STEPHEN KOVACEVICH

As his 75th birthday approaches, the pianist gladly embraces the wildly different characters of Bartók and Beethoven, Schubert and Scriabin, even if he doesn't always recognise his own playing…

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN MILLAR

A couple of years ago Stephen Kovacevich was driving along and a recording of Beethoven's Sonata No. 27 in E minor came on the radio. He recalled a recording he had made of the piece and a last movement about which he'd never been quite satisfied. This one was much better. Who was playing? Wilhelm Kempff, probably.

The performance ended. 'Do you know what? It was my own recording, and I didn't even recognise it,' he tells me. 'I wasn't expecting it, and there it was.' And the lesson is? 'Sometimes when you anticipate, you preclude ecstasy.'

It's a mistake to think too much about what to expect. Let it come to you. Some critics fail to do it, he says, too often. There's a nice expletive here about someone from another magazine, which is better omitted. 'I'm not going into California hippy mode to say that everything has to be unplanned, but I do think that we often overlook spontaneity.'

We're talking about this battle against expectation in his home in Hampstead, in the room where he plays, which is draped with Indian wall hangings and where a steady stream of the most talented young players come to seek the advice of one of the great artists of our era, about to turn 75.

'When I'm coaching someone and they have a beautiful sense of *rubato*, I will praise them, but I will never, ever, praise a certain phrase, saying "Oh you played that phrase so wonderfully", because next time they won't do it. They'll be self-conscious, they'll worry they can't do it again. Is it going to be so beautiful the second time?

'I can say that most of the gifted kids between 20 and 30 have found their way to this piano. I worked with someone who was very gifted – could not be more gifted, really – playing the Chopin B minor Sonata. There was a beautiful phrase that we both liked. Then another beautiful phrase which, on a very high level, was tight. I said, "Please do it again. I'm giving you no advice. But don't type it." What was released was something completely magnificent. It was inside. That person – I won't say who it was – trusted me. That trust was a catalyst and it was miraculous. If you heard that at a concert, you would be so grateful.'

He talks with the excitement of a youngster. On the set of his complete Philips recordings being released to mark his birthday (recorded between 1968 and 1985) you can hear many such moments, and feel the warmth of that fire. When he arrived in London at the end of the '50s, the young Stephen Bishop began to give electric performances. By the time he recorded Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* in 1968 he had established himself in the repertoire that was going to build his ▶

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AWAY FROM THE KEYS: Kovacevich conducts

Starting out: Born on 17 December 1940 in California, he made his public concert debut age 11 in San Francisco, performing Jean Françaix's Concertino.

Heading abroad: At 18, he moved to London to pursue a piano scholarship with Dame Myra Hess before making his European debut at Wigmore Hall in 1961.

Notable partnership: Among his most fêted recordings is his 1978 disc of Bartók, Mozart and Debussy piano duets with Martha Argerich, his former partner with whom he has a daughter, Stéphanie.

Multi-tasking: 1984 saw his first concert as a conductor with the Houston Symphony Orchestra. He has since conducted many of the world's leading orchestras.

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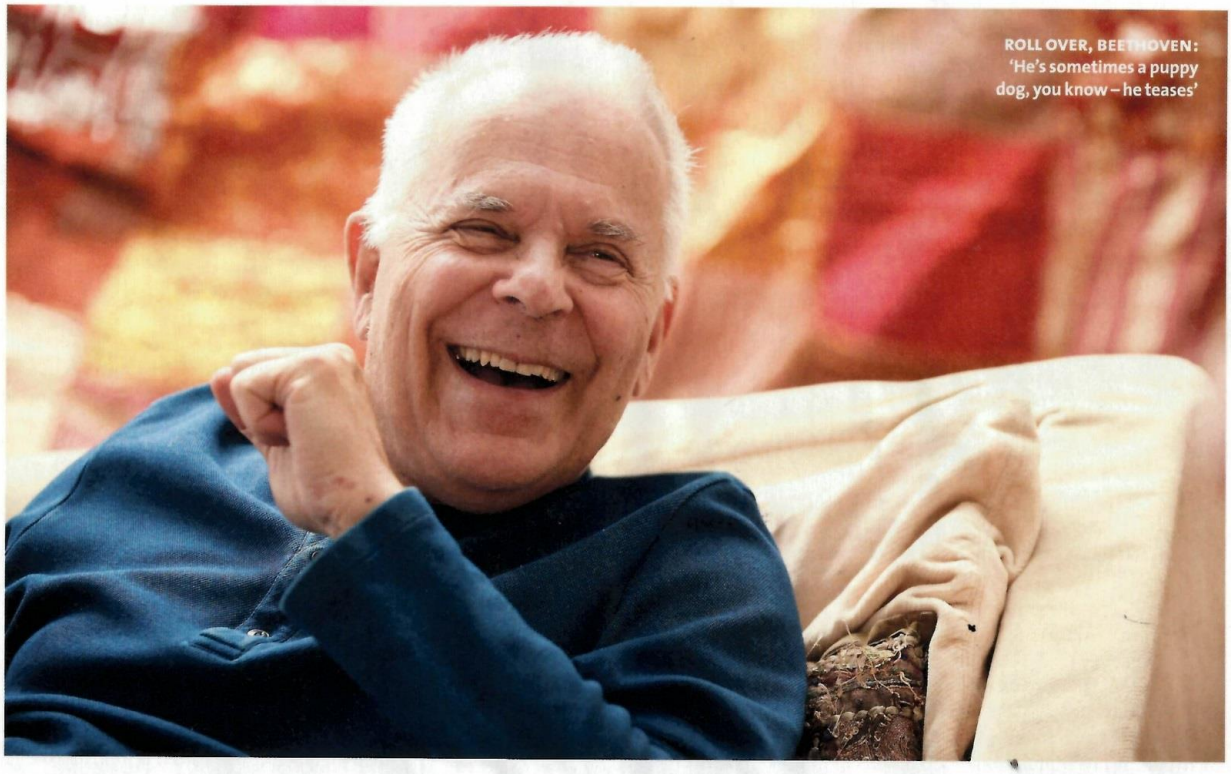


