

The 10 greatest pianists of all time — chosen by the experts

To mark 125 years of top-notch ivory-tickling at Wigmore Hall in London (built by a piano manufacturer) we asked some of today's leading pianists to name their personal GOATs



Arthur Rubenstein, Martha Argerich and Vladimir Horowitz
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In fashionable Edwardian London, 125 years ago this month, the talk was all about a new concert hall — beautifully crafted in Verona marble with perfect acoustics and a dazzling art nouveau frieze over its stage — that was about to open its doors in Wigmore Street. Pianos and pianists played a central role in it from the outset. Indeed it was called the Bechstein Hall, after the German piano manufacturer that had built it next door to its showroom. And its opening recital, on May 31, 1901, featured (among other starry names) one of the greatest pianists of the day: Ferruccio Busoni, playing a Beethoven sonata.

The Bechstein connection lasted just 15 years. In 1916 the British government amended a law banning “trading with the enemy”. Bechstein had to shut its London showroom and its sumptuous hall was auctioned off as “enemy property”. It reopened in 1917 as Wigmore Hall, the name it has retained.

But one thing didn’t change. It has always been a magnet for the world’s top pianists. And fittingly quite a few of today’s keyboard luminaries — such names as Igor Levit, Yunchan Lim, Alexandre Kantorow, Angela Hewitt, Cédric Tiberghien and Piotr Anderszewski — are featured in the Wigmore’s 125th anniversary festival, a 14-day event (broadcast in its

entirety by Radio 3) that kicks off on May 25 with a partial recreation of that opening concert in May 1901.



Wigmore Hall has always been a magnet for the world's top pianists SKAUPO KIKKAS

So we thought it would be fun to mark those 125 years of top-notch ivory-tickling by asking some of today's leading pianists to name their personal GOATS — the pianists they consider to be the “greatest of all time”. We then crunched the results to produce a top ten ranking — the giants who are listed below.

Several things stand out. The first is the large proportion of Russians on the list — Rachmaninov, Richter, Horowitz and Sofronitsky, the last little known in the West (the Soviet authorities rarely let him out of the country),

but revered inside Russia. The Russian “school” is a formidable influence on pianists round the globe even today: thunderous power, virtuosic dexterity and dazzling speeds always attract a crowd. Nevertheless, it’s a little surprising and perhaps sad that pianists from very different traditions — such figures as the maverick Glenn Gould, the elegant and refined Clifford Curzon, the deep-thinking Alfred Brendel, the tragically short-lived Dinu Lipatti — haven’t made the top ten.

Another striking thing: there’s only one woman on the list, the tempestuous Martha Argerich — and she is also the only top ten pianist still alive. Perhaps the gender bias is inevitable. Clara Schumann was reckoned to be the greatest pianist of her day, but we have no recordings to speak for her. And although there were superb female pianists in the mid-20th century — think of Alicia de Larrocha and her peerless interpretations of Spanish and French music, or Myra Hess who inspired countless British music lovers during the bleak 1940s — they were really pioneers in an age still wedded to the notion that musical virtuosity was essentially a male thing.

How do today’s top pianists match up to their most illustrious predecessors? In terms of sheer technique, the answer has to be “as good if not better”. Even Rachmaninov or Horowitz might have been stunned by some of the unbelievable things Yuja Wang does when she sets out on her customary eight encores. And when you look round the scene today — at the quirky, lateral-thinking Vikingur Olafsson, the gloriously expressive Emanuel Ax, the mercurial and witty Stephen Hough, the magisterial Andras Schiff, the delicate Mitsuko Uchida, the sensational and still maturing Yunchan Lim — you would be mad to argue that today’s pianists are less characterful or enthralling than their predecessors.

Happily, we don't have to choose between the old guard and the new. It's all out there, on 120-odd years of recordings, to amaze, delight and move to tears each new generation afresh.

The panel

Pianists Stephen Hough, Igor Levit, Nikolai Lugansky, Benjamin Grosvenor, Yunchan Lim, Piotr Anderszewski, Mitsuko Uchida, Pavel Kole-snikov and Isata Kanneh-Mason, concert manager Annabelle Weidenfeld and the Wigmore Hall director John Gilhooly