

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT LEVIN

By Pamela Hickman

Robert Levin
Photo by Clive Barda



On November 4th 2018, I spoke to keyboard artist Robert Levin (USA) about his career and various musical activities. A pianist, harpsichordist and fortepianist whose solo engagements have taken him throughout the United States, to Europe, Australia and Asia, Prof. Levin is known for his improvised embellishments and cadenzas in repertoire of the Classical period. His active career as a chamber musician includes a long association with violist Kim Kashkashian and frequent concert appearances with his wife, pianist Ya-Fei Chuang. A fervent champion of new music, Robert Levin has commissioned and premiered many contemporary works. Readers may be interested to read an article about his improvisation http://seedmagazine.com/content/article/the_improvisational_brain/P1/ and in watching a youtube video from the early 1990s alongside a very youthful Christopher Hogwood at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVexDvUi1DA>

PH: Professor Levin, where were you born?

RL: I was born in Brooklyn, NY.

PH: Do you come from a musical family?

RL: My mother played a bit of piano. My father was a dental ceramist (he made porcelain teeth) but was a passionate music-lover. He owned 150 Mozart albums before I started taking lessons. My mother's younger brother, Benjamin D. Spieler, was the musician of the family—a Juilliard graduate who, after the Second World War, was among the first recipients of a Fulbright scholarship that took him to the Paris Conservatory for four years. Upon his return he took my musical education in hand, finding teachers and sponsoring my further education—chaperoning me in Fontainebleau with Nadia Boulanger from when I was age 12. He was my musical guardian angel.

PH: What are your first musical experiences?

RL: Music was a constant factor in my upbringing—on recordings and broadcasts. My father made a recording of me singing at age 24 months. The repertoire mirrors my parents' eclectic love of music: "La ci darem la mano" from Mozart's Don Giovanni, "I'm as corny as Kansas in August" from South Pacific

and the American folk tune "The Arkansas Traveller".

PH: How did your early music education begin?

RL: When my uncle returned from Europe, my parents advised him of my singing back the tunes I had heard. He tested me and discovered I had absolute pitch. He then started me on a regime of piano lessons and solfeggio (ear training) as he had received it in Paris. That gave me a tremendous boost, as most musicians do not receive such training before they get into their teens. I worked with a variety of piano teachers and, at age nine, was admitted to the Chatham Square Music School, founded by the visionary Samuel Chotzinoff (who created the NBC Symphony for Toscanini); there I studied piano with Jan Gorbaty, composition with Stefan Wolpe, and ear training with Seymour Bernstein and Louis Martin. Louis Martin was a former student of Vlado PeReLemuter at the Paris Conservatory. It was he who advised my family to send me to Fontainebleau to work with Nadia Boulanger—a turning point in my artistic trajectory.

PH: And your tertiary education?

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RL: I spent five summers and a whole year with Nadia Boulanger (the latter when I was 14-15—a great adventure). It was Nadia Boulanger who declared that I was not to attend a conservatory, where I risked being an idiot savant, but needed a rounded education. She shook a bony finger at me and said, “YOU are going to Harvard.” “How will I get in?” I asked. “You will get in,” she declared; and she wrote three letters of recommendation that surely helped.

At Harvard I met F. John Adams, later the conductor of the Harvard Glee Club. He invited me to participate in a concert of Bach double harpsichord concertos with co-soloist William Christie, and to play organ in a performance of the Mozart Requiem. He had just received the latest score of the Requiem (a volume of the New Mozart Edition), which contained the sketch for a fugue on the text “Amen” to conclude the *Lacrimosa*—a sketch that Süssmayr’s traditional version did not incorporate. He suggested that I finish the fugue and he would integrate it into his performance. I thought he was mad, but the previous summer Hans Swarowsky, with whom I was studying conducting, insisted that idiomatic performances of Mozart’s piano concertos required improvisation—during the tutti sections, decorations of the melodies, and above all improvised cadenzas. I thought that trying to compose in the style of Mozart might prepare me for improvising in that style. After the Requiem performance I switched my major from French (I was planning a thesis on Baudelaire) to Music so I could write about the unfinished works of Mozart. The thesis, which researched three fragmentary manuscripts—a concerto in D for piano, violin and orchestra K.315f, a quintet in B-flat for clarinet and strings, K. 516c, and the Amen fugue for the Requiem, was given a *summa cum laude*.

