

## The Corners of History and the Price of Freedom: An Interview with Mikhail Korzhev



Krenek: Complete Piano Concertos, Vol. 1

Audio CD

Toccata



“Well.... ” A short breath, slight pause, and then it begins. “Well, you know, I’m always interested in the music that’s hiding in the corners, you know what I mean? Even where the traditional repertoire is concerned, I like to explore the music that nobody’s examined. Take this unfinished suite in Baroque style by Mozart I’m working on now—an absolutely beautiful piece in the style of Handel, by which I mean that, if you listen beyond the surface, there are certainly resonances of Handel in it, because by that time, Mozart was in Vienna, and as you probably know, he was always in Gottfried Van Zwieten’s library....”

I haven’t asked pianist Mikhail Korzhev about Mozart. My question concerns Ernst Krenek, the composer whose first three concertos he has just released on the Toccata label and whose solo works he championed previously, having recorded a disc of Piano Sonatas 1, 2, and 4 for the Phoenix label in 2008. Krenek proves to be an integral component to our nearly three-hour phone conversation, but, for now, Mozart has taken the proverbial front seat. Korzhev’s enthusiasm is as boundless as his playing is energetic. The words simply won’t come out fast enough, a Russian accent providing the backdrop for a voice, in a low tenor and baritone range, that might be read as overly serious until gusts and gales of laughter raise it an octave. Words are strung out into long flowing sentences which attain the epic circuitry of rivers, Samuel Beckett’s “vast stretches of time,” layered with ideas ... until, suddenly, almost with a

jolt, Korzhev is back to the initial subject, but only after a few digressions about Medtner, Scriabin, the Russian conductor Golovanov, the role of jazz in Krenek's supposedly jazz opera, *Johnny Spielt Auf*—more on this later—and, finally, relating all this to Krenek's autobiography. "It's not published yet, but I've read it. It's about his life, of course, but also about the cultural life of Vienna and central Europe, between the wars, ending with his move to the United States, where it was written." Korzhev's affinity with this work and its author's music is no surprise, an allegiance that becomes clear the longer we speak.

Korzhev was not born into a musical family, nor was music particularly encouraged as he was growing up. "I had no professional musicians in my family, but my father was a fairly well-schooled amateur. I heard a fair amount of music early on, mostly classical, but somehow, I got it into my head to pursue music. The fascinating thing is that when I really began to study seriously, beginning in my early teenage years, I realized that many of the melodies I was playing were quite familiar from my childhood!"

While Korzhev's budding pianism was not discouraged as such, he did not have the most adequate support system imaginable. His father, while heavily inclined toward music, had marketplace practicalities in mind, hoping his son might go into something more employable, such as math or science. "Just to be clear, they didn't complain about me playing the piano; it just wasn't overly encouraged. I had a great musical experience as a child. I'd have two piano lessons a week at local music School 45; they had nearly 100 music schools in Moscow, and they employed a lot of the Moscow Conservatory graduates. I had intensive theory, we gave concerts in the concert hall, it was phenomenal!"

Eventually, music won the day. "They really gave in when I was about 13," laughs Korzhev. From that point on, the young pianist reaped all of the benefits an education at the Moscow Conservatory College has to offer. "Maybe the best four years of my life," muses Korzhev. "Just as an example, I studied theory with the influential theorist and pedagogue Dmitri Blum. Actually, we were his last class. He had taught many of the greats, like Richter and Ashkenazy, and I remember that in 1986 and 1987, when the Russian players began to come back from the West, Blum would tell us stories: 'Well, when I taught Ashkenazy, who was sitting in this room, right where you are now....'" His piano studies were supervised by another eminent teacher, Vera Khoroshina, a student of Heinrich Neuhaus who was also in the same class as Richter and, at this writing, still lives and teaches in her early 90s. "With her, it was all about listening. In that kind of an education, there's no fixed border between playing and theory, and so what we did complemented what I was studying with Professor Blum, but we also worked on a lot of mental

technique. I remember learning Prokofiev's Third Piano Sonata away from the piano. It's the best way of memorizing things; you can wake me up in the middle of the night, hang me upside down and I'll play it for you. When you can clearly imagine the sound in your head and play it in your mind, you really know the piece. I still do this now, and it's how I've worked on these Krenek scores."

