

Fiddler on the rise

The world's fastest violinist bows to rock _ a crossing of genres to reach young fans and make a statement of intent for classical music

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David Garrett studied under legendary violinists Ida Haendel and Itzhak Perlman, played with top orchestras and conductors such as Zubin Mehta and is in Guinness World Records as the world's fastest violinist playing Rimsky-Korsakov's Flight of the Bumblebee.



PHOTOS: PORNPROM SATRABHAYA

Yet when he arrived in town last month to promote his crossover album *Rock Symphonies*, his introduction to the Thai media was as "the David Beckham of classical music". It was a nod to his looks and star quality _ a chorus of calls from female fans greeted him at one promotional event for the concert _ and appearances on talk shows around the world, including the Oprah Winfrey Show.

While Beckham's social and footballing judgements over the years might make him a questionable paragon of crossover superstardom, there is some logic to the comparison. After all Garrett, like Beckham, is exceptionally good at what he does, has long sandy hair, worked as a fashion model in New York, attracts many fans who could care less about his career pursuits ... and is named David.

Brunch sat down with him to learn more about the man behind the curious construct of a classical music celebrity.

Garrett, 31, grew up in Aachen, Germany, to an American ballerina and German lawyer. Born Bongartz, he uses his mother's surname professionally. His flawless English carries only the faintest of Teutonic overtones but he insists he was raised German rather than bilingually.

"Everything is merging," he says, "so I don't feel I was brought up between cultures. My mum and dad decided before school it would make sense to speak one language. All the English I know I learned in school."

While classical music is often associated with "old Europe" and rock with US brashness, Garrett insists his choice to cross musical genres was not due to his family roots.



"My parents were quite conservative, both more into classical music. Let's say the person I am now, I don't think my parents have much to do with that any more. They would have chosen a different road. At some point you've got to have your own mind."

The great violinists who influenced his early career, he says, such as Perlman at the famous Juilliard School in New York, constantly emphasised to him the importance of having his own mind.

"I think the most important thing I learned from the great musicians I worked with is that you can play the violin well, but everything else you have to learn for yourself. The sound is too genormt [normalised] now, where everybody keeps sounding alike," he says. "And if you look back, especially in the '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s, all of the violinists had their own idea of sound, of break and vibrato and bow speed, everything was more individual _ and Haendel, Perlman, Isaac Stern, [Yehudi] Menuhin, they all emphasised that in the end it is dangerous to listen too much to other violinists."

That Garrett is his own man is apparent during the photo shoot during our interview. He plays violin for the camera but when asked for a different pose he insists on continuing to play instead, demonstrating passion for his music more than petulance after a draining morning flight from Singapore.

"You have to have the guts and the balls to come up with your own mind," he says. "There's enough information in the score, and information that's not there you have to come up with yourself. It's probably a little more scary to convince people of your own ideas but that's what music is about _ it's an individual take on the composer."

The New York setting at Juilliard School suited Garrett much better than London, where he was expelled from the Royal College of Music for not attending classes.

"Everybody has to find the people around them to give them the right inspiration," he says pensively. "Maybe it wasn't the right time for me in London. Being able to work with Perlman in New York gave me a different attitude, freedom and motivation. For me Perlman was always an icon, and I wanted to go to New York first, while London was a sort of compromise. Compromises never really turn out great."

Garrett stresses that musical collaboration at its best is not about compromise. He has often worked with full orchestras and imposing conductors including Mehta and Rafael Fruhbeck de Burgos, yet he's been able to find harmony between his ideas for a composition and those of the conductors.

"Music-making is about listening, communication and adapting to what the other person brings to the table," he says. "If you listen you automatically communicate and change the way you play."

Garrett says that while everyone goes in with opinions about a composition, the actual performance is an organic process that must be allowed to develop in the moment. "It's really a sense of knowing what's happening around you and being able to answer quickly. If someone brings a different emotion to the stage you have to also adapt to that and the emotion you've rehearsed. It's very important to have music be living."

Despite the number of orchestras struggling for funding, Garrett says he is not worried about classical music's future.

"Classical music is probably the most healthy music of all," says. "I want to see jazz and R&B and rock survive for 300 years."

He says that many orchestras still receive public or government funding but that this is no reason for those promoting the genre to remain complacent.

"Even if you have a great product you still have to promote it, you have to present it and make sure people pay attention. Every other musical direction does it, and classical has even more legitimate reason to do it because of its quality."

Rock Symphonies certainly commands attention. The album contains songs made famous by Nirvana, Wings, Metallica, Led Zeppelin, John Fogerty, Guns N' Roses and Aerosmith, mixed with compositions by Vivaldi, Bach, Beethoven, Grieg and Alveniz, as well as original pieces, all in a fresh and virtuosic violin-heavy voice.

"Everyone has their own path to promote classical music," Garrett says. "For me it was crossover. I'm sure every classical musician has their own take on what can be done, but it's important to do something to promote the music."

Garrett likes to alternate pure classical with his crossover albums, so in the latest, Legacy, just released in Germany, he plays Mozart, Beethoven and Bach. For the next album, he says, he is undecided.

"Music always has to live. You have to have the education to know what's happening around you [musically]. You can't be ignorant. Once you have the knowledge, you have to go back to the original reason you went into music, which was to have a good time and enjoy it."

He says such flexibility is nothing new.

"If you look back, especially [Niccolo] Paganini, how many classical pieces did he write variations on? Why did he do it? Because he knew audiences would know what was popular at the time," he says. "I'm doing the same, taking something which is mainstream and making it virtuosic and interesting _ that's how you connect to audiences, that's how to keep interest in the instrument, that's how you build a bridge. I find my way of making music more traditional than just playing, at least from a virtuosic point of view."

Garrett has been quite successful at reaching across genres and ages with his albums. He estimates most of his fans are between 25 and 40; however, "there are older people and also young kids of 12 or 13".

He says he feels honoured to be an ambassador for classical music.

"If you have a passion for it you have to find your way in it. How great is it to find new audiences, to promote something that has such quality. I'm going to do everything in my power to have as many people listen to it as possible.

"The biggest problem with classical music is it's nowhere to be seen. The only thing I can do is try to make it visible. From my experience, once people listen to it without prejudice, especially young people, they fall in love with it."

He has been on judging panels for competitions in order to develop independent musicians' careers and give something back to music.

What would be his advice for a young musician trying to make it in this difficult industry?

"There's so much pressure and so many obstacles, even if you have talent. You have to really believe in yourself every second and fight for what you want to do. You shouldn't define success by money or having a lot of concerts. Success can be defined by giving yourself goals and reaching them. Everything else is secondary."

Garrett started playing at four and within a year was winning violin competitions. By 13 he had two CDs and several TV appearances to his name. By 14 he was the youngest soloist in Europe and by 17 he had played with the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra under Mehta. His rise was meteoric _ so was he always confident of his own talent?

"F***, I don't even know now," he exclaims. "I knew that I could play the violin well, that's it. Talent is something you have to grasp. I think talent is 90% hard work and 10% of pushing yourself even beyond that."

And by pushing himself, he hopes also to push an entire genre back into lasting international prominence.