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**DANIEL  
LEVY**

Una vida  
para el piano

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ENTREVISTAS KLAUS FLORIAN VOGT · LEONIDAS KAVAKOS · EVGENY KISSIN

# Daniel Levy

## A Life for the Piano

by Gonzalo Pérez Chamorro

Photographs by © Noah Shaye

After just a minute of conversation, one soon recognises that the person speaking is a gentleman. Daniel Levy speaks slowly but clearly, with a baritone voice. From his emission flows a flowery and exuberant vocabulary, but never pompous, the fruit of his meticulous Buenos Aires education. The famous pianist, who has only been living in Spain for a short time, praises the fact the weather is good for a season as cold as winter, while one can detect all the cultural background that a musician who has recorded a multitude of albums - all live - has accumulated, since, as the maestro states, "it is always live, even when there is no audience in the recording studio". Among these recordings, two stand out as a soloist, both conducted by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and accompanied by no less than the Philharmonia Orchestra. One is Brahms' *First Concerto* and the second are two works by Schumann, *Concerto Op. 54* and *Introduction and Allegro Appassionato Op. 92*. But Daniel Levy has also been a tireless worker, writer and pedagogue, without forgetting his recordings for solo piano (especially for Edelweiss Emission) and his frequent concerts, either solo, with orchestra or chamber music, "which is where I discovered that its nature is to establish relationships". His answer to my question about finding inspiration emerges as a *leitmotif*: "inspiration is found in the silence of the mind and in the wonders of nature, which have been the source of the most exquisite works of art". In his search for beauty there is much spirituality, and from it he has almost made a philosophy of life - a life that he does not understand without the black and white of the piano always by his side, the piano of his indispensable Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Grieg, Franck, Debussy or Scriabin.



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## Interview

### Ritmo (Spain)

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**Maestro, after an important international career of concerts and recordings, you have arrived in our country. What links you to Spain? What is the purpose of your stay in our country?**

Spain has always been alive in my family through my maternal grandparents, evoking in me various aspects of the great literature and poetry that I loved to listen to as a child and, later, having the experience of it being a favourite subject of my studies as a youth. Its rich music accompanied me thanks to my family, both in terms of its popularity and later through the richness of Albéniz, Granados and Manuel de Falla, some of whose piano works I studied in my formative years. So I am united by a sympathy, in its deepest sense, and admiration for Spain's great artists and thinkers, as many as they are multifaceted. I believe that an endless number of life circumstances, besides frequent stays during my travels and tours, led me to choose this beautiful country to live in and develop what I feel is important and essential in Music as well as in Education and Philosophy. I would say that more than a purpose based on projections or ideas, this is a suitable space, which appears to me to be fertile for carrying out my possible contribution and existence. In a way, it is a return to my origins.

**What leads you to devote yourself with body and soul to a new work; to study it?**

First a consonance is generated, which does not appear because I have planned to study that new work. A form of magnetic attraction, which distinguishes between what I want to hear and what I face, in order to make it mine in some way. Sometimes pieces that I would not have thought of working on appear without being sought out. There are also many others in the vast piano repertoire that widen the horizons and elevate, to the point of being like milestones that an artist must cross. When the time comes to study, what is mysterious is the way you need to penetrate what the composer left behind as signs and, beyond those signs what exists between the lines. I firmly believe that what we call works are living and organic beings, and they manifest themselves to us in unthinkable ways. In short, in order to dedicate the soul and body there must exist, in my own case, a fascination, which goes beyond mere curiosity.

**Within the vast repertoire of which you speak, what or who forms an essential part of your repertoire, and what others have you discarded?**

This is a very interesting question. I cannot esteem categories that prioritise some composers over others, and make selections from among their own works, given the immense existing repertoire for piano. I clarify this, because in addition to the repertoire as a soloist, I am passionate about chamber music and Lied, which makes these choices and affinities much broader. But nothing leaves me indifferent, and that is why Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Grieg, Franck, Debussy and Scriabin are among my essentials. Also Rachmaninov and, to a different extent, others like Guastavino, Granados, Falla and Albéniz. I love Dvorák, even though his piano work is relatively scarce, and Gabriel Fauré seems very profound to me. As for the works that are not included, I can say that it is not a question of leaving them aside, but there are many works that I prefer to listen to when performed by other musicians, such as those by Prokofiev or Bartók. There is not enough time for all the wonderful works within the repertoire and it is always necessary to have the discernment to decide which works accompany one's own path. On the other hand, a musician must certainly know and deal with different styles and languages, but it is not compulsory that he should perform every composition. If that were the case, there would be no way of going deeper into anything.

