Arts & Humanities

The Modest Virtuoso

Pianist Emanuel Ax has scaled astonishing musical heights. But his feet are still very much on the ground.

By
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|
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Emanuel Ax (Sarah Shatz)

I. ***You practice; you repeat things over and over and over in order to perform them when you're nervous or under pressure. That's the reason***

for repetition.

The piano waited onstage, a black whale showing its rack of teeth. In the wings, preparing to make his entrance, was Emanuel Ax ’70CC. Few in the audience that night would have suspected that Ax, one of the most celebrated classical pianists of his generation, might be suffering from a bad case of the jitters. Hardly uncommon, this terror, but underappreciated as a component of live performance. Horowitz and Gould were crippled by stage fright. Others, like Stravinsky, who attributed his panic at the piano to the fear of a memory lapse or a distraction “which might have irreparable consequences,” worked through it with great effort.

If the susceptible Ax was nervous that late May night, he could at least be assured of two things: that the greatness of the piece he was about to perform would come through no matter what, and that the sold-out house at Avery Fisher Hall was perfectly ready to love him. He was, after all, a hometown favorite, the pièce de résistance after a first-half program of orchestrations of Debussy études and Berio’s realization of Schubert’s sketches for his unfinished Tenth Symphony. Beethoven, robust and immortal, was approaching. When Ax entered the stage with conductor David Robertson, the molecules in the air changed. Applause, loud and eager. The members of the New York Philharmonic, clad in black, also seemed to come a little more alive.

The piece was Beethoven’s fifth and final piano concerto, called the *Emperor*. The name didn’t come from Beethoven — not with Napoleon bombarding Vienna during the composition of the piece in 1809 — but the heroic nature of the work likely inspired the grand sobriquet, and Ax, a musician of valiant breadth, conqueror of vast territories of repertoire, was now set to confront the formidable task set up for him by the composer.

The *Emperor* is noted for how the piano is pitted against the full power of the orchestra. Not exactly a fair fight, but Ax, crowned with gusts of white maestro hair, rose vigorously to the call. Upon the orchestra’s opening chords, florid cadenza-like passages rolled up and down the keyboard, announcing the outgunned protagonist in plumes of billowing glory. With the piano’s vitality established, the orchestra introduced the martial motif, and the battle was joined in earnest. Toward the end of the first movement, when the orchestra returned to the main theme, Ax, gleaming with sweat, jowls aquiver, turned to the players and pumped his fist to the triumphant melody, then swung back to the keys and brought down an avalanche of

broken octaves.

In a rousing climax, the final chords of the movement were struck, and an eruption of wild cheers and applause was dutifully, piously, frustratingly suppressed. A strained silence, punctuated by coughs, rustlings, tortured ahems. Those in the audience cognizant of Ax's axiom that "applause should be welcomed whenever it comes" might have detected in the pianist a trace of regret over this denial of a joyous impulse. "Certainly when a composer like Beethoven wrote the symphonies and piano concertos that we hear today in the concert hall," Ax has written, "he expected that if a movement ended with a flourish, such as the first movement of the Fifth Piano Concerto, the audience would leap to its collective feet and let the composer (and pianist) know that they had triumphed."

There is no better palliative for an anxious performer than applause. So try it next time. Cheer the Allegro. Start a between-movement movement. Your neighbors might turn to you with contempt and horror, but fear not. The emperor will be pleased.

II. ***We lived on the roof of a building right across the street from Carnegie Hall, 57th and 7th. A little two-room cube, a sort of servants' quarters — my dad worked for the guy who owned the penthouse in that building as a kind of valet. And they had these two rooms, right under the water tower. That's where we lived.***

It's a New York story. A musical little boy, born in Lvov, Ukraine, in 1949 to survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, moves with his parents to Winnipeg, Canada, at the age of 10. But his father, a speech and voice therapist, can't find work, and the family emigrates a year later to New York. And not just New York, but within the very nimbus of the world's most famous concert hall. It's more than a stroke of fortune. It's a dream.

Manny Ax, age 12, age 13, Juilliard student, steadfast pupil of Mieczyslaw Münz, intoxicated lover of music, has the most magnificent front yard in the world. Haven't we seen this somewhere before? In a children's book, maybe? Like the boy who lives by an amusement park, Manny stepped outside and lost himself in magical adventure. Night after night he turned up in the balcony of Carnegie Hall. There, he heard the giants: aristocratic Rubinstein. Fleet-fingered Serkin. Insatiable Gilels. He

was even there for Horowitz’s famous comeback in ’65, after a 12-year absence from the stage — an event as otherworldly as a resurrection, and for which the teenaged Ax waited two days in the rain to get tickets.

