
Robert Levin

Selected Reviews

Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3 Scottish Chamber Orchestra (November 2017)

"Playing along quietly in the normally orchestra-only exposition, adding in his own improvised lead-ins and interruptions, pedalling freely, stretching rhythms and inserting impromptu melodic embellishments, he treated what we normally hear as nothing more than the Concerto's bare bones, a framework for spontaneous, in-the-moment creation – all backed up by serious historical scholarship, of course. The result was edge-of-your-seat stuff, sometimes raising a smile, often raising eyebrows, but carried through with utter conviction and brilliant, sometimes rather hard-edged clarity. Most captivating, though, was the breathtaking immediacy of Levin's account, and its disarming honesty – maybe this'll work, maybe not, he seemed to say, but we'll do it anyway." – **David Kettle, *The Scotsman* *******

"Robert Levin, who has just celebrated his 70th birthday, brought his renowned erudition to the solo part, as well as the flair of his own improvised cadenzas, always staying clearly within the embrace of Beethoven's own themes." – **Keith Bruce, *The Herald* *******

Alte Oper Recital Mozart Saal, Frankfurt (May 2017)

"Erfolgreich Musik machen und erfolgreich über sie reden können wenige. Ein solcher Universalkünstler, bekannt auch als Vollender berühmter Fragmente wie etwa Mozarts Requiem, ist der Pianist Robert Levin." – **Gerhard Schroth, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung***

Hilary Hahn Recitals European and US Tour (March 2017)

"A Mozart sonata, K. 481, followed. Again it was Levin whose dynamism collared our ears... it was clear that our musicians were enjoying a conversation.

...Levin's solo turn followed in Hans Peter Türk's *Träume*, another welcome UK premiere. Its angular opening line suggested an academic fugue was coming. Yet bell sounds and free-flowing fingers soon whisked us into a reflective world much more suited to the music's purpose as a memorial for the composer's late wife.

The final proof of Hahn's rebirth came in Schubert's Rondo, D. 895. For thrust and snap she and Levin were now equal, prancing together, jubilant in attack. The applause rang out; the encores arrived, topped off by Lili Boulanger's *Cortège* and *Nocturne*, easing us beautifully into the night. This was a very enjoyable second half." – **Geoff Brown, *The Times* *******

"Levin was a full partner, with Hahn a lyrical presence (the slow movement [of the Kreutzer Sonata] seemed downright magical)." – **Olin Chism, *Fort Worth Star Telegram***

"Their joint recital Saturday night at Jordan Hall as part of the Celebrity Series brought the best of both worlds... Levin brought dexterous technique and fine touch to both works. In the third movement of the Bach sonata, which featured Levin by himself, his phrases swirled elegantly in a singing, almost fruity tone..."

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Many of the Mozart's violin sonatas are juvenilia, but K. 481 is a mature work rich in flowering melody. In Saturday's performance, the first movement had moments of drama, with Hahn and Levin traversing both the delicate and dark themes with finesse. Levin was the focus of the second movement as he conjured soft phrases with clean, pure tone.

Long and rapturous applause brought Hahn and Levin back to the stage for three encores. These short works revealed yet again that Hahn and Levin are a duo of rare and sensitive musicality." – **Aaron Keebaugh, *Boston Classical Review***

"Mozart's Sonata in E-Flat Major was outstanding. A Mozart scholar and expert improviser in the Classical style, Levin played with a tender sort of assertiveness. Clear, connected phrases flowed like a transparent sheet of water blooming from a fountain... Three encores followed... After each, Hahn and Levin bowed to each other, and then to the audience, standing together as equals." – **Zoë Madonna, *The Boston Globe***

Hilary Hahn Recitals US Tour (October 2016)

"In Mozart's Sonata in E-flat Major, K. 481, Levin provided a specialist's variety of articulation, which enlivened the piece considerably. Levin was a consummate accompanist, never overwhelming Hahn's solo lines or forcing her to make herself heard. She sounded, as a result, completely at ease throughout the evening. The slow movement had a beautiful nonchalance, and the concluding theme poked along amiably, reflecting an admirable decision not to go for speed only for the sake of speed.