After a year at the Gnessin Institute, where he studied with Alexander Satz, Korzhev was invited to the United States to play a recital at the Southwestern Youth Music Festival in Los Angeles. Soon after his arrival in the States, he played for composer, conductor, and arts activist Herbert Zipper, who was so impressed that he made a phone call to the University of Southern California and asked them to audition Korzhev, even though it was the late summer of 1991. "Funny thing about that," remembers Korzhev, "I had to change my flight back to Moscow, and as it turns out, I would have flown back on the Monday when that coup happened, do you remember? I missed it!" Korzhev was accepted, with a full scholarship, into the studio of Daniel Pollack and was granted a doctorate from the university at which he still teaches, balancing those duties with teaching at other California institutions.

Since 2005, Korzhev has devoted considerable time and study to the works of Krenek. In that year, he won the Krenek division of the Virginia Waring competition, an accomplishment which would be integral to the recitals and recording projects he's undertaken since. He remembers fondly a meeting with pianist Earl Wild, who came to listen to the finals. "He asked to meet with me when they were over. I think it was before the winners were announced. He told me that he'd been coming to the competition on and off for two weeks, and he paid me a huge compliment. He said, 'Finally, I've heard a pianist!'" Korzhev then became friends with the renowned pianist, even playing at his 90th birthday. "He was amazing." Korzhev's voice takes on a resonant reverence. "You know he played a Carnegie Hall recital at 90, right? He was vigorous, basically up to the end!"

There is an element of predestination surrounding Korzhev's fascination with Krenek's music and life, which began years before that 2005 competition victory. His interest in the prolific and still criminally neglected composer has been long in the making, and our discussion of his many and varied compositions pulls all of the threads of our conversation together. "You have to understand that I heard Krenek's name even before I went to college. I was always fascinated by Mozart, and I would even say, despite a very different musical vocabulary, that there is something Mozartian about Krenek's compositions. Maybe it's the ease with which he composes in combination with an astonishing craftsmanship and the scope of the music he writes." Furthering the

transgenerational dialectic, Korzhev points out that both men wrote 19 operas, and that Krenek's last opera, *Sardakai*, employs a plot line similar to that of *Così fan Tutte*, quotations from which can be heard at a strategic moment in Krenek's opera. "All this to tell you how I first heard of Krenek," enthuses Korzhev. "I read a fascinating book about Mozart by a man named Georgy Chicherin, who ended up being the first foreign minister of the Soviet Union, can you believe that? Mozart was the passion of his life, and when he writes about Mozart's operas in this book, he makes comparisons to Krenek's work of the 1920s; that's where I first heard the name." Chicherin's assessment of Mozart, explains Korzhev, is that the 19th century viewed him through a narrowed lens and with skewed perception. In the well-read and equally well-listened foreign minister's vision, Mozart was, as Shakespeare was to Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, all in all. To many 19th-century ears, his compositions were as diverse as the breadth of his language and aesthetic are misunderstood. He adhered neither to one technique nor one overarching aesthetic, rendering his music problematic to his contemporaries and immediate successors.

The same intimations of forward-thinking genius apply to Krenek's work, and there is no one better qualified to judge that huge corpus than Korzhev. It appears that when the pianist becomes passionate about a subject, he digs deep and incessantly, scouring for detail and searching hungrily for fresh perspective. Far from being limited to Krenek's piano works and operas, Korzhev's knowledge of the composer's corpus is detailed and thorough. At one point in our conversation, he speaks with boundless enthusiasm of Krenek's choral masterpiece, *Lamentations of Jeremiah*. "It uses 12-tone technique, but Krenek also managed to compose the whole thing in Renaissance counterpoint and harmonic gestures; it's absolutely one of his most important works!"