“You learn a lot more from live performance than you do from recordings,” he says, seated near the Steinway grand piano in his living room on the Upper West Side. “Seeing how people approach the instrument, listening to how they deal with the space in the hall; that was the biggest education.”

Education is a motif with Ax. Most concert-level soloists attend a conservatory rather than a university, but Ax, to his father’s delight, did both. He entered Columbia in 1966 as a French major while continuing his studies at Juilliard with Münz. At Columbia he studied with French department professors Donald Frame and Jacqueline Hellerman (“fantastic teachers”) and Nathan Gross (“an original — he loved drama and music both”). One of his most memorable courses was freshman Humanities with Michael Rosenthal.

Now Ax himself is a teacher at Juilliard. “Teaching is the most difficult thing to do,” he says. “Not just teaching music. Teaching anything. We should have much more reward for teaching. Much more. It’s terrible because we talk about how much we care about our children, but when you look around at the salaries of teachers, that’s not really borne out. It’s ridiculous. It’s complete nonsense.”

Good teachers are rare, and necessary. Talent helps, too. But for Ax, the real key to success as an artist is drive and perseverance. Under Münz’s fastidious eye, Ax worked extremely hard, and in 1974, at age 25, he won the first Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition, in Tel Aviv. At that point, owing mostly to conflicts in their schedules (Ax suddenly became very busy), he and Münz drifted apart. After 14 years with Münz, Ax had reached that moment of maturity when the lessons end and a different sort of education begins. Touring, recording, exposure to other musicians; the world. In 1979, Ax won the Avery Fisher Prize. He later received Grammy Awards for his cycle of Haydn sonatas and his recordings with Yo-Yo Ma of the piano and cello sonatas by Brahms and Beethoven — seven Grammys in all. He has been a pianist-in-residence with the Berlin Philharmonic and an active figure in New York cultural and civic life. In 2003, he was awarded Columbia’s Alexander Hamilton Medal for distinguished service and accomplishment and this year was given an honorary degree.

Despite the accolades, Ax still says that he doesn't work hard enough, feels he's only scratching the surface of being good. He'd *like* to practice more. But one must maintain a balance. One must, for instance, watch tennis. One must attend the U.S. Open. One must meet with friends, spend time with family. (Ax and his wife, the pianist Yoko Nozaki, have two grown children.) One must follow the Giants, whose Super Bowl victory last year equaled, for sheer drama and ecstasy, anything in Brahms. One must — there's no avoiding it — travel. And having devoured, on planes and in hotel rooms, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky's new translation of *Anna Karenina*, one really must get their translation of *War and Peace*. But first one must finish *Moneyball* and check for the latest story by Julian Barnes. (And, when the mood strikes, dip back into the brilliant and nasty memoirs of Berlioz.) One must, it goes without saying, concertize in Sydney and Paris and Beijing, teach master classes, commission new pieces, eat good food, watch movies, read the paper, and listen to Oscar Peterson. As Scriabin said to Horowitz's mother: "Your son will be a great pianist, but please, let him be an overall cultured man, and make him understand not only music, but other important aspects of life. Only then will he be an all-around musician."

With a house in the Berkshires (he's a Tanglewood regular) and the apartment in Manhattan, Emanuel Ax could probably remain fulfilled if he never boarded a plane again. Even his original New York home, or rather, his home away from home, the music palace at 57th and 7th, is still there, only now Ax gets paid to visit it, and others pay to see him. Next spring, he will appear at Carnegie Hall with his friends Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman to perform the Mendelssohn piano trios. What young, passionate listener in the balcony will get his education?

III. ***Ideally, as a pianist, what you try to do is be, in a certain sense, like a good translator. You see what's on the page, you take in that information, and you say to yourself, "Okay, this is how I see the piece."***

Like an aerialist without a net, the concert pianist lives dangerously. From the first note to the last, he is out on the wire, with a steep psychic drop below. *That is the reason for repetition*. The rule holds for any performer. "The reason you hit a hundred backhands is because when you have to make the backhand, you'll be able to do it because you've done it a hundred times a day for years," Ax says. "So you're able to overcome the nerves. The same is true for me."

As the butterflies subside, the subtler process of interpretation takes over — an intellectual and emotional elucidation of the written page, articulated in the most nuanced and controlled of physical movements. It's what distinguishes the sound of Rubinstein from that of Horowitz, Serkin from Schnabel, and Ax from his duo partner Yefim Bronfman — and, no less so, it's what differentiates a pianist's own separate performances of the same piece. No two alike. (Glenn Gould's versions of Bach's Goldberg Variations, recorded nearly 30 years apart, are a conspicuous case study.)

