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SPECIAL FEATURES

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Welcome

As musicians and music-lovers, we inevitably listen with a critical ear. But how can we be sure when we react negatively to something that we're not just closing our ears to a new experience? To paraphrase Lewis Carroll's March Hare, isn't there a danger that knowing what we like ends up being the same as liking what we know?

Philosophers and critics down the ages would certainly disagree. Great thinkers from Pythagoras to Nietzsche and beyond have sought to establish fundamental principles for music criticism – witness Plato's dictum that composers and performers should 'aim not at a music which is pleasing, but at one which is *right*'. Most listeners' experience of music, however, tends to be somewhat more subjective.

In my work as editor of *IP* I'm fortunate enough to have access to many different interpretations of the core piano repertoire, and am often delighted by diversity of approaches taken by different pianists – even if I don't personally like what they do. Last month, for example, I heard two radically opposed interpretations of Schumann's *Kreisleriana* by Daniil Trifonov at the Barbican and Mitsuko Uchida at the Royal Festival Hall. Neither was ideal, but each brought a distinctive personality to this music: Trifonov's approach emphasised the drama and mystery of Schumann's score, while Uchida was more lyrical and understated.

Chatting to fellow critics in the foyer after Trifonov's recital, I was struck by their starkly polarised perspectives on what we had just heard. One colleague told me they 'hated' what Trifonov had done, while another said they thought it was 'absolutely fascinating' (a view closer to my own). Michael Church's review in this issue of *IP* (page 65) sums it up nicely when he writes: 'Trifonov had interrogated *Kreisleriana* with such thoroughness that what emerged seemed at times like a new work. There are many ways in which it can be played, but he found some I had never encountered before.'

Trifonov gave his recital on a Fazioli piano, a choice that prompted comments from several audience members. The very fact that *not* playing on a Steinway has become such a talking point is testament to the quality and ubiquity of this brand. Yet should it mean we can't consider other more radical departures from the Steinway sound? Historic instruments have already challenged this hegemony, but no modern concert grand has attempted to offer anything significantly different – until now: the Straightstrung Concert Grand from Belgian instrument maker Chris Maene, which combines the best in old and new design (see page 27). The first one was made for Daniel Barenboim, who says he has 'fallen in love with it': a gauntlet, if ever there was one, for audiences to embrace the new…

OWEN MORTIMER
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★ OFF-KEY ASSERTIONS

I feel obliged to object to the recent article by Charivari in *IP* Jan/Feb (page 18). His 'argument' is so full of holes that it would hardly even get wet if you poured water into it.

'Do music and politics really mix? [...] Charivari takes a dim view of musicians who turn the concert platform into a political soapbox' runs the standfirst, yet Charivari's first illustration relates to veganism, which has nothing whatever to do with politics, and his second refers to a journalist's, not a musician's, insistence on politicising a post-concert interview.

And does Valery Gergiev harangue his concert audiences with eulogies to the Russian president? I can find no evidence of his doing so. Or does Gabriela Montero follow her celebrated improvised encores with prepared speeches criticising the Venezuelan government? Again, I have found no reports of her doing so. In neither case does Charivari refer to any such specific events.

Yes, Daniel Barenboim attempts to 'advance the cause of peace and co-operation with his East–West Divan Orchestra', but even Charivari is forced to admit that this initiative is 'admirable'. In fact, it surely perfectly supports Charivari's own contention that 'concerts [...] should remain events where people of all political creeds and persuasions can come together to celebrate their shared humanity'.

Only two of Charivari's many examples actually back up his argument – those of Benedict Cumberbatch's *Hamlet* and the Broadway musical *Hamilton* – but both are rather far removed from the world with which we are concerned in the pages of *IP*.

In any case, in over 40 years of concert-going, I have never experienced the type of situation Charivari refers to. Clearly, from his spurious and erroneous examples, neither has he.

Joseph Laredo, via email

The Editor replies:

Many thanks for your robust rebuttal of Charivari's recent polemic on politics and music. As its title suggests, our 'Ill-Tempered Clavier' series offers a satirical perspective on topical issues in the classical music world with the intention of stimulating debate. I'm delighted that you've taken up last month's gauntlet with such gusto and look forward to reading your thoughts on Charivari's latest offering about women composers (turn to page 14).

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– Opus Klassiek

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news&notes

AIMARD AWARDED SIEMENS PRIZE

FRENCH PIANIST PIERRE-LAURENT Aimard has been awarded this year's Ernst von Siemens Music Prize by the EvS Foundation in Switzerland. The honour will be bestowed at a ceremony in Munich on 2 June.

Worth €250,000 (£212,000), the Prize recognises individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the world of music. Former recipients include Aimard's mentors Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, György Kurtág and György Ligeti.

The citation praises Aimard as 'a pianist of light and colour who brings clarity and life to everything he plays. His unusual path from the music of the present to that of the past, his boundless joy of discovery and the meticulousness with which he devotes himself to composers ranging from Bach via Debussy to George Benjamin, make him one of the exceptional musicians of our time.'

Aimard is currently the co-curator of 'Inspirations' at London's Southbank Centre, working in partnership with conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen to explore masterworks of the piano repertoire from Beethoven to Ligeti. His next two concerts in the series take place at the Royal Festival Hall on 4 and 7 May.

www.pierrelaurentaimard.com

A pianist of light and colour: Pierre-Laurent Aimard

LOST SHOSTAKOVICH SCORE TO RECEIVE PREMIERE

SHOSTAKOVICH'S LOST PIANO score for the 1929 Soviet film *The New Babylon* will receive its world premiere at LSO St Luke's in London on 25 March, performed by the Ukrainian pianist Sasha Grynyuk.

Set during the time of the 1871 Paris Commune, *The New Babylon* follows the encounter and tragic fate of two lovers separated by the barricades of the Commune. Shostakovich's music for *The New Babylon* was his first film score, written when he was just 23 years old. Numerous re-writes of the film were demanded before completion of the directors' final cut in December 1928, when the composer was contracted to join the production.

However, after two industry preview screenings with the composer himself performing his original solo piano score, the Moscow Sovkino office (a body charged with popularising Soviet propaganda films) ordered the removal of more than 20 per cent of the film. Editing Shostakovich's music to fit the shortened film proved impossible so the original score was sold. A rare surviving copy has provided the material for Grynyuk's performance in London.

The event will be introduced by John Riley, film scholar and author of *Shostakovich: A Life in Film*.

www.barbican.org.uk

GROTRIAN CONCERT ROYAL RELEASED FOR PIANOTEQ

Software firm Modartt has released its latest modelled piano sound pack for Pianoteq 5, the MIDI-controlled computer programme that simulates real acoustic pianos.

The Grotrian Concert Royal is the flagship grand piano of German maker Grotrian in Braunschweig. Handmade to meet the highest standards of craftsmanship, each Grotrian Concert Royal takes eight months to produce and promises a rich and brilliant tone that fills even the largest concert hall.

Modartt has fine-tuned every detail of their Pianoteq model to reproduce the characteristic clarity and warmth of the Grotrian Concert Royal. The resulting sound and complex resonances are entirely authentic, as can be heard from the audio examples on the Pianoteq website.

The Grotrian Concert Royal is now available as an instrument pack for Pianoteq 5.

www.pianoteq.com/grotrian

IOUDENITCH JOINS OBERLIN FACULTY

STANISLAV IOUDENITCH HAS been appointed as an associate professor of piano at Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Ohio.

Born in Uzbekistan, Ioudenitch earned widespread recognition in 2001 as the gold medal winner the XI Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. He has gone on to perform at major venues around the world and collaborated with leading orchestras and musicians such as the Munich Philharmonic, Mariinsky Orchestra and the National Symphony in Washington, DC; the Takács, Prazák, and Borromeo string quartets; and conductors James Conlon, Valery Gergiev and Mikhail Pletnev. His recordings are available on the Harmonia Mundi and Academy labels.

Ioudenitch is a former student of the prestigious International Piano Academy Lake Como in Italy. He now serves as vice-president of the Academy, which since 2015 has enjoyed a partnership with Oberlin Conservatory that brings elite student pianists to the Ohio campus for advanced study.

Ioudenitch says his new role will allow him to 'draw upon my international connections with the Russian school, as represented by my former teachers, including Natalia Vasinkina and Dmitri Bashkirov; and with the great European and world traditions represented by Karl Ulrich Schnabel, Rosalyn Tureck, William Grant Naboré and Leon Fleisher.'

Ioudenitch has previously performed recitals and led masterclasses at Oberlin, and has served for several years as a jury member of the Cooper International Competition as well as its predecessor, the Oberlin International Piano Competition. Prior to his appointment at Oberlin, Ioudenitch helped create the International Center for Music and the Youth

Stanislav Ioudenitch

Conservatory of Music at Park University near Kansas City, Missouri.

Commenting on Ioudenitch's appointment, Oberlin's piano department chair Alvin Chow said: 'He has the rare ability to articulate his feelings about the music in a way that transforms his students' playing, so we feel he is a perfect fit to join our already distinguished piano faculty.'

www.oberlin.edu/con

ROMANIAN WINS BNDES COMPETITION IN RIO

THE FIFTH BNDES INTERNATIONAL Piano Competition in Rio de Janeiro has been won by the Romanian pianist Daniel Ciobanu. His dramatic reading of Prokofiev's Concerto No 3 during the final round followed a semifinal recital crowned by an impassioned Prokofiev Sonata No 7. He receives BRL 120,000 (£28,300) plus concerts in Brazil, Europe and the USA during the 2017/18 season.

Ciobanu recently completed a masters degree at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and is currently studying for a second masters at the Universitat der Kunst, Berlin under Pascqal Devoyon.

The Competition's second prize and audience award (worth a total of £19,500) went to Joo Hyeon Park from South Korea. British pianist Andreas Ioannides won third prize.

Lucas Thomazinho (Brasil) received the award for the best performance of Brazilian music, and Liza Kliuchereva (Russia) won the Ginastera award, offered to the best interpreter of a piece by the Argentinian composer.

www.concursopianorio.com

Daniel Ciobanu triumphs in Rio

Out of the ordinary

Jeremy Nicholas meets Artem Yasynskyy, a 29-year-old Ukrainian pianist who grew up steeped in music-making of all kinds, developing a taste for unusual areas of the piano repertoire that remain unjustly neglected

PIANO-FANCIERS MIGHT RECOGNISE THE NAME OF the young Ukrainian Artem Yasynskyy from a CD released in 2015 of piano works by Josef Hofmann. 'It came about because I performed in the first German Piano Competition of Polish Music in 2013, held in Hamburg and organised by Hubert Rutkowski. I won the 'Hofmannspreis', which allowed me to record the disc in Poland for Polish Radio [and subsequently released on the Grand Piano label]. It was my dream when I started to prepare for this competition that I would win this prize because I really wanted to record Hofmann's music. It's not just that it is written so pianistically: you don't have to think about the sound because it's already there in the writing. It's so fantastic and enjoyable, and it sounds different from other music that I play.'

Yasynskyy was born in Donetsk in 1988 into a family of musicians. 'We had a piano, so I was interested – but like every child not really interested in practising. When I was maybe six, my grandfather said I needed to learn music. He was also a musician, a multi-instrumentalist who could play the cello, balalaika, saxophone and clarinet. So my mother and father (they're both pianists) took me to the music school in Donetsk, and the examiners there said I had no talent whatsoever! I was a very small child and I had no idea what I had to do. They asked me to sing something and I said, "Why should I?" My grandfather was really angry about this and said, "He needs to study!". So after one year they admitted me and that was how it started. It was a special school just for musicians – which I really liked. I preferred to improvise rather than practise, so it wasn't that easy for me at first. Then I began to practise and enjoy it.'

When he was just eight, Yasynskyy gave his first public concert and, still a child, performed as a concerto soloist with orchestras such as the Donetsk State Orchestra and the Ukrainian National Orchestra. 'At the school, we studied music more than any other subject, so although the pieces were really hard, that was all there was to think about. It was a very good system. Then when I was about 10 or 11 (perhaps I shouldn't say this!) I discovered that I love being on stage, because anything can happen – every time is different, and I enjoy that feeling. I spent most of the day at the piano learning repertoire but also composing and improvising. In four years I was playing Liszt Rhapsodies; and by the time I was 12, I remember listening to Horowitz playing his version of the Hungarian Rhapsody No 19 and writing it out note by note so that I could have my own score of it.'

Yasynskyy makes his Carnegie Hall debut

'I like just being on stage, because anything can happen: every time is different, and I enjoy that feeling'

Yasynskyy has had just two piano teachers throughout his life: Albina Oryshchuk, in Ukraine from age seven to 20 and, from 21 till now, Patrick O'Byrne at the Hochschule für Künste Bremen. Most of the concerts he gave in Ukraine were student recitals and competitions. Aged 14, he came joint third in the biennial International Horowitz Competition for Young Pianists (held in Kiev, Horowitz's birthplace). A scholarship granted by the president of the Ukraine enabled him to study at the Prokofiev State Academy of Music in Donetsk, where he also took composition classes with Aleksander Rudyansky, graduating in 2010 with honours. As his international career began to take off, he decided to move to Germany, aged 21.

Last year Yasynskyy was invited to the prestigious Husum Festival of Piano Rarities in Germany, and made his Carnegie Hall debut, one of the rewards of winning the gold medal and audience prize at the 2015 Cincinnati World Piano Competition. 'I was really excited, as you can imagine! It went very well and I had a lovely warm audience. I played Bach's Partita No 5, the Szymanowski *Variations* (which might have been written for the acoustics at Carnegie Hall, it sounded so good there), Prokofiev's Sonata No 8 and Britten's *Holiday Diary* – Prokofiev and Britten go so well together! For encores I played Horowitz *Carmen Variations* (they said if you're in New York you have to play Horowitz!) and then a Scarlatti sonata.'

In fact, Yasynskyy's next project is a CD of 18 (mainly lesser known) Scarlatti sonatas for the Naxos label. 'It's very important for me and I hope it will work. It's wonderful music and it's really complicated to play – much more complicated than Hofmann!' ♪

Artem Yasynskyy's debut album Hofmann: Piano Works *is available on the Grand Piano label (GP675).*
www.artemyasynskyy.com

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Klaus HELLWIG [Pianist, Germany]
Shinichiro IKEBE [Composer, Japan]
Ikuyo KAMIYA [Pianist, Japan]
Daejin KIM [Pianist, Korea]
Piotr PALECZNY [Pianist, Poland]
Mikhail VOSKRESENSKY [Pianist, Russia]

*The names of the Jury are listed in alphabetical order without their titles.

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Ears wide open

Why are audiences unwilling to give new music a fair hearing? *Michael Johnson* urges composers to wait patiently for the recognition they deserve

A FRIEND OF MINE WHO LIKES to play John Cage's prepared piano pieces struggles with many new keyboard works, devoting hours of practice to their mind-bending notation. He concludes, alas, that the level of contemporary composition has 'plunged dramatically' in the past few years. I am with him. Too much of it is computer-aided, offhand or just awful. My least favourite works are those that thump and bang in an effort to shock.

And yet it is not always thus. Look around and open your ears – you may be pleasantly surprised. For there are also marvellous new soundworlds that gradually settle in the mind. True, some can be difficult at first hearing: I need at least five repeats on my CD player to lock onto what really innovative composers are doing. The younger ones are often intent on redefining the very meaning of music.

Experimental/contemporary music is for those who like to be challenged, not those who choose to stay in their comfort zone. Of course there is no common standard by which to judge new music, so every choice is personal and, worse, the playing field is constantly shifting. One American music professor tells his students to compose pieces 'that you don't like yet'.

I am annoyed that conservative audiences today can be so tone deaf and so alienated that they stalk out of a concert when the contemporary element begins. They may never know what they are missing. Most of the early exits are of a certain age and I have to restrain myself from grabbing them and pulling them back into their seats. How can they resist Morton Feldman's *Palais de Mari* or his *For Bunita Marcus*? John Cage's *In a Landscape* is as haunting as anything from our European past. How can any open-minded listener fail to see the beauty in Laurence Crane's *Four Short Pieces*?

Listening to Frank Denyers's *Whispers* recently I found myself drawn into his intimate and barely audible world. He asks you to listen hard, to strain your ear to grasp his 'exquisite sensitivity to sound', as one critic put it. Keeril Makan does the same in his *Washed by Fire*.

I refer to Cage's dictum: 'The function of music is to change the mind so that it becomes open to experience, which is inevitably interesting.' The composer often cited his Indian friend Gita Sarabhai who believed music could 'sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences'.

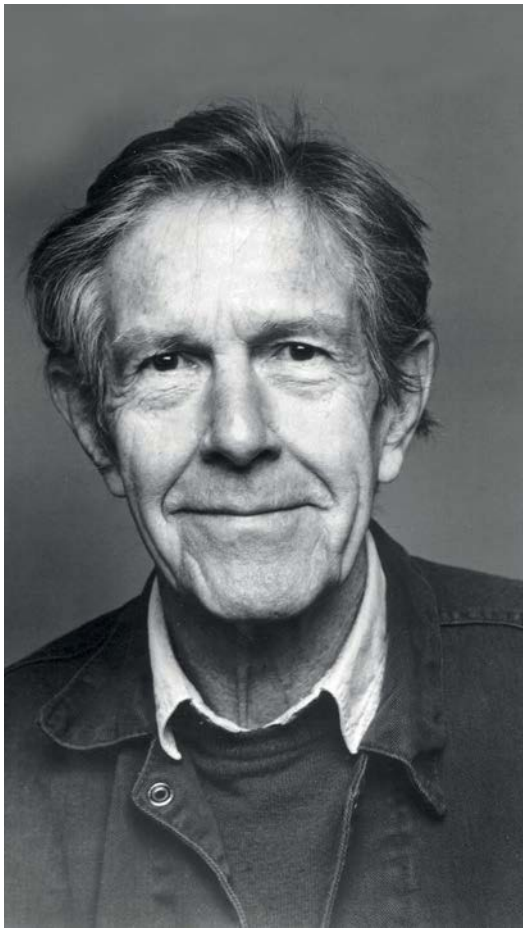
Looking for backup to support my own prejudices, I tracked down the mild-mannered Simon Reynell, founder and director of the record label Another Timbre, based in Sheffield, UK. He is producing around one new CD of experimental/contemporary music a month and has his finger on the pulse better than almost anyone. 'The audience is expanding,' he tells me, 'but also breaking up into new fragments.' His CDs sell in the hundreds, some more than a thousand, as word-of-mouth spreads among the aficionados. Orders flow in from Japan, the US and Europe in equal proportions.

Some composers believe it is time to take audience reaction into account, to meet the listener halfway. Keeril Makan urges explanatory talks before playing; others go further and advise toning down the shock effects altogether. Indeed, Reynell says these softening trends are already evident. In his 10 years in the avant-garde, he has noted a clear movement toward melody and harmony. Moreover, today his composers rely 80 per cent on written scores and 20 per cent on improvisation. Those ratios were reversed 10 years ago.

As we know from history, rejection of music innovators is nothing particularly new: bold composers – from Beethoven to Stravinsky and Copland – have faced stiff resistance. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was likened to 'a blind painter touching the canvas at random'; Stravinsky sparked riots; and it was said of Copland that to write such violent orchestral works, he must be capable of murder.