The three piano concertos on this CD were composed between 1923 and 1946, and they mirror the composer's adventurous, historically multifarious and diverse compositional trajectory. I observe to Korzhev that the First Concerto is in F# Major, and this simple fact initiates an exegetical torrent. "Even his supposedly tonal music is unconventional!" Korzhev's voice is rising with the excitement and discovery that can be heard in every bar he plays. "I'm not going to use the term 'eclectic,' because I believe that it's done Krenek's reputation more harm than good, a fact that I discussed with his widow—who, by the way, is still alive and living in Palm Springs—but what I'm saying is that Krenek believed himself to be free to choose any 20th-century compositional technique he wished and to use it in his own way! Don't you hear shades of Fauré's *Ballade*, or Richard Strauss's *Burlesque*, in that First Concerto, even though much of its tonality is so ambiguous? It's certainly post-


Romantic, with all those post-Lisztian gestures throughout it. He wrote at prodigious speed, writing an opera at the same time as the first concertos, during his student days in Berlin. Did you know it was written, from beginning to end, in two months? I've seen the manuscript!" Korzhev is certain, his conclusion recently confirmed by his research, that the final movement of Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony demonstrates influence from this extremely diverse concerto. "If you listen to the second movement, the *Allegro Agitato*, it is obvious that Krenek's main theme and the main theme from that Shostakovich movement share the same rhythm." He sings the Shostakovich theme in his guttural baritone voice to get the point across.

It becomes clear that the key to Krenek is just this freedom, the freedom to re-examine historical nooks and crannies and then to deconstruct and reassemble the methods and artifacts uncovered there in whatever way seems most appropriate to the composition at hand. "Take the Second Concerto, for example. Do you remember the theme, the one in the cellos that's almost Wagnerian? He wrote that first; it's in his autobiography. Then, he decided to write a piano concerto, and only after that did he decide that it would be written using the 12-tone method." When listening to the piece, with its vastly varied opening material, analyzing it from a single historical perspective seems undesirable at best, impossible at worst. I hear everything from late-period Scriabin to the harmonically innovative gestures of Chopin's more daring études, with the transitional Schoenberg of *Erwartung* thrown in for good measure, and despite such ravishing diversity, Korzhev slips another fly into an already thick ointment. "Do you hear the bluesy piano, right at the end of the introduction? I studied that passage quite deeply, and while you wouldn't believe it, the row is there, just presented vertically!" Indeed, none of these compositional nuts and bolts is apparent, or even necessary to understand, to enjoy Krenek's music. As with Berg's operatic masterpiece *Wozzeck*, the compositional techniques are simultaneously integral and subservient to an extraordinary sense of drama, a coincidence I suggest to Korzhev. "Oh yes," he responds with immediate enthusiasm, "they were great friends. Berg died in Krenek's presence; there was a great deal of mutual influence there."

Therein lies the dilemma for Krenek where the history books are concerned. Whereas it might be argued that Berg adopted 12-tone techniques even more consistently than did his teacher, Krenek followed his own vision, placing his music beyond facile categorization and, subsequently, beyond the purview of anthology compilers. "It's really too bad," opines Korzhev. "I think he's one of the most interesting composers of the 20th century. Just take his most famous opera, *Johnny Spielt Auf*, as one example. Do you hear jazz there? There's very little jazz, or

maybe it's better to say that the musical language of the opera is much more diverse than the 'jazz' categorization allows, but you should see the trouble it got him in with Hitler.... ” And he's off again on another romp through the various webs of history he seems always, and remarkably, able to expose and untangle.