Yet for all these divergences, the music ultimately flows from the same source; the performer is always, to some degree, a conduit.

"Ideally," says Ax, "having included all the information on the page, you get a good picture of the composer's intentions. Then you can honestly say, 'I'm just doing what the composer said.' Of course, there's no real way to know what the composer said, because looking at the printed page, the entire issue of *how* soft, *how* loud, *how* fast, *how* slow — you don't know. Ideally, you don't do anything *against* the indications.

"Also, the way you approach the instrument physically is going to make a big difference in the way things sound. If you like a certain quality of sound on the piano — dark sounds, then more left hand; a more projected top, then more right hand; or else a more even sound — all of that is going to influence the sound of the piece. And that's why any two people who take into account every single marking on the page will sound totally different."

Ax's sound has been characterized as "shimmering and velvety" (the *New York Times*), his playing as "poetic," "graceful," "intelligent," "sensitive," "exuberant," "playful," "perceptive." (The same can be said for the man.) But Ax is also, in a crucial sense, a physical player, not just for his enormous power, but for his sense of how a piece of music suits his particular athleticism. His kindred spirit of the keyboard is Brahms. Ax once speculated that his affinity with Brahms had to do with the composer's corpulence (Ax himself was, as he says, a chubby kid) and the stout, splendid figure he cut at the piano.



Ax practicing in his house in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. (Sarah Shatz)

“It feels right to me to play Brahms,” Ax says. “And the more I read about him, the more I like him. I feel sorry for him, but I like him a lot. He had a terrible life. He had incredible professional success, but he had this absurd affair with Clara Schumann, which was probably never consummated. But it’s 40 years — 40 years of being in love with the same woman, and being unable to connect with any other women because of it. And it just paralleled his entire life. You can hear it in the music — the older she gets and the less she plays, the shorter and softer and sadder his piano pieces get. And when she dies, that’s how the music feels, too.”

Ax has said that his favorite piano piece is the Brahms B-flat Piano Concerto no. 2, one of the most difficult works in the literature. In its length, sweep, and majesty it recalls Beethoven’s *Emperor*. Brahms idolized Beethoven and had played the *Emperor* himself in concert. He began to sketch the B-flat in 1878 and completed it in 1881. Listening to Ax’s recording of the piece with the Boston Symphony under Bernard Haitink (Sony Classical, 1999), one is swept helplessly into the storm of Brahms’s passion. Ax plays with extraordinary prowess and emotion, from the startling cadenza that follows the opening theme (leaving no doubt as to the piano’s dominant role in this struggle) to the dense drama and rhythmic daring of the

second movement to the elegiac chamber poetry of the Andante to the scampering, dancelike frolic of the finale. Just as Brahms took up Beethoven's heavy torch, Ax has inherited the spiritual empathy that can be heard in the great Brahms interpreters, from Schnabel to Claudio Arrau.

But Ax's mastery ranges far beyond Brahms, or his award-winning Haydn. He's performed and recorded the music of Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, Schoenberg, as well as contemporary composers like John Adams, Christopher Rouse, and John Corigliano '59CC, among others. A frightful omnivorousness, spanning centuries, continents.

Still, there are composers whose works Ax has avoided, for fear he cannot do them justice. (His modesty is almost as famous as his virtuosity, and seems more a mark of Socratic wisdom than of neurosis: He's smart enough to know how much he doesn't know.) He shies from the Russians; he has never, for instance, played Prokofiev, or the Tchaikovsky B-flat Minor Concerto no. 1, a piece he adores. Bach is not typically on his menu. And for years, he was too intimidated by the fragile beauty of Schubert's music to perform it.

When the final chords of the *Emperor* were struck, the audience, having been ushered through the flames of a great masterpiece, was now free to express itself. A standing ovation, long and forceful, leading to multiple curtain calls. Ax, smiling bashfully, drenched in perspiration, luxuriated for a moment in the lights. Then, to everyone's surprise, he headed back to the piano. The evening was not over yet.

Ax sat down, and the room hushed to a grateful and reverent silence. With the bombast of the *Emperor* still reverberating in the hall, it was hard to imagine what could follow. Ax placed his hands on the keys, and there arose a sound as soft as water. Those expecting further pyrotechnics had misjudged Ax's sense of pacing. Here was something altogether different: tender, slow, full of longing and sorrow. A sublime rumination that was like balm to the smoldering nerves of the evening.

The piece was the Andante from the Sonata in A Major, D. 664. The composer was Schubert.

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