

Kuerti at 60: A Birthday Salute

Jeremy Siepmann reflects on a singular career

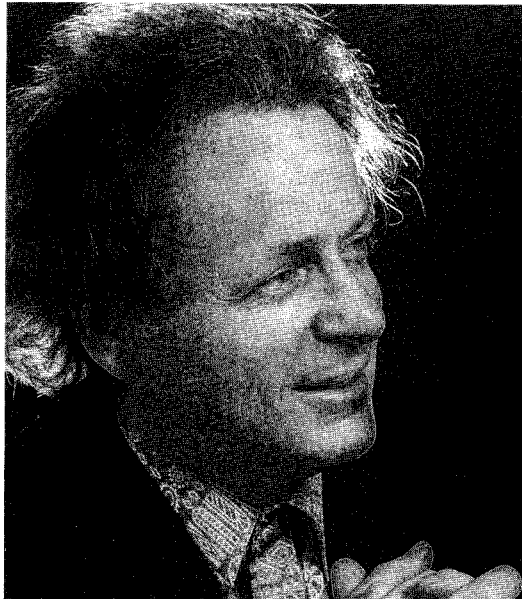
Anton Kuerti (b. 21 July, 1938) is something of a unique case in today's musical world. A musician's musician, yes; a pianist's pianist, undoubtedly – but one whose complete cycle of the Beethoven sonatas has received the highest possible acclaim, being proclaimed by some critics, on both sides of the Atlantic, as the finest ever recorded. In Britain's *CD Review* he has been hailed as 'one of the truly great pianists of this century', while *Fanfare* magazine in the United States has declared flatly that 'Kuerti is the best pianist currently playing' – a fatuously simplistic statement, if you stop to ponder it, but the point holds, nevertheless. His recording of Schumann's *Kreisleriana* has been favourably compared with those of Rubinstein and Horowitz. What renders his career unique, however, is the astounding fact that in spite of all this he remains virtually unknown to the great bulk of the musical public outside Germany, Canada and the United States. And the more you consider his case, the more perplexing it becomes.

Born in Austria, he grew up in the U.S., where he studied with Arthur Loesser, Mieczyslaw Horszowski and Rudolf Serkin. At the age of 11 he performed the Grieg Concerto with Arthur Fiedler, and was still a student when he won the famous Leventrit Award. For the last thirty years he has made his home in Canada, where he has been a household name for two decades. He has toured 31 countries, and performed with most of the major U.S. orchestras and conductors.

In preparation for this article, I have listened to many of Kuerti's 30-odd recordings, including the entire Beethoven set (not out of a sense of duty but because the playing alone compelled me to do so). Like him or not – and there's no denying that some don't – the man is conspicuously a master, and as his earliest records make plain, has been so since the beginning of his career. He brings to his playing a penetrating intellect, a consistently individual viewpoint and a technique of Horowitzian brilliance. Less Horowitzian is the strong sense of an incorruptible artistic integrity which precludes any thought of 'playing to the gallery'. While charm is by no means absent from his interpretative armoury, he has never been an ingratiating player. He doesn't woo the listener. Yet as his article in the present issue bears out [see p.27], he is acutely aware of his audience

and of the essentially communicative nature of his art.

Although most of his public repertoire is grounded in the traditions of nineteenth-century romanticism, he is not generally a sensualist, pianistically speaking. But as his recordings of



Anton Kuerti

Scriabin, Chopin and Liszt amply demonstrate, this is a matter of interpretative choice rather than a limitation. In the detail and the multi-layered vision of his reflections, as in the broad sweep of his structural perspectives and the extraordinary subtlety of his melodic inflections, his playing of the Beethoven sonatas conveys a level of devotion, thoroughness and aspiration seldom hinted at by most other artists. And all this with an acuteness and precision of textual accuracy which is never pedantic and usually illuminating. Kuerti's playing has always been controversial, but such is the nature of his particular artistry that it becomes almost irrelevant whether one 'likes' or 'dislikes' what he does. Without recourse to Gouldian eccentricity (though not without the occasional didactic gesture), he focuses the attention sharply, often powerfully, on the music itself, sending one (this one, anyway) straight back to the score, to discover and explore it afresh. At his best – and his batting average is extraordinarily high – his playing affords a continuous and vital reminder that in the greatest music

even our highest aspirations in performance are only a beginning.

Not that he's always high-minded and probing. He brings to the lighter side of the repertoire (though he largely eschews fluff of any kind) a particular kind of stylishness which is widely thought to have vanished from the musical scene. In his dazzling potpourri of Russian music, for instance [Analekta AL 2 9202], his playing of Glazunov's E-flat *Concert Waltz* is a delectable reminder that such nostalgia is misplaced. Add a dose of period hiss and crackle and this would be acclaimed by critics the world over as a shining example of the Golden Age. It isn't just brilliant, it's *fun* – not something widely associated with Kuerti's playing.

For some – even some of his greatest admirers – his playing can seem too highly charged with nervous energy, his rhythmic profile too sharply etched, with jagged, almost aggressive dynamic contrasts and an occasional tendency to rush, which can be exhilarating and exciting in the concert hall but distracting in the unnatural permanence of a recording. His account of Schubert's great D major Sonata (for many, among the composer's sunniest) has a driving urgency and a sustained, almost tragic intensity which are almost abrasive on first acquaintance. But it is a frequent feature of his playing that it challenges one's preconceptions and one's unexamined assumptions. Not by self-conscious design, nor as a deliberate act of provocation, but by dint of intense spiritual commitment and closely reasoned argument. A Kuerti performance may be many things, but never dull. One feels that no note, no rest, no slur or dot has escaped his considered attention.

As his many stimulating programme notes suggest, Kuerti is the last man to see music in isolation. He is widely read, and not only in things musical, and his interpretations, while never rigid, are conceived in a panoramic historical-cum-literary perspective. His *Kreisleriana* is fundamentally nourished by his first-hand acquaintance with the work of E.T.A. Hoffmann, whose writings inspired it.

When we listen to his performances, we are also listening to a man whose keen and lifelong interest in politics led him to run for the Canadian Parliament in 1988, and who counts whitewater rafting among his favourite pastimes. An active and outspoken participant in public life for many years (often, one suspects, at some cost to his career), he has published countless articles and letters on a variety of subjects, especially world peace, human rights and the environment, and has frequently appeared on radio and TV, not only as a performer but as an advocate of various causes. He contributes 25% of the price of all records sold at his concerts to Oxfam. Nor are his strictly musical activities confined to the piano. A former pupil of Henry Cowell, he has composed numerous works, including a symphony, a piano concerto, a concerto for wind quintet & strings, chamber music and solo piano works.