Schubert's *Rondo Brilliant* in B-flat Major, D. 895, gave both musicians the chance to display their virtuoso credentials. Hahn brought a more bravura tone, after seeming to hold back much of the evening, and Levin's hands drew forth more symphonic boldness from the Steinway.

The most exciting new music of the evening came from Levin alone, who performed *Träume* from 2012, a solo piece written for him by Hans Peter Türk. Written in memory of the composer's late wife, it attempts to set to music the dreams his wife recorded in the final weeks of her struggle with cancer. Textures varied from the monophonic opening, in which a sighing minor third was prevalent, through a three-part arrangement decorated by right-hand stardust, to a section that called on Levin's improvisatory talent. Here was a piece worth listening to many more times." – **Charles T. Downey, *Washington Classical Review***

"The Hahn-Levin team developed a full head of steam, burning through Schubert's Rondo in B Minor, D. 895, with forceful, even rollicking rhythmic momentum." – **Richard S. Ginell, *The Los Angeles Times***

"All this new work, bracing but never abrasive, was beautifully balanced by three masterworks from the canon: Bach's Sonata No. 6 in G, BWV 1019; Mozart's Sonata in E-flat, K. 481; and Schubert's Rondo in B minor, D. 895. The Bach and the Mozart are true duets, in which the piano and violin have equal roles, and Levin made an arresting partner. Both players sounded so spontaneous that it seemed miraculous they were so perfectly coordinated. The Bach was as fluid and swift as rushing water, and the Mozart sounded as contemporary as the Abril." – **Anne Midgette, *The Washington Post***

"An ebullient reading of the Schubert Rondo in B Minor (D.895) found Hahn and Levin closing the program in complete accord." – **Melinda Bargreen, *The Seattle Times***

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Beethoven Piano Concerto No. 3 Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra (October 2016)

"Levin's solo work in the concerto was marked not only by nimble technique and expressive clarity, but by the deep knowledge of the period that gives his every performance such a sense of linguistic mastery. At the most obvious level, that enables him to improvise his own cadenzas — the showy, unaccompanied flourishes that come right before the conclusion of nearly every movement — just as Beethoven and his contemporaries would have done, and to do so firmly within the bounds of Beethoven's musical grammar and vocabulary.

Beyond that, though, there was a combination of fluency and definition to Levin's playing that made each individual passage sound richly dramatic. The opening movement was no less tumultuous for being delivered with the slender sonority of a fortepiano; the hushed opening strains of the slow movement sounded, if anything, even more fantastical and affecting. And if the finale began in a somewhat clunky fashion, it emerged bright and gleaming into the light of the concluding Presto section." — **Joshua Kosman, *San Francisco Gate***

Beethoven Cello Sonatas with fortepiano (Isserlis) Edinburgh International Festival (August 2016)

"The cellist Steven Isserlis has found his perfect kindred spirit in the scholarly keyboard player Robert Levin... Isserlis's supple, sinuous timbre seems ideally complemented by Levin's instrument, a copy of a Beethoven-era fortepiano that sounds so much less cloggy and heavy-booted than a modern Steinway. Suddenly, the balances work... this exuberant cycle is shaping up to be one of the musical highlights of the Edinburgh Festival." — **Richard Morrison, *The Times* *******

"LORD, what a performance from cellist Steven Isserlis and fortepianist Robert Levin of Beethoven's music for cello and piano... The stylistic integrity between Isserlis' expressive playing, whether light or robust, and Levin's busy, but clatter-free, virtuosity on his fortepiano was seamless." — **Michael Tumelty, *The Herald* *******

Stuttgart Radio Orchestra BBC Proms (July 2016)

"For Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 4 the soloist, Robert Levin, sat with his back to the audience, with the players virtually surrounding him, and Norrington conducting at the other end of the piano. As you might expect, this produced a real chamber music rapport and intimacy." — **Richard Morrison, *The Times* *******

"Robert Levin, a man who likes to throw caution to the winds, and reinvent classical concertos on the spot. He joined in the orchestral introduction, where most pianists sit mutely waiting for the solo part Beethoven wrote for them, and added little flourishes and introductions here and there.

