

Bloomberg

Yefim Bronfman Wins Grammy, Gets Paid in Napa Valley Wine

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--Zinta Lundborg

Powerhouse pianist Yefim Bronfman plays with the world's great orchestras and musicians,

This season, the Grammy-Award-winning Bronfman, Fima to his friends, is artist-in-residence with the New York Philharmonic, where the major project is a Beethoven cycle.

We spoke at Bloomberg world headquarters in New York.

Lundborg: What do you think about Philip Roth's amusing description of you in "The Human Stain"? Among other things, the narrator says hearing you play makes him feel immortal.

Bronfman: When Roth wrote it, I hadn't met him. A colleague told me about it, and then I read that particular page, where he highlighted the brontosaurus, my look of an unshaven Russian Jew.

Lundborg: He said that judging by appearance, you should be moving the piano rather than playing it.

Bronfman: I still look like a piano mover.

Lundborg: He also wrote that after you finish playing, they have to throw the piano out.

Bronfman: I used to play like that. I don't play like that anymore. I'm much older, much wiser.

Lundborg: There's great video of you doing the third Rachmaninoff concerto with Valery Gergiev where you're jumping off the bench.

Bronfman: I was excited that it was coming to an end.

Lundborg: How did you and Roth get on when you finally met?

Bronfman: The guy is brilliant. There are a lot of intelligent people I meet, but he can kind of read through your mind, look through you and go to the next thing before you even realize it.

BEETHOVEN CYCLE

Lundborg: You're going to be artist-in-residence with the New York Philharmonic this season. For your big project, why did you choose the Beethoven piano concertos?

Bronfman: I played and recorded the concertos six years ago, but in recent years I haven't gotten to do much Beethoven. I was focusing on other of things -- Brahms, Prokofiev and some new concertos written for me.

I love to play Beethoven, not only the concertos but also sonatas and other piano music. And to play with a great orchestra, it's fantastic.

Lundborg: You've worked with a lot of conductors -- what makes a great one?

Bronfman: Within 15 seconds you realize that there is somebody who is somebody standing next to you, that everything is right, everything has an idea.

YOUNG TURKS

Lundborg: Is there a difference in style between the old guard and the Young Turks?

Bronfman: I've played with a lot of the old guard, conductors now in their 70s. You realize that conducting is not just waving your hands, but it's also knowing everything, every instrument, all the repertory.

I bet Riccardo Muti could sit down at the piano and play an entire Wagner opera and sing all the parts, and then explain what's going on behind it. This is a real conductor. There are a lot of charlatans -- I could give you a long list.

Lundborg: What's it like learning a new piece?

BRAINS DESTROYED

Bronfman: I almost discontinued my friendship with Esa-Pekka Salonen when I realized that not only didn't he deliver the piece on time, it was the most difficult concerto ever written. He wanted to break my hands and my legs and destroy my brains.

He delivered it -- it was scary -- four weeks before the first performance.

Lundborg: And the Magnus Lindberg piece?

Bronfman: It was a similar situation: He delivered it quite late, and I was slaving over it. And then three weeks before the concert, he called and said, "Oh, by the way, I just finished the cadenza. It's not so bad, five pages. But if you don't feel like it, you don't have to play it."

But of course I know what that means: If you don't play it, I'll cut your balls off!

Lundborg: And was it a piece of cake?

Bronfman: When it arrived, I almost had a nervous breakdown -- the pages loomed dark from the amount of notes that I had to learn in three weeks before the premiere in New York.

Lundborg: Why do you prefer certain orchestras over others?

BEST ORCHESTRAS

Bronfman: I was talking to the late conductor Kurt Sanderling, and I asked him, Maestro, what's your favorite orchestra to conduct? And he said, "My favorite orchestra is the one that wants to play."

So I think for me also it's the attitude of musicians that makes a big difference. You can tell that they care about the composition. When you know that, you're in good shape.

Lundborg: How long was it until you found your individual playing style?

Bronfman: I'm still looking for it. Actually, I'm not interested in expressing myself. I like to be able to get inside the composer's mind as much as I can in every way possible. I don't like eccentricity -- it's not interesting.

Lundborg: What do you do when you're not working or practicing?

Bronfman: After a long tour, it takes about three weeks for your body to realize you are no longer performing. I see shows and movies, and I enjoy going out with friends for good food and wine.

FIMASAURUS WINE

I have to brag about something that's much more important to me than anything else in my career: There is a wine named after me -- Fimasaurus, a blend of cabernet and merlot produced by John Kongsgaard in Napa Valley.

Lundborg: How did that come about?

Bronfman: I spend my vacations there sometimes. He has a piano.

He also has concerts -- and you get paid in wine. You play for 400 people in a church in Napa and it's all winemakers. They see a poor starving musician so they want to feed you and make sure you get a good drink. (Zinta Lundborg is an editor for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own. This interview was adapted from a longer conversation.)

CLASSICALITE

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--**James Inverne**

In an enjoyable interview for Bloomberg, Yefim Bronfman--by any measure one of the most in-demand pianists on the planet--reveals an unusual accolade: "I have to brag about something that's much more important to me than anything else in my career," says the man nicknamed "Fima."

"There is a wine named after me--Fimasaurus, a blend of cabernet and merlot produced by John Kongsgaard in Napa Valley."

Moreover, it appears that someone on the New York Philharmonic's Tumblr has even had a (small) bottle, no less.

But that's not all. When Bronfman plays for his winemaker, he gets paid in wine.

Presumably, the fee is paid after the performance rather than in advance, otherwise whichever masterwork is being essayed on that particular evening might suddenly exhibit some unwritten slurs and staccatos!

And one finds a rather fragrant description on the Kongsgaard Wine website:

"Fima is a giant of the piano, and he plays with the explosive passion you find in this wine. One might think that the merlot would soften the cabernet, but the merlot on our mountain is at least as brooding and concentrated as the cabernet, and the 50/50 blend is a unique powerhouse. Chocolate, cassis and saddle leather lead the aromatic profile, and the dense wine makes a profound impression as the layers of dark fruit and fine tannin unfold on the finish."

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