensemble techniques?

KB: Yes. That was also the period when I started playing continuo on the harpsichord very seriously. I am incredibly grateful for the experience of playing real-life ensemble music that is quasi-improvised and how that shapes your approach to solo literature of every period, whether that be playing the continuo for Bach cantatas and then solo Bach harpsichord literature or playing continuo in Lully operas and then playing late 17th-century French music. Similarly, playing Mozart operas on the fortepiano as a continuo player draws one into realizing the cross-fertilisation between genres that is so important for this period. And that is what you never get if you just play piano trios and piano quartets for your whole life. That was something that really happened in a major way when I was at the Eastman School.

H&F: When did you start performing seriously?

KB: I would say that the first big breakthrough for me came in 2001 when I won the First Prize and the Audience Prize in the Flanders International Fortepiano Competition (Bruges). It was later that year that I was set up with a fringe concert in the Utrecht Early Music Festival, where I played a solo Mozart concert. I think that concert really paved the way for several things, many of which happened in Holland. Several of my earliest serious professional concerts were in Holland, like with the Netherlands Chamber Choir with Marcus Creed and many other projects that happened in Holland way before I started playing regularly in other countries. I am happy to say that playing in the Netherlands was really the beginning of my serious professional career.

H&F: Was this mostly fortepiano?

KB: Yes. That is safe to say. I was certainly playing Steinway here and there in those first seasons, but my performance was 80% fortepiano, 10% Steinway and 10% harpsichord, mostly because of the kind of repertoire profile that I wanted to establish and the recordings I was releasing at the time. Those two aspects go hand in hand for the industry; presenters want to present you in repertoire that they know they can sell. Nowadays, your concert performance is determined so much by what you have been recording.

H&F: Isn't that limiting?

KB: I'm not complaining, because I get to play Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert and all of that repertoire. If one grows tired of that, it is time to give up!

H&F: So, has your performance focused mostly on Classical and early Romantic repertoire?

KB: Well, no. I have certainly been playing tons of Bach, Handel and French Baroque as well, but I haven't recorded any of it, so it goes under the radar. If I do a solo harpsichord recital, it is impossible to know about it unless one is there or it gets written up. But the majority of my work is late 18th-century Classical and early 19th-century and then, as I said, here and there, a solo Bach programme. I have just recorded the Bach Violin Sonatas with Isabelle Faust; that will be coming out next year.

H&F: would you like to mention ensembles with whom you have played?

KB: Yes. I have been lucky enough to have a number of strong and ongoing relationships. I guess the most important of them has been with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra; as of next year, I will be guest co-artistic director with them for three seasons. It has always been one of my favourite period instrument orchestras and I was so delighted to start working with it regularly. I think it is safe to say that, since 2007, we have had a project together every season. In addition to that, I have worked extensively with the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century under Frans Brüggen; they have been among the most important concerts I have done, starting in 2006, when we did the complete cycle of late Mozart piano concertos; also, over the years, we have done the complete Beethoven piano concertos three times. And there are more ensembles: Philippe Herreweghe and the Orchestre des Champs Elysées... I have had a very strong connection with John Eliot Gardiner and his orchestra — the English Baroque Soloists — and now, more and more, with the English Concert, a period instrument orchestra based in London. It's kind of crazy when I think about the number of ensembles with which I'm invited to work regularly. Such incredibly classy, refined playing. It is a great honour to be working with them.

H&F: How do your solo recitals fit in with all of this?

KB: Well, to be honest, the solo recitals are both a blessing and a curse. I remember reading an interview with Piotr Anderszewski, in which he made a comment that he was working with an orchestra and some conductor: he said it is the hardest thing in the world because there is so much compromise and sacrifice involved in the flexibility and absolute perfection of what you are doing, as you have to respond to the

musical cues given you by your colleagues or by a conductor who is on a totally different wavelength to you. So, in a certain sense, the opposite of that is playing a solo recital, where you have total control over every note, every timing, every chord and sonority and over perfection...your own laboratory of control freakdom possibly. On the other hand, the sacrifice is that playing a solo recital demands such incredible concentration; you need to have such unbelievable laser focus to maintain the level of two hours playing by yourself. It can be so exhausting.

H&F: What kind of solo recitals have you been doing lately?

KB: It has been the case that the solo recitals I have played over the last few years have been very, very much focused on Mozart, about which, as I said before, I am not complaining. But the bulk of those programmes have been promoting my new Mozart releases that have come out over the years on Harmonia Mundi. However, there is something very rewarding about playing a two-hour solo Mozart programme and an audience member coming up to you afterwards and saying, "Wow...I was a bit nervous about hearing a two-hour programme of Mozart sonatas on the fortepiano..." There is so much variety and so much beguiling narrative detail in these pieces, so many colours and landscapes and so many varied forms that Mozart chooses to use that people find it surprisingly "unboring". I feel very good if I can have that effect on an audience with that kind of repertoire.

H&F: How is it different?