The really thrilling bit came in the cadenzas, the point where the soloist is supposed to show off. Most pianists make use of Beethoven's written-out cadenzas; Levin made up his own, full of thunderous arpeggios and cliff-hanging high trills. Would Sir Roger and the orchestra know when they were coming to an end? Would Robert Levin himself know? Fortunately it all came out right in the end... this Prom was a lesson in how familiar things can be made exciting and risky, as if they were created yesterday... to witness it was riveting." — **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* *******

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Beethoven Cello Sonatas with fortepiano (Isserlis) Isabella Stewarts Gardner Museum, Boston (October 2015)

"Sunday's first installment of this two-part traversal was an inspired showing, an afternoon of chamber music-making at its best, by turns conversational, virtuosic, and poetically charged... Shiny-edged and immaculate performances of this repertoire are not hard to come by. These artists offered the rarer gift of insight." – **Jeremy Eichler, *Boston Globe***

Academy of Ancient Music Barbican Centre (February 2015)

"He managed the piano's light exchanges with the orchestra beautifully, and found the all the depth and emotion of this, the longest of Mozart's concertos [Piano Concerto No. 25 in C major]. This performance became not about the period instruments themselves, but about what the instruments revealed in the music." – **John Allison, *The Telegraph* *******

Beethoven Cello Sonatas with fortepiano (Isserlis) Hyperion (CDA67981/2)

"Levin supplies his own muscular music-making. The fortepiano's sound may lack depth but it certainly boasts sharp teeth. There's hushed delicacy too... Chandos's sound, as usual, is immaculate. More Beethoven, please." – **Geoff Brown, *The Times* *******

"This set contains some of the finest Beethoven performances you are likely to hear... The ensemble with Robert Levin is dynamic, intimate, often electric. There's a sense of two powerful minds intensely engaged in Beethoven's dialogue. At best it's unbeatable... The fortepiano comes into its own in the delightful sets of Magic Flute Variations... There isn't a better version with fortepiano." – **Helen Wallace, *BBC Music Magazine* *******

"Isserlis had the theme but Levin is no mere accompanist, fastidious in his role as a partner yet one who never overwhelms the cello... Theirs is a shared experience of audacity and spirituality. Small changes in recorded levels plus a few sniffs are insignificant. They don't retract from the riches born of scant regard for the superficiality of toeing conventional lines or selecting safe options, shared with listeners in even the less mighty works, the variations and Horn Sonata. This is Beethoven fleshed out by Levin and Isserlis – and anodyne he ain't here". – **Nalen Anthony, *Gramophone Mazine – Recording of the Month***

"Levin's pianoforte is an ideal match, with a sinuous, intimate sound well captured by Hyperion's microphones. Recommended." – **Guy Weatherall, *Classical Music Magazine* *******

"Levin is absolutely compelling here, characterful playing which does not impinge upon the musical development, and – allied to Isserlis's knowing partnership – the music is revealed as being amongst the greatest of the relatively youthful composer's output. The recorded quality and instrumental balance are first-class, as we have invariably come to expect from this company." – **Robert Matthew-Walker, *International Record Review (IRR Outstanding)***

"Isserlis, on a gut-strung 1726 Stradivari, joins fortepianist Robert Levin to explore the different balance and effects achieved with a keyboard instrument from Beethoven's day. The result is not dry academic authenticity, but a wealth of unexpected

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treasures and new insights, enlivened by the passionate joy of their music making." – **Janet Banks, *The Strad***

"Their performances are as fresh in manner as a voyage of discovery, and always notable for the transparency of balance between the instruments." – **Michael Dervan, *The Irish Times* *******

Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment Queen Elizabeth Hall (November 2013)

"Levin and Chuang brought an admirable sense of cohesion to Schubert's Fantasy in F minor, joining the disparate sections skilfully." - **George Hall, *The Guardian* *****

"All these distractions were banished in Schubert's great F minor Fantasy for piano duet, where both pianists were seated at the same piano. In the mysterious dusky colours of the first movement's central section, and the tender give and take of the slow movement, they were absolutely as one. Sound and sense came satisfyingly together." - **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* *******