Korzhev is not one to boast of his accomplishments, but there is one aspect of the Krenek concerto project of which he is justly proud. “That big cadenza in the Second Concerto, do you remember? I recorded it in one take, very complicated music for sure!” He is correct. The extended passage comprises myriad contrapuntal traps, jumps, and inter-registral harmonic twists and turns, not to mention potential coloristic pitfalls, at least in the hands of any lesser pianist. Korzhev handles all with ease and consummate skill, as he does the surprising but intensely beautiful strummed chords in the Third Concerto, played by silently depressing chords on the keyboard with the left hand and strumming inside the piano with the right. These ethereal sounds are answered by an equally agile harp, and the effect is magical. “Mitropoulos wanted Krenek to write a more accessible concerto,” Korzhev explains, “something the American audiences would be able to enjoy, and I think he succeeded quite well!” Korzhev speaks of his upcoming projects with relish. There is another volume of Krenek concertos in the works. It will contain the Fourth Piano Concerto; one for two pianos and orchestra; one for piano, violin, and orchestra; and one for piano or harpsichord, organ, and orchestra. Despite his continued commitment to Krenek's work, Korzhev is hesitant to be pigeonholed as a Krenek expert. “I enjoy his music, that's for sure, but there are a lot of other things I'm working on; I'm still interested in recording works by Gerard Schurmann, for just one example.” He's recorded two discs of the nonagenarian composer's chamber music to date. With musical interests as diverse as Mozart, Schurmann, and Krenek, I ask the pianist what, if anything, unifies the various projects in which he's continually involved. “I love to perform,” he responds, “Because I love to share things with people. I'm not one of those players who enjoys demonstrating virtuosity; I just love to share music about which I'm passionate. You know, it's why I love talking about music! I think about this interview as I do performing, just sharing whatever insights I have about this music about which I care very deeply.” His passion is our boon.

 **KRENEK Piano Concertos Nos. 1–3 • Mikhail Korzhev**  
(pn); Kenneth Woods, cond; English SO • TOCCATA 0323 (68:45)

It is simply beyond comprehension that the music of Ernst Krenek (1900–1991) is not better known and appreciated. For those who've never heard his music, it might help to think of some combination of Mahler, Berg,

and Scriabin, though even those points of reference do the composer little justice. There's a bit of Impressionism in the service of a wonderful and sometimes whimsical sense of orchestrational color; there's a blues chord or two, though I can hear precious little jazz, whatever history says about his most famous opera. For the uninitiated, there is no better introduction than Russian pianist Mikhail Korzhev's new and excellently played disc of piano concertos.

The First and Third Concertos (1923 and 1946, respectively) occupy a world in which tonality is skirted rather than simply eschewed. The first was written at white heat, during a fruitful period of the prolific composer's youth. Listen to the piano's opening passages, the way scale, chord, and contrapuntal gesture point toward the home key of F# while never quite allowing it to emerge, the way a sitar virtuoso might hint at the raga in an alap. Revel in the way the English Symphony Orchestra, under the expert direction of Kenneth Woods, ushers in the first orchestral entrance, as if it were hewn and growing out of Korzhev's equally compelling pianism. The music is a rollercoaster of harmonic implication and evasion, a post-Romantic journey through the ambiguities of key, harmony, and emotional state. The Third Concerto signals the beginning of a happy time for the composer. As annotator Peter Tregear observes, it was written for Dmitri Mitropoulos during his Minnesota sojourn, and while there are certainly passages of thorny pantonal implication, there is a sense of whimsical fun, possibly Neoclassical in nature, in the third movement's piano and winds exchanges.

The Second Concerto hails from the beginning of Krenek's adoption of the 12-tone technique. I say adoption, but this is not a wholesale assimilation of that controversial methodology, as Krenek valued his compositional freedom at all costs, even though he was labeled an "eclectic" because of it. True, this is more difficult music, but it is intensely beautiful, especially as the opening bars break the silence in the extreme upper register. Even in the somewhat severe final movement, a two-note motive, passed between piano and orchestra, provides a strap for travelers to grasp as the music moves along.

As I listen again, I'm reminded of the arch-like path, from simplicity to complexity and back, that Bartók followed through his six string quartets, but Krenek sounds nothing like the Hungarian composer. His music is uniquely referential; I have heard no other recordings of these three concertos and can find none, but it is difficult to imagine the music being played with more insight and conviction. Like Peter Hill's Messiaen, or Pascal Rogé's Debussy, Korzhev inhabits the pieces, and I hope the disc brings pianist and composer a wealth of new listeners. It is labeled

Volume 1, and I eagerly anticipate the second installment! **Marc  
Medwin**