

Pianist prized for his music

BY DAVID LASKER
The Globe and Mail

WHO but Anton Kuerti would have the nerve to perform all five Beethoven piano concertos in a single evening, as he did at this past summer's Lanaudière Festival near Montreal? The deed was vintage Kuerti: provocative, seemingly eccentric, yet based on sound historic precedent. Beethoven himself premiered his *Piano Concerto No. 4* in a monster 1808 concert in Vienna that included the debuts of his fifth and sixth symphonies, the *Fantasy for Piano, Chorus and Orchestra* and four other works.

When Kuerti's complete set of the 32 Beethoven sonatas appeared on disc, the American publication *Fanfare* wrote that "Kuerti is the best pianist currently playing." *CD Review*, in London, called him "one of the truly great pianists of the century."

As a Beethoven interpreter, his credentials are impeccable. "I get back to Beethoven with just three intervening teachers, believe it or not: Horszowski, Leschetizky, Czerny and Beethoven," the trim, tousled-haired 59-year-old said recently while folding laundry in the study of his Victorian townhouse in Toronto, during a weekend off from his hectic touring schedule.

Yet just when Kuerti borders on braggadocio, he counters with a modest self-assessment. "I don't remember what my teachers taught me, and they probably don't remember what their teachers taught them."

Yesterday it was announced that the maverick pianist, music-festival founder, political progressive and polemical letters-to-the-editor writer had won the 1997 Toronto Arts Award for music. It was well deserved. But why did it take so long? And why isn't Kuerti even better known?

As a larger-than-life, Beethovenian figure himself, Kuerti's dogged determination to do things his own way hasn't always endeared him to those in a position to help his career.

For instance, the CBC is reissuing his acclaimed Beethoven concerto cycle with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and Andrew Davis, yet he has refused invitations to make further recordings with the nation's broadcaster because he doesn't like working with one of its producers.

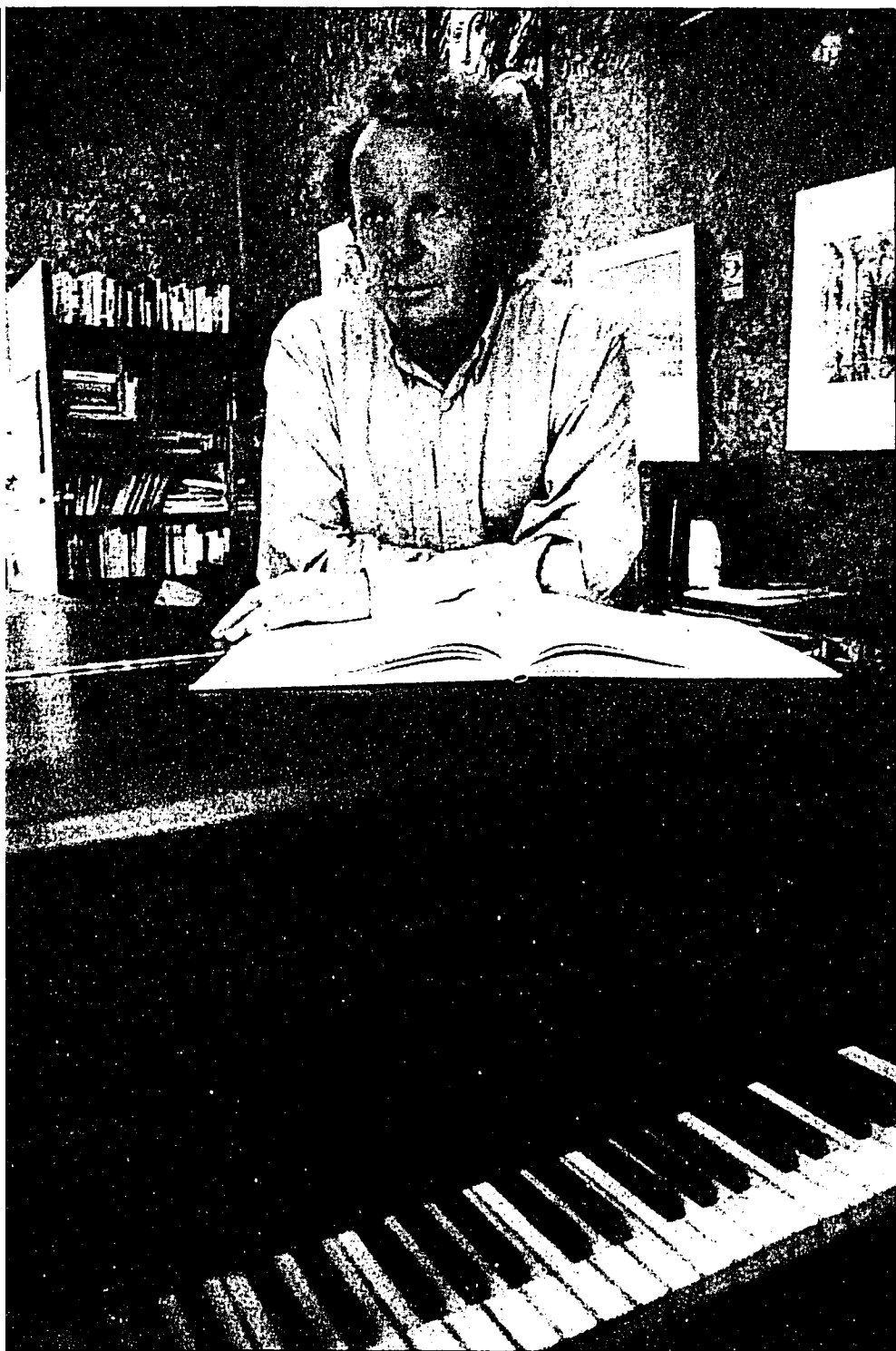
Kuerti was obliged to schlep his own piano in the late 1970s, when Steinway declared that the firm's instruments, supplied to most concert halls, were off-limits to him. Kuerti had written in a trade journal that Steinway's use of Teflon bushings rendered their pianos "unfit for human consumption." (The Teflon is gone and the feud is off.)