"He (Levin) provided the electric charge, ensuring that even subsidiary ideas never lost their shine in the glorious garrulousness of the 15-year-old Mendelssohn's miracle of invention." - **Hilary Finch, *The Times* *******

"We got a fine sense of complicity between soloists and orchestra, because their respective timbres were so evenly balanced. The pair then returned to give a beautifully-calibrated account of Schubert's majestic "Fantasy in F minor"" - **Michael Church, *The Independent* *******

"The main appeal is the vigorous and acrobatic piano scoring, here played by Ya-Fei Chuang and Robert Levin on two forte-pianos, which produced a very bright, emphatic sound." - ***The Bristol Post***

Reicha / Mozart / Schubert Scottish Chamber Orchestra (May 2013)

"I know from experience the SCO would rather be judged from what they do than by what they say. They have told me this. But sometimes I wish they would shout a bit more about what they've got. Perhaps people might be more curious and interested than they think. Friday night's concert with pianist/director Robert Levin, the closing concert of the current SCO season, was reasonably attended, but should have been a sell-out.

Levin is an astounding communicator. Sometimes he says a lot; sometimes very little. But what he does and says is gold dust. Bluntly, what he and the SCO did on Friday night was staggering in its revelatory qualities. He interrupted his blinding performance of Mozart's D major piano concerto, K 451, one of the lesser-known concertos, by announcing that the showcase cadenzas, which he improvised, were not so much a display of how fast the soloist could play, as how fast he could think: an immensely interesting comment, reflecting clearly Levin's philosophy, attitude and, indeed, the amazing rapport between him and the SCO, as evidenced in the heart-stopping performance of the concerto.

But that wasn't the half of it, as Levin and the SCO demonstrated in a mind-blowing performance of Anton Reicha's conspicuously complex Overture In D major, a study in 5/4 time that, at its most elusive and tricky, makes Holst's Mars from The Planets Suite seem routine and symmetrical, and in a thrilling account of Schubert's Second Symphony which suggested a masterpiece in embryo. This team is a real force on the Scottish music scene." – **Michael Tumelty, *The Herald* *******

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"You can always rely on the American pianist, conductor and academic Robert Levin to come up with something out of the ordinary. Not just in the way he performs Mozart, but in the repertoire he digs up to go with it.

Last night's opener from the SCO was a case in point – an Overture in D by the hugely eccentric Anton Reicha, better known as a friend of Beethoven and teacher of Berlioz than as a composer in his own right. Yet everything about this piece, and of Levin's high-octane reading of it, pointed to an individual and progressive voice. Who else in Beethoven's day would have risked a 5-in-the-bar romp like this and get away with it. Fun and frolics all the way with Levin gouging out its inner soul with incisive clarity.

Then to Mozart, with Levin himself at the piano, adding lightning sparks to his performance of the Piano Concerto in D, K451 by improvising its cadenzas on the spot. It's an approach that adds palpable risk, in which you find yourself willing him to make all the right harmonic twists and turns, and somehow to knit together the re-entry of the orchestra. He did, of course.

Visceral insight and energy lit every inch of Schubert's Symphony No 2, and with it a flamboyant end to a boisterous concert and the main SCO season." – **Kenneth Walton, *The Scotsman* ******

"All the pieces were upbeat, youthful works. The personality of the guest piano/conductor Robert Levin mirrored the choice of music with his energetic style, making most of the humorous possibilities of the three pieces.

As Levin explained before he began, although Mozart wrote cadenzas for the concerto he was going to play his own, improvised version of the cadenzas and also he was going to be improvising various notes throughout. An extremely accomplished pianist, he was thoroughly enjoying himself laughing and smiling throughout – it was indeed uplifting." – **Barbara Bryan, *The Edinburgh Guide***

