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David Garrett: the Beckham of the violin

Adam Sweeting meets David Garrett, the pin-up who plays Nirvana and Led Zeppelin on the fiddle .



Dave Garrett: endorsed by young fans and eminent musicians

By Adam Sweeting

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At the age of 31, violinist David Garrett has already had two careers. He signed to the classical label Deutsche Grammophon when he was 13, which led to him recording Mozart concertos and Paganini's Caprices and playing concerts with the world's leading orchestras. But today, you're as likely to find him in a sports arena playing music from his Rock Symphonies album to shrieking hordes of fans as to hear him exploring Beethoven's violin concerto in some stately concert hall.

Which one is the real Garrett? Both, according to him. In person, with his Kurt Cobain-style blond hair, motorcycle boots, jeans and medallions, he looks like he's about to stroll onstage with a metal band, but he swears that classical music will always be in his blood.

“I never stopped playing classical music,” he says, in fluent English inflected with both his native German and a trace of New York, where he went to study in the late Nineties. “But when you become really accomplished on the violin, and you can play the technical stuff from Paganini onwards, you can literally do anything. It’s just a matter of what you really want to do with music.”

It’s the rocky Garrett who will appear tonight at the Shepherd’s Bush Empire in London, leading his five-piece band through his own arrangements of such rock anthems as Nirvana’s Smells Like Teen Spirit, Aerosmith’s Walk This Way, Metallica’s Master of Puppets and Led Zeppelin’s Kashmir. A particular highlight is likely to be Vivaldi vs Vertigo, where he rams together the thundering riff from U2’s Vertigo with the Winter Concerto from Vivaldi’s Four Seasons. Bono liked it so much he wrote Garrett a congratulatory letter.

“I don’t agree that rock music is less technically developed than classical,” Garrett says. “Even if a rock song is fast and exciting it still has that sense of relaxation, because it’s never on the beat but slightly behind it. You need a good sense of musicianship to achieve that. And if I listen to a great guitar solo by somebody like Eddie Van Halen, I ask myself if there’s some inspiration there I can use for the violin.”

Musicians who dare to step outside the classical bubble in search of broader, and younger, audiences usually hear the doors clanging firmly shut behind them. Yet such eminences of classical music as violinist Itzhak Perlman and conductor Zubin Mehta are happy to endorse the quality of Garrett’s playing, while his revered violin teacher Ida Haendel argues that, “If he loves rock music, let him do it. He can still be a wonderful classical violinist and do rock.”

Garrett points out that the musicians he truly respects are the most liberal when it comes to crossover projects. “Perlman loves doing those kind of things, and [cellist] Yo-Yo Ma. They’re all about music, not what kind of music, as long as the quality is there.”

It’s Garrett’s parents we have to thank for their son’s career path, though not in the way they planned it. His father, Georg Bongartz, plays the violin and runs an auction house in Germany which frequently handles priceless violins. His mother, Dove Garrett, was a ballerina in Washington DC before she came to work in Germany and met Georg. Spotting David’s musical talent early on, they set about hothousing him towards a classical career (David used his mother’s surname so as not to appear to be trading on the Bongartz name in Germany). It was all going well until it dawned on the teenage David that everybody was having a say in his future except him. He decided to strike out on his own, move to New York and study at the Juilliard school.

“My life in Germany had been extremely sheltered. I had never taken public transport, never gone grocery shopping or known how to do the laundry. I never went to buy clothes because my mum always did that for me. When I told them I was going to New York, they said: ‘If you want to do it you’ll have to get the money for tuition yourself.’ I guess they wanted me to fail, which is kind of weird. But I didn’t want to prove them right. It gave me really strong motivation.”

One way he paid his bills was by modelling menswear, appearing in catwalk shows and being photographed for Vogue wearing Armani. This helped to earn him the nickname of “the David Beckham of the violin”.

He puts his head in his hands when I bring this up. “I stopped doing that eight years ago!” he wails. “Jesus Christ, it keeps following me around... I needed to pay for tuition, and we had very limited time off from school. I had to come up with quick money, and modelling was the easiest way to do it.”

Naturally, Garrett’s pin-up qualities haven’t hindered his progress as a popular violin icon. Anyway, he adds, he’s only following in the great tradition of flamboyant crowd-pleasing fiddlers such as Fritz Kreisler or Pablo de Sarasate.

“In the end, are you just playing for 20 critics, or are you playing for thousands of people and giving them a great time?” he says. “It’s your responsibility to grow a new audience for your generation, because who else is going to do it?”