KB: It is a very different feeling from playing a recital where you play a Bach partita, a Mozart sonata, some Brahms intermezzos and a then a Janáček piece. It focuses the listening in a very,

very different way, I find.

H&F: You are also conducting.

KB: That's right. That is something I would like to do much more of, and I will expand my repertoire as much as I can. I conducted a lot of Bach in the last season. I conducted my first St. Matthew Passion this year. Next year, I will be directing a programme of Bach cantatas with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra. Conducting is wonderful: it refocuses your energy and forces you to gain a new skill set which provides such amazing insight into your own playing, I find. So, when I did the Matthew Passion, I conducted the whole thing from the keyboard and played all the recitatives and all the arias. It was just a fascinating experience. It is so wildly different to playing a concert of Mozart piano sonatas and yet just as rewarding, but much more demanding, I would say!

And then, playing a concert with a period instrument chamber orchestra, where you conduct, let's say, a Mozart piano concerto or a Haydn symphony and navigate, playing with your colleagues and also directing them when they need it, is so rewarding. It is a more intense style of music-making, one that involves more risk-taking and more responsibility that can yield a more vivid, somehow dangerous, and exciting result, I find. That's why I am also doing many more of those programmes, conducting from the keyboard with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra, English Concert and other groups in Europe and in America, too, also with the Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra (Canada).

H&F: Did you study conducting?

KB: No. Not officially. Not in any serious way. One of my best friends is New York conductor Brad Lubman. I played under him in many orchestras at the Eastman School when I was a

student there, playing flute. I have learned so much from just watching him over the years. His incredible combination of precision and simplicity of gesture have been very inspiring to me. But again, in a way, conducting is like continuo playing or sight-reading; you learn it on the job. You have to start somewhere and just try and get better. You find out which gestures are very helpful and which are not. It's trial and error. It's like any kind of technical endeavour; you only get better by trying to get better and that is only possible if you are actually doing it in real life on the stage or in rehearsal. It does not happen in the practice room...at least, that is my feeling.

H&F: Do you edit?

KB: I used to do quite a lot of that when I was a student, actually, and most of it was when unearthing late 18th-century Lied repertoire, so I made editions of wildly off-the-beaten-path Lieder: anything written from the late 1750s to the 1770s. A lot of that was for a research project I was doing at the time on the origins of the Lied, tracing the history of the Lied before Schubert. That is such a neglected corner of the repertoire and one that deserves much more attention. So, I made editions of pieces by Herbing (Herbing's very interesting and delightful collection of songs from the 1750s is almost never performed) and Fleischer. I performed some of them with a colleague at the time. Well, I also kind-of "doctor" editions of Mozart piano concertos for myself, in which I can play continuo and solos in a way that I think reflects late 18th-century performance practice. A lot of the existing editions of those pieces are a nightmare because they just totally ignore this tendency and don't let you make decisions for yourself, which I think is a great shame.

H&F: What about writing in words...articles, etc?

KB: That's a very interesting question. Around 10 years ago, I was so keen to write as much as possible, especially about Mozart, and I realise now that I had found myself in a tricky position. My feeling at the time was "Just put pen to paper, do the best you can and put your thoughts out there." In doing so, I think I was a bit naive, in a sense, to pretend that there isn't scholarship related to Mozart and Bach, especially, that is just on such a high level of detail and expertise. But I did write liner notes for recordings of Mozart violin sonatas - a lot of fun but very hard work. Then I stopped writing for a long time. As to liner notes, I now feel differently about them, that they should be more personal — not so much about what was happening compositionally in May 1782, for example — in fact, combining scholarship with a sense of getting under the surface of composers like Mozart and Bach and asking what the motivations for writing a certain genre were or what was ailing Mozart at the time, what was frustrating him and what he was trying to prove when writing music like this. I am inspired to do that more much now but it needs to be done on a very high level, because writing, like recording, is there forever. Somehow, I would like to write very seriously about Mozart performance practice in a context that approaches the keyboard music from the keyboard player's perspective; also, about what it means to record nine volumes of Mozart sonatas and variations and how that changes your view of his notational style: the music's tricks, hidden agendas and the extrapolations that are really important when one is playing Mozart keyboard music...and, in fact, any music. But having been so immersed in it for eight years, I am trying to come up with some descriptions of what I have

concluded in my realisation of what I think was probably going on in Mozart's brain a lot of the time when he was playing this music.

H&F: Where do you stand regarding the authentic early music movement?

KB: That's a big issue. It's a hot topic at the moment, especially with the press writing about a certain furor that is going on within various factions of the harpsichord community...a lot of fun and interesting to read but also divisive and damaging and a cause for concern, I think. I have to say that the thing for me is that my experience with early music was a very happy and laboratory-style one that occurred in a very funky, wacky time and environment for me, which is, I think, part of the reason I found it so attractive. The reason for that is my attending the Eastman School of Music and studying for modern piano degrees - undergraduate, masters and my D.M.A.

