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Jerome Rose – a Man with a Pianistic Vision

For 15 years now, Jerome Rose's piano recital has opened the annual International Keyboard Institute and Festival (IKIF), which he founded in 1999. Taking place at Mannes College of Music, one of Rose's alma maters, the intensive, two week-long celebration of the piano features lectures, master classes, and faculty recitals, as well as two guest artist performance series. That's a lot of piano – even for New York City. The festival shines by its musical diversity and vast variety of different approaches to the instrument, and so promotes an open-minded and low-key atmosphere. It also sponsors a competition whose winner is honored with the Dorothy MacKenzie Competition prize (\$10,000) and a recital at the next festival (this year's first place prize winner was Kho Woon Kim). "With the sheer volume in organizational tasks, such an undertaking needs to be driven by two equally important entities: a fountainhead that creates the concept, and the person who executes the event," says Rose, whose wife, Julie Kedersha, serves as the festival's executive director.

During each of his opening concerts, which have been recorded by WFMT Chicago and NPR for worldwide radio broadcasts, Rose immerses himself in a selection of works by a single composer. He records this repertoire on his own Medici Classics label at Yamaha's Artists Services New York, which for seven years has featured a compilation of DVDs that reflect his concert programs and the composers he features in the "Jerome Rose plays: [featured composer] live in concert." This year's selection is devoted to Beethoven sonatas. In addition to his personable, verbal introduction on the DVD, in which he explains his own place within the pianistic tradition, he delivers a "Waldstein" live in concert that attests to his pianistic patina, gained through mature musicianship and fervent radiance at the piano.

A conversation with the now seventy-five year-old entrepreneurial pianist and educator reveals a consuming, highly energetic man with a vision that demands relentless pursuit, no matter how much effort, or how high the stakes.

If it is true that pianists "play who they are," which is Rose's famous maxim, his reputation as "one of the last true romantics" fits the depiction perfectly. Rose understands romanticism as "playing on the edge...as if your life depends on it."

'The Romantics' also happens to be the title of London's First International Festival of the Romantic Movement in the Arts at London's Royal Festival Hall in 1981, under Rose's artistic direction and the auspices of H.R.H. Princess Alexandra. Combining scholarship and the performing arts, Rose was an early adapter to interdisciplinary arts festivals. An animated raconteur, he recalls how he managed to delve into this extraordinary undertaking: "I was challenged by the fact that I was told it could not be done," says Rose, who refused to give up on his vision of bringing a broader perspective to the close connection he felt for the composers whose art he had studied and lived with intensely throughout his pianistic career.

While curating the festival, Rose never abandoned his attempts to convince the director of the UK's Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges, James Platt, of his concept. Finally, Platt responded to Rose's vision, ultimately even becoming the festival's chairman. "In my heart I knew it could be done" he says about his decision to support the pianist's project. What also helped to make it happen was that Rose had come prepared with an airtight budget that did not leave any wiggle room. He wanted to avoid repeating the mistakes he had made pursuing another great vision of his almost a decade earlier: In 1973, Rose had initiated a concept for a national festival of American symphony orchestras for international broadcast. With Emmy award-winning producer Curtis Davis and Channel 13 interested, Rose had already received acceptance letters from major symphony orchestras, yet finally saw his high-flying proposal shattered by politics and conflicting interests. "Who was I to tell everyone what to do?" he asks with a pinch of irony.

Emerging almost unfazed by this experience and still feeling the need to present music culture in an interrelated manner, he remained true to his powerful convictions. "You realize that all great composers were generally cultured individuals; it just transcends, being a pianist," he says, and includes his own life experience in this statement. Undeterred, Rose went on to curate the Schubert and Brahms Festival at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and a comprehensive Liszt celebration in 1986. Rose readily acknowledges that it was Marlboro Music and its annual Vermont-based festival, which is devoted to artistic excellence, and development of new talent that gave him a true understanding of what music can do. Marlboro pioneered the concept of having master artists play together with exceptional young professionals. Says Rose: "My whole view of what it is to be an artist and a musician, a spokesman for the arts, was transformed when I came to Marlboro in 1956, under Rudolf Serkin and Leonard Shure. I have never been exposed to a richer way of inspiration."