The great critic, conductor-composer and commentator Nicolas Slonimsky advanced a theory in his essay, *Non-Acceptance of the Unfamiliar*, that to listeners steeped in traditional music 'modern works are meaningless'. He advised calm and patience. After 40 years, he wrote, monstrosities have a way of becoming masterpieces. ♪

Open to experience: John Cage (1912-1992)



The Ill-tempered Clavier

Gender inequality among composers has come to be regarded as the norm in a field where the the fairer sex has been all but ignored – even in exalted musical circles. *Charivari* senses that the tide is at last turning, and invokes women composers to rise up and be counted

WOMEN COMPOSERS, female composers, lady composers – or whatever the current politically correct ascription might be – have had a hard time during the whole course of musical history. They have been side-lined and ignored by society every bit as much as women in the church, mosque or synagogue. Things are changing – faster in the last 100 years than at any time before; but in music, as in religion, there is so much catching up to do that the historical imbalance is likely to take several generations before it is fully redressed.

It seems outrageous now that women should have been held back from pursuing careers in whatever field they chose. In piano composition, one winces at the stance of the sublimely talented, much-admired Felix Mendelssohn. On being asked to support the publication of his sister Fanny's music, he replied: 'To encourage something that I do not consider right, that I cannot do.'

Here is that genius and cultural icon Robert Schumann on his wife's music: 'Clara has composed a series of small pieces, which show a musical and tender ingenuity such as she has never attained before. But to have children, and a husband who is always living in the realm of imagination, does not go together with composing. She cannot work at it regularly, and I am often disturbed to think how many profound ideas are lost because she cannot work them out.' You have to remember that Fanny Hensel and Clara Schumann were the famous ones.

Musical and tender ingenuity: Clara Schumann (1819-96)

Only a handful of women managed to break ranks before them, all now forgotten, such as the French harpsichordist Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (1665-1729), whose music and recitals in Paris were widely acclaimed; the English composer and pianist Jane Guest (1762-1846), a pupil of J C Bach, whose Six Sonatas Op 1 appeared in about 1785; the name of Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831), the Polish composer/pianist, is better known than her music; her compatriot Paula Szalit (1887-

1920) has vanished into obscurity. Of more familiar names (Teresa Carreño and Agathe Backer-Grøndahl, for instance), none could be described as heavyweight composers of the symphony and opera.

Which brings me to ask what the sisterhood itself is doing to help in the process? Not enough, it seems to me, even though the door has been opened and the glass ceiling smashed. There have been many glowing exceptions of course. Those of a certain vintage will recall the American pianist Marie Louise Boehm (1924-2002) and her pioneering recording from the early 1970s of Amy Beach's tremendous Piano Concerto (another account came from Joanne Polk in 2000). Teresa Carreño was the dedicatee of the Concerto; Carreño's own works have been championed on a 2009 Nimbus disc by Clara Rodriguez.

The latest example comes via a splendid new disc on the Orchid Classics label featuring the music of Hélène de Montgeroult (1764-1836). She was born Hélène de Nervo in Lyon into an aristocratic family – already a handicap if you wanted to be taken seriously as a musician, for any person of noble descent was forbidden to give public concerts or be published under her own name. She became a child prodigy, married at 20 the 48-year-old Marquis de Montgeroult, was imprisoned by Austrian soldiers, escaped (unlike her husband, who died), and returned to Paris only to be imprisoned there. Her biographer, Jérôme Dorival, reveals that she owed her freedom to her improvisations on *La Marseillaise* performed in front of the Committee of Public Safety. She then became the first woman professor at the Paris Conservatory (1795) and published three sets of three Sonatas, one of which is included on the new CD. Her major work was *Cours complet pour l'enseignement du forté-piano* written between 1788 and 1812, published in 1816, and which ran to more than 700 pages, including 115 Etudes. Dorival asserts that Montgeroult is 'the missing link between Mozart and Chopin' and, while this a moot point, it is hard to believe that Chopin was not familiar with her etudes. No 107 in D minor has striking similarities to Chopin's famous 'Revolutionary' study in C minor. Hats off to Edna Stern for her fine playing and allowing us to hear the music of this intriguing figure.

Equally encouraging is the latest disc in Hyperion's Romantic Piano Concerto series. This features three works for piano and orchestra by three women composers: Amy Beach, Dorothy Howell and Cécile Chaminade. Rebecca Miller conducts her soloist husband Danny Driver on a recording supported by the Ambache Charitable Trust. This admirable organisation founded in 2013 seeks 'to raise the profile of music by women' with grants supporting performances, recordings and education projects. Their next deadline for applications is 31 March 2017. Come on ladies! How about a disc of solo works by Agathe Backer-Grøndahl, Paula Szalit or Jane Guest? Anyone? ♪

THINKING BIG

She may be tiny in stature and on stage her slinky dresses are clearly meant to thrill. Once at the keyboard, however, the 30-year-old Chinese pianist Yuja Wang cuts a seriously commanding figure who tackles the most challenging repertoire with fearless self-confidence and profound artistry. *Stephen Wigler* meets a sensational young player who seems to defy expectations at every turn

I HAVE MET MANY CELEBRITY musicians in my life, but this time as I wait for my famous guest in a restaurant on New York's Upper West Side, I'm more nervous than usual. My apprehension is fuelled by several factors: my interviewee is very attractive – almost intimidatingly so; she achieved celebrity early, when she was still in her teens; she is extraordinarily gifted, scaling the Everests of the concerto repertoire with what seems like insouciant disregard for their difficulty, whether it be Rachmaninov, Prokofiev or Bartók.

Wang's appearance as she emerges onto the stage creates almost as much of a stir as her electrifying performances. In a *New Yorker* magazine profile last September, Janet Malcolm described the pianist's *Hammerklavier* Sonata thus: 'Her back was bare… She looked like a dominatrix or a lion tamer's assistant. She had come to tame the beast of a piece, this half-naked woman in sadistic high heels. Take that, and that, Beethoven!'

Having seen her perform, I had decided she must be arrogant, so utterly assured and formidable was her presence on stage. Indeed, one of her contemporaries, who has known her since their childhood in Beijing, describes her 'as the most confident person I've ever known'. All in all, I expected to be in the company of a predatory half-leopardess, as played by the young Nastassja Kinski in *Cat People*.

Imagine my surprise when I notice a waitress pointing at my table for the benefit of a young woman who has just come in from the rain. She is beautiful, but not in any way that could be called dangerous. Dressed modestly in sneakers, loose-fitting and comfortable-looking blue jeans and a sweatshirt, there is none of the forbidding glamour she exudes on stage. She approaches me, wearing a genuinely warm, sweet smile.

'Hi, I'm Yuja,' she says as she shakes my hand and sits down to order a hamburger and fries. First impressions: I knew she wasn't a tall person, but I wasn't expecting her to be as tiny as Alicia de Larrocha or Maria João Pires – and even more slender than both.

There's nothing small about her playing, of course. In the passages that call upon the piano to create the most thunderous sonorities – in Liszt, Prokofiev or Rachmaninov – Wang effortlessly matches the climaxes achieved by pianists such as Denis Matsuev, Horacio Gutierrez or Alexander Toradze, all more than twice her size.

She interrupts my thoughts. 'What were you reading when I walked in?' she asks, as she points at my notebook. 'Oh,' I say, caught off guard. 'Those are just some of the questions I've been mulling over. People want to know how you choose your, er, concert attire.' Her good-natured laughter rings out over the hubbub of the other diners: 'I could tell you that I really like the designers whose clothes I choose. And that since I'm not yet 30 [she turned 30 on 10 February], I still look fine in the sort of stuff I wear. But the truth is that I'm very self-conscious about how tiny I am. When I dress the way I do,' she says, as she bites into her burger, 'I don't feel tiny and I don't look tiny – not even when I'm seated in front of a nine-foot Steinway.'

She eats with gusto, finishing off the burger by licking the melted cheese from her fingers: 'God, I can't believe what a slob I can be!' she laughs.

LATER THAT DAY, I HAVE dinner with the pianist Horacio Gutierrez. Gutierrez particularly admires the way Yuja performs one of his specialities, Prokofiev's Concerto No 2. He is surprised to learn how small she is: 'On stage, she doesn't seem small,' he says. 'For one thing, she looks like she has large hands; and for another, there are her muscles! She has the thighs, the shoulders and the arms of an athlete. She certainly does not play small.'

Actually, Wang's hand-size, while not enormous, is quite large – about the same as that of Martha Argerich, Mitsuko Uchida and Hélène Grimaud. What's more, she has the flexibility for the wide stretches in Rachmaninov and the hailstorms of double octaves in Liszt. 'No one since Martha has played the big repertoire in so big a way,' Gutierrez observes. He is not the first person to note Wang's resemblance to Argerich. She possesses much the same derring-do virtuosity, explosive temperament and charisma that make Argerich's audiences stand up, stamp their feet and cheer.

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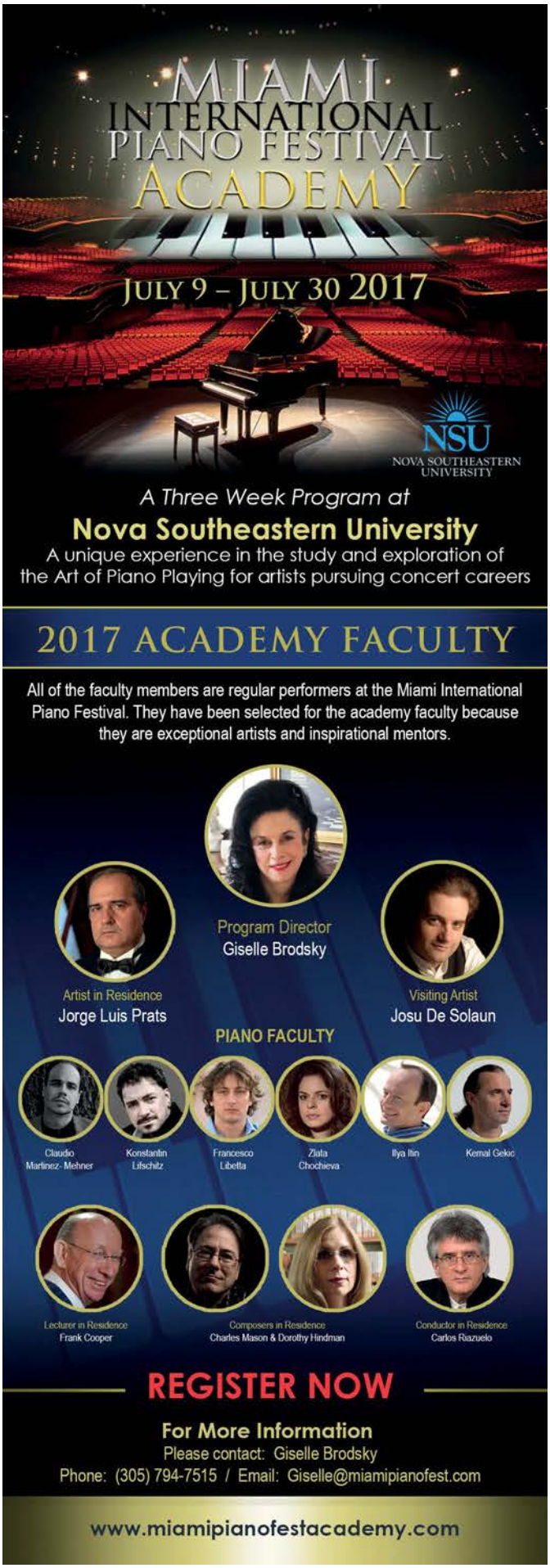

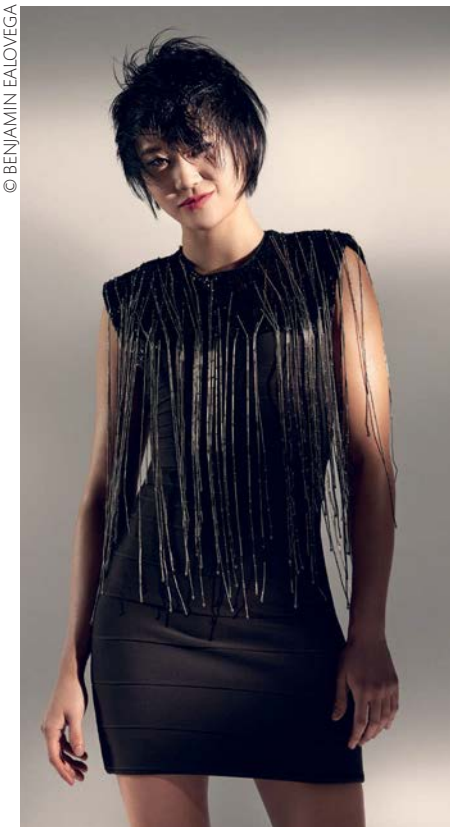

'When I dress the way I do, I don't feel tiny'

It was, in fact, as a replacement for Argerich that Wang had her first big break. In March 2007, Argerich had been scheduled to give four subscription concerts with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, appearing with guest conductor Charles Dutoit (Argerich's former husband) in Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No 1. Wang recalls how Argerich casually directed the spotlight in her direction: 'With Martha it was like, "I'm tired… Do you want to play with the Boston Symphony for me?" I replied, Of course – as if you even need to ask the question!'

At the time, the 19-year-old pianist did not know the Tchaikovsky, but she's an extraordinarily fast learner. I was in the audience at Symphony Hall on the first evening of the series, and the audience's initial disgruntlement dissipated with the startling impact of her opening chords; by the concerto's final notes, they had become a cheering mob, giving her a standing ovation. Her interpretation had a fearlessness and abundance of temperament that out-Argeriched Argerich herself.

BORN INTO AN ARTISTIC family in Beijing (her mother was a dancer and her father a percussionist), Yuja Wang, began playing the piano aged six. A year later, her extraordinary gifts being apparent, she was enrolled to study at the Beijing Music Conservatoire, and by 15, her 'intelligence and good taste' as a pianist won her a prestigious place at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia.

She was still a student at the Curtis when she was asked by Argerich to come to the rescue in Boston, thus becoming an overnight sensation. However, many in the classical piano world already knew who Yuja Wang was. I had first heard of her five years earlier, when the conductor David Zinman gave me a broadcast recording of the 15-year-old playing Beethoven's Concerto No 4 in G major with his Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra. I was astonished by its depth and musical sophistication. I was not surprised to discover that the teenaged pianist already had management. Shortly after,

Wang with the Tonhalle Orchestra in Zurich

a friend who worked for what was then Yuja's concert agency, Opus 3 Artists, gave me a CD of a recital programme. It contained, among other things, performances of Chopin's Sonata in B-flat minor and Stravinsky's *Petrushka* that were as stunning as the performances Evgeny Kissin had given when he was Yuja's age.

Even before standing in for Argerich in Boston, there had been other, less publicised, substitutions for pre-eminent pianists, including Evgeny Kissin, Radu Lupu and Murray Perahia. It was only a question of time before Wang stood shoulder-to-shoulder with these greats. Soon after Boston came a recording contract from Deutsche Grammophon; and in the 10 years since, she has become one of the tiny handful of pianists whose recordings people actually buy and who can reliably be depended upon to sell out large concert halls.

There are several ways in which Yuja Wang clearly surpasses Argerich. The most important of these lies in her curiosity about the full extent of the piano repertoire and her fearless approach to programming. Argerich has been playing essentially the same repertoire for the last 50 years: only one Bartók concerto – No 3, the easiest; one Prokofiev concerto, the popular No 3; one Prokofiev sonata, the relatively short No 7; the first three of the five Beethoven concertos and only two or three of his piano sonatas; and very little contemporary music.

Wang, by contrast, seems to have an appetite for everything. She plays Brahms' Concerto No 1, but also the composer's even longer and more challenging second concerto. With the possible exceptions of Vladimir Ashkenazy and Yefim Bronfman in their younger days, she may be the only pianist I know who programmes in the same season what are considered the three titans of the piano concerto form: Bartók 2, Prokofiev 2 and Rachmaninov 3. She plays the two longest and most difficult Prokofiev Sonatas, Nos 6 and 8, as well as the solo version of Ravel's *La Valse* (Argerich plays only the two-piano version); she programmes both books of Brahms' *Paganini Variations* (Argerich has never programmed even one). One could go on.

IT'S CLEAR THAT THE CHIEF reasons for the breadth and depth of Wang's repertoire are her curiosity and the remarkable memory that permits her to satisfy that curiosity. Yet she's also not afraid to walk on stage with music. She thinks it is ridiculous to take time off, as some very well-known pianists have done – in extreme cases for sabbaticals lasting several months – to learn difficult repertoire. Search online for 'Yuja Wang, Bartók Concerto No 2' and you will find several videos of her playing this monstrously difficult piece with the music in front of her. The performances are magnificent and she scarcely ever looks at the music, so why does she use it? 'At one of those performances [of the Bartók Second], one of the members of the orchestra asked me about it,' she says. 'I replied, "Wait a minute! Are *you* not using music?"'

'When you reach a certain age, no one minds if you play with music in front of you,' she continues. 'I'm sure nobody raised objections back in the days when Richter and Curzon began doing it or today when Menahem Pressler does it. Everybody knows that they know *everything* about the music they play. But audiences shouldn't mind no matter what age the player is – not even if they're young!'

Wang believes people tend to have a 'misconception about the use of music' – namely that if a performer uses music they are not prepared. 'That's simply not true,' she asserts. 'When I use music, it's not because it's a security blanket. Instead of worrying about forgetting, you can focus on communicating. What's on the page – even if you're not reading it – begins to issue forth from you with a force that's otherwise hard to imagine.'

'Even the greatest pianists have problems with the fear of forgetting,' she says. She mentions one of the greatest living interpreters of Beethoven and Schubert, whose career began to hit roadblocks as he approached middle age about 30 years ago. Now, in his 70s – because he's no longer embarrassed to use music on stage – his appearances have become more frequent and his reputation has begun to resume much of its former lustre.

'He was always able to play wonderfully,' she says, 'but his nervousness on stage sometimes made it hard for him. Since that kind of fear is something that – to some degree – afflicts all of us, I don't want to have to worry about it.'

'ANY OTHER QUESTIONS ON your notebook?' Yuja asks when our post-lunch cappuccinos arrive. 'Well,' I say, 'it would be good to know why, when you are still so young, you seem to want to take on the most monumental challenges in the repertoire – pieces for which most pianists wait until they are fully mature? Why, for example, did you decide to programme Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata before doing any of the other Beethoven sonatas? And why are you planning to introduce Bach's *Goldberg Variations* before performing any of his smaller works?'

Yuja thinks for a moment: 'I played the *Hammerklavier* when I turned 29 and I will be playing the *Goldberg*s when I am 30,' she says, with a smile. 'I guess you could say that I'm playing pieces that have a numerical significance for whatever age I am.' She laughs at her own joke: the *Hammerklavier* is Beethoven's 29th piano sonata and the *Goldberg* is made up of 30 variations upon its opening aria.

Wang turns serious: 'I think people often have pretty set ideas about what age you must be in order to play something,' she says. 'But when there are rules, I just go ahead and break them. And anyway, what's the big deal about works like the *Hammerklavier* or the *Goldberg*s?'

