

LEON GURVITCH

A REBEL CLASSICAL MUSICIAN

Leon Gurvitch is a pianist, conductor, composer, assistance professor at Johannes Brahms Music Conservatory in Hamburg, the author of more than three hundred different compositions and arrangements, including those for the movie “Death Games” by an Oscar-winning producer Menahem Golan. Leon's native city is Minsk, but he has been living and working in Hamburg since 2001. His concerts in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Belgium, Italy and the USA are always fully booked. Nevertheless, Leon's first ever concert in Belarus after his moving to Germany took place only in the end of 2016. Our interview will tell you why he hasn't visited his motherland for so long and what his musical rebellion is all about.

— **Fifteen years is a long time of absence from your homeland. What is the reason?**

— I often ask myself the same question. You never know what your future life will bring you. I didn't take offence at anyone or anything, I just moved to another country. I plunged into work and concert activities. I was willing to give a concert in Belarus, but something always kept me from doing it. And in 2016 I finally got the opportunity: Inga Bukhvalova (the director of the concert agency “Equilibrium Arts” — editor's note) and the head of Goethe Institute suggested me taking part in “Jazz Bridge”, I agreed, and in September of 2016 I performed my jazz program “American Masters” together with an American vocalist Love Newkirk.

Then, in January of 2017, I came to Minsk again with another program: I

gave a concert of classical and contemporary music with State Chamber Orchestra of the Republic of Belarus in the Big Hall of the Belarusian State Philharmonic Society. We performed musical pieces by Haydn, Shostakovich, Schnittke and several of my compositions. Along with that, the world premiere of my composition for a string orchestra entitled “Con Anima” took place at this concert. This way I came back to Belarus (smiles). I think it can be considered as a new stage of my Belarusian life.

— **Judging by the public's ovations at both these concerts, this stage has started successfully. Could you tell me more about the program “American Masters”?**

— “American Masters” is my own interpretation of George Gershwin's, Duke Ellington's, Dave Brubeck's and Miles Davis' pieces. Unfortunately, it is

impossible to comprehend the entire America's jazz heritage during one concert. That's why I have chosen versatile compositions, many of which are well known to the public. I included one of my own musical pieces as well. An American vocalist Love Newkirk, who also lives in Hamburg, performed at this concert with me.

I have to confess that it was rather hard for me to choose the right “voice” for the program: I work with different singers, and all of them have unique voices. I invited Love to rehearse with me, and everything was perfect from the very beginning, even though Love had to handle a difficult task: to understand and convey my views about music. And my arrangements are not that easy to perform. But Love coped with it brilliantly. Moreover, she is incredibly artistic and charismatic. I'm very glad we have such a creative tandem.



— **As for author's arrangements of familiar compositions: there is always a risk that the public may either like or dislike it...**

— My purpose isn't creating music that only a narrow range of intellectuals would be able to understand. On the contrary, I want my music to be clear to the general public. At the same time, I don't let the public push me around. For example, I presented the program "American Masters" in many European cities, and the listeners, among whom there were not only the Germans but also foreigners, including the Americans, always had a positive reaction to it. The concert in Minsk showed that the Belarusians also enjoyed my interpretation of well-known jazz compositions.

— **Leon, what are you currently working on?**

— The 2017th year will be very productive and is all planned out. The main event of this year for me is a solo concert in New York's Carnegie Hall,

which will take place in March and where I will perform as a pianist and composer. It is not my first performance in the USA, but it's my first time to perform on one of the world's greatest stages. I hope I will be able to live up to the listeners' expectations and worthily represent Belarus and Germany. I also plan to complete the compositions for orchestra I have started, there are several ones I am working at, and some choral compositions. The premier of one of these compositions — Cantata Domino — will be also held this year: it will be first performed in St.John's Church of Hamburg by The New Hamburg Youth Choir (Neuer Knabenchor Hamburg in German — editor's note).

