

Young Pianist Thrust Into Elite Group

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Odd, the pianist **Kirill Gerstein** thought. A music critic from Houston was coming to interview him in Jacksonville, Fla. Mr. Gerstein's manager had arranged the meeting, at the Omni Hotel's J bar, to coincide with a run of concerts last November. Might as well meet the writer, the pianist thought.

But instead of a critic waiting at the bar, it was the man from the Gilmore festival. And in his hand was an envelope proclaiming Mr. Gerstein the latest winner of one of the arts world's great windfalls: the \$300,000 Gilmore Artist Award, given every four years to an unsuspecting pianist.

"I swallowed it," Mr. Gerstein said of the mischievous ruse in an interview in New York on Tuesday. "I was so amazed. I went kind of blank for a minute."

Mr. Gerstein, 30, is the sixth member of an elite and eclectic group of pianists that includes **Ingrid Fliter**, **Piotr Anderszewski** and **Leif Ove Andsnes**. He will receive \$50,000 outright to spend as he wishes and can apply the rest to anything that furthers his career or artistry, subject to the Gilmore festival's approval. He will give a recital at the festival in Kalamazoo, Mich., on May 3.

The award, which will officially be announced on Thursday morning, is music's answer to the MacArthur Foundation "genius" grants. And it is something of an anti-Van Cliburn Competition, a tacit rejection of the hoopla, bloodlust and horse-race quality of the international competition circuit.

It is administered by the Irving S. Gilmore International Keyboard Festival in Kalamazoo. Nominations are solicited; an anonymous committee sifts through commercial and noncommercial recordings, some of them surreptitiously obtained; committee members secretly slip into dozens of

concerts — sometimes keeping to the balcony or hiding their faces with programs — to assess the performers, who are not supposed to know they are under consideration.

Mr. Gerstein, a naturalized American citizen of Russian origin, said he had no immediate plans to spend the money. “I’m looking forward to fantasizing with Dan the things that can be done,” he said, referring to Daniel R. Gustin, the festival’s director and the supposed music critic from Houston.

Mr. Gerstein ran through a few ideas: commissioning a work; carrying out a project that marries piano playing to a visual display or dance element; or combining his roots in jazz with his classical career. Mr. Gerstein also has long-term ambitions to record the music of Busoni, whom he calls the James Joyce of composition for his modernist, magpie tendencies.

Previous winners have used the money to take a sabbatical for practicing, to hire a publicist or commission works and, in almost all cases, to buy a piano. Mr. Gerstein ruled out the last option. He owns five pianos. They are lodged at his family home in Newton, Mass., and his residence in Stuttgart, Germany, where he teaches at the conservatory. “I think I should not be buying one for a while,” he said dryly.

His instruments include a Bechstein with two keyboards, one of 16 made by the company; a Steinway B grand; an 1899 Blüthner; and an 1848 Pleyel, its original parts intact, that is identical to Chopin’s favorite piano. Of the piano in general, he said: “At times it’s your friend. At times it’s an all-consuming monster that’s about to devour you.”

Mr. Gerstein has thinning hair and an overbite that gives him a boyish air. He ponders the effect of recordings on listeners’ ears and finds freshness in sticking to the score and stripping away performing tradition (a word he does not like). “It can sound shockingly original if you just follow what’s written there,” he said. He also does not like the word career. “I prefer life in music,” he said.

Mr. Gerstein was born in Voronezh, in southern Russia, to a mathematician father and music-teaching mother. His parents, unusually for the time and place, had a large jazz collection that absorbed Mr. Gerstein. From the time of his earliest memory he studied musicianship

and piano fitfully, until he became serious about the instrument at 10, at a specialized music school. At 11 he won a piano competition in Poland, where he encountered live jazz musicians for the first time.

He later spent two summers there at a jazz seminar. "This was like a revolution," he said. At a jazz festival in St. Petersburg, Russia, Mr. Gerstein encountered Gary Burton, a vibraphonist and teacher at the Berklee College of Music in Boston, who eventually arranged for him to attend. At only 14, and without a high school diploma, Mr. Gerstein moved to Boston with his mother to study jazz at Berklee.

Soon, he said, he began to feel a little "overfed" with jazz and turned to classical music, partly influenced by an acquaintanceship with Ralph Gomberg, the former principal oboist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Looking back, Mr. Gerstein explained his conversion as the "radical position of a 16-year-old." He said it seemed more interesting "to be busy with the great creations of the great minds" rather than with whatever he could produce as an improviser.