The spring of my senior year I was invited by Rudolf Serkin to head the theory department of the Curtis Institute of Music—

a post I assumed at age 20. It was Nadia Boulanger who recommended me. From that point on there was no looking back.

PH: How did your interest in playing on historic keyboard instruments start?

RL: Through my acquaintance with Malcolm Bilson, whom I met at two conferences at the Kennedy Center in Washington (Mozart, 1994, Haydn 1995). Malcolm brought his fortepiano, a copy by Philip Belt of an instrument by Dulcken. It was the first time I heard a period piano live. Around 1980, Malcolm invited me to collaborate on a disc for Nonesuch of two Mozart four-hand sonatas. I was completely new to period pianos. Malcolm was extraordinarily helpful and supportive as I fell under the spell of an instrument that could speak as well as sing. Our collaboration evolved into a deep friendship; we have performed together many times over the years and he invited me to participate in his Mozart concerto cycle with Sir John Eliot Gardiner, playing the double and triple concertos.

PH: Can you mention on which of the keyboard instruments you are most at home?

RL: Each era is a world unto itself. I have performed on pianos that span the time 1745 to the early 20th century. I cannot single out a favourite, any more than I could single out my favourite cuisine.

PH: Where do you stand as regards the historically performed music movement?

RL: It has had a tremendous influence on my music-making, including my performances on standard instruments. I am a staunch advocate of period instrument performance.

PH: You have done extensive enquiry into Mozart’s music and are known for your improvised embellishments and cadenzas in Classical repertoire. Would you like to elaborate on that aspect of your career?

RL: Yes. It was during a conducting seminar with Hans Swarowsky that the maestro

declared, "Improvisation is essential to the proper performance of Mozart piano concertos." He called attention to a recording of the concertos K. 467 and 595 that he made with Austrian pianist Friedrich Gulda, also a fluent jazz musician. I bought the recording, was thunderstruck by its audacity, and decided that henceforth I needed to learn how to incorporate improvisation into my classical performances.

PH: How much of your performing career is taken up with chamber music and with what repertoire?

RL: A considerable amount. I was a founding member of the New York Philomusica, performing with such stellar chamber music colleagues as Felix Galimir, Isidore Cohen, John Graham, Kim Kashkashian, Timothy Eddy, Samuel Baron, Ronald Roseman, Joseph Rabbai, A. Robert Johnson, and Arthur Weisberg. We did a considerable amount of contemporary music as well as the classics. I have recorded numerous chamber works both on standard and period instruments and continue to do so. Since 1979 I have taught and performed chamber music at the Sarasota Music Festival (I was its artistic director from 2007-2015).

PH: What subjects you are currently teaching, and how you see the upcoming generation of "authentic" musicians?

RL: I taught my last class at Harvard in May 2013. My visiting professorship at Juilliard entails private lessons (piano, historic keyboards), chamber music coaching (standard and historic instruments), seminars, master classes, and individual projects.

PH: I am interested to hear about your recordings of both volumes of J.S.Bach's WTC on five keyboard instruments.

RL: Book I on one-manual and two-manual harpsichords, clavichord, and organ; Book II on these plus Silbermann piano. I chose

instruments for each prelude and fugue based upon the writing and the sonic possibilities. The recordings are part of the Edition Bachakademie issued by Hänssler and released in the Bach year 2000. As I recall, I made the recordings in 1999 and 2000. Other Bach works I have recorded for that Edition are the six English Suites (on Steinway) and the complete concertos for 1-4 harpsichords (on harpsichord) with Helmuth Rilling and the Bach-Collegium Stuttgart. (A new recording of the six Partitas, on Steinway, will be issued in 2019.)

PH: Do you compose music?

RL: I was trained as a composer, studying with Stefan Wolpe, Nadia Boulanger, and Leon Kirchner. After my graduation from Harvard I devoted myself to creative work with past masters (the completions), which were an outgrowth of my Harvard senior thesis.

PH: You seem to have a very hectic recording schedule.

RL: In the 1990s I was in the studio quite often. In the past three years I have done a number of recordings, and that process is likely to continue.

PH: Do you find the general public interested in historic instruments and historically informed performance?

RL: Very much so.

PH: You are also very involved in modern music... Rands, Dutilleux, etc. Do you commission and perform music of the younger generation?

RL: Yes. Anthony Cheung wrote me a piece, and Julian Anderson soon will.

PH: When it is not music, what interests you?

RL: Trams, electric railways, cuisine.

PH: Professor Levin, it has been most interesting hearing about your life in music. Many thanks.