— **And how do you organize the music writing process?**

— In fact, it is a difficult question for a composer to describe how he writes music. Moreover, this process is absolutely individual for everyone. But it is a fact that this action is really mysterious (smiles). However, I can't

tell you any stories that are usually shown in movies: for example, a composer goes to the forest, watches the dawn, and then inspiration suddenly comes to him, a new brilliant melody is born, and he promptly writes it down in his notebook. It's more prosaic and simple for me (laughs).

I am more like a miner who goes down the mine and works, works, works. I actually write music by a usual classical method that was used by composers about 300-400 years ago: the piano, music paper and a pencil. Sometimes I can do without a musical instrument, but this happens rarely, mostly at night time. Sometimes a tune comes to my mind at night, when I'm asleep, and I get up (to be more exact, I make myself get up) to write it down because if I don't, in the morning I won't remember anything. And I will have a guilty conscience because of missing the idea. I have written a considerable part of a composition for chamber orchestra "5 Dances in Old Style", which is dedicated to the project "Classic for peace", in such a way.



You know, I am more of a rebel classical musician. I am not interested in following clearly defined rules or waiting till I will be shown the way what and how to play. First of all I see myself as a composer, who absorbs all the best as a sponge and creates his own art

The music writing process is rather labour-intensive and long-lasting for me. I can spend several years on writing some pieces: revise, polish them before they get the intended shape. The idea of a piece comes quickly, it is all about the realization. I would compare it with refining a raw diamond: one has to put much effort into it in order to get a precious stone. It is also my self-criticism that doesn't let this process go faster: I always add or remove something, ask other musicians for advice. I am open to constructive criticism and willing to make changes even if it comes to revising the pieces I wrote 10-15 years ago.

— **Leon, do you consider yourself to be a classical or a jazz musician?**

— I have got a classical music education. But I don't want to limit myself with any bounds. Jazz has seriously influenced me, yet I cannot say I am a jazz musician. Jazz means freedom and widening the boundaries

for a musician, it is improvisation — something that is very untypical of classics. You know, I am more of a rebel classical musician. I don't find it interesting to follow exact rules and canons, to wait until I am shown what to play and how to play. But, first of all, I consider myself to be a composer who has a mind like a sponge and also creates something new. I have more than fifty music programs, which include pure classics, contemporary music and jazz. I am fond of thematic pieces that make sense, that make one contemplate and search for correlations, that are somewhat dramatic.

— **So are you all for creative experiments?**

— My every concert is a kind of creative experiment indeed. I often perform in unusual places. For example, once I gave a concert in a shipyard in Hamburg: concert managers rented it and temporarily turned it into a concert venue. In

Amsterdam I often perform in places with beautiful views of the canals. When a Russian jazz saxophonist Vladimir Chekasin came to Germany, we did crazy things on the stage (smiles) — it was not even a concert, it was a performance with a costumed dance show.

At one of my concerts I performed with a painter: as I was improvising, he was drawing sand pictures that were projected to a big screen. We tried to create an environment of full immersion into the world of musical and artistic improvisation for our spectators. I suppose, my project "Poetry and Music" — musical improvisations on poems by Rainer Maria Rilke, Friedrich Hoelderlin, Osip Mandelstam, Paul Gerhardt, Mascha Kaleko — can also be related to my creative experiment. I have recently presented my piece "Musical Fantasia on Daniil Kharm's Poems" to the public and recorded it together with an opera singer Maria Markina and the chamber orchestra of Hamburg State Opera.



— **Do you create ideas for your concerts yourself or do you get help with that?**

— I don't need much help with ideas, I have enough of them (smiles), but I always accept interesting offers eagerly. Help is necessary when I bring my ideas to life. The support of like-minded people, especially musicians who I create projects with, is very important in this case. They clearly understand that only a good performance is not enough to impress the public. It is boring to simply play the notes. They have to get people interested, as the listeners want to hear not only the piece itself but also its performer. In other words, to hear his interpretation of the piece. Even if it is a classical program. What's more, the classics can be presented in so many different ways! It depends just on the story the performer wants to tell by means of this music.