She is correct, of course: the younger you are as a pianist, the easier it is to learn the most complex works, as Gary Graffman, Yuja's teacher at the Curtis, has explained: 'When you're young, you're usually too dumb to know how difficult some things are – you just go ahead and learn them. I sometimes kick myself because I put things off until I felt ready for them. When the time came, I was too scared to attempt them.'

'The way most people learn is to start with something simpler and build toward things that are more complex,' says Yuja. 'But ever since I was a child, I've never done things that way. I always preferred to start with the biggest, most difficult work.

Taking flight: Wang's wing-borne photoshoot for her 2012 album *Fantasia*

'When there are rules, I just go ahead and break them.'

When I began to programme Liszt, I started with the Sonata in B minor. I've played a lot of Beethoven throughout my life, including four of the five concertos when I was still in my teens – leaving No 1 for later. However, I had never performed any of the sonatas in my recital programmes and at CD signings, people used to ask me "Why don't you play any Beethoven?" I heard this for about three or four years, and then I thought – You want to hear a Beethoven sonata? Well I'm gonna give you the one that lasts 50 minutes!'

In fact, Yuja's performance of the *Hammerklavier* lasts slightly more than 40 minutes, significantly quicker than well-known versions by, for example, Emil Gilels, Alfred Brendel and Daniel Barenboim. But while Yuja took only a few months to learn this gigantic piece, she studied and thought about it intensely. She agrees with András Schiff that it is too often performed in an overly ponderous and monumental manner. Beethoven's metronome markings for the first two movements are controversially fast, but it is clear that they are meant to tell the interpreter the tempo *must* be fast. 'If you try to make it beautiful, then you miss the energy and urgency that are the point of the piece,' Yuja says. 'When I was learning it, I made myself listen to other late Beethoven pieces all the time – the *Große Fugue* and the other late string quartets, the *Missa Solemnis* and the *Diabelli Variations.* Are these the first things I want to hear when I wake up? No. But that energy and strength in the music is what you need to tap into if you play the *Hammerklavier.*'

Wang's view of the piece may change in some details as she grows older. Nevertheless, it is already a great interpretation – easily the equal of the outstanding performances given by Ashkenazy, Pollini and Barenboim at her age. The first movement flows effortlessly and energetically at high velocity, but does not ignore intricate details, inner voices and harmonic colourings, all the while making its classical structure remarkably lucid. The Scherzo skips along mischievously. The slow movement is ethereal and thoughtful, rather than a self-consciously profound expression of immeasurable woe. The final fugue illuminates the complexities of Beethoven's contrapuntal art with X-ray clarity.

For a pianist still a year shy of 30, Wang's performance of the *Hammerklavier* is a magnificent achievement. If it is not as probing or profound as it could be, she has another 40 or 50 years to work on it. 'I am years from really understanding it,' Yuja admits. 'The more I play it, the more complexities I discover in it. There are layers beneath layers in that piece, and there are so many of them. They'll only reveal themselves over the years,' she says, adding with a laugh: 'Whether by playing it or by *not* playing it, I don't know!' ♪

Yuja Wang will present a recital of works by Chopin, Brahms and Schubert in the 2016/17 International Piano Series at London's Royal Festival Hall on 11 April.

www.yujawang.com

YUJA WANG'S DIARY

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Mar 25
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Mar 29
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Het Concertgebouw

Apr 6
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Wiener Konzerthaus

Apr 9
Lisbon, Portugal
Gulbenkian Musica

Apr 11
London, UK
Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre

Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No 1
Orchestra dell'Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia/Antonio Pappano

Apr 27 to 29
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Sala Santa Cecilia

May 2
Zurich, Switzerland
Tonhalle Zurich

May 3
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May 4
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May 5
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May 9
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Concertgebouw

May 10
Paris, France
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May 11
London, UK
Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre

May 13
Essen, Germany
Philharmonie Essen

Bartók concertos cycle
Los Angeles Philharmonic/ Gustavo Dudamel

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Los Angeles, US
Bartók Piano Concerto No 1
Walt Disney Concert Hall

Jun 1 & 2
Los Angeles, US
Bartók Piano Concerto No 2
Walt Disney Concert Hall

Jun 3 & 4
Los Angeles, US
Bartók Piano Concerto No 3
Walt Disney Concert Hall

PERSONAL TOUCH

Pianist *Penelope Thwaites* has long been a passionate advocate of the music of Percy Grainger, celebrating its irreverent, eccentric genius in the recital hall and on disc. Her latest project is a recording that features works for two pianos, calling for unusual sonorities drawn from a range of musical sources

WHEN THE FIRST THREE CDs of works for two pianos by Percy Grainger (1882-1961) were released (50 tracks, including 30 premiere recordings), the musicologist Wilfrid Mellers remarked that the music 'sets feet tapping and hearts bounding'. This is indeed the joyous experience of many when listening to Grainger. Not only is his music exploding with life, but he is endlessly inventive in his harmonies and rhythms, and in brilliantly deploying the many possibilities of the two-piano ensemble. His *Children's March*, for instance, depicts a trickster who resembles Till Eulenspiegel, with sly asides, subversive harmonies and glorious climaxes of misbehaviour.

Percy Grainger (1882-1961)

By contrast, try Grainger's highly unusual take on Bach's *Sheep May safely Graze*, re-christened *Blithe Bells*. While paying tribute to JSB, Grainger also introduces a touch of Gershwin, whom he also admired – an unlikely idea, yet it works. Bell-like sounds reappear in his arrangement of Balfour Gardiner's *English Dance*. This time, we have English church bells drifting across the greensward – a magical opening. Grainger was always fascinated by percussion instruments (and had been captivated by the sounds of the Javanese gamelan ensemble at the 1901 Paris Exhibition). His orchestral writing often features an extensive percussion section, and naturally this translates well in his versions for two pianos. *Arrival Platform Humlet* is great fun to play and highly effective in its fierce octave-unison texture.

It is a feature of Grainger's works for two pianos that they almost all began for orchestra, wind-band, choir or chamber group. So pianists have these references in finding their own range of pianistic colours. For example, try listening first to his extraordinary *Pastoral* in its orchestral guise (as the second movement of the suite *In a Nutshell*). There is a lush magnificence, reminiscent of Wagner, with horns featuring at climactic moments; and again, percussion is used to mysterious effect. The two-piano version ends with notes played quietly on the strings by a marimba mallet.

Despite his effervescent exterior, Grainger's own background was a difficult one: alcoholism and violence in

Penelope Thwaites and Timothy Young recording Grainger in the composer's native Melbourne

his brilliant architect father, a reaction of fear-filled control from his passionately musical mother (inflicted with syphilis by his father), and economic insecurity. Their son's prodigious musical gifts had been encouraged and cultivated, but after his parents parted, young Percy's duty became clear – as a piano virtuoso he had to be the breadwinner for himself and his mother. The strain told on him and from adolescence he became addicted to self-harm. Against this background, encountering his *Rondo* (1897) is heart-touching. It was written in those adolescent years while studying in Frankfurt and we can hear a sadness and vulnerability that Grainger seldom showed in person. The rumbustious *The Crew of the Long Serpent* (1898) is more the Grainger people recognise.

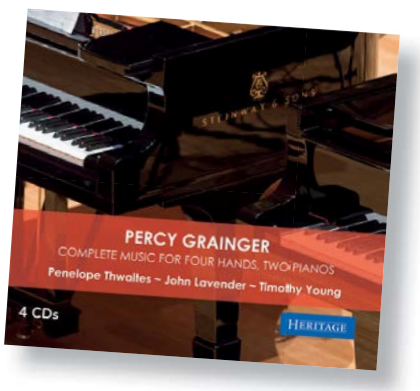
It was undoubtedly his own painful experience that fuelled Grainger's unique way with setting folk-tunes. *Lincolnshire Posy* sets six of them, and depicts not only the story of the songs but the personality of each of the folk-singers who sang for Grainger. He loved and respected these people and expressed real anger at the hardness of their lives. All this comes through in the music. No wonder Britten declared that, 'In the art of setting folksong, Grainger is my master.'

As well as the longer original works such as the two *Hill Songs*, the melodious *Warriors 2* and his youthful *Konzertstuck 1896* and masterful arrangements of Gershwin, Delius, Grieg and others, there are a host of short pieces which are most enjoyable to play, and from which one can learn much. Take his early-music settings – for example, two versions of Claude le Jeune's (1528-1602) *La bel'aronde*: version one takes a legato, vocal approach; version two is more staccato and dance-like. In both versions, the two pianos must keep in mind the sound of a small 16th-century choir. Grainger's longer setting of the William Lawes (1602-1645) *Fantasia and Aire* for six-part viol consort is a real challenge. Two pianos? Surely not. But through these unlikely transformations, we pianists find colours we did not know we had. We learn to balance the strands in our own part, and in the whole two-piano texture.

Grainger regularly taught and coached student pianists, urging them to listen to each other. His two-piano works are the ideal way of learning how to make one colourful tapestry of many sounds. It is surprising to me that teachers in colleges and universities have rarely discovered, let alone made use of, this superb repertoire. *The New Percy Grainger Companion* (Boydell Press) provides essential repertoire advice and details of how to obtain scores. ♪

Penelope Thwaites has recorded over 260 tracks of Grainger's music – solo, duo and multi-hand piano. She is the editor of The New Percy Grainger Companion, *now out in paperback.*

The 4-CD set of Percy Grainger: The Complete Music For Four Hands, Two Pianos *is released by Heritage Records (HTGCD403), featuring pianists Penelope Thwaites, John Lavender and Timothy Young. www.heritage-records.com*



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STRAIGHT TO THE HEART

Over the past four decades, Chris Maene has quietly been building a piano empire in Belgium, encompassing everything from historic restoration to modern instrument sales. His dream, however, has been to launch his own concert grand that combines the best in modern materials and manufacturing techniques with the straight-strung construction and sound favoured by makers of yesteryear. *Owen Mortimer* travelled to Maene's workshop in West Flanders to find out more

DRIVING THROUGH THE OPEN COUNTRYSIDE 30 kilometres west of Ghent, where flat, fertile fields stretch to the horizon in every direction, you could be forgiven for wondering whether you've come to the right place to find Belgium's leading piano company. Yet here, on the outskirts of the tiny town of Ruiselede, Chris Maene has built the showroom, workshop and office from which he has slowly but surely conquered every corner of the country's piano market. Sprawling over an area of more than 4,000 square metres, the complex even includes a concert hall where Maene showcases his instruments and hosts events such as the recent Belgian Steinway Competition.

I am nervous before our meeting, wondering what kind of man could be behind such a seemingly rapacious enterprise. These fears turn out to be completely unfounded: Maene is as down-to-earth as one could hope. His shock of pure white hair, funky glasses and animated manner give him the air of a mad professor, and indeed he turns out to be something of a maverick. Born into a family of instrument builders, he made his first harpsichord at the age of 16, and by 21 had constructed a copy of an 18th-century Dulcken fortepiano. 'My father worked with me on that first fortepiano and it was signed by both of us,' says Maene. 'He was a very good technician and I learnt a lot from working together. That first piano was an immediate success and was hired out extensively, including being used by the Festival of Flanders in Bruges.'

Maverick instrument maker Chris Maene at his workshop in Belgium

Frame by frame: Chris Maene's Straightstrung Concert Grand (left) alongside the cross-strung Steinway Model D

This turned out to be the start of an extraordinary journey into the world of historic instruments that has seen Maene create copies of dozens of harpsichords and pianos, including some very rare instruments such as Beethoven's Broadwood, Chopin's 1843 Pleyel and the first fortepiano built by Heinrich Engelhard Steinweg – later to become known as Steinway.

Each instrument has its own unique story, none more fascinating than the creation of the Steinweg. 'This was very difficult because there is only one piece in the world and the underside of the instrument is closed,' explains Maene. 'However, there are many cracks in the soundboard so I was able to use paper to feel inside the whole system. In the end, we also received sponsorship from General Electric who paid to have the instrument X-rayed. What we found was exactly the same as my designs, though it was good to have this confirmation!' Steinweg's original instrument dates from 1836 and can no longer be played, but thanks to the hard work of Maene and his colleagues, audiences today can now hear how it would have sounded. (A documentary about the creation of

Maene's Steinweg replica is available on DVD: *Building a Legend: The quest for the original sound of the first Steinway Grand piano*.)

MAENE HAS BEEN THE EXCLUSIVE IMPORTER OF Steinway & Sons for Belgium since 2002, but the Steinweg project further deepened the relationship between the two companies. Maene was therefore the first person Steinway turned to when a leading Steinway Artist began asking them about straight-stringing – a construction method that hadn't been employed in Steinway pianos since Henry Steinway Jr patented cross-stringing in 1869.

The Steinway Artist in question was Daniel Barenboim, who on a visit to Siena in 2011 played Liszt's recently restored 1862 Bechstein piano and was struck by the quality of its sound. Having discovering that the Bechstein is straight-strung, he became interested in creating his own specially modified piano – a dream come true for Maene, who had already envisaged such an instrument.

Liszt's Bechstein was not restored by Pianos Maene, though they have a similar instrument in their collection. The sound is both powerful and rich. What particularly excited Barenboim in Siena was the transparency of the bass, which allows the player to delineate the music's harmonic structure very clearly and for the listener to hear every note within each chord. It allows longer pedalling without the sound becoming muddy.

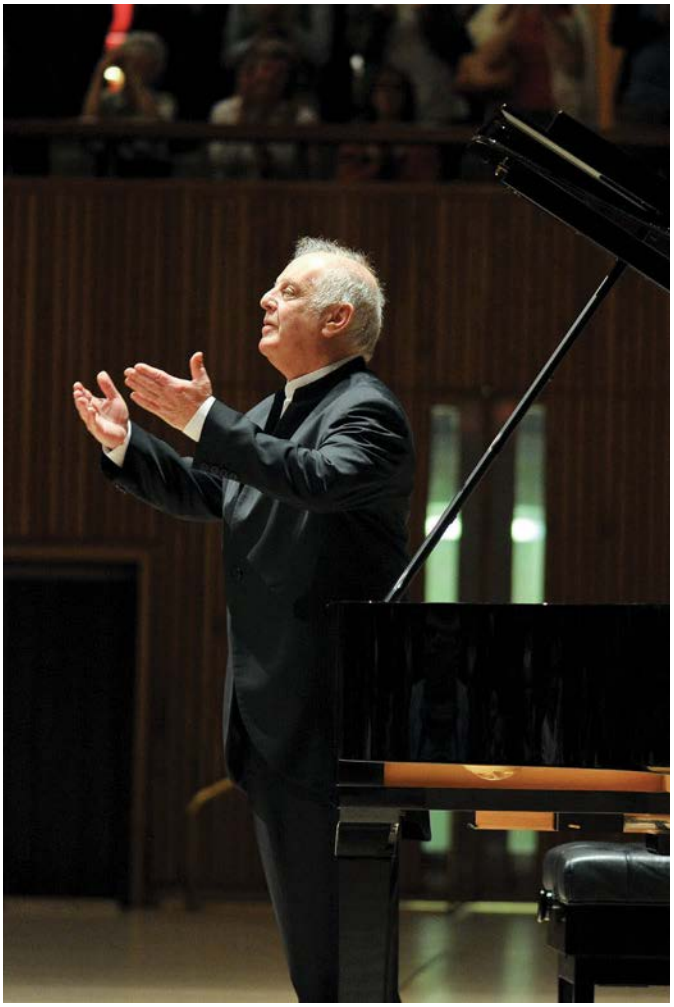
If a leading artist like Barenboim can find these qualities so exciting, why haven't any modern manufacturers continued to employ straight-stringing? According to Wolf Leye from the Antwerp showroom of Pianos Maene, the answer to this question is complicated, but can be ascribed primarily to the demand for more powerful instruments to fill bigger concert halls during the last decades of the 19th century. However, says Leye, 'there are more ways than one to approach this challenge. Steinway was very successful with the cross-strung instrument, but we contend that you can be equally successful with a different sound and different construction method. Essentially, everyone stopped using straight-stringing because they started copying one another. For example, Pleyel shifted to the production of cross-strung instruments following the Paris International Exposition in 1867 [where Steinway's cross-strung piano was exhibited]. The only manufacturers who continued producing straight-strung instruments after that date were Erard and Broadwood.' (Broadwood introduced cross-stringing in 1896.)

The key challenge for Maene when he began work on Barenboim's straight-strung piano was therefore to produce an instrument powerful enough for today's concert halls while capturing the timbral qualities favoured by the artist. The result is a hybrid incorporating elements from old and new pianos. 'It made no sense to invent a new piano – though the combination of elements is new,' says Maene.

Apart from the straight, parallel strings that give the piano its ➤

Technicians at Pianos Maene lower the cast-iron frame into a new straight-strung instrument

© PHILIPPE DEBEERST



Daniel Barenboim receives rapturous applause for his Southbank Centre Schubert sonatas cycle, performed on the Barenboim-Maene piano

name, Maene's instrument features specially designed bridges, ribs and bracings. The strings are also yellow rather than red brass and the hammers have been repositioned to create, says Barenboim, 'a different relationship between the tip of the fingers and the key.'

During my tour of the Chris Maene Workshop, I was fortunate enough to see one of the new instruments being constructed, allowing a close-up examination of its constituent parts. One innovation of which Maene is particularly proud is the soundboard, which combines wood grains that run in different directions – lengthwise in the bass, diagonally in the treble. This helps to optimise the sound and keep each register more localised. As Maene puts it: 'If you cook three different vegetables in the same pot they will influence other another. If you cook them separately they will keep their individual taste.'

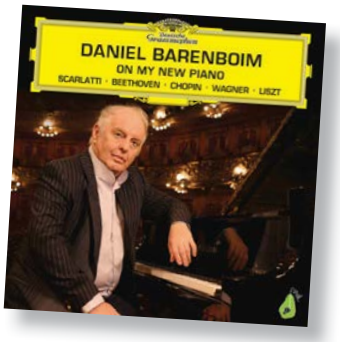
The Barenboim-Maene Concert Grand was launched in May 2015 with complete cycle of Schubert sonatas at London's Southbank Centre. *IP* correspondent Michael Church described the piano's sound in these performances as 'intimate and contained, with dry top notes but a sinewy bass which really sings', allowing 'both Schubert and Barenboim to come across in a refreshingly new way'. For readers who missed those concerts, Barenboim has recently released a solo album titled *On My New Piano* (Deutsche Grammophon), which showcases the straight-strung instrument in works by Scarlatti, Beethoven, Chopin, Wagner and Liszt. The Wagner (Liszt's transcription of the 'Solemn March to the Holy Grail' from *Parsifal*) is particularly effective for demonstrating control of tonal colours and clarity in the music's huge chordal sonorities.

Leye acknowledges the key role Barenboim has played in supporting the development of Maene's piano: 'If we had tried to build it without Maestro Barenboim's involvement it wouldn't have been as fast, it would have cost a huge amount of money, and then we would have had to find an artist to play it. So this was *the* opportunity we needed to go forward,' he explains. Yet he also offers this caveat: 'If it weren't for the co-operation with Maestro Barenboim, perhaps we would have been even more radical.'

