

# Mindful play on expression

Reguero, Anna . Reguero, Anna.

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## ABSTRACT

[...]it takes guts to admit that annoying your collaborative partners, which include world-renowned violinist Joshua Bell and cellist Steven Isserlis, is on the top of your to-do list -- possibly above practicing Ligeti etudes for a concert later the same day. In his popular blog, Think Denk at [jeremydenk.blogspot.com](http://jeremydenk.blogspot.com), he reveals the person behind the pianist, who is not only constantly thinking about music in endlessly creative and relevant ways, but also one whose writing ability is only second to his piano playing. [...]Liszt's Hungarian nationality left the window open for Denk to start off boldly with another Hungarian, Bartok, where the pianistic color and shading are elements shared between the two composers, however different their approach to tonality and rhythm.

## FULL TEXT

Not every pianist can create a fictional conversation on the Beethoven Hammerklavier Sonata with politician Sarah Palin.

"Beethoven," the fictional Palin says, "is the guy who said thanks but no thanks to Napoleon."

Nor could every pianist find traces of Schubert in the Twilight series soundtracks. And it takes guts to admit that annoying your collaborative partners, which include world-renowned violinist Joshua Bell and cellist Steven Isserlis, is on the top of your to-do list -- possibly above practicing Ligeti etudes for a concert later the same day.

But pianist Jeremy Denk -- who performs a recital at the Eastman School of Music on Tuesday -- isn't an ordinary pianist.

In his popular blog, Think Denk at [jeremydenk.blogspot.com](http://jeremydenk.blogspot.com), he reveals the person behind the pianist, who is not only constantly thinking about music in endlessly creative and relevant ways, but also one whose writing ability is only second to his piano playing. His blog, started in 2005, has been a gateway for invitations to write pieces for The New York Times and The New Yorker magazine.

Denk, 42, chalks it all up to a lifelong love for literature and an attention deficit for sticking to one intellectual task. As an undergrad at Oberlin College, he double-majored in music and chemistry, while also squeezing in as many English courses as he could muster. He earned his master's degree at Indiana University and his doctorate at Juilliard.

"I've always had a yen to be a writer, I'll admit that. I love to read, I'm obsessed with literature," he says.

Playing the piano or writing about music, it's all just communicating about music, he says.

"It's complicated, because I wrote something about how in some corners of the world, musicians aren't really

supposed to think. The corollary to that is that somehow thinking deprives music of its emotional core," he says. "I still think it can, but I don't necessarily think it has to. When David Foster Wallace decides to think about tennis, he somehow finds a way to reveal incredible emotional layers: the game, the idea of the game, the players, what they must be going through, for example. And so, I'm mostly of the school that thinking isn't always bad."

Indeed, his quirky, postmodern writing transfers well to the keyboard -- or maybe vice versa. He seeks connections between the two disciplines.

"I love seeing the literary qualities in music, the narrative qualities, the things about the rhythm or sentence or poem that are connected to the way music unfolds. I find all those connections often very enlightening and inspiring, and they help me think about music freshly again," he says. "How do we reawaken the moment when Beethoven had written something but people didn't even know it yet, it was just sitting on his music stand? Or maybe, even when Beethoven was in the middle of composing and didn't know how it was going to go?"

It's the literary and narrative qualities of music that inform his interpretations, particularly in his current recital program. The dualities of heaven and hell bind the wildly contrasting Liszt Dante Sonata with Beethoven's brooding C-minor Sonata, Op. 111. Bach's Prelude and Fugue in B-minor sustains the mood.

Literary notes on love, first based on the Italian Renaissance poet Petrarch and then the story of Tristan and Isolde set to music originally by Wagner, are the sources behind two other Liszt works to be performed. And Liszt's Hungarian nationality left the window open for Denk to start off boldly with another Hungarian, Bartok, where the pianistic color and shading are elements shared between the two composers, however different their approach to tonality and rhythm.

Denk, as usual, says it best: "Beethoven is channeling Bach in op. 111, then there's Bach on the program, and then there's Liszt channeling Bach. I think all of that is supposed to sit together, sort of a mini-theme, a sub-plot." If all the sub-plots involved in the program sound too numerous to recognize, Denk's playing will surely lead listeners through it all.

Denk's playing has often been called cerebral -- though it's a designation he wears with caution.

"It's usually associated with something where the flesh of the music vanishes and you're left with the skeleton of the structure," he says. Instead, he probes the score to find metaphor and imagery that can help access its emotional depth. Such ambitions are his hope with his latest recording project, the monumental Goldberg Variations, which should be released this spring.

As well worn as piano literature gets, Denk hopes to reveal not only its complex construction but also its humanity.

"What I have to say about it is hopefully about how much of a big tent piece it is, in which every imaginable human emotion is contained," he says. "It is a little miniature universe; some of the silliest to the most profound thoughts are in it."

For the moment, he continues to receive praise for his recent recording of Ligeti and Beethoven works; he performs his Eastman program three days later at Carnegie Hall.

In the little bit of time left in between his concert schedule, he'll likely be seeking idiosyncratic ways of writing about the untold life of a concert pianist, his analytical thoughts along with the search for good coffee serving as a very

personal kind of program notes into his creative mind.

Reguero, former classical music critic for the Democrat and Chronicle, is a doctoral student at State University at Stony Brook.

If you go

What: Jeremy Denk recital.

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday.

Where: Eastman School of Music's Kilbourn Hall, 26 Gibbs St.

Cost: \$10 to \$20.

For tickets: (585) 454-2100 or [esm.rochester.edu](http://esm.rochester.edu).

## DETAILS

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