— **I suppose you support the creative process in teaching also...**

— I've been teaching conducting and composition at the conservatory for already 12 years, and I like it when the study process gives my students space for freedom. It has to be mostly creativity rather than studies. I expect my students to be initiative and try to keep them motivated. I teach them to think, create, develop their own individual style rather than copy someone else's one. All my students are different in every sense of the word, from their nationality to their creative experience. Some of them have a strong background and a completely formed creative personality, they only need a little guidance, and the other ones are more like children who still have a lot to discover. I love working with students because I also learn together with them, they make me contemplate and constantly improve. We have a real exchange of experience, knowledge, energy.

I also try to make my students realise

that it is necessary to study, work on themselves and develop their skills all life long. Graduating from the conservatory isn't enough to make a musician a maestro. In the German language there are two cognate words with completely different meanings: Beruf (a profession) and Berufung (a vocation). You may be a composer by profession, but it will be nothing different from plain workmanship: the main thing is to do everything on time and well. Being a vocational composer is not the same: in this case, it isn't enough just to do a good job, you have to put your soul into every note. Students refine their techniques, study the details, find their professional direction at the conservatory. But this all is not the last stage, it is only another one that helps them get higher.

— **Let's form Leon Gurvitch's rule for musicians...**

— It is necessary to learn all the rules thoroughly and later forget them. Only then you will be able to set out on a real journey to the world of creativity. But before breaking any rule, one has to know it really well. Breaking the rules you don't know is quackery rather than creativity. Every artistic

person should have a basis for their creative process. It is like a basement of a building. No construction will stand without an efficient groundwork. And in the end the whole situation may remind you of a well-known fairytale ("The Emperor's New Clothes" by Hans Christian Andersen — translator's note): the emperor has no clothes.

— **Leon, all your time is devoted to concerts, tours, teaching, composing... Are you able to find some time for rest?**

— I don't usually have much spare time, but I manage to find some. I love reading when I have such an opportunity. Lately, I've been fond of reading the correspondence of well-known composers, for example, Gustav Mahler, Robert Schumann, Dmitri Shostakovich. This way I get to know their thoughts that they couldn't speak out, learn more about their personal communication. I have recently read the book "Wandering Stars" by Scholem Aleichem, and I'm still impressed by it. Its plot is very much similar to the story of my life. It describes the nomadic life of travelling circus performers, of the people who left their homeland, who change one country for another, searching for love



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and hoping to make their dreams come true. I often read Thomas Mann's works, they help me find the answers to my questions.

I also pay attention to contemporary editions. For example, I discovered an autobiographical book "My Life" by Marcel Reich-Ranicki, someone who survived in the Warsaw ghetto, someone who wasn't a native German but considerably influenced German literature after World War II. Inspired by this book, I devoted my own piece "Mein Leben" (translated as "My Life" — editor's note) to its author.

— **Is there a phrase or quote that helps you get through tough times?**

— "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself,

who am I? If not now, when?" (these words are attributed to an ancient Jewish wizard Hillel — editor's note). These quote helps me very much when I lose heart. Music and creativity are my little world, my favourite country. I have much more music and ideas in my head than time to bring them all to life. I will be glad if I manage to leave at least a small part of creative work behind.

Everyone comes to this world with a certain purpose. It doesn't matter if you are a creative person or not. Everyone must benefit society. But some of us lack willpower and diligence to do so. It is necessary to be hardworking, as genius consists of 1 percent of talent and 99 percent of hard work. A well-known Internet picture of a ballet dancer's feet with

one foot in a beautiful pointe shoe and another one with crooked bleeding toes is the reality rather than fiction. A strong person isn't someone who can afford a lot, it is someone who can give up many things.

I advise all the creative people to realise all their craziest ideas, as the most brilliant creations were born to really mad ideas that no one believed in. Don't listen to other people's opinions. Listen to your heart.

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