21C
MEDIA GROUP

21C MEDIA GROUP, INC.
162 WEST 56TH ST, SUITE 506, NEW YORK, NY 10019
T (212) 245-2110 • F (212) 245-1965 • INFO@21CMEDIAGROUP.COM

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
Tuesday, February 26, 2008

CULTURAL CONVERSATION

Pursuing 'an Ongoing Experiment'

By STUART ISACOFF

Ismael Roldan

Romantic notions of the artist tend to fall into two categories – one, the fragile introvert (picture Chopin, the consumptive with a poetic soul); the other, the impassioned conqueror (think Beethoven, shaking his fist at the heavens). As it turns out, pianist Yefim Bronfman is a bit of each.

Audiences know him as a brawny, powerhouse virtuoso who appears unruffled by the most demanding works in the repertoire. This season, Carnegie Hall endowed him with a "Perspectives Series," an honor previously given to such stellar artists as pianists Daniel Barenboim, Richard Goode, Martha Argerich, Maurizio Pollini, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and the Emerson String Quartet. Mr. Bronfman's programs have included notoriously difficult pieces like Ravel's "Gaspard de la Nuit" and Balakirev's "Islamey."

When the pianist premiered a new piano concerto by conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen with the New York Philharmonic last year – a fierce, unrelenting work that seems to require of a soloist the stamina of an Olympic athlete – critic Peter G. Davis, writing in Musical America, described Mr. Salonen's attempt to "recapture the freewheeling, exuberant spirit" of the great 19th-century piano concertos, and declared the result "something of a miracle." The music's success, he explained, was due in part to "Bronfman's fire-eating virtuosity at the keyboard."

Yefim Bronfman is far from comfortable with such heroic imagery, however. Peer beneath the fire-eater surface and you'll find signs of tender introspection. He was a bit stunned, he says, that Carnegie Hall chose to anoint him with his own "Perspectives Series," wondering if he really deserved the distinction. "When I see all the fuss about me, I don't understand why," he says. It is a reflection of how seriously he takes his role as a performing artist. Reviewers may praise his seeming command of the music, he explains, but he doesn't believe in the virtuoso as vanquisher, or even in the ultimate perfectibility of an interpretation: "What's important is to be a musician for whom concerts are like taking something from your studio and showing it, and then taking it back for more work. It is always an ongoing experiment, never finished." He fantasizes about creating a concert in which no one knows who the performers are, thereby forcing the audience to pay attention only to the music – "That's where the focus belongs," he argues.

Sometimes, though, that's a lot to ask of an audience. At his "Perspectives" concert on Jan. 27, Mr. Bronfman joined James Levine and the Metropolitan Opera Chamber Ensemble at Zankel Hall in Alban Berg's extraordinarily challenging Chamber Concerto for Piano, Violin and 13 Winds. It was impossible to ignore the singular achievement involved in executing that composer's thorny complexities as if they were mere child's play. The pianist's uncanny ability to make the musical texture unfailingly clear throughout, his range of sonority – from lyrical to pungent, to explosive,

with earthy rumbles in the bass and light, tip-toeing passages in the treble – and the rhythmic precision of the pianist (and of violinist Gil Shaham, and the entire ensemble) apparently astounded even the conductor. When the piece ended, Mr. Levine could be seen mouthing the words "wow, wow, wow" as the audience jumped to its feet. "He wants to do it again," Mr. Bronfman later reported about Mr. Levine. "I do too. I had the time of my life; there was so much passion in music-making that night."

He has had a passion for music all of his life. Born in Tashkent in what is now Uzbekistan but was then part of the Soviet Union, Mr. Bronfman emigrated to Israel in 1973, at the age of 14, and trained there for four years with pianist Arie Vardi. "He gave me discipline," says Mr. Bronfman. "At the first lesson, I put music up on the piano and he took it away. 'Go home,' he told me. 'It's not acceptable to use the music. From now on you will play everything from memory.' And every week I had a lesson that lasted three or four hours, and I always had to play from memory. I learned the Berg Sonata in four or five days. I learned the entire first movement of the Rachmaninoff Third Piano Concerto for one lesson. He also made sure that I studied harmony and conducting and counterpoint, and made me listen to symphonies and operas."