**You spoke about Lied and about "deciding which works accompany one's path". This leads us directly to the *Winterreise*...**

I feel that the *Winter Journey* is a type of apex, a philosophical search by Schubert, of his own life and of an almost initiatory journey. He searches for the meaning of life, and at the same time an objective that ends in silence. It feels like the entire journey of a human being until it reaches a kind of realisation which, in my opinion ends in silence.

**How does Daniel Levy see all these types of final works, such as *Winterreise*, the last Beethoven Sonatas or the final pieces of Brahms, when you are approaching a similar vital stage?**

Except in the case of Schubert, of course, who composed *Winterreise* at the end of his young life. These "final" works for me deserve such respect that I sometimes think they should not be performed in concert. They are works for one's intimacy, for oneself. They reflect a world so intimate that perhaps they shouldn't be played in public. In fact, we don't know if Beethoven would have liked it.

**Final and enigmatic...**

True, they are all works steeped in mystery. Another work that is adapted to this enigmatic final period of many creators, is Bach's *The Art of Fugue*. It was also composed for a Pythagorean society and as such has its own symbolism and numerical relationship, which moves it to a higher level of thought, perhaps unique in the history of art. As you know, it could not be completed, it is supposedly unfinished, and even this aspect gives it its enigmatic nature above any other work. Its meaning, so to speak, has not yet been found.

**What is it about a pianist that distinguishes them from other instrumentalists, perhaps their ability to encompass everything, to play on instruments that are always different?**

I feel very identified with what Liszt says so clearly about the piano. For him, the piano was "like the horse for the Arab". I have found it to be the most faithful friend, a wonderful extension of emotions, thoughts and intuitions. Someone in whom you can entrust your own desires and ideals. And clearly a living being. I don't always like to make note of what distinguishes it from other instruments, which is the idiosyncrasy of the soloist who, because the piano encompasses all registers, mistakenly believes that he can isolate himself and appear as someone who is sufficient to make music. Instead, it fascinates me to the core when it assumes the noble colour of a cello, or the timbre of a clarinet, and when it seems like a human voice. That is where I discover that its nature is to establish relationships. The fact you find different pianos in every music hall, when it is not possible to bring your own - the one you have worked on and sought to consecrate your time - is part of a psychological and athletic training, where it is possible to find surprises. Perhaps this is the least rewarding aspect, depending on how the instruments have been cared for in music halls. In any case, everyone has a different voice and it is necessary to be flexible to make it your own in only a few hours. In short, I prefer that which unites you to the music rather than that which distinguishes you from wonderful instruments of another kind.

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## Interview Ritmo (Spain)

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**"There is not enough time for all the wonderful works within the repertoire and it is always necessary to have the discernment to decide which works accompany one's own path.", the pianist affirms.**

### **To what extent does an interpreter's state of mind, life and deeds, his or her struggles, condition him or her?**

The word performer, which is most commonly used for musicians who do not play their own compositions, is the first conditioner. He is not and must not be a poor translator, or a mere performer of all the notes and written indications, but he should become as much as possible an intermediary between the composer's intention and its audible form, which is when the music "sounds", firstly from silence. And the intermediary is always susceptible to their own states of mind, facts of life, contexts and local or planetary situations, from the moment they become a human being participating in global life. But I believe that those things that condition us must have the ability to be experiences that make us understand what the creators lived through, felt and intuited. In this way what vibrates in music is something that comes from experience, and this is transferred to sound, to breath and to emotion. Otherwise, we would witness robotic modalities who repeat what they read without absolutely understanding it. When one enters the realm of music there is, in turn, a type of transcendence, which gives every fleeting thing its place, but that also allows the universal and timelessness of works that are centuries old to be listened today in a way that moves us beyond the era in which we live.