THERE ARE ONLY TWO BARENBOIM-MAENE PIANOS in existence, but three more instruments are now being built. Its maker hopes it will challenge the 'process of standardisation' that has come to dominate piano manufacturing: 'Thirty years ago each concert hall would have a Steinway plus perhaps a Bösendorfer and a Bechstein so artists had a choice, but today everywhere is the same – they play the same music on the same pianos.'

One big advantage of the Maene Straightstrung Concert Grand versus straight-strung historic instruments is that it feels fairly similar to modern concert grands, so players do not require specialised training to use it. Nor does it require a specialist technician, but can be tuned and maintained by someone familiar with modern instruments. Nevertheless, with a price tag of €170,000 the Maene Straightstrung Concert Grand is only likely to appeal to wealthy individuals and institutions who already own several cross-strung instruments. 'It is a small market,' admits Maene, 'but between Steinway and the other brands there are more than 1,500 new concert grands sold each year worldwide, so if only one percent wants something else that's already 15 instruments per year.'

If all goes well, Maene says he will build more models in the future – with plans already in the pipeline: 'I believe there is a lot of scope for differentiation. For example, we often have pianists who want to choose between different Steinway instruments depending on the repertoire they are playing. In fact, these pianos are all very similar, but it would be possible to make instruments in which the differences are more pronounced, designed with specific repertoire in mind.' ♪



Daniel Barenboim's On My New Piano *is available from Deutsche Grammophon (DG 479 6724). www.danielbarenboim.com*

For further details about Chris Maene's Straightstrung Concert Grand visit www.chrismaene.be/nl/straight-strung-concert-grand

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SECRET HELPERS

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National Opera Studio répétiteurs (l-r) Killian Farrell, Iwan Teifion Davies, Edmund Whitehead and Frederick Brown

Jeremy Nicholas throws light on the hidden art of the répétiteur, first-rate pianists and all-round communicators who perform a vital but often unacknowledged role in the opera house

CAN YOU NAME A FAMOUS RÉPÉTITEUR? NOT THE ones who have gone on to become celebrated conductors – the likes of Bruno Walter, Josef Krips, Georg Solti and Antonio Pappano. Think of a famous répétiteur currently working in one of the world's major opera houses. You can't? That's because there are none. This is a profession that hides away from the view of the public, practitioners known only to the backstage world of opera. Which is ironic, because if you consider the serious talent required to be a 'rep' (as they are known in the business), you might think that some of them would be stars in their own right.

So what exactly does an opera répétiteur do? They play for rehearsals in an opera house; they have to play an entire opera score in a piano reduction; and they are sort of accompanists – but not exactly. The world of the répétiteur, and the kinds of people it attracts, can seem like a well-kept secret, so to discover more, I visited the National Opera Studio (NOS) in a converted chapel tucked away off Wandsworth High Street in South London.

The NOS, to quote their website, is 'engaged by Arts Council England and the UK's leading Opera Companies to provide professional training of the highest quality for singers and répétiteurs who have the potential to become the leading artists of their generation.' It does this with remarkable success: NOS alumni are on the permanent music staff of all six of the leading UK opera companies as well as working internationally.

The acclaimed soprano Kathryn Harries has been the NOS director since the end of 2008. What does she look for when auditioning candidates for the Studio's répétiteur course? 'You need people with a splendid technique, who love opera and all that it entails, people with imagination, who are excited by the drama, who like working with singers – and not everybody does:

Edmund Whitehead joins NOS soprano Caroline Modiba for coaching by British bass Brindley Sherratt

some of them can be very difficult! Répétiteurs have to be sure of their musical ethic and be able to work with a great variety of different personalities. They also need to be psychologists. All my operatic life, there has been a pianist at hand. They work with you in preparing, right the way through the rehearsal period. They are essential to what you do and so much a part of the scene that you don't really think about it – they're just there.'

Where do you find anonymous talents with such highly-specialised skills willing to leave their egos at the stage door? I met three of them – all, as it happened, male twenty-somethings – who are on the NOS's year-long répétiteur course: Iwan Teifion Davies (from Wales), Killian Farrell (from Dublin) and Edmund Whitehead (Anglo-Russian). To get this far they have passed the NOS two-stage audition, an achievement in itself. For the first round they are asked to prepare two scenes from contrasting operas, involving at least two characters. They have to play while singing in the vocal lines. Then there is some sight-reading. In the second round you have to play while coaching a singer, and this is followed by an interview. There are four répétiteur places available at the NOS each year, and competition for them is fierce.

What, I wondered, motivated these young musicians to become répétiteurs? Iwan Davies sang and played the piano and organ as a child, conducted local amateurs and formed his own choir before going to university. 'I thought I wanted to be a singer but after university, I got myself a job playing the piano at a drama school, enjoyed it and for the next few years worked a lot in musicals. After that I decided I wouldn't be a singer but wanted to work in opera which was my first love. I got a place at Guildhall on the répétiteurs course.'

Killian started playing the piano and then at 15 discovered opera. 'Hearing *Salomé* was what did it for me – I thought, "Wouldn't it be a great thing to conduct that!" I read up on it and found that in Germany especially there was a tradition of the pianist starting off in the opera house, working your way up the ladder until you become a conductor. While I was at Trinity College, Dublin, I got a job as répétiteur for RTE, Ireland's national broadcaster. So then I decided to audition for NOS, to focus on the piano and work with some really wonderful practitioners of opera.'

Ed Whitehead, meanwhile, began his career as a child actor. 'I've always loved theatre and languages. I decided I wanted to be a conductor – I'd played in a lot of orchestras as a double-bassist and then got an organ scholarship to Oxford. I loved mucking about on the piano but never took it very seriously. Then someone told me that to get into conducting opera you could be a rep if you're good at sight-reading. So I went to a month-long summer course in Norfolk where we lived in a house with a bunch of singers – it's called the York Trust Course – and I got a new pile of music to sight-read every morning.' After that it was a répétiteur scholarship at Oxford, then the course at Guildhall, staying for a second year on a conducting fellowship before auditioning for the NOS course.

THERE ARE A FEW MYTHS TO DISPEL. ONE: REPS ARE not all geniuses who have to be able to transcribe full scores to the keyboard at sight. None of the three has ever met anyone who has had to do that professionally (though they know a few people who can do it when required). Two: reps are not accompanists in the 'Lieder recital' sense. 'Very few répétiteurs become or would wish to be accompanists,' says Ed. 'In the opera house you are working with a wide range of international-standard voices. If *Wozzeck* is one of the operas being staged, then you not only have to get through the whole score correctly but know all the vocal lines so well that you can sing any one of them when needed at the drop of a hat *and* coach the singers. That demands a certain degree of flexibility in technique.'

Iwan concurs: 'Some répétiteurs are wonderful accompanists and some accompanists are wonderful répétiteurs, but they are two different mindsets. I would treat operas quite differently from the way I play songs. Playing a piece non-stop for three or four hours can be very tiring – and you need to find a way of protecting yourself against that – but fundamentally an accompanist is worrying about the sound of the piano, where répétiteurs are worrying about the sound of the orchestra and playing it in such a way that it helps the singer rather than for audience consumption.'

Killian is also quick to stress that the art of the répétiteur is distinctive: 'If you're doing the Act II finale of *Figaro* and you're listening to as many of the 11 vocal lines as you can, you're thinking

about the language, aspects of vocal technique, balance between the voices and how you might be able to help the singers – for example, how consonants could be placed to make a person clearer, or identifying the reasons why someone is rushing. You're trying to follow a conductor, be aware of the staging behind you and play it all. It is very different from being a song accompanist, where you can focus on yourself and one other.'

It is often the case that répétiteurs harbour ambitions to become conductors. 'There is not,' says Killian, 'a huge difference in some ways between what a conductor and répétiteur does, especially in the way we coach singers and try to get the best out of them.' 'And,' Ed continues, 'you have to be able to conduct to be a good répétiteur, and you have to be able to rep to be a good opera conductor.'

The other side of the training is linguistic. 'We have very good language coaches here,' says Iwan. 'A lot of work is done with phonetics, taking apart the sounds that you make in a language and eventually piecing it all together and learning about diction, the poetry and the artistic side. I always start *my* preparation with the language because I can't motivate myself if I don't know what it's about.' Killian agrees. 'Analysis of what it takes to sing well in a certain language is more important than knowing how to speak it. We're not going to be able to go to famous singers and give them interpretative notes, but what we can do – because singers always need ears outside of themselves – is tell them such-and-such is not coming across clearly, you're too loud here, you're not loud enough there, this word needs to come across differently in this theatre. Répétiteurs need to have that very pragmatic approach.'

When Iwan, Killian and Ed leave the NSO and start out at an opera house, they will be rehearsal pianists. Their opinion may not be asked for, but Kathryn Harries assures me, 'If a répétiteur has got something to offer, most experienced singers, even those who have sung a role many times, will take it gracefully, and consider it. A seasoned répétiteur will be able to pass on the conductor's wishes or advise on how to approach a particular passage in a specific production. It's very much a collaboration. As a great friend of mine says, there's no letter "I" in the word "team".'

It's possible that we'll never hear again of Iwan, Killian or Ed as they work successfully but incognito, as far as the public is concerned, in their chosen profession. It is just as likely that we will encounter any one of them in a few years' time taking a well-deserved bow in the orchestra pit of one of the world's opera houses. ♪

A group of gifted singers and répétiteurs from the National Opera Studio will perform a Rhinegold LIVE recital at London's Conway Hall on Monday 27 March 2017. Register online for free tickets and a complimentary drink: www.rhinegoldlive.co.uk

Iwan Teifion Davies: 'I always start *my* preparation with the language'

FESTIVALS OF NOTE

IP looks ahead to some key festival dates for your diary, from the glamour of the French Riviera to the laid-back environs of America's Pacific Northwest

EUROPE

FESTIVAL PRINTEMPS DES ARTS DE MONTE-CARLO

17 March to 8 April 2017

The Festival Printemps des Arts de Monte-Carlo began in 1970 at the instigation of Princess Grace. For the past dozen or so years it has been directed by the quirky composer Marc Monnet, also known for his role at IRCAM, the Paris-based new-music mecca founded by the late cultural iconoclast Pierre Boulez. Monnet judges brilliantly how to balance box office and '*épater la bourgeoisie*' by pushing boundaries during theFestival's extensive four-week programme.

This year features a feast of piano events during week two (22 to 26 March), culminating in a four-concerto concert with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo, running the gamut from Mozart to Ligeti with soloists Jean-Efflam Bavouzet, Ivo Kahánek, Bruno Leonardo Gelber and Jan Michiels. Other highlights include a masterclass by Bavouzet, a pair of solo recitals on the same evening by Bavouzet and Kahánek, and a lecture with the intriguing title 'Instruments de tortures pianistiques', by musicologist David Christoffel.

www.printempsdesarts.mc

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet leads a feast of piano events in Monte Carlo

© BENJAMIN EALOVEGA

SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN MUSIK FESTIVAL

1 July to 28 August 2017

In the far north of Germany, the province of Schleswig-Holsein is steeped in the history of European nobility, maritime trade and the cultural activities of the Hanseatic League.

Founded in 1986, the Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival distinguishes itself by taking music out of traditional concert halls and opera houses and presenting it settings that lend a very particular atmosphere to the programming. These range from beautiful castles and spectacular churches to historic manor houses, barns and farmsteads, and even shipyards and industrial halls. As well as a summer-long series of concerts and recitals, the Festival is known for its family-friendly events featuring musical picnics in country estates, and workshops for children.

Each annual Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival has a composer at the heart of its programming and the 2017 event will revolve around the works of Maurice Ravel, including a number of piano recitals and concerto programmes featuring the Schleswig-Holstein Festival Orchestra – founded by Leonard Bernstein in 1987 as an Academy for talented young instrumentalists.

The international jazz festival, JazzBaltica, has also been

This year's Schleswig-Holstein Festival celebrates the works of Maurice Ravel

© TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

a part of the Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival since 2002. Visit www.jazzbaltica.de for more information about this year's jazz programme.
www.shmf.de

US

MIAMI INTERNATIONAL PIANO FESTIVAL ACADEMY

20th Anniversary Season

Established in 1998, the Miami International Piano Festival of Discovery celebrates its 20th season this year, having established itself as an important year-round platform for emerging young artists who bring a distinctive approach to their playing and programming.

Performers in the Festival are chosen by an artistic advisory committee made up of pianists, music critics and scholars in the US and Europe. The final selection of young pianists is not a matter of competition but is based on highlighting excellence and individuality. Among the new talent presented by the Festival, two pianists have gone on to receive the prestigious Gilmore Artists Award – Piotr Anderszewski and Ingrid Fliter.

The Festival itself consists of a concert series held in three venues. Classical Sundays at Five offers a chance to hear some of the piano world's finest young talent in a full recital programme at the Aventura Arts & Cultural Center. Forthcoming concerts in March and April feature the Francesco Libetta from Italy and the Serbian pianist Misha Dacić. A Master Series is held at the Broward Center for Performing Arts, and a Discovery Series presents new talent at the Colony Theatre, a stylish and intimate Art Deco venue, culminating in a the Festival's Grand Finale on 14 May.

This summer also sees the return of the Miami International Piano Festival Academy, in partnership with the Nova Southern University. The faculty, made up of pianists discovered in past Miami Festivals, will give concerts and masterclasses aimed at inspiring and teaching a new generation of pianists.
www.miamipianofest.com

SOUTHEASTERN PIANO FESTIVAL

15th Anniversary Festival

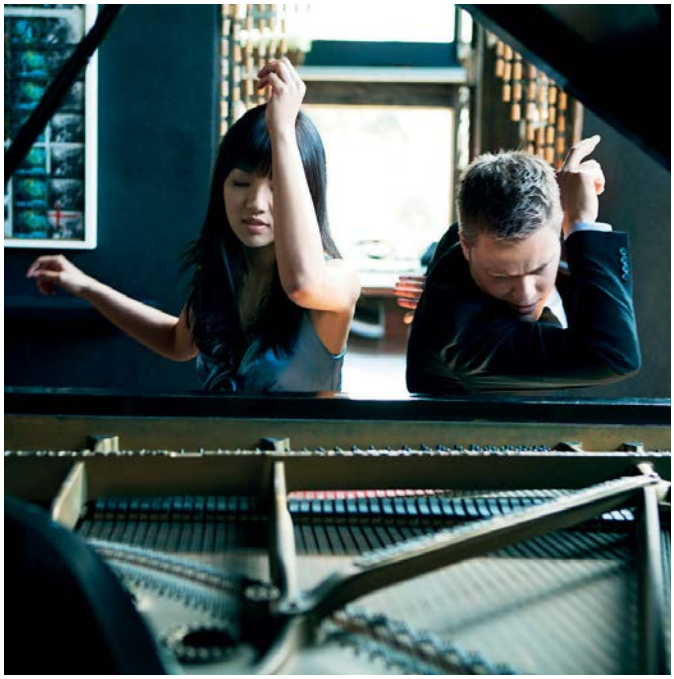
18 to 24 June 2017

Each summer the Southeastern Piano Festival transforms the city of Columbia, South Carolina, into a major cultural destination that draws audiences and exceptional young artists from across the US.

The Festival serves as a high-level training platform for rising pianists, a presenter of world-renowned pianists, an advocate for new music and a vehicle for exploring the piano's multi-faceted role on stage and beyond.

This year marks the Festival's 15th anniversary. It begins with a Piano Extravaganza gala featuring 15 pianists, five pianos and an award-winning Miami-based choir in *Carmina Burana*. The week continues with concerts by international artists and culminates in the Arthur Fraser International Piano Competition. Guest performers include Van Cliburn Competition gold medallist Vadim Kholodenko, piano guru Frederic Chiu and the American duo Anderson and Roe.

The Festival's commitment to presenting young artists can be seen in a series of performances by Southeastern alumni



© LISA-MARIE MAZZUCCO

Anderson and Roe bring their trademark dynamism to the Southeastern Piano Festival

Chaeyoung Park, Anna Han, Maria Parrini, Susan Zhang and Zachary Hughes. All concerts and masterclasses will take place at venues around the city of Columbia including the Koger Center, Johnson Hall, Trinity Cathedral and the University of South Carolina School of Music.
www.SoutheasternPianoFestival.com

SEATTLE INTERNATIONAL PIANO FESTIVAL & COMPETITION

October 2017

America's Pacific Northwest has built a formidable reputation for its musical and artistic life, centred around the laid-back, culturally lively city of Seattle.

The centrepiece of the Seattle International Piano Festival (SIPF) is the bi-annual Seattle International Piano Competition, held in October at the Illsley Ball Nordstrom Recital Hall at Benaroya Hall.

The Competition is unusual in that it accommodates entries from professional, student and amateur pianists from all over the world, as well as promoting aspiring local talent from Seattle and its environs. Participants can select repertoire that shows off their individual qualities at the keyboard, without any specific requirements imposed by the Competition's organisers. Updated rules for the 2017 Competition, the seventh bi-annual event of its kind, are now available (visit the website below) and the deadline for applications is 15 May 2017.

Aside from the solo piano competition, the Festival also features guest recitals, masterclasses and lectures presented by world-class performers. Meanwhile, the SIPF also organises other local events throughout the year, including the NW Festivals for local competitive participants, and guest artist performances as a part of its KB Piano Series.
www.seattlepianocompetition.org

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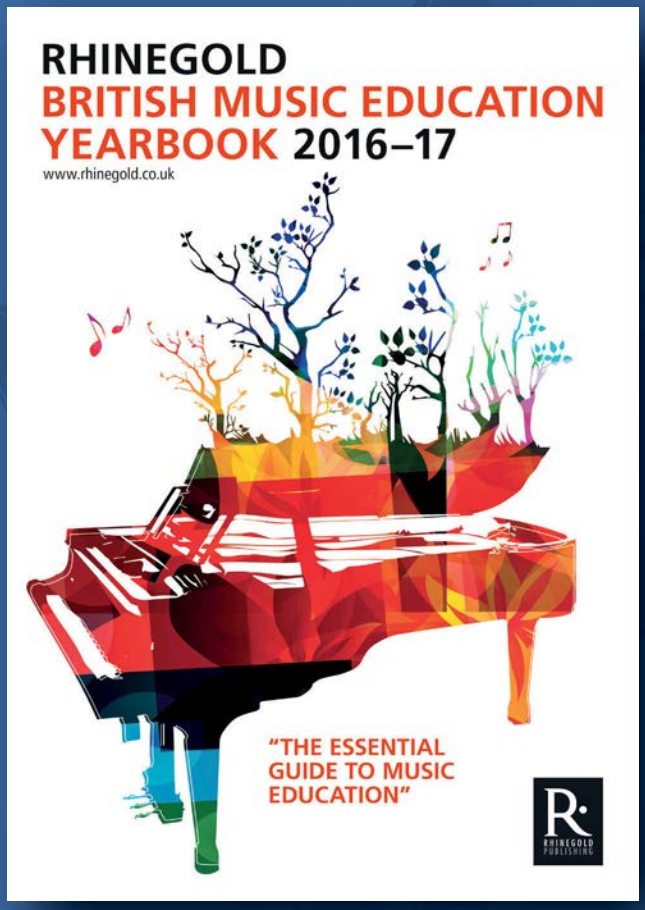

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KEY NOTES

Historical perspectives on piano technique

BY MURRAY MCLACHLAN

OCTAVES

OCTAVES HAVE A POWERFUL, exciting reputation. They are associated with thrilling virtuosity and high-wire pianism and therefore can appear quite daunting for inexperienced or amateur players. This is a great shame, since healthy octave playing should feel as natural and controllable as healthy scales – whatever level you have achieved.