And in a concert with Symphony Nova Scotia in 1985, when the tuning of the Steinway grand was not quite to Kuerti's liking, the intermission had to be prolonged, as maestro Boris Brott fidgeted in the wings and the re-assembled audience looked on with amusement, while Kuerti fiddled with the keyboard action and pulled it right out of the case. But the piano stayed so painfully out of tune that the CBC — which had sent a team to record the performance — never broadcast the concert.

Yet Kuerti can afford to be fussy: He is one of Canada's few concert artists to make a living without the financial cushion of a faculty position. Indeed, the severing of his ties with the University of Toronto, where he had taught since 1966, typifies his impetuous personality. "I resigned when my older boy was going into ninth grade. I wanted him to take the test to get into the University of Toronto Schools and they never got my application, and they refused to believe I had sent it. I was 22 years in the university community. If I hadn't created enough confidence in my integrity to be believed for the cut-off date for applications, then I had served in vain."

Although he makes a comfortable living from his concerts, he has contributed letters and columns to the *Globe and Mail* complaining that superstars' skyrocketing fees are ruining the classical-music performance business. "I think my fee is high." (He charges about \$5,000 for an appearance with a major orchestra.) "I think other people's fees are outrageous. But some of my agents claim it would be easier to sell me if my fees were higher. Many orchestras assume that anyone who asks for less than \$15,000 is not of suffi-

IN PERSON / *Anton Kuerti is celebrated as a great interpreter of Beethoven, transcending the politics and eccentricities that may have hindered his career.*



Pianist Anton Kuerti, Toronto arts award winner: "I think other people's fees are outrageous. But some of my agents claim it would be easier to sell me if my fees were higher." (FRED LUM/The Globe and Mail)

cient merit to be invited as a soloist. Without blinking an eyelash, concert presenters will pay \$15,000 or \$20,000 for colleagues who are not significantly better known than I am."

To help bring his music to small communities, Kuerti drives his own van, containing his own piano (a Steinway), which takes six volunteers to move. But unless he's on a tour, he won't drive great distances. "It's environmentally too extravagant, aside from the cost."

Kuerti is a vegetarian. "When I started cooking for myself, handling bleeding pork chops and veal roasts disgusted me. I decided that since I wouldn't kill an animal unless I was starving to death, I shouldn't let others do it either."

He served on Pollution Probe's board for many years, and donates money to organizations such as Greenpeace, "although it may not get me any engagements in B.C. at the moment. I think it's scandalous the way they've set the workers against the environmentalists in B.C. when in fact their cause should be a common one." No doubt he finds the B.C. government's stand a betrayal of NDP principles, having stood, unsuccessfully, as the federal NDP candidate for the Toronto riding of Don Valley North in 1988.

While not sure whether his political activism has hurt his career, he said "I don't think one becomes a better artist by spending 14 hours a day

at one's art. It's important to be a useful member of the community in other respects."

Such altruism was imbibed along with his mother's milk. Kuerti was born in Vienna, where his parents were scientists and active social democrats. They were also Jewish and, recognizing the Nazi threat, emigrated to the United States in 1939, where his father taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). (Kuerti proudly showed off his father's glowing employment recommendation from none other than Albert Einstein.)

He began his piano studies at age 4½, attended Baltimore's Peabody Institute and Philadelphia's Curtis Institute, and won the prestigious Leventritt Competition in 1958, which offered two years of appearances with several of the country's finest orchestras.

"Competitions are necessary evils. Even with total integrity and good will on the part of the jurors, it's often impossible to meaningfully rank people who are really outstanding. Nevertheless, it's essential that there be some way that young artists with no money and connections bring themselves to the attention of the music world."

In 1964, he helped the TSO by replacing an ailing Dame Myra Hess on 48 hours notice. The favourable rave reviews helped generate further Canadian performance opportunities

and the invitation to teach at the U of T. In 1965, disapproving of the Vietnam War, he moved to Canada and is now a citizen.

At a concert in Ottawa, he noticed a cellist, Kristine Bogoy, and later married her; they have two sons, 20 and 16, who play violin and cello respectively.

When not making music, Kuerti likes to trek into the wilderness with his family. In order, he says, "to spoil our vacation retreat," in 1980 he founded the Festival of the Sound in Parry Sound, Ont. and directed it for eight years. "The combination of lovely scenery and music had worked so well in so many places," he said. "At the time there was very little of that sort of thing in eastern Canada."

Although known as a specialist in Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms, Kuerti likes to explore lesser-known byways of the German Romantic repertoire. Earlier this week, the Montreal-based Analekta label released a Kuerti CD devoted to relatively obscure works by Carl Czerny, including a march for Beethoven's funeral.

While he has played and recorded concertos by Canadians such as Oskar Morawetz and Sophie-Carmen Eckhardt-Grammate, he admits that new music forms a small part of his repertoire. "I guess the main reason is that I compose myself. When I plan a program, I'd rather play my own second-rate music than someone else's."