### **Can you tell us about an unforgettable experience you had at one of your concerts?**

I have had several experiences in concert, which are unforgettable for very different reasons, mainly because of the psychological states the music led me to. But these are facts that are attributable to myself, in relation to an orchestra or to a special music hall. During these times there is a component that for me represents a clear sign, an example of what music can do and transform in those who listen to it. For years now, it has become a habit for me to perform what I call "Concert-Dialogues", where I try to put the audience in tune with the thoughts and intuitions declared by the composers, through their words and works, generating an atmosphere of intimacy and an individual relationship with each listener, which is something that I

consider to be superior to the traditional form of the concert.

### **Like a guide for the listener..**

Right, it's like a guide, it's like putting the listener in a situation closer to the immediate interpretation, preparing them to not be afraid of what they are going to hear. They are not lessons in musicology, but a way of investigating the inner space of the creator, the feelings they expressed before or after composing, their inspiration and, as a consequence, their life. A young man who had never listened to classical music came to one of these concerts, brought by his mother to accompany her. What he heard, what I said and the pieces I performed were not at all easy, such as the *Intermezzi* and the *Ballads* by Brahms, which are not exactly the ones you usually hear when introducing yourself to the repertoire. At the end of the concert, he approached me, strongly moved and impacted by the experience, telling me that from that moment on he would dedicate his time to listening to classical music and studying the lives of the great creative geniuses. Because in an instant he had discovered a new, important and fascinating world. At that moment I noticed with more clarity and amazement the immense need for the contact and closeness that allows one to realise that there were young people who gave the world masterpieces, and that many other young people (apparently distant from that world) can discover the goodness that this listening brings to their lives. I consider it an unforgettable experience, which has been multiplied by bringing others closer to works of great importance, which can be appreciated as doors to an unknown landscape, by young people who have only heard rock, pop and other music genres. Without a doubt, it is something magnificent that connects people with a true musical education to develop new music lovers.

### **This need to explain music has also led to the publication of several books...**

Indeed, for the International Academy of Euphony (Locarno, Switzerland) I published *Euphony, The Sound of Life*, about the effects of sound on the human being; *Pythagoras and Euphony*,

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## Interview Ritmo (Spain)

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which reveals the intimate relationship between Pythagoras and Euphony as a reality applicable to human relations; *Echoes of the Wind, the Story of a Journey Towards the Centre of Sound*; and *Eternal Beauty*, stories, maxims and reflections on the archetypes of Beauty.

### **Would you say that the 19th century and Romanticism, like Schumann, are the pillars of your repertoire?**

Actually my main pillar is Bach, from where everything that has followed him derives. Everything we listen to, in terms of western classical music from the last 300 years, has Bach as its source - without exception. So are Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, in terms of enormous sources. Romanticism was able to understand this inexhaustible source and, among them, Schumann represents for me the one who knew how to give language to the intimate and deep, whispered in the ear. He is a turning point in 19th century music and has, in his imagination and intuition, a magic that emanates from states of the human soul like few others. In my repertoire, I consider Scriabin to be a focal point who, in my opinion, is the true precursor to the changes in the music of the 20th century. Stravinsky himself was unable to identify where he had emerged from and how he would inspire others to follow him.

### **But you will have your Eusebius days and your Florestan days...**

Some days of Eusebius and others of Florestan, but sometimes I must invoke Maestro Raro, who was the unifier and synthesiser of the right balance between these tendencies of the spirit.

### **And Bach... his *Goldberg Variations*, *Partitas*, *Well-Tempered Clavier*...**

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* is for tempering the soul. Some time ago I recorded *Book I* in the wonderful acoustics of a baroque hall in Austria which gave me a type of peace consonant with that exalted music. *The Art of Fugue* is surely Bach's most mysterious work and I always work on it as a unifier of all voices. The *Partitas* are portentous works and I have had the privilege of studying them with Maria Tipo in Florence. I owe my affinity with Bach to her for the serious devotion she transmitted through her teaching, which I have treasured every time I have been faced with these monumental works. I visit the *Goldberg Variations* and they are waiting for me to integrate them into my repertoire. The great and vivid versions, like those by Rosalind Tureck and Peter Serkin, are archetypes of simplicity and eloquence.