As is so often the case with technique, it is sensible to begin practising patiently, working with calm intelligence and an awareness of what feels comfortable and what doesn't. I strongly recommend that you do not begin working seriously at octaves until you are well on the way to mastering relaxation and concentration when you play. By that, I mean you should already have learned about avoiding 'blocked' wrists and have an awareness of the dangers of practising for too long with stiffness in the neck, shoulders and elbow joints.

You can check for tension and work towards octaves by practising single-note scales with the fifth finger alone in each hand. You should also practise scales with the two thumbs alone and together, an octave and two octaves apart. Build these scale exercises up from slow speeds and try to feel totally at ease with the requisite mini wrist-undulations between each note. The extent to which you can remain loose and relaxed in your wrists will determine just how successful your octave-playing will become.

As you extend your work and gain in confidence, you can eventually start to practise octaves properly, but always ensure that your hand feels still and stationary. This may appear strange at first, but it's really common sense: when you play octaves it is your arms that move your hands up and down the keyboard. If you feel that your hands are being chauffeured across the keyboard by your arms in perfect alignment with your loose wrists then you have an excellent starting point from which to gradually build up confidence, velocity and fullness of tone.

OCTAVES REALLY BEGIN FOR pianists with Scarlatti and his sonatas. Scarlattian octaves require a lightness of touch and economy of movement. Though we are not in the business of being pale imitators of harpsichordists or fortepianists, it is important for modern pianists to know the sonic boundaries of Scarlatti's era, and to realise that delicacy and awareness of stylistic limits are prerequisites. Certainly in 18th-century octave-playing, it is important to adopt loose wrists and refrain from temptations associated with the use of the forearm. In fact, there is no need for 'arm weight' in this context whatsoever. As with all octaves, ease and comfort of execution are essential in an approach to the keyboard which should never be flustered, strained or lacking in wrist/finger coordination. The moment that the octave 'speaks' should see perfect alignment between the forearm and wrist. If your wrist juts out and adopts an angle in relation to your forearm, then you risk tension, stiffness and ultimately injury.

In between each octave, the wrists should be free to undulate and move in sine wave shapes to facilitate relaxed smooth pianism and elegance. This is certainly true for much of the pre-percussive, post-1900 repertoire.

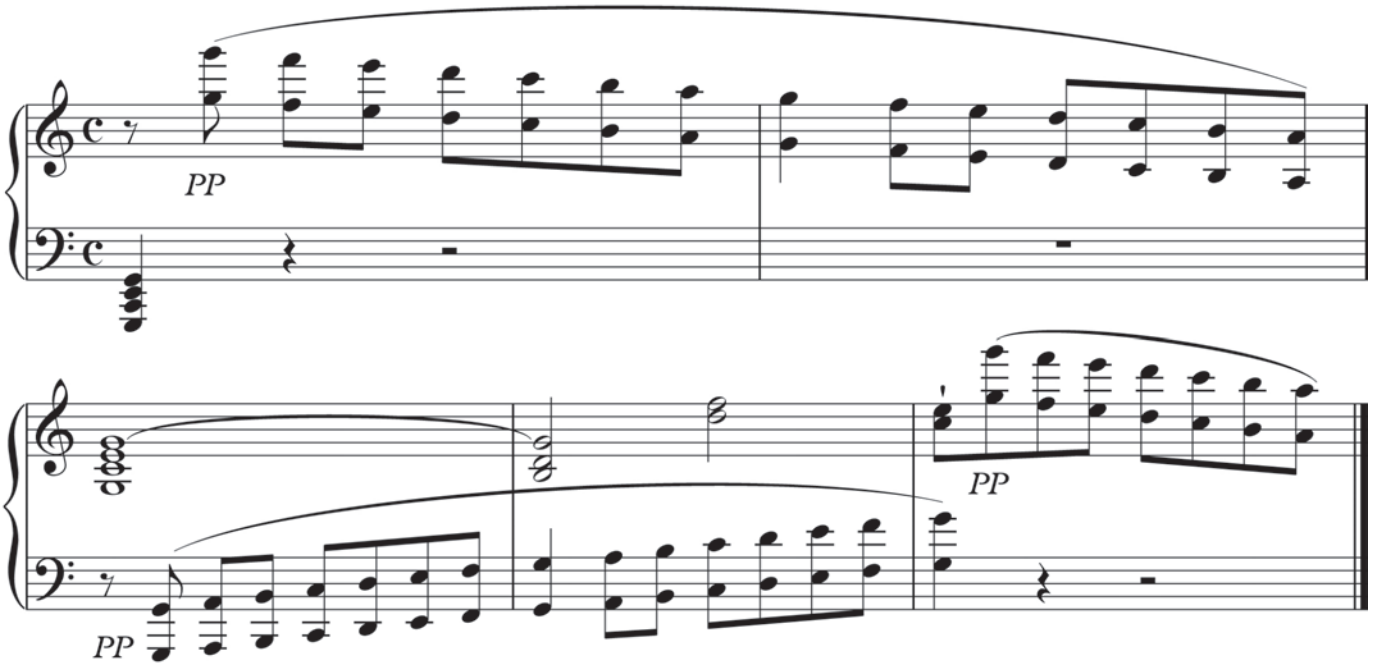
After Scarlatti the music of the 'London Pianoforte School' rapidly developed octave playing to unprecedented heights. Indeed Mozart and Haydn's sonatas are much less significant than the early sonatas of Clementi, who represented a huge leap in technical possibilities. It seems sad that Clementi's earliest sonatas remain so neglected today, because they contain a feast of vibrant, virtuosic music. Those in doubt need only glance at the explosion of octave fireworks in the finale of Clementi's Sonata in A major Op 2 No 2 (1782). Though these need a little more firmness of touch and weight than in many of Scarlatti's octave runs, they still require restraint and focus in keeping with the overall musical style. It is not so much use of the forearm that is required as precise co-ordinated control from the (relaxed and loose) wrists. Clementi's innovations with octaves greatly influenced subsequent generations and composers. The octave etudes of Czerny and the approach of Theodor Kullak in his monumental three-volume *School of Octave Studies* derives directly from Clementi, who in many respects deserves to be described as the father of modern piano technique.

Octaves in Classical repertoire can lead to specific technical problems related to conflicts between modern instruments and fortepianos designed specifically for the needs of musicians at the turn of the 18th/19th centuries. Nowhere can this be felt more than in the coda of the third movement in Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata (see Example 1, overleaf).

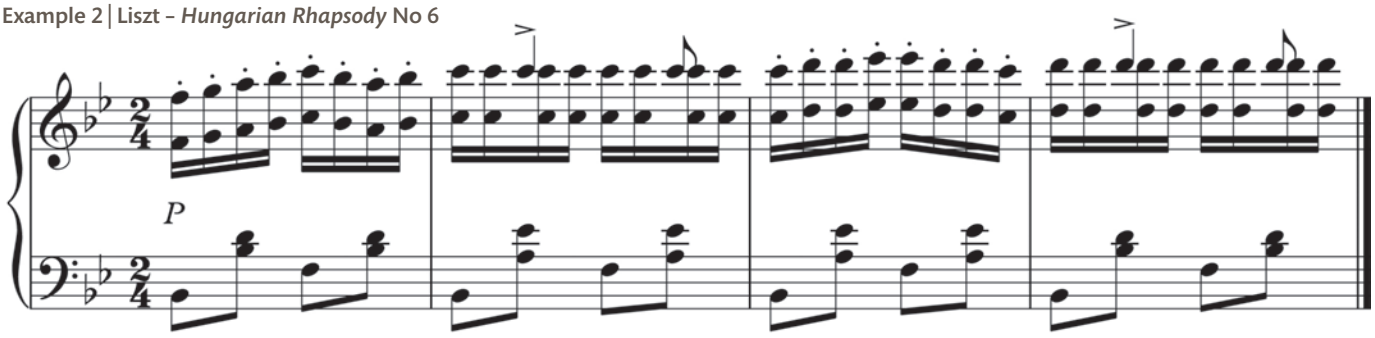
While there is a long tradition of pianists re-arranging this passage between the two hands (and disguising the fact that this approach requires a number of notes to go unplayed), it is possible to realise these octaves honestly: practise them by playing near the surface of the keys and literally adopting a *glissando* technique! Keep your approach as light as possible.

Beethoven's descending octaves work best if the focus is centred on lower ➤

Example 1 | Beethoven – *Waldstein* Sonata



Example 2 | Liszt – *Hungarian Rhapsody* No 6



notes, with a change of emphasis to the top notes for the ascending octaves. Of course Beethoven's music makes extensive use of octaves, and though it would be misleading to generalise about a 'Beethovenian octave approach' (because such a thing does not exist), it is nonetheless the case that octaves in Beethoven are more easily realised when arm weight is engaged. Aim for a firmer, more solid and deeper aesthetic than with the music of Clementi, though refrain from employing the shoulders and back muscles for all but the most extrovert passages (such as the fortissimo E-flat minor double-octave scale run at the climax of the development in the first movement of the *Emperor* Concerto).

For the early Romantics, avoidance of heaviness in octave playing is also a good principle. Passages such as the the final page of Mendelssohn's *Rondo Capriccioso*, the obstinate left-hand octaves in the central section of Chopin's A-flat Polonaise Op 53, or the octaves in the middle of Schumann's *Toccata* require a feline facility and weightlessness that would all but be obliterated through the use of too much body weight. This is also true of many octave challenges in Liszt. Let us take one of his most famous octave 'stunts' as an example: the famous 'Friska' section that closes his legendary sixth *Hungarian Rhapsody* with so much energy and sparkling virtuosity (see Example 2, above).

This excerpt is frequently cited as an instance where injury is likely to occur by the unwary. It requires economy, concentration of movement, freedom and looseness in the elbow joint and upper arm. Success will most likely evolve slowly from quiet playing which concentrates on technical ease and even weight. Velocity can then be built up alongside an increase in decibel level.

WITH LATE-ROMANTIC COMPOSERS and the 'war horse' concerto repertoire in particular, we find a need for more depth of tone. We could do a lot worse than work on what can best be described as 'heroic octaves' by beginning with the thumbs alone. Thinking of high-Romantic challenges in terms of horizontal rather than vertical movements will also help, as it will enable the sensation of spinning octaves to manifest itself: 'shaking octaves out of your sleeve' is a useful metaphor to bear in mind. Inevitably, your wrists

will seem to be raised much higher when octaves are despatched with energy and excitement in order to achieve a sense of panache.

Brahms' octaves require special mention in the high-Romantic context, if only because his music, perhaps more than any other in the standard literature, requires an effortless and aristocratic sense of well-being and repose. Even in the most exciting passages there is still a sense that the physical effort expended in the interpretation of the music should be relaxed, magisterial and deep. Anchor your feet firmly on the ground, co-ordinate and utilise your back muscles in tandem with relaxed upper-arm movements and aligned wrists and forearms, and authority is assured (see Example 3, below).

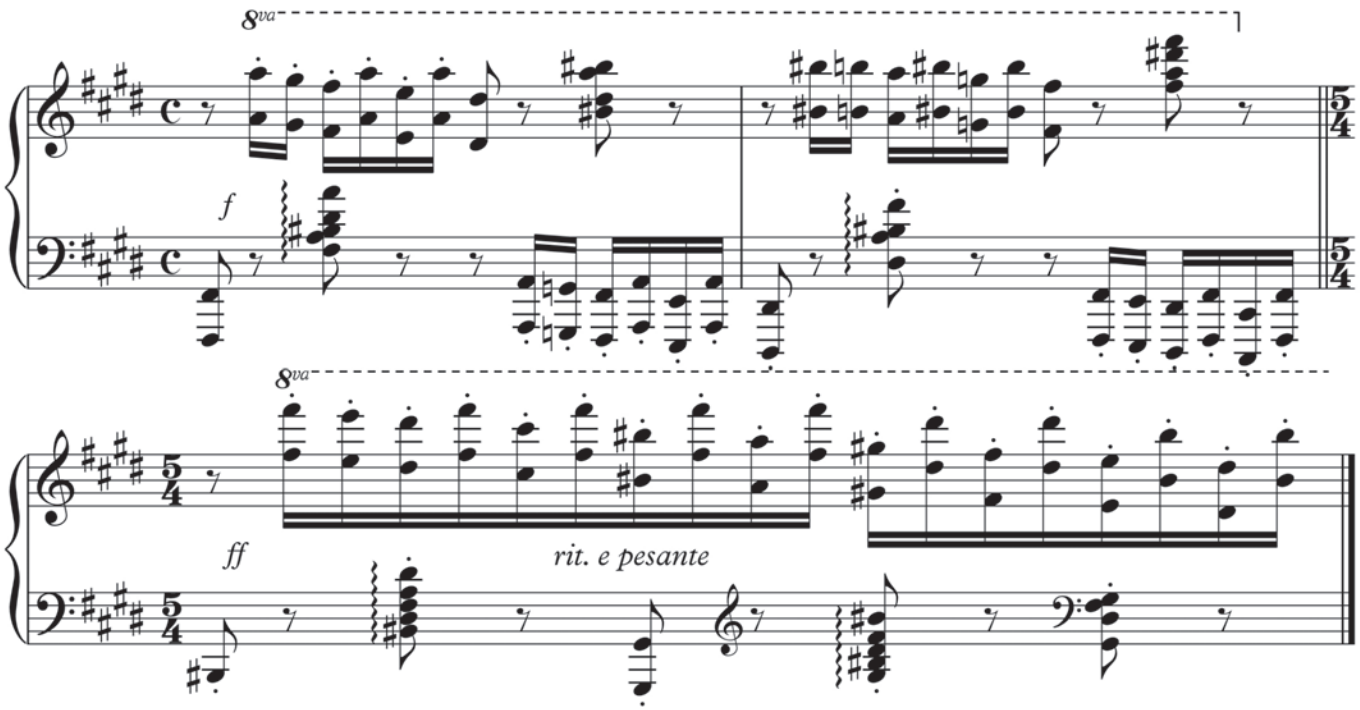
IN THE POST-ROMANTIC ERA IT IS important to consider the quality of sound that your inner ear most readily desires when practising octaves. This is particularly evident in French repertoire: works such as Debussy's *Étude* 'Pour les octaves' require meticulously gauged sonic judgement. It is vital to be aware of sound production and pianism in every passage so that the requisite fluidity and grace of the overall characterisation in the piece remains in place.

Of course a totally different aesthetic from this is required in scores by Bartók, Prokofiev or Shostakovich, where the characterisation is much more percussive, brittle and at times motoric. Let's examine a few bars from Bartók's celebrated *Allegro barbaro* (see Example 4, below).

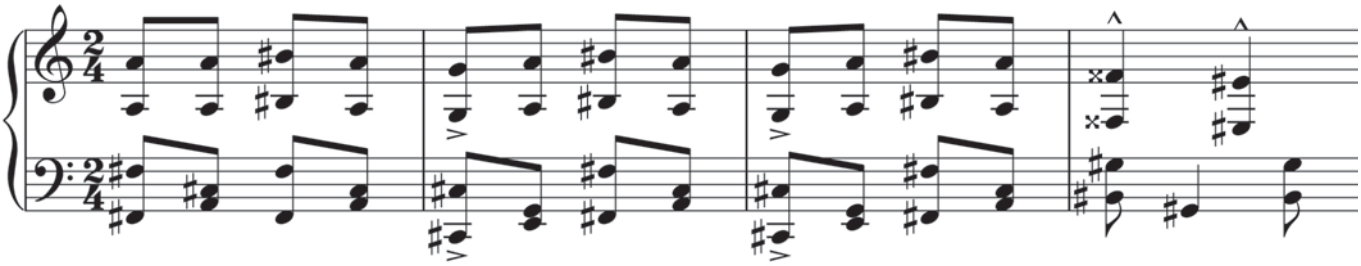
In such ferocious writing the pianist can feel that he is literally 'attacking' the piano. While this may well be the case it is still possible to do this while remaining in control: playing percussive octaves from the elbow does not mean tensing your muscles in a harmful way.

In summary, there are two major points to bear in mind when playing octaves: on the one hand we should do all we can to cultivate healthy, comfortable practice when dealing with the vast array of contexts in which octaves appear throughout the piano repertoire; then, on a purely musical level, we should constantly be searching for a variety of approaches, in keeping with each musical challenge as it arises. In such an extensive musical universe, a 'one size fits all' approach to playing octaves will not suffice. ♪

Example 3 | Brahms – Sonata No 3 in F minor Op 5



Example 4 | Bartók – *Allegro barbaro*



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Swale by Philip Cashian from *Spectrum 5* (ABRSM)

About the music

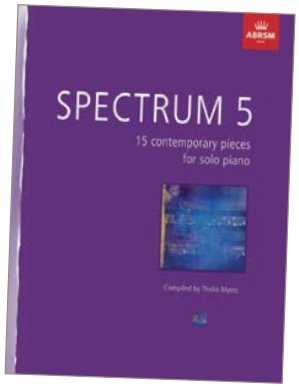
Spectrum 5 is a unique collection of contemporary works for solo piano. It includes 15 pieces that have been specially commissioned from some of today's leading composers and reflect current compositional trends. This richly varied collection ranges in difficulty from approximately Grade 6 to Diploma, and is suitable for student, amateur and professional pianists of all ages.

The *Spectrum* series was established by ABRSM and Thalia Myers for piano in 1996 and now includes volumes for piano duet, violin, cello, clarinet, trumpet and string quartet.

Thalia Myers, series compiler says: 'Although the pieces in *Spectrum 5* are generally harder to play than many of those in earlier piano volumes, the purpose of *Spectrum* has remained unchanged since the first anthology twenty-odd years ago: to commission some of the world's finest composers to write pieces of modest length and difficulty, while preserving the essential characteristics of their compositional style.'

Spectrum 5 includes specially commissioned works by leading composers Victoria Borisova-Ollas, Philip Cashian, Chen Yi, Michael Finnissy, Graham Fitkin, Cheryl Frances-Hoad, Helen Grime, Gavin Higgins, Gabriel Jackson, Harold Meltzer, Poul Ruders, Timothy Salter, Howard Skempton, Karen Tanaka and Huw Watkins.

Where appropriate, composers have given notes about the background to their pieces and brief guides to interpretation; these appear as footnotes on the first page of each work. The pieces range in length from 2-5 pages, with most being 3 pages long.



Thalia Myers suggests that players coming to the music of a particular composer for the first time may find it helpful to seek out her or his recorded music for instruments other than the piano. Supporting the pieces, there is a recording of all 15 pieces on the USK label (USK 1233DL) by Thalia Myers herself.

