



THE Q+A

BY
BRIAN
WISE

Jonathan Biss

The multifaceted pianist and writer explains how the relentless pursuit of perfection in classical music risks hindering creative growth and originality.

→ **JONATHAN BISS** (Piano '01) has charted a singular career: Audiences may be just as likely to hear him in recital as they are to read his latest opinion column in the *New York Times* or download his latest audio book on Audible. Yet he follows in a long tradition of concert pianists who double as public thinkers, scholars, and teachers, contributing to a wider conversation about music and art.

A self-described contrarian, Mr. Biss has recently written about society's misplaced quest for perfection—and about finding artistic truth in an age of disinformation and uncertainty around AI. The co-artistic director of the Marlboro Music School and Festival, Mr. Biss tells us what fuels his writing and playing these days.

In your November 2025 *New York Times* column, “The Quest for Perfection Is Stunting Our Society,” you write that “seeking perfection keeps us from exploring... and stymies our creativity, both as individuals and as a society.”

What brought you to this premise?

It's something that I have observed both in myself and in my students, and just in the larger culture all the time. And when I say observed, I don't just see the tendency, but I see the effects of it. I see the shrinking of my own imagination when I feel like I'm not allowed to do anything wrong. I see how restricted my students feel by the fact that they almost don't think that they have permission to use their imaginations, critical faculties, and awareness until they know that they're not going to do something wrong first. And I think it's very damaging. It causes stagnation both in the individual and on a societal level. And therefore, it's important to talk about it.

You bring up social media influencers with obsessively curated and airbrushed online profiles as an example of this quest for perfection. How much is the quest also driven by the fear of being called out online for making a mistake?

Oh, it's all fear-driven. Even before the social media landscape started to play its role in this, I think perfectionism is rooted in the fear of being seen as vulnerable and having any weakness in your arsenal that could be exploited in some way. But I certainly think now that a larger percentage of what we all do is supposed to be visible all the time. I *don't* think social media is all bad, but it's very damaging when it leads people to think that there's no value in doing something unless other people are watching it. Certainly, for an artist, a huge part of what you do is you experiment in private and a lot of it needs to be terrible, because you only learn what works by having experienced a thousand different things that you don't always feel. You figure out where boundaries lie by crossing them frequently.

You recently performed on the Detroit Symphony's livestream, where there was a chat running alongside it on YouTube. The comments were positive, but it made me think that such commentary must weigh on musicians these days.

Absolutely. It's a big thing with competitions now. People watch them like dog races. The way in which people are evaluated as a commodity—it's awful. And

again, the humanity is taken out of it. With the arts, so much of it is subjective. It makes it tempting to focus on the few things that aren't, like the note 'F' is not the note 'G.' You can't fight about that. So, a wrong note is an identifiable thing everyone has to acknowledge: Either that note was right or it was wrong. And I'm not saying that it's not important to play with care, which is part of how you convey the message of the music. But if you're not interested in what the message of the music is, then all the accuracy in the world isn't going to get you anywhere.

You recently finished recording a Beethoven piano concerto cycle with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra. In making a live recording, do you have conversations with your producers about how “perfect” it should sound? How perfect is too perfect?

Artur Schnabel, when he was recording, apparently played something very messily, and the producer asked him to play it again. He famously said, 'Well, it might be better, but it wouldn't be as good.' Whether it's live or in the studio, in the [editing process], there's very often a question of whether you choose the take in which every note speaks exactly evenly—or whether you use the take in which one note is less audible, but the shape of the line is clearer. And 99 times out of 100 I will take the one where the gesture is clearer.

You're not a big social media person. So, your comments on online perfectionism would seem to come from a personal place.

Absolutely. I really protect myself. I have a Facebook and an Instagram account, on which I post, but I don't even have the login information for them. I must give the material to someone else because I don't want to engage with it.



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Why is that?

I can see what it would do to me. And I do not want that. And again, to be clear, I'm not saying it's all bad. I think [social media] has elevated voices that would have continued to be ignored otherwise. For example, victims of police brutality can post videos there. And it's not like those things didn't happen before, but just no one saw them. But in terms of what it does to the psyche, in a certain environment, it is very dangerous.

In your *Times* column in March, you write how, in an era of mass disinformation and artificial intelligence, artists must be truth seekers through their work. How is that something that classical musicians can aspire to do?

I don't want to speak for anyone beyond myself, but it's interesting that my career started around the year 2000. By now, there's not that much historical memory of what life was like behind the Iron Curtain. But back then, I used to talk to many people in Eastern Europe. Not a single person was nostalgic [for the Soviet Union]. But over and over, I heard that music meant more. Living in that society, they were told [by authorities] that truth is not what you can see with your eyes and hear with your ears, but it's 'what we tell you is the truth.'

People feel they are being told the truth when they are in contact with great art or artists. And maybe we're all living through a period like that now. There is an incredible cynicism about the honesty of the motives of, not just our leaders, but people who have followers online. That's without even getting to the influence of AI, which complicates all of this. And I think cynicism is a very, very corrosive thing. And it makes the power of a performance that cuts through that all the greater.

The interview has been lightly edited and condensed.