### **How much of an interpretation does the final result owe to inspiration and work?**

As Brahms said when asked about his inspiration, he said that sweat and work were a solid foundation on which inspiration could rest. In my experience, working on a work from the outside and from the inside leads to glimpses of the inspiration that led to its creation. This too is a term that has lost its meaning and applies to any little thing, whereas in artistic creation and science it is due to something we possess but do not frequent, a kind of upper floor where our vital elevator and we ourselves prefer not to visit. When we do, the surprise is great, because we become aware of possessing an unheard of treasure that has yet to be opened.

### **And speaking of inspiration, is it easy to find?**

It is more difficult and arduous to find it in the midst of the noises and superficiality that we find every day in the lifestyle we have been instilled with, completely focused on the outside. Our apparent speedy approach to all things important, makes us believe that we have reached the bottom of a subject and, in truth, we have only partially understood the shell. Inspiration is found in the silence of the mind and in the wonders of nature, which has been the source

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of the greatest works of art. It is precisely this absence that makes our comfortable ways of listening obsolete and the reason we must approach renewed ways of creating, studying and listening to classical music, very different from that constant distraction, lack of concentration and admiration for the passing glamour, which leaves the substance and transforming effects of musical sounding in oblivion.

### **Do you listen to yourself? Do you listen to other pianists?**

I listen to myself intensely while I work and study, not only with the eagerness of self-criticism that modifies or corrects, but as a verification of an internal listening that takes place only when reading the score, without the instrument, and also in the moment before the production of the sound. In general, this practice helps one to discover intentions and colours that otherwise would have no place. There is little point in only listening afterwards. It is listening that prepares audibility. And strangely enough, it is what is least taught in conservatories and academies: to listen without the instrument, to listen to oneself, and above all to listen in order to understand what the composer heard before writing the notes that form the score. I listen to pianists who enlighten what they play and who have been lucky enough to listen to their teachers and discover for themselves, without copying by listening to recordings that shape them. That is, those who were born of their own intuition with the legacy of the teaching they received. Schnabel, Backhaus, Arrau or Kempff are inexhaustible sources of splendour, of real humility, as are Ingrid Haebler and Clara Haskil. I believe that after them the piano "ego" and the fireworks were born, which are interesting but do not manage to move me, as they make the intermediary noticeable and worth more than the creator and his music.

### **What are you asking the audience?**

Before asking the audience I ask musicians to investigate the intuitions and deep reasons of Music, its role in the world and its qualities, not only aesthetic but transformative, educational and healing. Only musicians can change and overcome the crisis experienced by many talented young people who currently have no examples to follow. I believe that the time of the divas, of the piano tamers and acrobatic shows, which always attract amazement, has passed - that they are far from the intentions and hopes nourished by that reduced number of creators, whose works are used in abundance throughout the musical world. Beethoven, who today celebrated the 250th anniversary of his birth, said: "I have not composed these works to distract you but to bring the new man to birth". The audience should then be put in a position to claim this attitude from the musicians. I think this is one of the reasons why the audience at concerts has decreased dramatically. The traditional concert form has now been revealed to be outdated. And the change lies not only in its form, but in its essence.

### **He has been slow to emerge - like the main prize in the Christmas lottery - but he has already been quoted in this interview: Beethoven...**

I consider him to be the true Hero of Music. I would like to quote a letter that has always impressed me, that he wrote when he was only 11 years old and that says it all, about this "deaf" person who could

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## Interview Ritmo (Spain)

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**"Inspiration is found in the silence of the mind and in the wonders of nature, which have been the source of the most exquisite works of art", says Daniel Levy.**

hear the human heart and elevate it to great heights: "From the age of four music began to be the most important of my youthful occupations. Having become familiar with the sweet Muse with which my soul was endowed for pure harmonies, I learned to cherish her and she, too, at least so it seemed to me, also took to me. Now I reached my eleventh year and from then on in sacred hours of inspiration my Muse would often whisper 'try it out, write down the harmonies of your soul'. Only eleven – I thought – what kind of figure would I cut as a composer? What would adults expert in the art say? I was almost intimidated. But my Muse insisted and I obeyed and composed." 239 years have passed since this letter and there is no need for other comments...

