

## MUSIC

# Ludovico Einaudi, a Classical Artist for the YouTube Age

By STEPHEN HEYMAN DEC. 30, 2016

The Italian composer and pianist Ludovico Einaudi, 61, is one of the world's most-streamed classical artists, with more followers on Spotify (about 740,000) than Mozart (680,000). His music, by turns minimal and lush, incorporates an array of influences from Bach to rock to West African kora music. While sold-out audiences across Europe find something sublime in his searching style, some classical critics disagree — like Ben Beaumont-Thomas of *The Guardian*, who says it's nothing more than the “dashed-off poignancy of an Instagrammed sunset.”

No one, however, debates his commercial success. His latest album, “Elements” (Decca/Ponderosa Music&Art), climbed the charts in several countries, including Britain, where it became the first classical release in 23 years to break into the Top 15, briefly outselling pop stars like Taylor Swift. This past summer, Mr. Einaudi became an even more visible star when Greenpeace filmed him playing the piano on a floating platform beside melting glaciers in the Arctic Ocean, to highlight the effects of climate change. That piece, “Elegy for the Arctic,” has been watched more than 2.5 million times on YouTube. The following are edited excerpts from a conversation with Mr. Einaudi.

**Your father, Giulio Einaudi, founded an iconic Italian publishing house, and your grandfather Luigi Einaudi was Italy's president from 1948 to 1955. Do you think that coming from such a public family has made being onstage more natural for you?**

I never thought about that. Even though my grandfather was the president of Italy after the war, he was a very sober, studious person, completely unlike today's politicians who are constantly talking on TV. My father was more

eccentric for sure, but even if his publishing house was very famous, he was still very concentrated on his work rather than being a public person.

### **Is there a genre or category that your music fits into?**

I never feel at ease when they try to categorize my work. Also I think labels are in a way restricting. You can put the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in the same category, but the types of music, the colors each band evokes, are completely different. It's the same with Mozart and Beethoven — they express two very different aspects of music. Today when they ask me if my music is minimal, is classical, is contemporary — I can say yes or no, but it doesn't make sense of what I am doing.

### **What about “classical crossover” — a genre that's perched between classical and pop music, which some people say vulgarizes or dumbs down classical music?**

I don't like the idea of “classical crossover,” even if sometimes I see this category given to what I'm doing. There are many commercial projects in that genre, where they make a quartet out of beautiful fashion models or whatever. I take things more seriously than that. And I don't have a commercial perspective in what I'm doing. On the other hand, the idea of “crossover,” of crossing boundaries, is interesting in the arts, but this is something that has always been true. Stravinsky crossed boundaries — he was embracing folk music from Russia and popular music. Mozart was working in a theater and writing songs for a company that was almost like a circus when he wrote “The Magic Flute.”

### **When you're writing your music, are you thinking to yourself, “I want to make this accessible to the broadest possible audience, to reach people who maybe have never heard a Bach concerto?”**

No. My music comes from my personal background. When I compose, I search for myself. You pick from your memories, from your experiences, from your life, and you have to sense it. I don't think about breaking barriers. But in a way, after I compose a piece, I can analyze it and can recognize things, and I can talk about something that comes from my experience with African music, or is connected with some rock album I love, or a piece by Bach or Stockhausen.

## **Why is African music in particular such a strong influence for you?**

I went to Mali for the first time in 2000, and I met Toumani Diabaté and Ballaké Sissoko — two of the greatest kora players of our time. The day I arrived in Bamako, Toumani was playing in a club, and he invited me to play onstage. But it was so beautiful to be given the chance to *live* the music in a different way. For them, music is completely connected with the rhythms of daily life. It's different from our European modern sensibility where life is divided and fragmented. There, days become longer, and when you say to someone let's meet on one day, the meeting can happen two days later, and nobody seems to care about it. And this is reflected in the timing of the pieces of music. On the radio, the music doesn't have to be three minutes — but can last 15 or 20 minutes. And then there is a sense of tradition, a connection with something very ancient in the music, that is very beautiful. They are refreshing songs that were written 500, 600, a thousand years ago — the songs are like fairy tales that belong to everybody.

## **What did it feel like playing the piano while floating on a platform in the Arctic? Were you thinking about the meaning of the music or were you too preoccupied with the cold or fear of sinking into the icy deep?**

It was quite cold, around 0 Celsius, so I had to stop every few minutes to warm my hands. I had different layers of technical clothing, some very thin, and on top of that I had more solid body covering and on top of that, my concert jacket. And they also gave me a life preserver. When I was performing, I was enjoying it very much, even if it was freezing and the conditions were not perfect, and the keys were very cold. But it was beautiful to be there alone on the platform, with the ice falling down. It felt almost like playing for the gods.