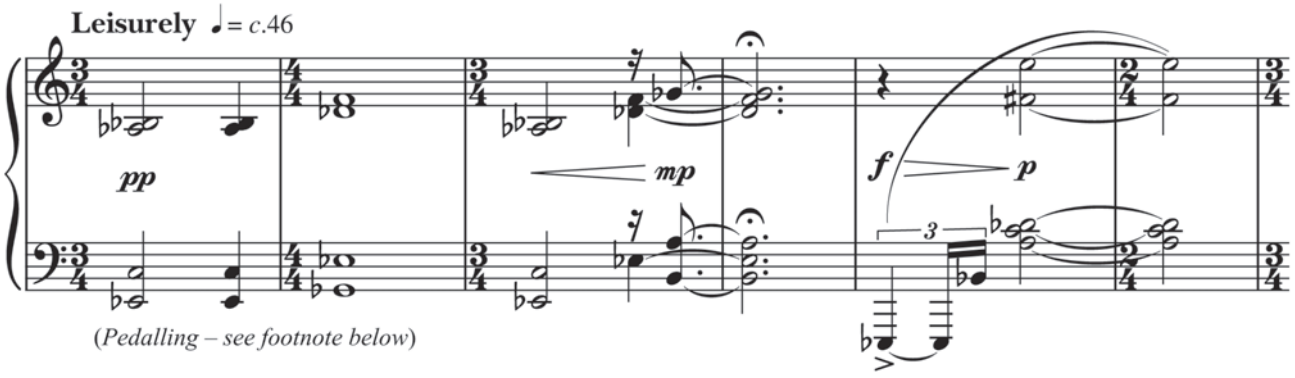
Thalia Myers says 'players unfamiliar with new music often find that a strongly lyrical element can help to provide a welcoming way in. Whether Philip Cashian's music is familiar or unfamiliar, for a Grade 8 pianist *Swale* is a wonderful example of music that is lyrical, colourful, narrative and modernist – and it's a joy to play'.

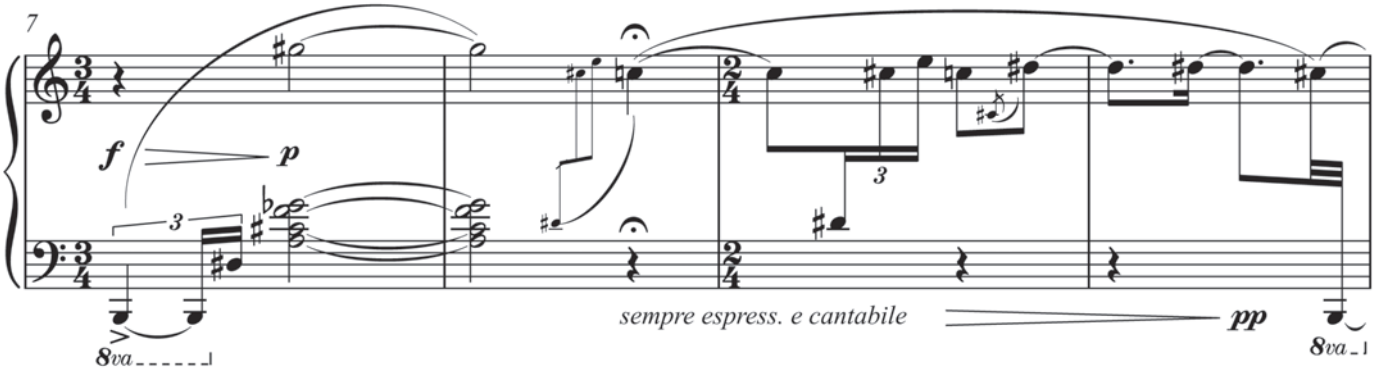
Spectrum 5 is now available to purchase online along with downloadable recordings at www.abrsm.org/spectrum or from music retailers worldwide.

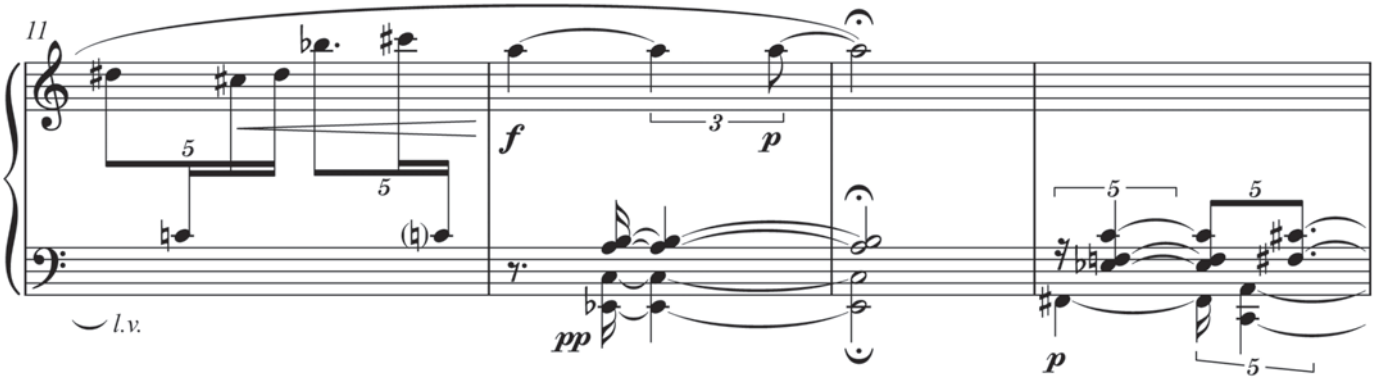
in memory of Martin Read

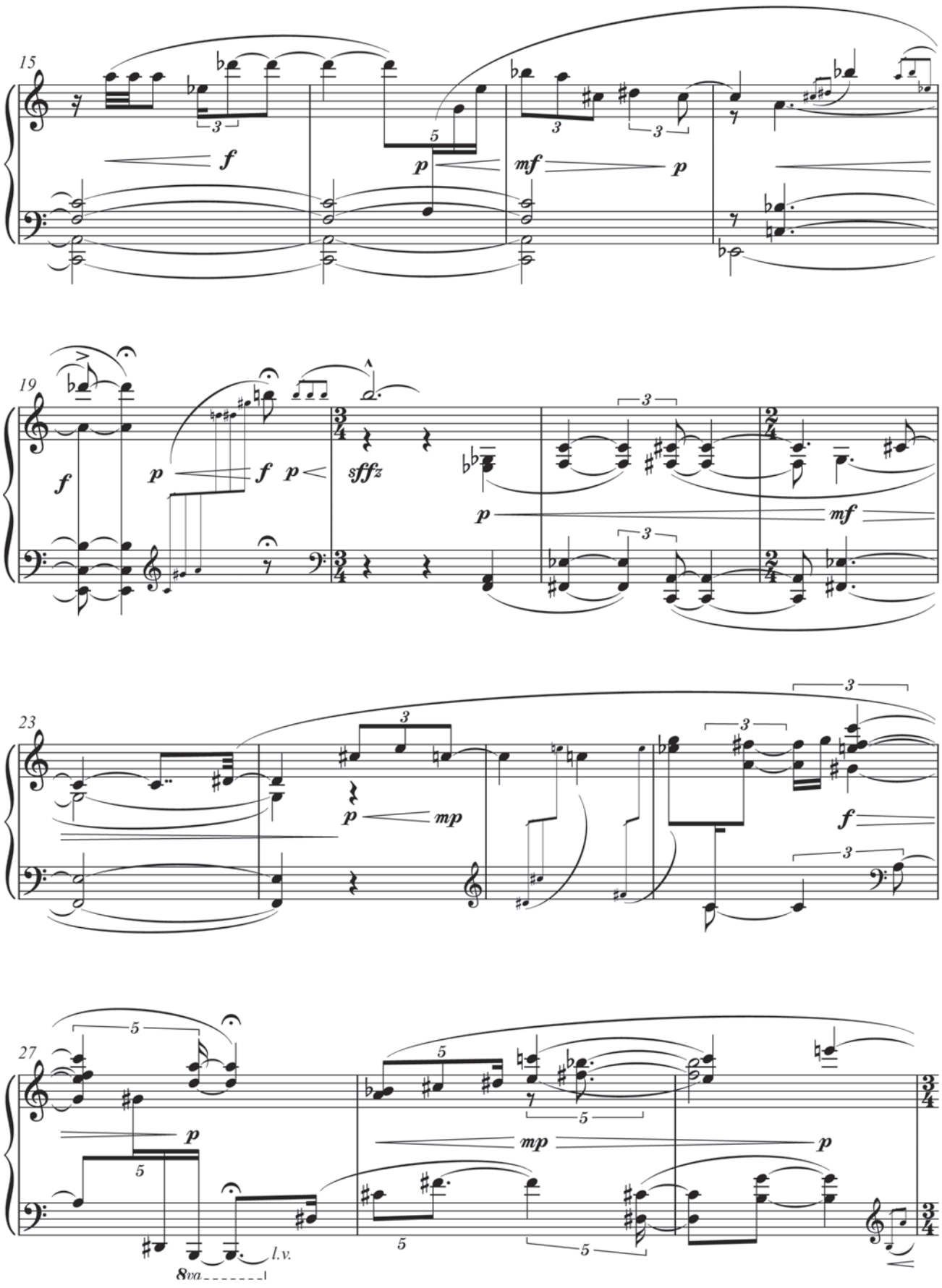
Swale

PHILIP CASHIAN





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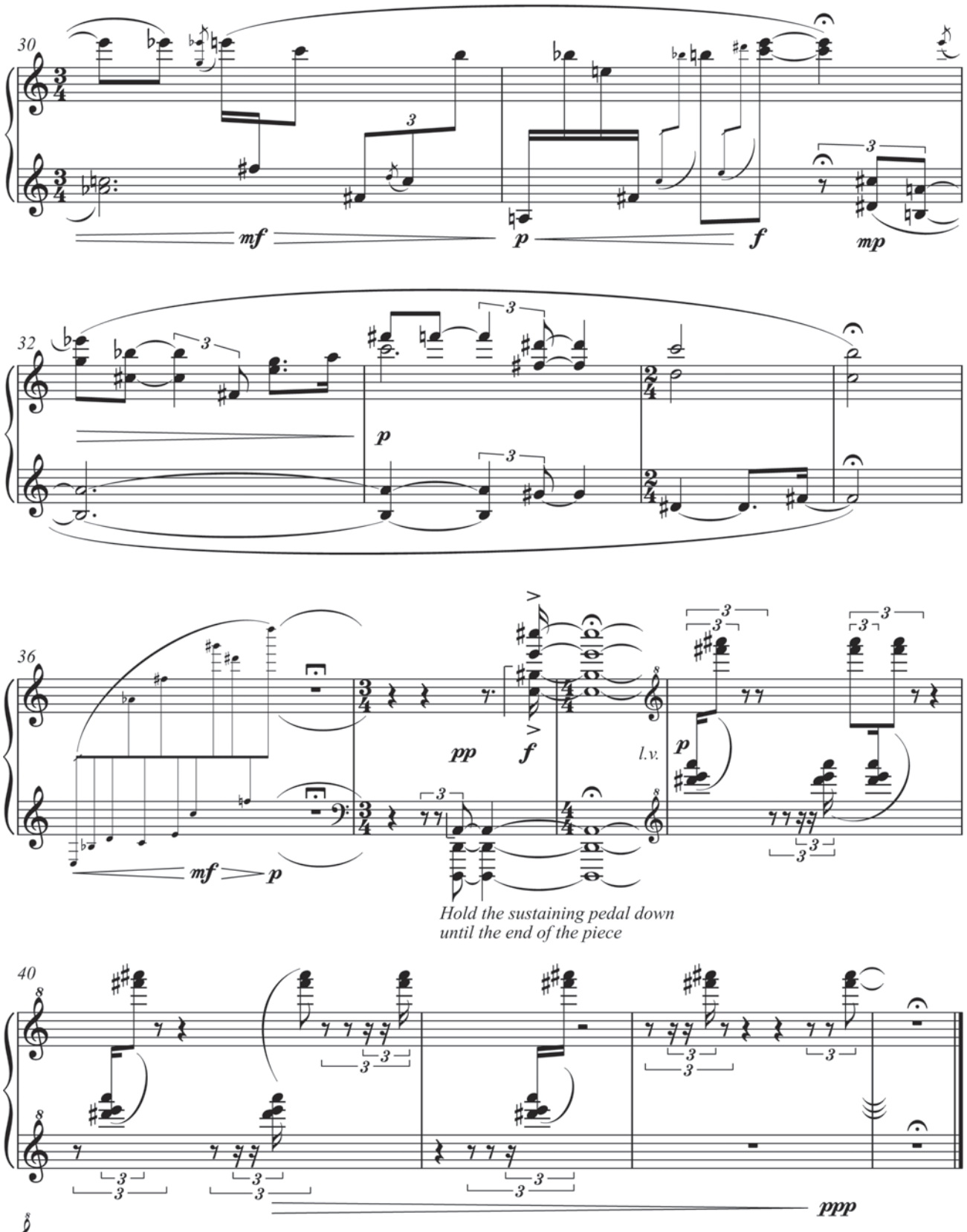

This clef indicates that the notes to which it applies should be played an octave higher than written.

Bars 39 to the end: if the right-hand notes are not available on the keyboard, play both hands at pitch.

Oberlin/London, April 2013

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Footnote to bar 126 and *Ludwig's harp* from *250 Piano Pieces for Beethoven*

(Editions Musica Ferrum)

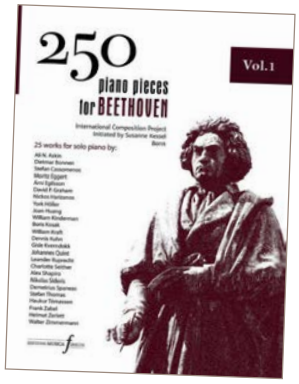
About the music

250 Piano Pieces for Beethoven is a major new contemporary music project curated by the German pianist Susanne Kessel to mark Beethoven's 250th birthday in 2020. The project will see the creation of 250 new works for solo piano by living composers, all inspired by Beethoven: his music, his philosophy, and his life. Kessel, like Beethoven, is a native of Bonn, where she will give the world premieres of these works as well as recording them for the independent label obst-music.

The two works offered in the following pages are taken from Volume 1 of the new collection, published in 2015 by Editions Musica Ferrum. The collection will eventually run to a total of 10 volumes, with Volume 3 scheduled for publication on 4 March 2017.

Two Footnotes by David P Graham is cast in two short movements, each of which takes its inspiration from a single bar in Beethoven's Bagatelle Op 126/4. Graham's music extends Beethoven's material with meter-hiding ties, rhythmic changes between upbeats and downbeats, overlapping phrases and high points set against the meter – including beating on the wooden framework and playing glissandi on the strings with a plectrum.

Sounds generated inside the piano dominate in ***Ludwig's harp*** by Dennis Kuhn. Pizzicati, knocks, glissandi and cluster chords on the strings transform the piano into a plucked instrument; its range and sonic sweep also resemble a harp. Single notes and chords from the second movement (Arietta) of Beethoven's final Piano Sonata in C minor Op 111 contrast with these percussive sounds. Some fragments can be heard as faint echoes on silently depressed keys; others stand out more clearly, such as the progression of fifths and sixths in E major at the end of the exposition (bar 18) which return after a rhythmically condensed development and shortened recapitulation to close the piece.



The first two volumes of 250 Piano Pieces for Beethoven *are now available from www.musica-ferrum.com.* *Turn to page 80 of this issue to read more about the project.*