**Let's talk about your recordings. There are many and they are very good...**

I have a special relationship with my recordings, probably because I have always been fortunate to be able to choose the repertoire I wanted to tackle and because of the acoustic response of selected special spaces that give natural life to the sound, outside of recording studios. Some of these recordings have also been of concerts. It's funny that when you do that it is called "live", since it's always live, even when there's no audience. Favouring immediacy, they are all experiences equal to or greater than those of a concert. From my understanding they are not photographs of a single instant, but living forms, as they are spaces full of art, whose atmosphere can be captured by the microphones. I have been able to record a good number of them, alone, on camera with notable musicians such as Nicolás Chumachenco, Wolfgang Holzmair or Franco Ormezowski, among others, or performing Lieder and works with orchestra. In this case, I especially remember the collaboration with the great Dietrich

Fischer-Dieskau, in his capacity as conductor and reciter of the only three Lieder for recited voice by Schumann. It was a collaboration that was captured on two albums, one with the *Piano Concerto No. 1* by Brahms and, on another CD, the aforementioned Schumann, with the *Piano Concerto in A minor Op. 54 and the Introduction and Allegro Appassionato Op. 92*, with the Philharmonia Orchestra. Both works, as I say, were conducted by Fischer-Dieskau, who will always remain in my memory for his powerful ability to make the orchestra sing. Among other records there are Schubert's *Sonatas* and the *Complete Lyric Pieces* by Grieg, Mozart's and Beethoven's *Sonatas*. Other new ones will be published this year, and a series of sessions with works by Rachmaninov and Scriabin are expected shortly.

**Who is Daniel Levy today? How can he define himself?**

Actually, as a student. I always keep in mind what Backhaus said when he was asked what he would like to hear when Beethoven received him in the afterlife. He would say, "Well, little Wilhelm, you've done something." I am a student in the sense of a seeker, who pursues something, beyond time and age.

**You haven't lost your curiosity...**

Of course, but even more so, I am amazed, amazed at the very works that I have worked on for so long, which continue to reveal themselves to me with new details that continually astonish me.

**What was Daniel Levy like in his early years as a musician?**

I have great respect for the teachers I had, and I am grateful to them for what I can do every day. In particular, Vicente Scaramuzza, who always told us: "I don't teach for the piano, I teach for life". And this, when you are seventeen years old, leaves you thinking in front of a keyboard... I remember all kinds of concerts, learning, learning to listen as time went by, without limiting myself to the piano as such.

**You are more of a pianist of pianissimo finales than fortissimo finales...**

The applause that motivates the fortissimi does not have the reflection that pianissimo generates, even though it is a very suggestive and highly productive and favourable method. I had the experience of listening live, together with my family, to a Mahler Novena in London which Claudio Abbado conducted at the end of his life, and those endless minutes after the last dying note and the silence that followed, which could be cut with a knife, are among the most intense musical experiences I have had. The idea of the applause is important, but in many cases it breaks the atmosphere created; without the applause, the music stays more inside of you, you take it with you; the applause gratifies the musician, of course, but it releases the tension of the spectator.

**What do you expect from life?**

To know that my purpose has served something, especially to young people. To be able to leave some seed.

**Has life been fair to your efforts?**

When an effort has borne fruit, it can be considered more important than the idea that "all is well". On the other hand, I feel that every sincere effort has its reward and that many of them germinate when life considers them useful.

**We have reached the 'coda', and I can't help but ask you about your future projects...**

I am going to celebrate Beethoven at a festival in Switzerland, playing his chamber music with piano, in meetings with great

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## Interview Ritmo (Spain)

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musicians. After that, I have a tour in Italy, a series of Masterclasses and I am preparing projects in Spain, probably for 2021. As for the recordings, I have sessions with works by Rachmaninov and Scriabin, both of whose works I have already recorded, but now I am going to record Rachmaninov's *First Sonata* combined with the *Corelli Variations*; both works in D-minor, but with a time frame ranging from one of his first works to one of his last. And by Scriabin many short pieces; I have already recorded the *Preludes Op. 11*, but I am going to perform other opuses and other short pieces. What Stravinsky says about Scriabin is: "It is known that he came from Chopin, but not who can follow in his wake...".

by **Gonzalo Pérez Chamorro**

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