Beethoven Cello Sonatas with Steven Isserlis, San Francisco

"The performance was inspired by rare sensitivity, exacting musicianship and a wonderfully receptive audience for them... Mr. Levin revealed a comprehensive plan of the music. The gradual tendencies at cadences were moving, and one gathers that every key was weighed and put in its place following an arduous study of the score. Such musicianship and exquisite refinement is a rarity, as is the 1822 Anton Walter fortepiano on which Mr. Levin played. His arpeggios were crystalline, and in Op. 5 No. 2, his voiced chords and the subtlety of their execution were the subject of our fascination. Contrasts in mood were seamless and the fortepiano supported the clarity of sound, which one believes added to the emotional experience of the sonatas." – **Elijah Ho, *The Examiner***

"Still, what mattered most last night was the execution of this "historical sampling" of Beethoven's output. Isserlis and Levin have been performing this repertoire for some time, and they work very well together as a team. If there were undercurrents of competition in Beethoven's original conceptions, they knew how to acknowledge that competitive spirit without succumbing to it. Most important, however, was their command of their "historically informed" instruments, fortepiano and gut-stringed cello. This was a performance in which we on audience side could thoroughly relish the expressiveness of Beethoven's use of pianissimo dynamics, that hushed quality through which he could bring suspense to a phrase or close off an entire composition in a gesture of thoroughly serene quietude...Taken as a whole, last night's recital offered a side of Beethoven that only rarely emerges in concert performances, both for its historical perspective and particularly for his sensitivity to the dynamics of the instruments of his day; and Isserlis and Levin left one with a yearning to encounter such a perspective of the composer more often." – **Stephen Smoliar, *The Examiner***

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Beethoven Cello Sonatas with Steven Isserlis, 92nd Street Y, New York City

"Not surprising given their experience together and their continuing partnership, Mr. Isserlis and Mr. Levin proved kindred spirits, each matching the other's phrases in temperament and dynamics, right down to the quietest turn of phrase. But what was most impressive — and Beethovenian — was the power of their climaxes, especially in the A major.

Even to a fan of early instruments who has never entirely warmed to the fortepiano, the balance between instruments here quickly came to feel just right. And that was especially true in loud outbursts, where the performers were able to match not only dynamic levels but also energy levels.

It is one thing on a modern piano to choose a loud dynamic more or less arbitrarily to match the energy of the cello playing full out. It is something altogether different when the fortepiano also has to play full out to match the cello's output. These players, pushing each other to the limit, achieved a gripping excitement seldom heard in these works from the combination of cello and modern piano." - **James R. Oestreich, *The New York Times***

Beethoven Triple Concerto, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Queen Elizabeth Hall

"Beethoven's concerto is unusual in assembling the three players making up a regular piano trio into a small but highly co-ordinated unit. Here, each soloist gave leads to the other players, with delightfully detailed results" - **George Hall, *The Guardian*** [****]

"the broad grin and mercurial fingers of Robert Levin at the fortepiano" – **Hilary Finch, *The Times***

"An extraordinary display of talent took place as Faust, Isserlis and Robert Levin took to the stage as soloists for the Beethoven *Triple Concerto*...With such a fantastic line up of soloists, it was always going to be a fantastic rendition. Robert Levin joined Isserlis and Faust as the third soloist, playing on a traditional pianoforte...The interaction and chemistry between the musicians on stage was captivating to watch, particularly in the playful Rondo middle movement. Big chords were met with an arm in the air from Robert Levin behind his music. A point in the last movement where the piano rumbled with some unusually low trills added to the excitement of the piece." - **Alexandra Hamilton-Ayres, *BachTrack.com***

"For anyone who regards Beethoven's Triple Concerto as an unloved half-sibling of the piano concertos, respected for its intimacy and lyricism but thought lacking in dramatic excitement, this vivid account will have been a revelation. Nominally directed by Robert Levin, the performance bristled with stirring passion framing the magnetic synchronicity and honeyed tones of Faust and Isserlis...it was a terrific performance, both beautiful and thrilling, and left in no doubt that this is a great work." - **Graham Rogers, *ClassicalSource.com***

Beethoven Cello Sonatas with Steven Isserlis, Queen Elizabeth Hall

"the fortepiano ensures an even fresher sense of discovery to his cello odyssey. The drier sound certainly changes the balance – no problems of the modern piano overwhelming the cello here – but it also generates a soundworld that is simultaneously more intimate and more hair-raising than the traditional combination of cello and grand piano, and one which, especially in the two late sonatas, stretches the instruments to their limits.

