

The name dropper

He has changed his name twice, and fought a lifelong battle with nerves. But pianist Stephen Kovacevich is now happy with his music - and himself. He talks to Jessica Duchon

Friday February 9, 2001

[The Guardian](#)

"They agreed to drop the Bishop." It sounds mystifying, but Stephen Kovacevich is actually talking about his name. It was as Stephen Bishop that Kovacevich first shot to fame as a pianist. Later, for a while, he tagged Kovacevich on after the Bishop. Finally, when EMI signed him up around six years ago, he seized the chance to divest himself of a name he had never wanted. His father was Croatian and Kovacevich was born in California. "My mother remarried when I was about 12 and, although my stepfather did not adopt me, she thought we should have the same surname," he explains. Recently he saw an article in an in-flight magazine about the fragility of talent. "It said: Stephen Bishop - is he still alive?"

He is not only alive, but currently enjoying a hefty schedule, approaching the second of three Beethoven recitals in the South Bank Centre's Harrods International Piano Series and recording the complete Beethoven sonatas. At 60, he can look back over his sometimes complex career with realism and humour. At last Kovacevich is a man comfortable with himself, his name and his music.

The battle was not easily won. He gave his first concert at the age of 11, and nervousness often blighted his early performances: "I became too aware of the nerves of my mother, stepfather and teacher. If you do have a child who's gifted, and if for some reason it's considered a good idea for them to perform so young, don't make the child think that the parents' well-being depends on how the kid performs! I'd have felt better if my stepfather had gone and played golf instead."

He won a scholarship, aged 17, to study with Myra Hess in London. Hess was renowned for her profound interpretations of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Brahms; Kovacevich has effectively followed in her footsteps. "She knew that technique concerns sound as well as velocity," he says. "You need the technique to be able to create all the variations in sound that you want, and she worked very hard with me on the ability to play quietly but with the full power of the music."

"In my 20s I became obsessed with late Beethoven. It seemed to me that the subtext of late Beethoven was metaphysical speculation - concerning energy in excess, rage in excess, with a dimension that was almost religious. The fury of the Hammerklavier Sonata's fugue and the radiance of Op 109 are not available only in 'earthly' terms. Angels and devils have to be around to produce this kind of luminosity and darkness."

He gave his first Wigmore Hall recital aged 20, playing Beethoven's Diabelli Variations. The recording he made of this pianistic tour de force four years later is still a classic, though he now finds it "rather pious". Maybe that's typical of the gradual change in his attitude to Beethoven. "I've grown to love the early sonatas. They're full of fun and virtuosity - I love all that. Beethoven is wonderfully immodest about his profundity. He has all the normal, pretentious faults of a young person reeking of talent, and sometimes he's too self-absorbed. And sometimes people don't realise how subversive he is, not only in the context of society but also to his own aesthetic. I wish people would get off their knees and see it for what it is. He's almost like Christ going into the temple and throwing out all the phoney priests. Sometimes he also throws out the phoney priest in himself."

Kovacevich nearly threw out his own career some years ago, a crisis caused by the pressure of performing, combined with the trauma of increasingly serious nerves; fortunately the pianist Tamas Vasary persuaded him to fight on. He hasn't looked back since. He has many achievements to be proud of. "There was a performance and recording of Bartok's Second Concerto with Colin Davis - I was so nervous for the concert that I couldn't even give the BBC a sound test! I'm proud of some of my Beethoven and Schubert sonata recordings and of the Beethoven D major cello sonata with Jackie."

"Jackie" is, of course, du Pré, with whom Kovacevich forged a partnership, musical and personal, back in the 1960s. "She was charismatic, generous, ridiculously beautiful and stupefyingly gifted. She had a vicious sense of humour, she was nobody's fool and she hated pomposity and snobbery. She was really potent in her sarcasm about it all."

What, just like Beethoven? Subversion, darkness, luminosity, fun, sarcasm - are these qualities with which Kovacevich identifies? "Yes - in my spirit," he says. "I don't live in a subversive way. But I certainly believe in it."

Stephen Kovacevich plays Beethoven at the Royal Festival Hall, London SE1 (020-7960 4242), on Sunday and May 13.