

Kirill Gerstein performing Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with the New York Philharmonic at Avery Fisher Hall.

"A Fresh Take Adds a Jolt to a Standard"



By **Anthony TOMMASINI -- NEW YORK TIMES**

Published: June 29, 2011

The Russian-born pianist **Kirill GERSTEIN**, in his Philharmonic debut, played a brilliant, perceptive and stunningly fresh account of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. At 31 Mr. Gerstein is emerging as one of the most respected pianists of his generation. In 2010 he became the sixth winner of the distinguished Gilmore Artist Award. Every four years the prize is bestowed as a surprise upon a pianist who has been observed in performance over an extended period by a roster of eminent judges.

One of the best recordings of 2010 was Mr. Gerstein's recital on the Myrios label that included works by Schumann, Liszt and Oliver Knussen. Though his artistry is fortified by comprehensive technique, he is no flashy virtuoso. Those in the audience on Tuesday accustomed to hearing the Tchaikovsky as a scintillating showpiece may have had to adjust to Mr. Gerstein's probing approach. I was with him from the first moments of the first movement. When the orchestra broke into the surging main theme, Mr. Gerstein played the series of thick, rising chords not just as an accompaniment, but as another musical element. The chords were shaped into gestures and phrases, and voiced with telling emphasis to bring out harmonies intricacies.

Throughout the first movement you never felt, as you often do in other performances, that the pianist was simply displaying how fast he could dispatch a cascade of double octaves or a burst of dizzying passagework. Every element of the piano part was organic and musical. He teased out the Schumanesque richness and contrapuntal details of the cadenza so intriguingly that you forgot how technically daunting it is.

The opening of the second movement was graceful and direct. Then, in the crazed scherzolike middle section, Mr. Gerstein dashed off the spiraling, hyper-fast runs with a fluidity that attested to his background as a jazz pianist. He taught himself jazz as a boy in Russia, then at 14 entered the Berklee College of Music in Boston to study jazz. Classical music eventually won out.

He and Mr. Tovey, the music director of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, took a bracing tempo in the finale, which Mr. Gerstein played with punchy rhythmic accents and the snappy brio of a slightly demonic dance. (...)