The second concert began securely in the 18th century, with a graceful account of the Variations on the Bei Männern duet from

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the Magic Flute. Then came the second of the two early sonatas, in the Mozartian key of G minor, also from 1796, with a daringly extended but perfectly executed transition from the introspective adagio into the vigorous allegro. With the two late sonatas Op 102, though, the contrasts between whispered introspection and explosive resolve are even more dramatic, and more fully realised. Isserlis and Levin rose compellingly to the occasion, with the cello producing exquisite tone in the extended slow movement of the D Major Final Sonata, and crunching into a closing fugue that combined wildness and discipline, and felt as if it ended only because Beethoven seemed to have reached the frontiers of the possible." - **Martin Kettle, *The Guardian* [****]**

Scottish Chamber Orchestra

"Nobody could accuse Robert Levin of toeing the party line. The American pianist, musicologist and conductor performed a version of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra that, I can assure you, will never have been heard before.

It was, in some senses, outrageous – but in a stimulating way. That's mainly because Levin chooses, as he himself announced, to throw caution to the wind by playing cadenzas that are not only improvised on the spot, but inserted at points in the concerto you wouldn't expect it. "When the orchestra stops, fasten your seat belts," declared the audacious eccentric.

Whatever the oddities and absurdities – the knife-edge harmonic brinksmanship of the cadenzas, or the surreal pedalling with which Levin allowed the opening theme of the Largo to fuse like an impressionistic cluster – this was riveting stuff. We heard a safe old favourite turned on its head and given a fresh lick of paint.

And we saw a lid-less piano turned around so that the pianist – Levin both directed and played – was facing the audience, surrounded by the orchestra. It's the way Beethoven would have done it, he said, and it was an astonishing revelation to hear the piano's amplified presence as a result.

Elsewhere in this absorbing concert, the animated Levin directed Mozart's nimble Divertimento in F and Schubert's charismatic Third Symphony. These performances were full of impeccable detail, and more eccentricity, such as the Trio partnering Schubert's Minuet, delivered with all the whimsical spontaneity of a flamboyant party piece for oboe and bassoon.

Never a dull moment." - **Kenneth Walton, *The Scotsman* 4******

Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment

"...Robert Levin, the pianist whose deft touch and improvisatory elan decorated a delightful and touching account of Mozart's Piano Concerto No.23...these were among the magic moments. The Mozart had its share, too, with woodwinds gamboling so gracefully, with such limpid beauty, that the small clatter of Levin's fortepiano became thrown into stark relief.

Still, it was a sweet clatter, and always nimble, especially in his improvised cadenza and the finale's mad swirl. Pleasure enough came from simply watching Levin action, directing the players mostly with his head, mimicking instruments with facial gestures: a pantomime dropped, happily, for the exquisitely forlorn slow movement." - **Geoff Brown, *The Times***

"Levin lives Mozart throughout his entire body, and for every second of the score. His eyes cue in every orchestral soloist – even if this means that they have to be at the back of his head. The chest lunges forward with every dynamic phrase or accent. And he plays the music as if he's writing it himself – for the first time. Every transformation and reinvention – not least his volleys of improvised ornament and embellishment – has the orchestra as much on the edge of their seats as the audience." - **Hilary Finch, *The Times***

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“he and the OAE then proceeded to deliver just about the most dramatic and exciting account of Mozart's Piano Concerto No 20 in D minor, K466, that the Queen Elizabeth Hall can ever have heard. How fierce, cutting, indeed revolutionary, sounded the tutti outbursts of the opening movement; how turbulent the central episode of the slow movement, how implacably driven the finale, till at the last moment it turns to comedy – and the boiling cadenzas Levin apparently improvised on the spot genuinely amplified the impact. [...]Mozart's relatively playful and lyrical Piano Concerto No 21 in C major, K467, was necessarily more relaxed. Yet in the magically floating Andante, Levin offered an exemplary demonstration of 18th-century rubato: melody freely inflected every which way over absolutely steady accompaniment. And in his finale cadenza he naughtily teased the orchestra as to when he was going to let it come in again. This intensity, this delight, we were persuaded, is the way that classical music can ever be made anew.” - **Bayan Northcott, *Independent***

Boston Symphony Orchestra / Seiji Ozawa / Beethoven Piano Concertos Nos. 2 & 4

“Picture poor Orpheus, separated from his beloved Eurydice and descending into Hades in the vain hope of retrieving her. Wellesley Professor Owen Jander has persuasively argued that Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto takes the Orpheus legend as its program, and the pathos and power of Robert Levin's performance of the work Tuesday night in Symphony Hall revealed that Jander is dead on target.

