Get a behind-the-scenes glimpse via Bill Lockwood, Director of Special Programming at McCarter, about how and why he brings phenomenal artists to our McCarter stages. This week, he spotlights Igor Levit, who will perform on the Matthews Stage at McCarter.

December 30, 2021

Igor Levit Plays Beethoven, Schubert, Wagner & Liszt

When the senior music critic for The New York Times compares any pianist’s recordings of the 32 Beethoven piano sonatas to those of the legendary Artur Schnabel, it makes you sit up and take notice. Schnabel’s recordings (1932-35) are considered the archival landmark, a gold standard for our time, but Igor Levit’s set has become a worthy challenger – which is why we should consider ourselves lucky that he has chosen to open his January 11th McCarter recital with Beethoven’s Sonata No. 30 (Op. 109).

In less time than it takes you to play an easy scale, Levit has risen to preeminence among today’s pianists, which is why his McCarter recital is so important. The Times goes on to call him “as penetrating a pianist as exists today,” and unlike many of his contemporaries, he has managed to break through thanks to a combination of artistry and daring, which earned him the prestigious Gilmore Award in 2019 – the equivalent of a MacArthur “genius” grant for pianists. Known for taking interpretive risks even with standard repertoire, at age 34, Levit has been everybody’s “pianist of the year” even before the pandemic; and during it, he achieved notoriety by his 53 Twitter-streamed live concerts from his Berlin apartment during the spring 2020 lockdown, about which he said: “I cannot say that music matters less, that it is not ‘essential.’ To me, it is absolutely essential. It is my reason for being. All I do, and I really mean it, is to press the keys down, and a tone comes up.”

Levit is given to sweeping projects, like the Beethoven sonatas and his latest undertaking, a set of Shostakovich’s 24 Preludes & Fugues, the contemporary equivalent of Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier. At his McCarter debut, his program ranges from music that is knotty and complex to tranquil and expansive, including not only the Beethoven, but Schubert’s Six Moments Musicaux and pianist Zoltan Kocsis’ arrangement of the Prelude to Act 1 of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde (and how often do you ever hear anything by Wagner played on the piano?). But Levit saves his biggest challenge for last: Liszt’s monumental Sonata in B Minor, one of the pinnacles of keyboard literature, played as a single movement. Wagner loved it, and Liszt dedicated it to his friend and fellow composer Robert Schumann. It has stood the test of time as a true test of pianistic stamina and endurance, which is why every pianist has to scale its heights at one time or another in their careers; for Levit, this is his turn, and it goes without saying that Liszt’s technical hurdles will have no choice but surrender to his color, sweep and intensity.

—William L. Lockwood, Jr.
Director of Special Programming