www.250-piano-pieces-for-beethoven.com

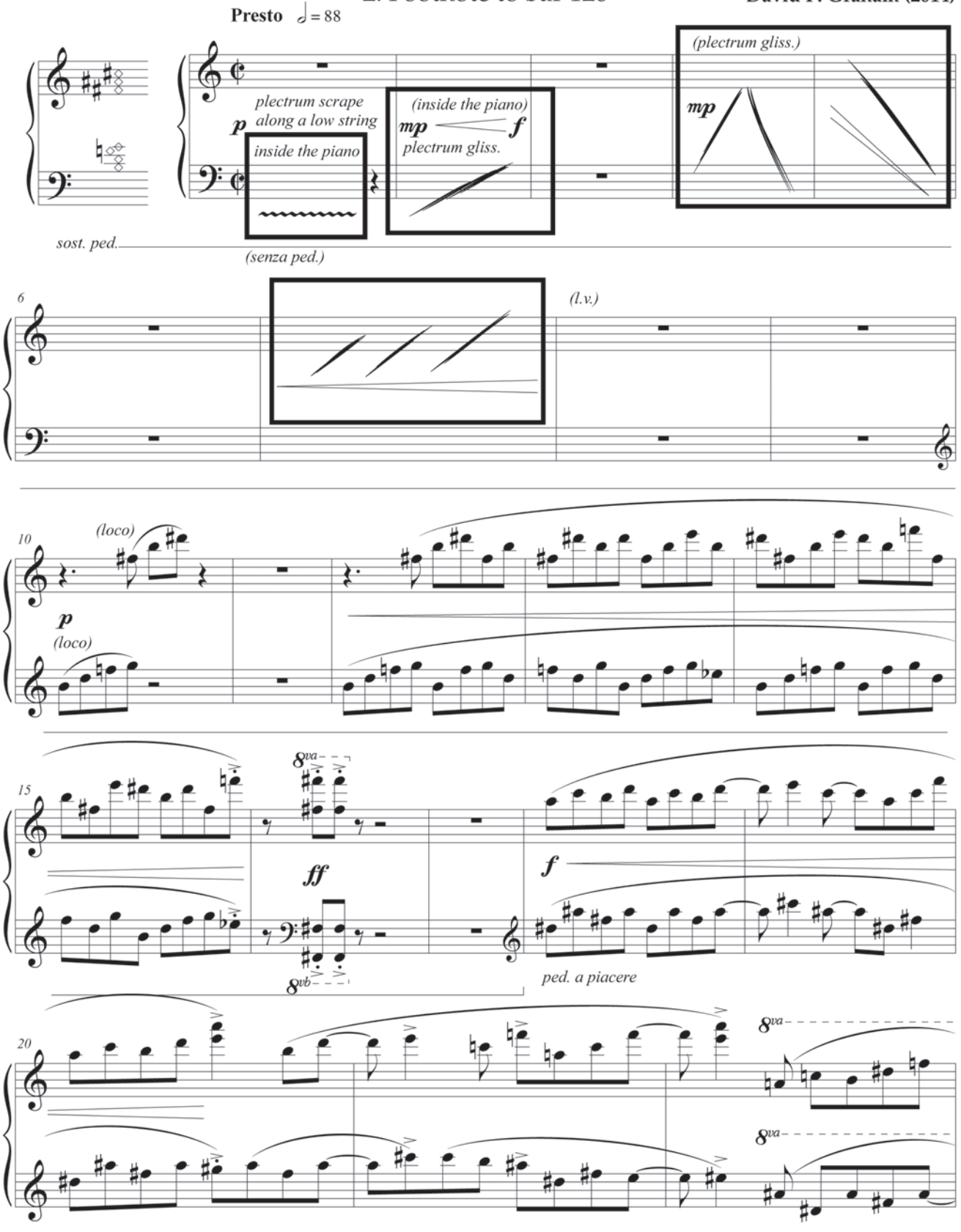
Two Footnotes

for solo piano

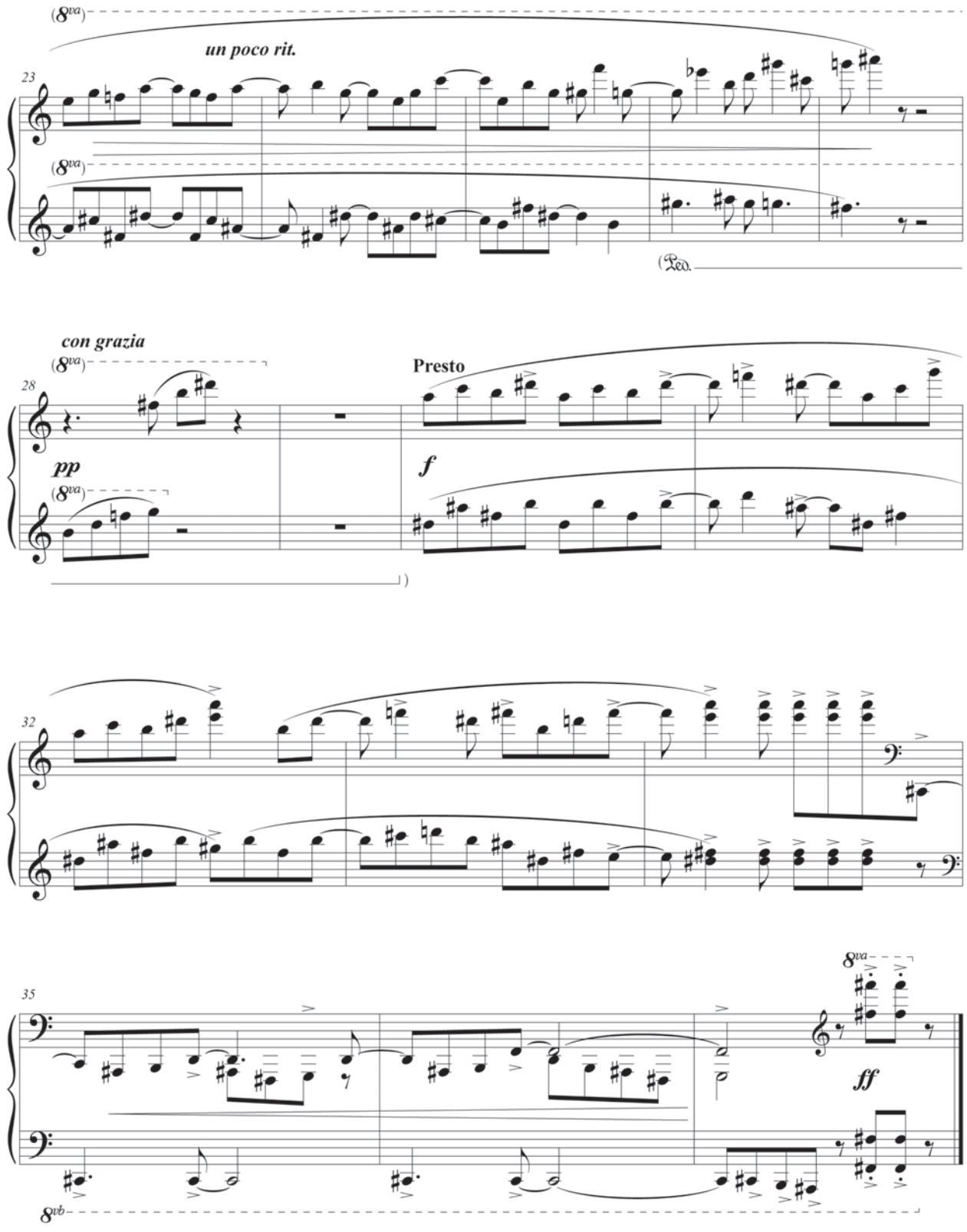
For Susanne Kessel

2. Footnote to bar 126

David P. Graham (2014)



* Depress these notes silently and hold to bar 17, with the sostenuto pedal.



Publication sponsor: Ilona Schmiel

7th of October 2014

Ludwig's harp

for solo piano

Dennis Kuhn

Instructions

Preparation

A small wedge should be placed on the key of the lowest E in order for the damper to be constantly lifted throughout the work.

Accessories

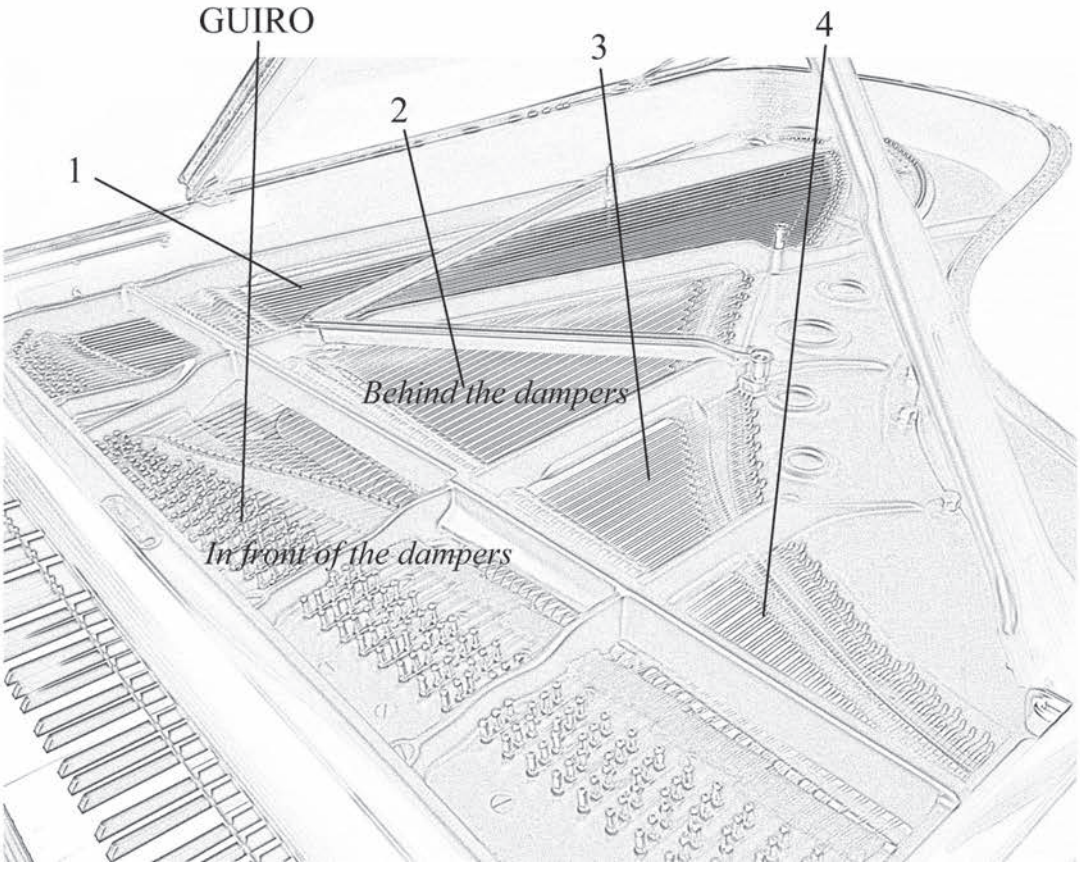
A wooden stick, approximately 30 cm long (for example a thin timbales stick).

Sections

In the score there are "areas" indicated by the use of numbers 1-4. These areas correspond to the sections as shown below. One should be aware that sometimes, depending on the piano brand, the keys shown in the notation are not strictly correct. What is important is the different sections. The ending of most glissandi is indicated with an x notehead, which means that the stick should end by hitting the cast iron divisions of each section. Between bars 36-46 the x notehad stands for hitting the cast iron like playing percussion.

Guiro

Play on the tunning pegs, as shown in the illustration below.

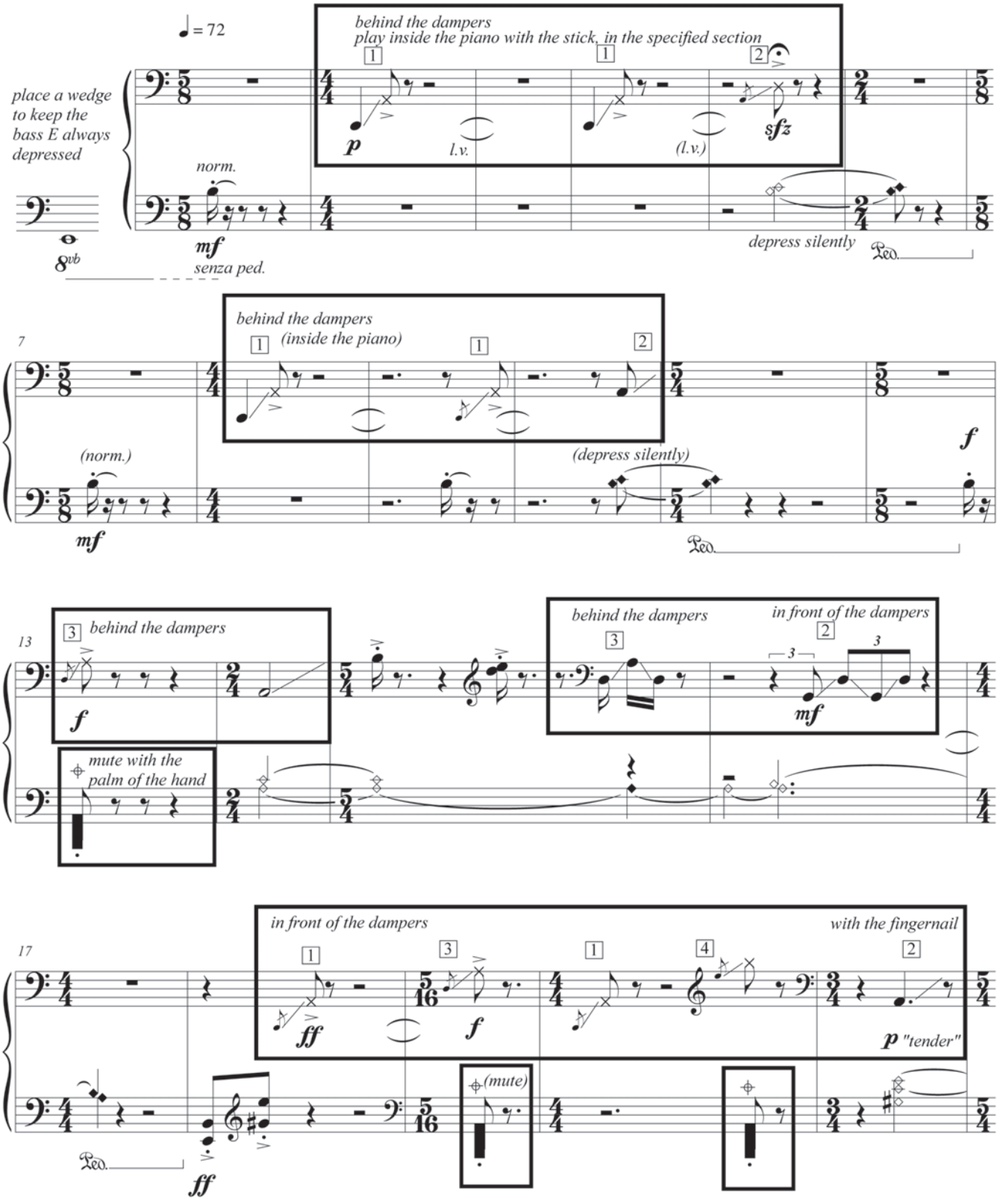


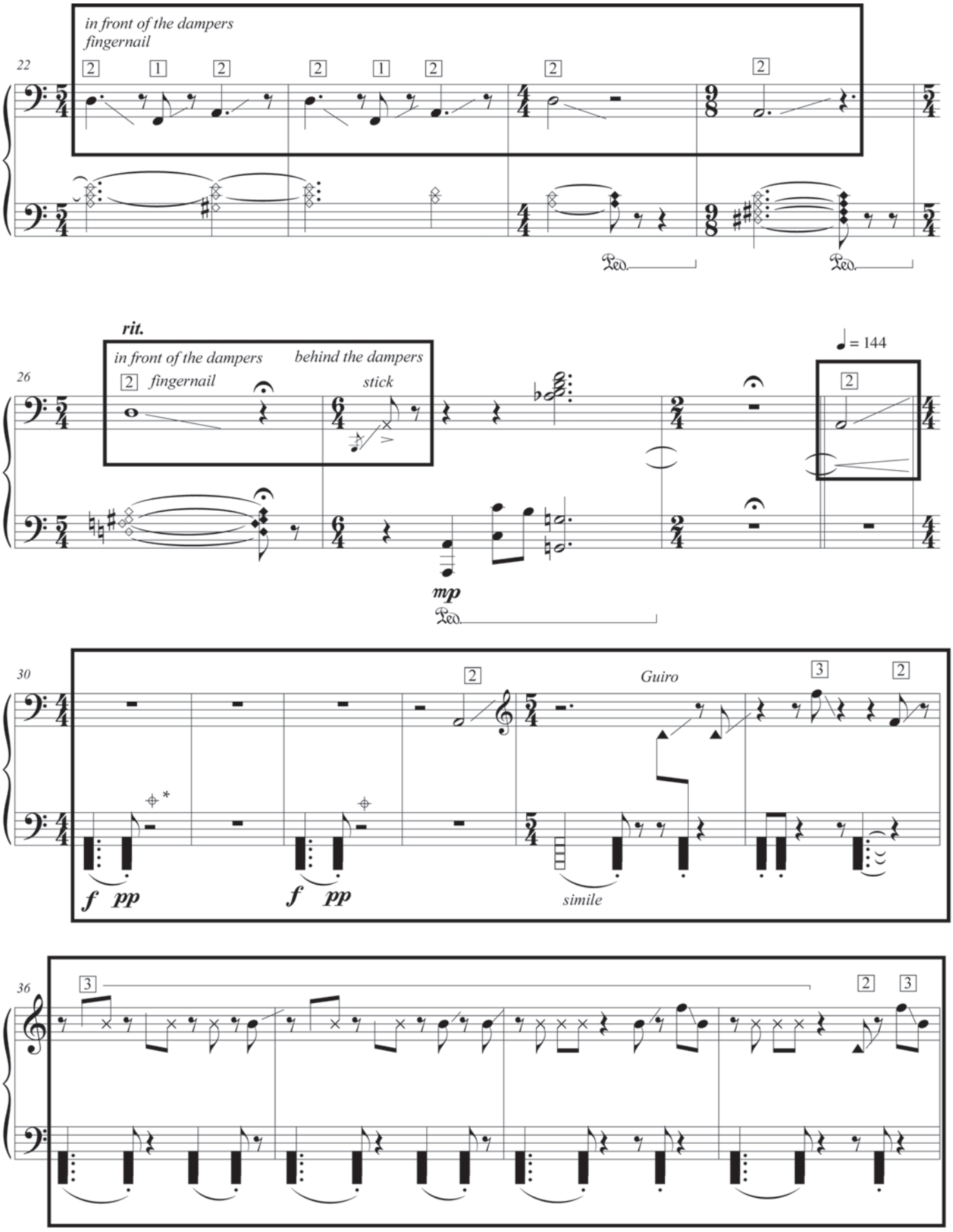
Ludwig's harp

for solo piano

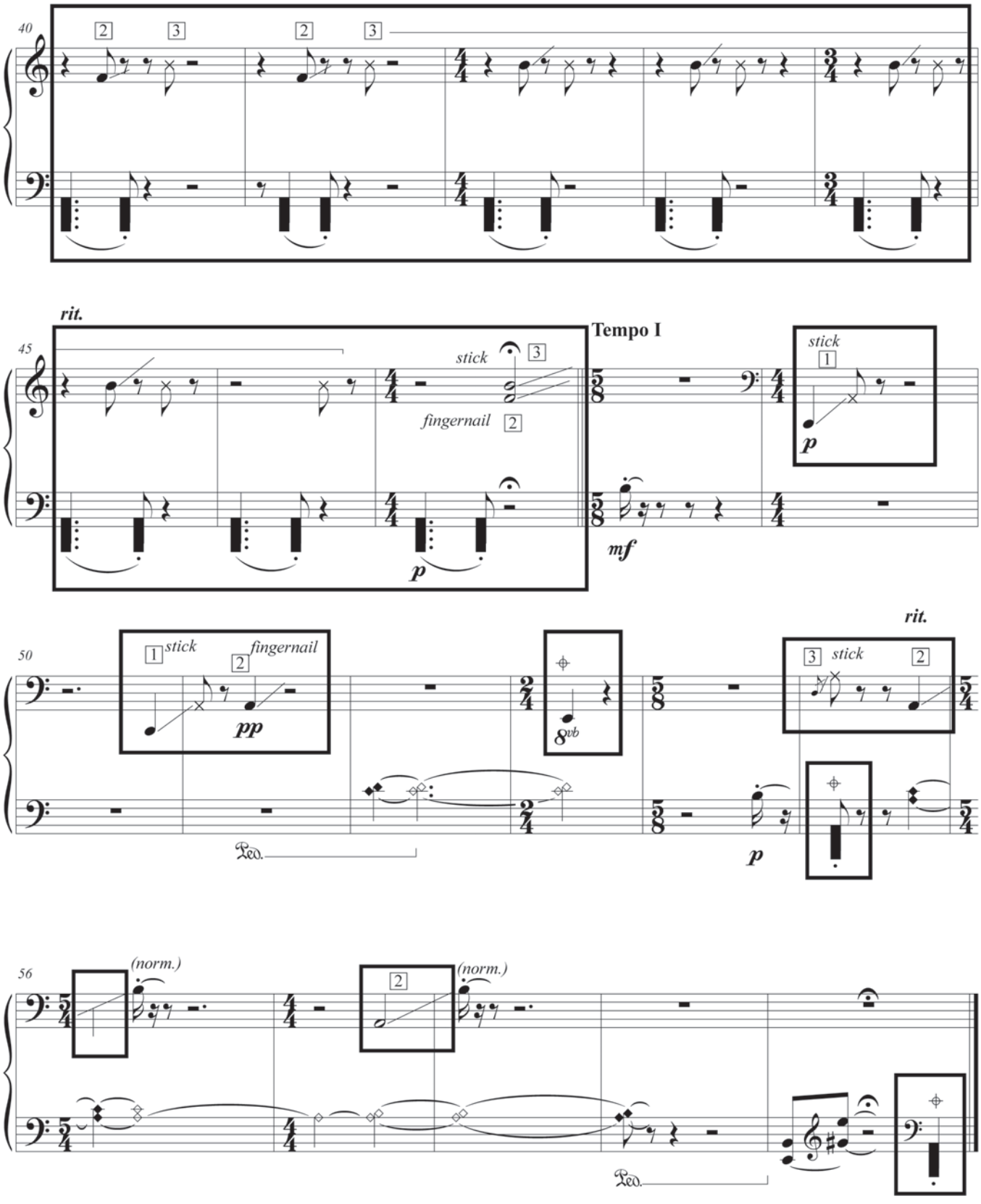
Für Susanne Kessel

Dennis Kuhn (*1957)





* Mute the cluster, but allow for the damping action to be heard.