My incredible luck was that my teacher said: "Do what you want and cut your teeth on any repertoire you think is appropriate to you. I am here to support you." In that way, I started studying the harpsichord and fortepiano and I played every Mozart sonata I could, I played Bach, Handel, Louis Couperin and Frescobaldi...I just did everything! But I wasn't studying for a fortepiano or harpsichord degree and I wasn't forced to do medieval ear-training.

The landscape is so different now: students can go to conservatories like the Schola Cantorum (Basel) or the Royal Conservatory of The Hague, the Trossingen University of Music, the Lyon Conservatory or wherever to have an intense immersive early music experience on the instrument of their choice. What worries me about that is that the new "orthodoxy" is so much about perfection and being involved in the field on the highest level that it can be easy to forget about the

halcyon days when you were first getting into this, dipping your toe into the waters of early music as a kind of slightly forbidden thing to do. I am very grateful for the fact that, when I was studying in the late '90s, it still felt like something you really had to make a case for, with the danger and excitement involved in it. I simply shut myself in the practice room (I didn't have a fortepiano teacher) and just figured it out "on the job", playing a lot and with advice from certain people for whom I played.

I hope that we can recapture that sense in a field that is sometimes a little hamstrung by the sheer level of playing. It can become easy to forget about naturalness and simplicity of expression in a quest to find ever new ways to reinvent certain repertoire. That has recently been happening a lot in recording, I think, sometimes in a grotesque, experimental style, which can be dangerous. I worry about two things: one is the fact that we have run out of things to do with repertoire and that the performer is forced to find new ways to "enliven" it and "make it more interesting again". The other is the opposite: where it is just okay to play perfectly in tune and beautifully. Finding a middle ground between those things is very tricky, requiring constant reassessment and a sense of finding your place in the field and not losing track of any kind of style or taste barometer. Easier said than done...and so subjective.

H&F: What instruments do you have at home?

KB: I have quite a limited collection and by "collection" I mean two. I have a really beautiful five-and-a-half octave Pollmann multi instrument that was built for me in 2009, a copy of an instrument by Anton Walter & Sohn. Standing next to that is a little Wendolin Long upright, a Viennese-designed upright

piano that was constructed in China and it is magnificent. It has a beautiful singing and lyrical sound, very velvety, and an incredibly light action. I find I can prepare, let's say, a programme of Schubert sonatas I am playing on the Viennese fortepiano and I can prepare it on the upright without a huge shift, because the action is so light and delicate that I can really get away with that. I have limited myself to that for now, as I am not one of those people who wants to amass a museum collection in my living room.

H&F: But you are confronted by a lot of different instruments in concert halls where you perform. Is that a problem?

KB: Actually, I do love the feeling of meeting an instrument the day before (or the day of) a concert for a three-hour rehearsal and really just getting under its skin for a few hours and saying "Okay, I need to recalibrate my expectations of how this is going to feel and sound"; the concert is then the laboratory for all of that to take place. A very important way to train your technique is to be able to adjust quickly...the best, I think. Also, having worked so much on the five-octave fortepiano piano as a student in my late teens was very formative in that sense, as those Mozart pianos require such a fine level of tonal and subtle articulation control that they really set you up in a very good way for playing any other type of piano keyboard instrument and that is because they are so fierce. They "take no prisoners" and they show up imperfections and irregularities in such a vivid way. That was a great, great learning experience.

H&F: We have touched on your recordings. Would you briefly sum up that aspect of your career so far?

KB: Yes. My very first disc for Harmonia Mundi was of violin sonatas with Petra Müllejans. After the positive experience of that, Harmonia Mundi approached me with the idea of recording Mozart's solo piano music: nine CDs of the complete Mozart Piano Sonatas, Variations and Fantasies. There have been two recordings of Mozart piano concertos with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra, a disc of Mendelssohn piano concertos with Freiburg Baroque, Schumann and Beethoven songs with Mark Padmore and then a disc of Schubert's "Die schöne Müllerin" and "Schwanengesang" with my friend Jan Kobow, a German tenor. Forthcoming projects include Bach violin sonatas with Isabelle Faust, as mentioned earlier (on harpsichord) and Beethoven piano concertos later this year with the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra.

H&F: When it is not music, what interests you?

KB: Well, I'm really passionate about interiors. I love interior design and furniture and I love creating a space that reflects who I am at home, filling my home with beautiful natural fabrics and with what you might call "luxurious minimalism". I really care about that deeply. It is such fun to curate a space you really think about, taking time to choose a colour palette for it. Along with that, one of my favourite things is mixing cocktails, stirring a really good Martini, mixing drinks for friends and family. This is such a source of fun and joy. The cocktail world, as the espresso world, is a little like music: it's such a simple thing to make, but it's all about the way it is done, the care and attention to detail.

H&F: Kristian Bezuidenhout, thank you so much for your time and for sharing so many fascinating ideas and thoughts.