ROLL OVER, BEETHOVEN: 'He's sometimes a puppy dog, you know – he teases'

remarkable career: Beethoven and Brahms, Mozart and Schubert, Bartók.

It is Bartók's Second Concerto, under Colin Davis, of which he says he's most proud among these recordings, and we talk about the extent to which his Slavic roots draw him to the composer. 'I can't tell. But I will say that, apart maybe from Fou Ts'ong, I think I play the Chopin mazurkas with a different feeling from most pianists who have no connection with central Europe.' He would clearly like this to be true. After all, he changed his name to reclaim his Croatian background, eventually dropping Bishop (his mother's name after her remarriage), having spent some years as Bishop-Kovacevich. A Californian by birth and style, he feels deeply European too.

As an adolescent, he was moved most by Chopin, Wagner ('I thought Beethoven was awful!') and, above all, by the Russian Scriabin's exoticism. 'I was too young to know how erotic it was, but I knew it was something of that nature. And the sonorities! Sometimes he's off the wall, you know. Quite mad.'

And as we start to talk about the composers he has studied and played throughout his life, he reveals his fascination for character, and his feeling for music as a never-ending search for an explanation which, however wholeheartedly you try to find it, is always bound to remain elusive.

As for Beethoven, 'What he does that nobody else does in the same way is to be subversive to his own muse. Then he'll take the mickey. It's not out of character for him; it's deep in his own nature. I think he was fundamentally religious, though not obviously in a conventional sense. There was a sense of underlying connections. Take the third period in his work – there's nothing of this in the first or second period. The subtext is: it's all right in the end. There's some destiny that makes it all worthwhile. I feel there's a strong feeling there. There's a radiance in late Mozart – the *Jupiter* Symphony, my God! – and Beethoven also has radiance. Listen to the minuet in the *Diabellis*.'

> 'If there is a god of some kind, we are not on good terms'

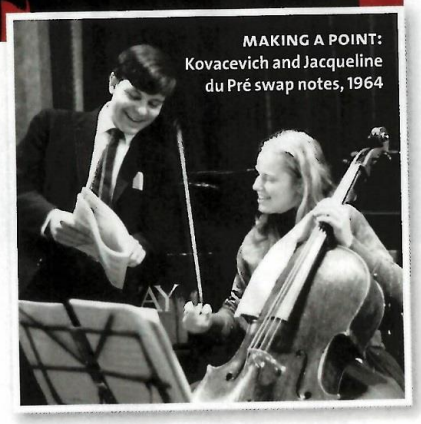
But Schubert is different. 'The quintet is out of this world. But there's no subtext there. And with Brahms, I don't think there's a positive message that I can feel. His main thing is compassion.'

Back to Mozart. 'If you take his third period from K482 – the late E-flat major Concerto – and listen to Symphony No. 39, the interesting thing is that in No. 39 he starts with this descending scale that's like paradise and you don't know why. It's a scale, that's all. But there's something secret, something that can't be revealed. We just don't know how to talk about it. It takes your breath away.'

It's natural to ask, with all this interest in mystery, if his fascination with India, which gripped him before he'd set foot in it, had led him towards meditation. No. And he's not religious ('if there's a god of some kind, I can tell you that we're not on good terms') and he prefers irreverence. He enjoys that in Beethoven ('he's sometimes a puppy dog, you know, he teases you') and although he has no sense of a simple answer in the search for meaning in life, he's moved by the seriousness of the quest, and the passion that it stirs up.