Mr. Bronfman was only 15 when he won a music scholarship from the America-Israel Cultural Foundation, and violinist Isaac Stern – who was deeply involved with the organization – became a big supporter. Then Leonard Bernstein auditioned him in Israel. "He wanted to hire me to play Beethoven with the Berlin Philharmonic, on television," remembers Mr. Bronfman. "Stern said, 'Over my dead body.' I was so upset. But he was looking out for me. I was too young. I didn't have to wait very long, though. My debut in New York was with Bernstein and the Israel Philharmonic in 1976, playing the Rachmaninoff Third Concerto."

Meanwhile, Stern continued to mentor the young pianist, arranging for him to study at the Marlboro Music Festival with Rudolf Serkin, and then, when things didn't quite work out between Mr. Bronfman and Serkin, persuading the pianist and teacher Leon Fleisher to take him on. "I studied with Fleisher for 10 years," he reveals, "and it saved my life." The change was crucial to his development. "They were both obviously great musicians," he remembers, "but Serkin belonged to the old school – he was extremely self-critical, and he demanded of his students what he demanded of himself. I was still trying to understand the ways of this country, and having a tough time. Fleisher reached out to his students in a unique way. He was extremely encouraging, and he opened me up. I was somehow able to do what he asked, and he kept me from drowning." His career has been going nonstop ever since.

Nevertheless, the pianist's outward success is, he says, often counterbalanced by moments of excruciating vulnerability and self-doubt. "Sometimes I have nightmares in which I'm going to play the Brahms Concertos without being prepared," he tells me. "It happens to all of us. Mstislav Rostropovich once said, 'I had a nightmare that I was playing the Dvorak Concerto unprepared, and when I woke up it was true.' We musicians are involved in a kind of endless self-examination: Why didn't I do better at my last concert? When should I prepare for something three months down the line? There are endless questions, and the answers aren't always forthcoming. Unfortunately, sometimes you have to fail in order to learn."

It was Rostropovich who helped him get over some of the anxiety. "I was about to play the Tchaikovsky Concerto with him and the Vienna Philharmonic," recalls Mr. Bronfman. "I went to his room and said, 'Maestro, I'm so nervous I don't know what to do.' He said, 'Why are you nervous? No matter what happens tonight, we'll go out after the concert and have a nice dinner. It's not like being a pilot, when if you make a mistake everybody dies.'"

Perhaps that sentiment has helped spur Mr. Bronfman's unending sense of adventure. His current "Perspectives Series" included a performance with the leaderless Orpheus Chamber Orchestra.

"They wanted to do the Brahms First Piano Concerto, something I was uncomfortable about trying without a conductor. But then I thought, 'Perspectives' is not necessarily about being safe. It is also about taking chances. Actually, I think it's important to take risks in music-making all of the time." Hence, the Berg Chamber Concerto – a piece that is seldom programmed – appearing in this series, as well as world premieres from composers Marc-André Dalbavie and Jörg Widmann.

Future concerts in the series also include programs with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and conductor Valery Gergiev (Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto) on March 1 and "Yefim Bronfman and Friends," featuring cellist Lynn Harrell, violinist Gil Shaham and the Emerson String Quartet, on May 4.

It is the May 4 program that will include the two world premieres, along with music by Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky. Of the commissioned works, he says: "I believe in these composers. I commissioned Jörg Widmann after I met him and listened to his music. He's the type, I think, who needs to be inspired by a performer. He heard me play a Mozart concerto with Pierre Boulez – he had a piece premiered on the same program – and he told me that he had heard sounds in my playing that he hadn't heard before. And he wanted an opportunity to create a work that would explore them. He composed a 20-minute, 11-movement piece, a 'Humoresque.' Despite the name, this music is not particularly funny, though one movement is marked 'to be played with humor.' It is like Schumann's 'Humoresque,' which is one of the most serious pieces in the literature. It's wonderful music. I sense something special about this composer.

"This music, like the other seldom-heard works on my programs, is full of surprises, and often on the edge. I love all of it. And I have so much pleasure in performing it that I want the audience to feel that too. I think it's important that they see how much I believe in it. That's ultimately what I have to offer."

Mr. Isacoff is author of "Temperament: How Music Became a Battleground for the Great Minds of Western Civilization" (Vintage) and editor of Piano Today magazine.