Levin was standing in for pianist Alfred Brendel, who had flown back to Germany for medical advice on an injury to his arm, and put on what must be one of the most spectacular performances Symphony Hall has ever hosted. Playing Beethoven's second and fourth piano concertos, he brought not only endless energy, but also a depth of insight and creativity that revealed wonders anew in each and every nook and cranny of these well-explored works. Brendel presented them with a vibrancy that made them appear fresh and new -- as if the ink of the composition had dried just today.

The slow movement of the fourth concerto provided the most profound moments of a spellbinding evening. Levin's piano opening was very serious and beautiful in its gentleness. By this stage in Beethoven's career the soft pedal had been developed to restrict piano hammer action to one of three strings (*una corda*) when a soft effect was desired. Likewise, we heard in Levin's dulcet playing the terrified but love-ensnared Orpheus venture forth into Hades balanced precariously on an *una corda* tightrope.

The piano not only relays the hopes and fears of Orpheus, but in three-string mode bears witness to the brutality of the Furies of Hades intent on his destruction. Levin's muscular playing evoked the savagery, the nightmare rammed home by a solid wall of precisely controlled BSO strings barring Orpheus' descent into the depths and, indeed, telling him to get the hell out of there. Levin's piano, venturing forth in *una corda* disregard of the danger, spoke of loneliness and pain but, in delicate nuance, communicated the essentials of hope to make this a deeply human performance.

Levin brought an inspired logic to the performances of both concerti, gripping and drawing his audience into the most fantastic of journeys. His ability to move naturally from serene legato to violent cacophony was magnetic. His improvisation of cadenzas in both concerto showed extraordinary daring: his solo ravings in the fourth concerto first movement cadenza reached such a level of brilliant madness that it seemed as if Beethoven himself were seated at the keyboard. His control here was fabulous. The interweaving of themes from the work during the cadenza showed a fine intellectual understanding, coupled with a drive to make Levin's Steinway at once an instrument of fine music and the outlet of the manic and despairing genius of the composer of the work driving the soloist to heights of excellence.

Conductor Seiji Ozawa narrowly missed a nasty accident during this cadenza. He stood nervously watching the pianist's hands, quite unsure when the Devil would leave Levin alone and allow the orchestra to come back and bring the work to its conclusion.

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At one point, Ozawa mistakenly raised his arms to the orchestra, dropping them just in time to allow Levin to continue his unfinished machinations unhindered.

The third movement of the fourth concerto sees the demise of Orpheus as he falls prey to tibia, cornu, timpanaque (Ovid, XI 1-19, as cited by Jander). While the orchestra had at times been on the heavy side during more tender moments, Ozawa certainly knows how to kick up a storm and the BSO showed its strength and determination to wipe out the struggling seeker of lost love, much as Levin's Steinway seemed disinclined to admit defeat.

The Second Piano Concerto was also given a magnificent performance. Levin's playing was a model of classicism for this early Beethoven work, but never missed an opportunity to experiment with an illuminating nuance here, a highlight there. The combination of fluency and subtlety on piano was bracing, while the BSO played with a sunny disposition, making the performance of this work along with that of the fourth a life-affirming experience that will go down as one of the greatest accomplishments in the BSO's history." - **Jonathan Richmond, *Boston Globe***

BBCSSO, Beethoven, Nicholas McGegan

"Levin's daredevil, scintillatingly provocative performance of Beethoven's Second Piano Concerto with its infectious embellishments, hair-raisingly improvised cadenza, and buccaneering delivery. A splendid night." – **Michael Tumely, *The Herald***