It is exactly this idea of learning and performing together that Rose has always intended to embed into his lifelong pianistic career. The high standard of musicianship and the diverse and immensely cultured personalities of his fellow artists at Marlboro made Rose want to carry the flame: "Being placed in a setting with many of the greatest talents of our time – James Levine, Van Cliburn, Claude Frank, Alexander Schneider of the Budapest Quartet, and so many others ... and then the production of 'Cosi fan Tutte' in the cafeteria ... the camaraderie ... it was exhilarating," he recalls. It was at Marlboro where he had the cathartic experience of how the love for music can become eternally

transcendent, something he also aspired to impart onto the younger generation. Beyond the cultural impact of his festivals, Rose certainly achieved this through his influence as a pedagogue.

Among the students the 1961 International Busoni Competition Gold Medalist ever took on is Polish pianist Magdalena Stern-Baczeswska who he first met at a 1996 master class in Warsaw. Stern-Baczeswska describes Rose as an invaluable mentor and father figure: “The moments spent with Mr. Rose at the piano are among my most vivid memories. Above all he has helped me find my identity as an artist, and expanded my personality and emotional range.”

And about his methodology as a teacher she says: “No two lessons were the same; Mr. Rose always knew what was on our minds, just by listening how we played. Sometimes a long discussion on a seemingly unrelated theme was the best approach; another time he would sit at the piano and break into a passage without saying a word. It was then when I understood another message of his: ‘the music will be only as important to your audience as it is to you.’”

She also comments on Jerome Rose, the performer: “When he played, music was the only thing on earth that seemed to truly matter. For a man who can easily intimidate, Mr. Rose has been always humble when it comes to music. Once, before his Salle Cortot debut in Paris, he asked me into the hall for his dress rehearsal and made it my task to let him know when he was rushing. The master became the student when the music required it.”

Stern-Baczeswska concludes: “There are many pianists whose fingers never slip, and whose memory never fails. Yet one leaves the concert hall with a feeling of void. It is in Mr. Rose’s recitals when unforgettable moments take place ... he plays who he is.” The Iowa-born and San Francisco-raised Rose began his international career in his early twenties. By the time his career was abruptly interrupted by the U.S. military draft during the missile crisis in October 1962, he had already performed in many major concert halls around the world. Thanks to an educational deferment he became an artist-in-residence at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, which gave him limited travel opportunities to perform and give master classes for three weeks at a time. Rose still contemplates his decision to opt out of an intense touring and concertizing career: “I asked myself many times if I sold out for security or if I was really smart. I got married and had four children and a university position with all the benefits of an institution. Everyone who has performed realizes that we are all victims of our own standards, and of the public’s and our own expectations. I did not like the insecurities of a performance career, and the dependency on critics, managers, and conductors.” But perhaps he’s too much of a people’s person to solely contribute as a performer to classical music. “It is my job to know a lot of people,” he says. And he has certainly touched a lot of people’s lives during his long and distinguished career. He has also inspired countless others with the activism and boundless enthusiasm he brings to music, both through his presentations and his performances.

One such person is New York's Yamaha Artist Services director Bonnie Barret: "He is the reason I came to Yamaha," she says. Having previously been involved with Steinway and later, with an artist management business, Barret attended Rose's Schubert recital at IKIF, at which he played on a Yamaha CFX that had just come onto the market. "There was a brochure on each seat and I got curious. It prompted me to do some research about the new product and I contacted Yamaha to offer my services." Beyond that, she was impressed by Rose's great projection. For his DVD recordings at Yamaha Artists Services since 2007, Rose used both the predecessor of the Yamaha CFX, the Yamaha CF3, and the CFX, thus adding a visual connection to his already existing catalogue of classical repertoire recorded for Monarch Classics, Sony, Newport Classics and Vox on CD. His Liszt recordings for Vox were awarded the Grand Prix du Disque. "I am concerned with the tradition of the great masters and what these performances represent", Rose says. "I want to put on record what I really believe in." Which might be why Jerome Rose has not only prevailed in his creative approach towards classical music in the widest sense, but he himself has transcended the expected model for success at the piano.