We return to the word which has cropped up a few times in our conversation. 'Radiance. Beethoven hoped that there was maybe a god, although his last words were bleak: "Comedia finita est". You have to remember how much physical pain he had. Terrible stomach pain, and now we'd describe him as borderline alcoholic. But, you know, when Rossini when to visit him he was surprised by two things: how polite he was, and how quietly he spoke. With his deafness you might have expected something else. But you know his love life was a mess. I think most people had a better time ▶

FAMILY GATHERING: with former partner Martha Argerich, daughter Stéphanie and violist Lyda Chen-Argerich in 2012



MAKING A POINT: Kovacevich and Jacqueline du Pré swap notes, 1964

than Beethoven, and I'd say I wouldn't have wanted him to marry my daughter.'

This is all delivered more cheerfully than it might seem. Kovacevich is bubbling with good humour, lots of that irreverence that he loves, and it's the kind of encounter where we're talking one minute about Beethoven's interest in Indian philosophy and then about which Netflix series he watches on his big screen (*Breaking Bad* and *House of Cards*, for the record).

Above all, however, we're talking about composers whom he's known all his life, and about performance. 'In my life experience, Schubert is the only one who scares me when I'm working. As a man, he was I don't know what. When I'm playing the late A major Sonata, I realise that the slow movement is the only written-out nervous breakdown in music. The first time I heard it – Serkin was playing – I thought he had made a slip. It's an astonishing passage. And here's a thought: I think there's an affinity between Schubert and – wait for it – Musorgsky. You can hear the repeated use of *ostinato* in the accompaniment. It's one of the symptoms of madness, a repeated thing like that. And there's something about Schubert's accompaniments that have that in them – think of the middle A minor passage.

'It's an unlikely connection to make. When you say it to some musicians they are shocked, but in an interesting way. The quality of the material is vastly different, but I think it's this quality of taking it on the chin that's the same. You know there's no way out. Mozart is completely different. The late quintets and late concertos have a quality which is radiant.'

He recalls an occasion after a New Year party when some musicians stayed late into the night and, without it being planned, played the Divertimento, K563. 'It was beautiful beyond words, the kind of thing that can happen when no one expects it. No one who heard that will ever forget it. Next time it mightn't happen.'

He recalls the psychiatrist Oliver Sachs, troubled and in pain, going back to what he called 'the music of consolation' and discovering that it didn't work every time. Kovacevich is back to his theme of the power of the unexpected and he tells an anecdote from India. 'I was playing the *Diabelli*s there about three years ago in Mumbai, and they hadn't heard it played live since 1925 – Kempff – because, remember, classical music still isn't that big in India. My experience actually still chokes me up just to remember it. I walked out and I saw the public, and there were so many kids that I thought I had miscalculated. And I said to the kids, "Look, this piece is very long. Don't worry if you find some of this boring, because some of it is boring. Just stay with me."

'What was unbelievable afterwards was that a girl came backstage – she was about ten or 12 – and she wasn't crying, she was absolutely sobbing, out of control. And where would a European or American kid do that? The culture doesn't allow us to be overwhelmed. We're so judgmental. But she was in floods of tears. She'd never heard anything like this before. She was so moved, and so was I.'

I wonder if he thinks that the reason such experiences happen less now is that we've simply got too many recordings around us. Maybe we hear too much. 'Maybe it's too many CDs? Who can tell? but there is a shining that doesn't happen as often as it used to, whatever the reason is. All I know is that when Horowitz walked on the stage to play Tchaikovsky, people hadn't had heard a dozen different pianists playing it. Schnabel didn't have ten different versions of Beethoven's Op. 111 Sonata that people were comparing. Why, I don't know, but I think that nobody plays with the unbelievable passion of Horowitz or Schnabel or Rachmaninov. I don't hear it, and I'm including myself.'

Mentioning Rachmaninov takes him to the Russian's recording of Schumann's *Carnaval*, made in the 1940s: 'It's unsurpassed, even today. Everyone I know who hears it, doesn't know what to say.' His playing? 'Dark and incredibly subtle; the rubato is probably the most beautiful that I know from anybody, because it comes from the music. There is no one else who can slow up like this. Some things have a passion that is just overwhelming. What worries me is that some people may not be able to hear it.' He quotes Blake on the horror of people who don't understand temptation.

Myra Hess, his teacher, knew Rachmaninov and told Kovacevich what it was like to hear him play, and understand his depth. She went to a performance in which he misread a chord – one chord. Backstage, she said, 'Maestro that was wonderful, but you misread a chord.' He bowed and said little. The next day she got the biggest bouquet of flowers she'd ever seen.

'I love that story,' Kovacevich says. And he ends our conversation with another. Hess was playing with Arturo Toscanini, and in the second half of the concert he conducted Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. After the performance, she found him locked in his dressing room. He was unhappy with the performance, and he was shouting, 'I've sinned again the Holy Ghost.' People standing outside his room heard him saying it again and again.

'You see?' says Kovacevich. 'He wasn't really making a religious statement, he was just saying that music is sacred. He was right, of course, about music. I'm no goody goody. But sacred is sacred. And that's it.' ■

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