

## Kirill Gerstein

MUSIC REVIEW

# Dancing Shoes Are Optional

## Kirill Gerstein Makes Solo Piano Debut at 92nd Street Y

By ZACHARY WOOLFE **The New York Times**

Encores at recitals tend to display an artist's virtuosity and range; it is rare that they can stand as symbols of the concerts they cap. But when the pianist Kirill Gerstein played a dazzling, slippery *étude* arrangement (by Earl Wild) of the Gershwins' "I Got Rhythm" at the end of his exhilarating solo debut at the 92nd Street Y on Saturday, it neatly encapsulated what he had been doing so excellently all evening.

Throughout a program that revolved around the theme of dance, Mr. Gerstein was never just entertaining. Dance, in his telling, is not about smooth grace or merely keeping time but about uncertainty and destabilization, a seductive uneasiness. The beat was never quite regular in his eclectic, time-traveling mix of gavottes, waltzes, boleros and gigue. Mr. Gerstein was always ready with a slight acceleration, a hairsbreadth rubato or a sudden, subtle shift of tone to keep you on your toes.

The recital was bookended by two capacious suites: Bach's English Suite No. 6 in D minor (BWV 811) and Schumann's "Carnaval," a collection of 22 shape-shifting miniatures. While there is much to love about Mr. Gerstein's assured, warm, generous playing — which is clean and clear but never arid or dull — his command of color was particularly astonishing on Saturday. In the Bach he played the Sarabande with quietly smoky tone and the second Gavotte with an unearthly airiness. There was a jittery lightness to the movements in the Schumann inspired by *commedia dell'arte* characters and, in the final "March of the Davidsbündler Against the Philistines," a richness that didn't stint the winking humor of the music's grandeur.

Mr. Gerstein has made a calling card of Oliver Knussen's superb 2010 piece "Ophelia's Last Dance," which was composed for him. In it, darkness, dissonance and freezing high notes creep into the childlike idyll of the opening. The effect is one of austere sophistication; Mr. Gerstein's performance here was even wider in sound and scope than in his excellent recording (on Myrios Classics).

The other works were also dances with sliding moods and unexpected rhythmic and harmonic shifts. (Or in the case of Busoni's "Gigue, Bolero and Variations: Studies After Mozart," all of the above.) The angular passages of Weber's "Invitation to the Dance" and the lush exuberance of Liszt's "Valse Caprice" No. 6, one of nine "Viennese Evenings" (waltzes based on melodies by Schubert), had the same perfectly calibrated eloquence as the rest of Mr. Gerstein's remarkable evening.

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