

**Anton Kuerti, pianist
with The Boston Symphony Orchestra
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Dad saves the day for Kuerti, BSO

By Matthew Guerrieri

Tuesday's Boston Symphony Orchestra concert paid tribute to every parent who ever bailed his kid out of a jam. Pianist Leon Fleisher fell victim to a stomach virus late Tuesday afternoon, putting the evening's scheduled performance of Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 5 ("Emperor") in jeopardy. But BSO assistant conductor Julian Kuerti, making his official debut with the orchestra on these concerts, had a fallback: His dad was in town. **And Anton Kuerti is one of the best interpreters of Beethoven around.**

The Vienna-born pianist, now something of a national treasure in Canada, has an impeccable lineage, having studied with Rudolf Serkin and Mieczyslaw Horszowski. His playing is strikingly individual, yet honors the spirit of Horszowski's teacher, the legendary Theodor Leschetizky: a focus on line and touch, a clear and flexible rhythm, a deeply analytical and exploratory approach. The latter quality was immediately apparent on Tuesday; not a note had been taken for granted, with even the most prosaic passages refracted through a powerful intellectual prism.

The elder Kuerti fully exploits the percussive attack of the piano without the tone ever becoming brittle. The opening movement's coursing scales buzzed and rang with bright power and stinging accents, while a quiet sharpness in the lyrical theme kept the electric current alive. Beethoven's explosive juxtapositions were not merely jolts, but the sudden release of coiled tension.

In the second-movement aria, Kuerti shaped the melody with a manifold palette of articulation, innumerable precisely-cut facets, but also deployed an uncanny consistency of tone to give Beethoven's more obsessive, repeated patterns a slow-burning intensity. An occasional delicate staccato and a touch of melting rubato emphasized the off-balance polyrhythms at the finale's outset, making the movement's thumping peroration all the more triumphant. After orchestra and soloist brought the music to a near-inaudible stillness, the piano positively detonated the blazing coda.

Contrasting with his father's often wiry tone, the younger Kuerti drew sumptuous sounds from the orchestra, making the concerto a real dialogue rather than a homogenized ersatz symphony. (He took a similar approach in the program's first half: a vibrant and dashing account of Oliver Knussen's "The Way to Castle Yonder" and a dark, robust reading of Dvorak's Seventh Symphony.) With no chance for rehearsal, rough edges were inevitable. But emphasizing spontaneity over smoothness, inquiry over indulgence, father and son showed why some warhorses deserve their status -- how, with enough intelligence and daring, even familiar music can seem new.