

Born to play the classics

Pianist Gabriela Montero deplores the fact that improvisation is associated only with the world of jazz



EVAN MILTON

inside track

Venezuelan child-prodigy and acclaimed concert pianist Gabriela Montero is hailed for her interpretation of classical works, plays a quiverful of concertos with ease – and is an exponent of the lost art of improvisation in classical music.

When she arrives in South Africa next month, it is for a curious trio of concerts. She performs as the featured soloist on an evening of Rachmaninov, Mussorgsky and Beethoven with the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra, and a second evening that will delight lovers of Beethoven: the glorious *Ninth* with the CFO and two choirs and her performance of the composer's *Fifth Piano Concerto*.

But the third performance sees her in the Centre for 'The Book, where the audience will be asked to hum tunes and she will improvise on these – but within a classical paradigm, rather than from a jazz-oriented perspective.

"Remember that improvisation began in classical music, with Handel, Bach, Chopin and Beethoven," she says by telephone from Boston before her dates in Edinburgh, Italy and Australia. "At that time it was normal that the great performers were improvisers and, in fact, there were improvisation competitions that were almost like duels. At that time, it wasn't at all odd, but for some reason in the past decades it has basically become something that is of the jazz world and other types of music."

Although she has been praised in the press for reprising the "lost art" of classical improvisation, she dismisses the thought. "I'm just fulfilling all my sides as an artist," she says. "I was born to be a classical pianist, but I have always improvised as well, so it is something that I bring to the stage



SOLOIST: Gabriela Montero loves Bach and Rachmaninov

to complete myself, musically, to show all that I am. I don't feel like I'm bringing back something and I don't feel like I'm doing anything novel. It's just that there are very few classical pianists now who do this."

Montero was born in Caracas, gave her first public performance at five and had her concerto debut at eight with the Venezuelan Youth Orchestra. She was granted a scholarship from the Venezuelan government to study in the United States and, at 12, won the AMSA Young Artist International Piano Competition, performing

often think about that. I was lucky that my parents and my family are not musicians, so I had a pretty normal childhood because they were not imposing their own fantasies of what I should or should not be. It was clear from the beginning that I was born to be a pianist. There were many times when I studied or tried to do other things – I was very serious about studying psychology. It took me many years to realise that the piano is such a strong element of who I am that, even though parts of the profession are difficult and challenging, I would not be able to be happy unless I was playing. It is wonderful when I get the feedback from the audience and that moves me, that's what is driving this need for expression."

Montero is in Cape Town with acclaimed conductor, professional speaker and author of *The Art of Possibility*, Benjamin Zander. How do the pair decide on what material should be performed? Montero laughs. "Ben chose the repertoire – I believe we are doing *Concerto No. 2* and he also wanted a big Beethoven evening and I play all the Beethoven concertos, so I let him choose. We have been friends and played together many times, so you can blame it on him."

Pressed to reveal her favourite works, she says: "Oh my gosh, that is very difficult. You see, I am torn between two composers that are so different and so extreme, but at the same time speak to me so strongly: Bach and Rachmaninov."

With Bach, let's just say that he is the father of it all, at such a high spiritual level, but so human and so earthly. I relate to both sides of that, to the quest for a evolution to a high spiritual level, and to the struggles of being human on this earth. He was very much on both worlds, so direct and yet so sublime.

"For an artist, it is almost like trying to inhabit two worlds at the same time, and it is so absolutely moiré."
"Rachmaninov is so powerful, again for the same reasons, but his is a torrent of emotion and

romanticism and tragedy and soul. His music moves me so much as well."

She bemoans the fact that, with tours to three continents on the horizon, her interview schedule is such that she barely has time to practise – especially since she is a single mother with two daughters. It prompts a question about the little ones and the potential of music lessons.

"They are very musical, but being a concert pianist is not going to be their road in life," she says.

"My little one is five-and-a-half, so she's not really that interested yet. My 11-year-old is into other types of music – her thing is singing. To be a concert pianist, you have to have many elements in combination, and your life begins with music and it is a lifetime thing. It's not something you can start when you are 10 or 11. It is basically decided for you from birth."

● Gabriela Montero performs her unique classical improvisation for one night only on August 29 (Centre for the Book, 62 Queen Victoria Street, 7 to 10pm, R425, includes cocktails and canapés; tickets and details 021 913 3507 and lynette@symphonia.net).

She is also the featured soloist with American conductor and author Benjamin Zander and the Cape Philharmonic Orchestra, playing Rachmaninov's *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Beethoven's *Cortolan Op. 62* and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (arr. Revel) on August 23 (Artscape Opera House, 8pm; tickets Computicket or 021 221 7656; R110 - R150; student pensioner discounts available; pre-concert talk 7pm).

She plays Beethoven's *Fifth Piano Concerto* on August 28 with Zander conducting Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* with the CFO, the New Apostolic Church Choir, Tygerberg City Choir and soloists Sabina Mossolow, Violina Angelova, Sijlo Pulvesi and Theo Marangoni (City Hall, 8pm; pre-concert talk at 6:45pm). Get more on GabrielaMontero.com and on her ENM debut CD and its follow-up, *Bach and Beyond*.