Publication Sponsor: Peter Gartiser

28th of August 2013

A source of inspiration

The Romanian pianist Dinu Lipatti is remembered for the depth and discipline of his artistry which paid meticulous heed to musical structures while breathing life and spirit into the score. *Mark Ainley* assesses the legacy of a musician whose life was tragically cut short, but who has continued to be loved and revered by great pianists, past and present

AT A MASTERCLASS IN THE late 1980s, Leon Fleischer declared, 'I believe there has only been one pianist who was able to get directly to the heart of the music and that was Dinu Lipatti'. As the Romanian pianist's name was uttered, a collective reverential 'aaah' arose from the gathered audience. It was evident that Lipatti was known to a wider public, his artistry appreciated beyond the specialist arena of historical recordings.

There may be no other pianist who has universally received this degree of veneration. During Lipatti's lifetime, the musical elite consistently and unreservedly praised his profound pianism and musicality: Backhaus, Cortot, Fischer, Haskil, Schnabel, Boulanger, Honegger, Menuhin, Markevitch and Toscanini were all great admirers. Lazare-Lévy commended his 'pianistic perfection', and Cortot 'could only be in wonder' and considered him 'the greatest of [his] generation'. Edwin Fischer believed that Lipatti had 'attained the greatest inspiration possible for a mortal', Honegger thought him 'above all a musician and secondly a pianist', and Karajan felt that his playing was 'no longer the sound of the piano but music in its purest form'. Since Lipatti's death in 1950, the foremost pianists have continued to speak of him with boundless respect. For Richter he was 'a magnificent pianist!' Yefim Bronfman refers to him as 'one of

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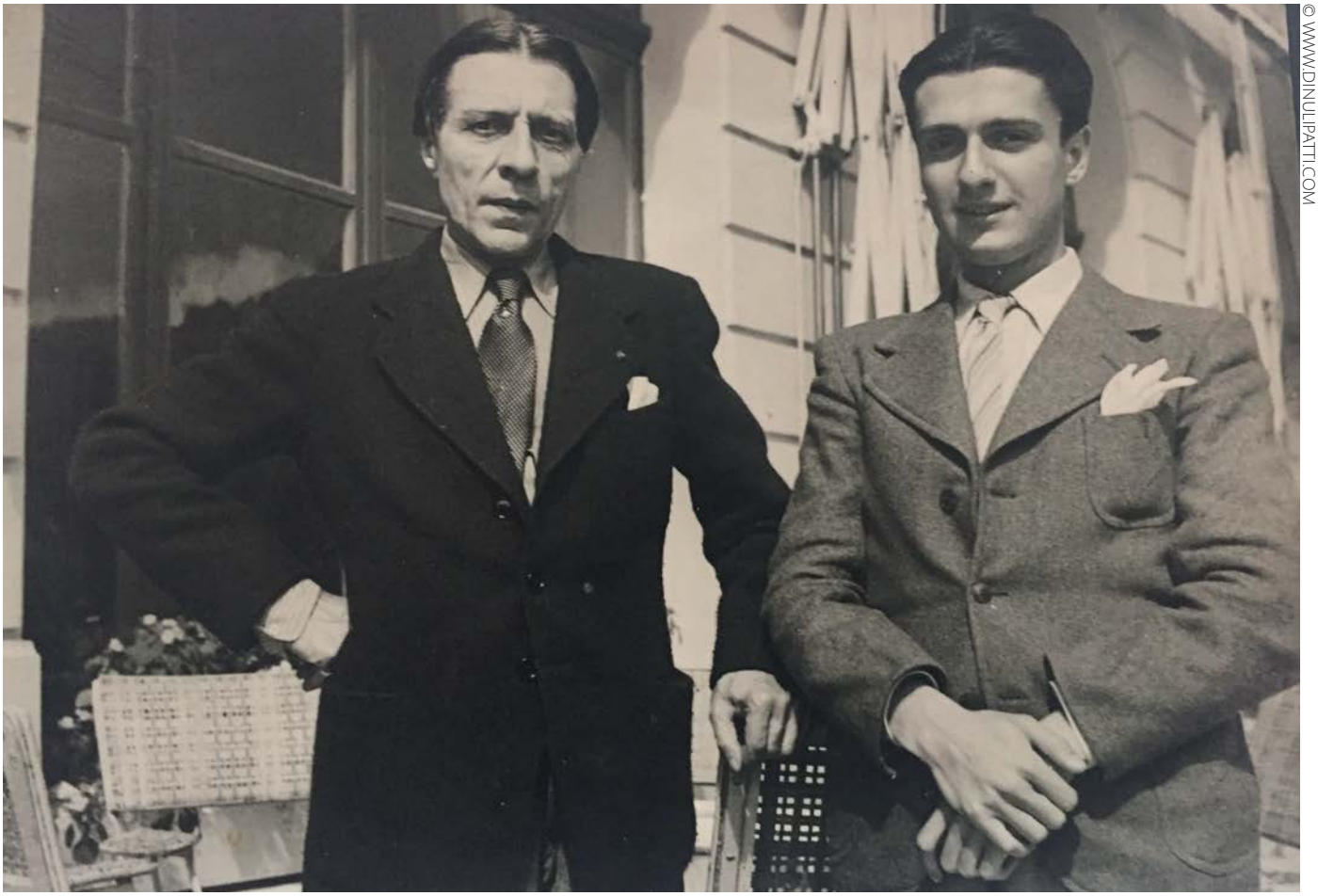
Dinu Lipatti (1917-1950)



Alfred Cortot (left) was an inspiration to Lipatti during the young Romanian's studies in Paris

my greatest idols', and Leif Ove Andsnes marvels at his 'miraculous playing'.

Lipatti's character has also been praised effusively, often to the point of invoking religious terminology: 'an instrument of God'; 'an artist of divine spirituality'; 'he plays like he is, that is to say like an angel'. However, while he was indeed kind and gentle, his personality was, like his pianism, more varied than has often been portrayed. He had a sharp sense of humour with a decidedly mischievous streak. He enjoyed playing practical jokes and his witty comments at dinner parties regularly left guests crying with laughter. An unpublished photo shows him dressed as Groucho Marx, complete with marker moustache, glasses, and cigar – in true Lipatti form, perfectly executed.

While some have implied that the mystique surrounding Lipatti may be due to his untimely death from the effects of Hodgkin's Disease, aged 33, the tremendous prestige he was afforded during his lifetime suggests that his fame would have grown regardless. His intent on serving the composer, and music itself, rather than vaunting his own personality, fulfils the postwar ideal of objectivity in performance. Lipatti plays with a cohesiveness that reveals musical structure in remarkable detail through clarity of touch and transparency of texture, with each note serving each phrase. This in turn serves the overall conception, with each element presented in context within the big picture as if illuminating a sonic blueprint. Meanwhile, his golden tone, sculpted phrasing, and subtle nuancing breathe life into the score, so that his interpretation never sounds academic or dry.

This seamless integration of structure, intellect and emotion results in performances that give a sense of Lipatti's insight into not only the composer's vision of the work, but the actual source of its inspiration. Nadia Boulanger wrote, 'It is through devotion and submission to the work and to the text that the personality of Dinu Lipatti comes to full light'. Lipatti's dedicated service to the composition, presented with his individual timbre and touch, paradoxically reveals not just the composer's message but also the pianist's character.

At the same time, Lipatti's sophistication and musical integrity afforded him the freedom to make occasional slight adjustments to the score, reminiscent of an earlier era of performance practice. His tasteful and judicious changes – doubled bass notes in Chopin's D-flat Nocturne and E minor Concerto, an extra chord closing Ravel's 'Alborada del gracioso' – seem so unerringly 'right' that they pass practically unnoticed. He spoke of serving the 'Urspirit' of the music rather than the Urtext, writing that 'true and great music transcends its time and, even more, never corresponded to the framework, forms, and rules in place at the time of its creation'. Lipatti pupil Béla Síki quoted ➤

him as saying that if you were well brought up, you could put your feet on the table and no one would notice. The conviction and sincerity with which Lipatti made any changes seem to override any criticism.

As a composer, Lipatti paid tribute to his native Romania's folk music and it is likely that its pronounced rhythms, fluid timing, and evocative colours helped inform the rhythmic élan, expressive yet controlled rubato, and varied tonal palette heard in his readings of the classical repertoire. Certainly the teaching of the eminent Romanian pedagogue Florica Musicescu gave him a grounded musical foundation, one that so impressed Alfred Cortot that the great pianist declared he had nothing to teach the young Lipatti. This is not to say Cortot's influence was insignificant: he was an inspiration to Lipatti, whose five years in Paris at the École Normale de Musique studying piano with Cortot and his assistant Yvonne Lefébure, conducting with Charles Münch, and composition with Paul Dukas and Nadia Boulanger, provided him with more exceptional training while bringing him into contact with the city's rich culture (his address book from that period reads like an encyclopedia of musical greats).

Lipatti left Paris at the outbreak of the Second World War and emigrated to Switzerland in 1943; Cortot moved there in 1947. While Cortot later stated that he felt privileged Lipatti sought his feedback before playing works in public, no letters or photos detailing these meetings in Switzerland have been found.

Meanwhile, Musicescu (who also taught Radu Lupu, Mindru Katz and Valentin Gheorghiu) was something of a tyrant, but Lipatti adored her and she instilled in him a tireless work ethic and a painstaking focus on comprehensive technical and interpretative precision. The day after Lipatti's 1940 Bucharest performance of the *Emperor* Concerto, fellow pupil Lory Wallfisch walked into her lesson to find Lipatti playing a single note over and over, attempting to produce the perfect tone. His performance the night before, Wallfisch said, was already beyond expectation.

Lipatti had a particularly close relationship with Nadia Boulanger, who was not just his composition teacher but his 'spiritual mother'. It was Boulanger who first brought the 19-year-old Lipatti into the recording studio in 1937 to record a selection of Brahms Waltzes for HMV. The two had planned to teach a joint masterclass on interpretation in Geneva in the spring of 1951 (only a page of Lipatti's notes has been published). She wrote beautiful tributes to him, praising him abundantly while advising music aficionados to listen to Lipatti's recordings

Enjoying a moment of quiet repose at the Lipatti family home in Leordeni, Romania

many times: 'Surround them with silence, without which there is no real attention, and you will understand what message they deliver.'

The recorded legacy is less abundant than we might might hope. After signing his EMI Columbia contract in January 1946, Lipatti wrote enthusiastically to his wife that Columbia did not have HMV's extensive back catalogue, 'so I can record *all* that I want'. However, on three visits to London between February 1947 and April 1948, Lipatti only recorded two concertos and an hour of solos (no recordings were produced in 1946). Producer Walter Legge alleged the pianist's 'devoted approach' was to blame, as he would require years to prepare the Tchaikovsky and Beethoven *Emperor* concertos; however, internal EMI memos signed by Legge himself in 1948 reveal that Lipatti had agreed to record the Tchaikovsky Concerto with Karajan in 1949 and had himself requested to record a Beethoven concerto (also slated for 1949) and Schumann's *Études Symphoniques*. Legge claimed that he offered 'a repertoire for recording for which many another pianist would have sacrificed his wife and family,' but the pianist's own proposals and the small volume of records produced up to that point (two hours in the two years since signing his contract) suggest that he may not have offered as much as the pianist had hoped for.

Perhaps Lipatti sensed that his days were numbered and he wanted to leave behind a more substantial discography. Although Legge quoted Lipatti as saying 'Let us give our lives to making records together,' he appears not to have taken action on the pianist's enthusiasm when he was in better health.

Lipatti was frustrated by the limitations caused by the onset of Hodgkin's Disease, a type of blood cancer: 'My artistic projects could be so magnificent if it were not for this miserable health which I must drag around with me,' he despaired. It has been suggested that his awareness of his mortality infused his later readings with greater depth. His earlier records certainly have a fiery passion largely absent from the final series of discs made in a Radio Genève studio in 1950, which are rather more restrained, though all his discs feature exquisite craftsmanship and tremendous focus.

Anecdotes regarding his illness combined with the repertoire chosen for these famous valedictory recordings (his 'less tiring programme') – and the drier acoustic in the Geneva studio – may have given the impression that he was a weak pianist, but that is not the case. Lipatti's 1947 recording of Chopin's Waltz Op 34 No 1, rarely issued on LP and yet to appear on any EMI CD (it is even lacking from their *Dinu Lipatti: The Complete Chopin Recordings* box set), is a dashing, daring performance whereas the familiar reading from the 1950 set is more quaint and salon-like in character. His 1947 Liszt 'Sonetto del Petrarca No 104' is brimming over with passion and his full-bodied sonority, while his devil-may-care 1948 'Alborada' is legendary for its stunning feats of virtuosity, with rapid-fire repeated notes and unbelievable glissandi that are just as spellbinding after multiple hearings.

Hearing Liszt's pupil Emil von Sauer playing both Liszt piano concertos was a formative experience: Lipatti wrote that the pianist's expansive tempi and lush treatment inspired him to revise his own conception of the works, and we can hear the result in Lipatti's 1947 concert recording of the Concerto No 1 in E-flat.

The few broadcast and private recordings that have been found show more varied aspects of Lipatti's art, among them a highly unconventional and exquisitely voiced Bach-Busoni Concerto in D minor and fleet-fingered yet lyrical Liszt in 'Gnomenreigen' and 'La Leggierezza'.

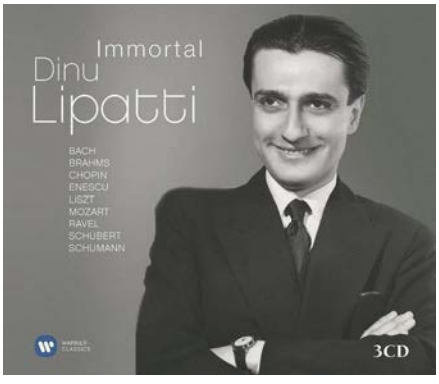
Private discs soon to be released on the Marston Records label include two late works by Brahms played with bold accents and dramatic pauses, more adventurous and unorthodox than the bulk of his commercial recordings.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER his birth, Lipatti's playing continues to communicate with an enduring quality of aliveness and directness, touching and influencing the latest generation of musicians and listeners. Over six decades after his final performances were recorded, Yefim Bronfman has remarked, 'It seems as though he is playing to you personally.' Benjamin Grosvenor writes that when introduced to these recordings at the age of 10, 'Lipatti's playing became my ideal… there is a particular sound and a heroic disavowal of artifice that is indelibly Lipatti.' Yuja Wang enthusiastically states, 'I *love* his playing: pure, noble, angelic and demonic in one intangible other-worldly spirit,' while Joseph Moog admires his 'golden tone and unmistakable sense of taste, style, and timing combined with his profound, genuine emotionality.'

In an era dominated by competitions and self-regarding demonstrations of facility, it is worth noting how well Lipatti's prodigious technical facility could be concealed: Grosvenor observes that he had 'a technique so complete that every musical aim could be realised without even a hint that physical constraints had played a part in the process'. Boulanger fixes upon what may be the greater message in Lipatti's playing – and its enduring appeal – when she states that in listening to his recordings one 'will understand how one reaches unity by taking the utmost care of every detail with love and joy. We learn from those who can see better and hear more than we do, that nothing can be considered granted and that nothing can be neglected.' ♪

Mark Ainley is a historical piano recording expert and runs the online blog www.dinulipatti.com

Immortal: Dinu Lipatti *is now available from Warner Classics (0190295867898). The 3-CD box set includes eight recordings made between 1937 and 1950, including a selection of Brahms Waltzes for piano four hands Op 39 with Nadia Boulanger and Lipatti's celebrated final recital from Besançon, France. www.warnerclassics.com*



True colours

The village of Lagrasse in southwest France has become an unlikely mecca for piano lovers, hosting a summer festival which celebrates the instrument and its exponents in an intimate and informal setting. *Jonathon Brown* samples the musical pleasures of En Blanc et Noir, washed down with a glass or two of the local rosé

I KNOW WE'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO peddle generalities, let alone stereotypes – but the French do tend to live up to them: Pagnol, *Clochemerle*, Tati, not to mention De Gaulle... the very essence of '*La France*' is captured in names such as these. This could possibly even explain the British relish for all things French, since the Brits have a deep affection for national self-parody (as any sitcom, from *Fawlty Towers* to *Blackadder* and *Little Britain*, will amply demonstrate).

En Blanc et Noir is a young summer festival in southwest France that provides a fine stage for the old Anglo-French *Entente Cordiale*. This celebration of the piano and its exponents is held in the picturesque village of Lagrasse, just beyond Carcassonne. Founded by a resident Englishman, himself a gifted amateur pianist, the festival is sustained by a cohort of stalwart volunteers, most of whom are blow-ins from Britain. After three years of existence, En Blanc et Noir feels as if it is now firmly on its feet, signalled by a performance last summer of the two-piano piece by Debussy after which the event is named.

Mediaeval charm: festival events take place in the old market hall of Lagrasse

© SARAH VERMEERSCH

The festival's centrepiece is a modular stage upon which a Steinway B sits, sings and sleeps for a week in a pretty covered market dating from the 12th century. You can give the piano a whirl for yourself if you like – last year there was an innovative, generous afternoon '*à volonté*', during which the public was invited to play.

THE MEDIEVAL VILLAGE OF Lagrasse nestles in the twist of the river Orbieu that makes its way from gentle gorges to the fertile slopes of the Languedoc region, dotted with every shade of green, from dusky cypresses to vivid fruit trees and vines. In contrast, patches of parched ochre remind you of how extreme the local climate can be, summer or winter.

Examine a village map and you'll discover a perfect example of that organic burgeoning in which Roman logic, squared off in a grid pattern, has slackened with history sloping off this way and that, shaped by the contours of the land and, no doubt, by the grasping genealogy of its owners. Down the sharp-shadowed lanes come piano-lovers from all corners of the world, as well as villagers equipped with the lunchtime baguette or their evening bottle of the local Corbières. Red, white or pink, this local tipple is as good as it gets for French wine that doesn't begin with the letter 'B'. As people settle down for an evening of virtuosic pianism, the gossip is good too: might the river be unusually dry because of one unnamed winemaker's nocturnal waterings?

If so, the naughty *vigneron* will have

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En plein air: setting up for Bartók in the round

missed the night Ivan Ilić gave us Morton Feldman's *For Bunita Marcus* at 11pm, the stars as sporadic and sparkling as the notes. Ilić also gave a lecture on 'Frenchness in Music', perhaps most memorable for accounts of his traumas at the way the French use cringeworthy puns for the names of restaurants, and tend to correct your French unforgivingly.

A taste for the unusual and the memorable is a feature of the En Blanc et Noir festival. Last summer's programme began with Bartók's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*, with James Kreiling and Janneke Brits, George Barton and Craig Apps, a celebratory fanfare given in the round. So effective was this intimate disposition that there was subsequent talk of having the 2017 festival also in the round, with the piano at on one side of the market square. It's an idea I personally like, since, as the creator of the black-and-white painted backdrop to the festival stage, I shall have to go back to double its size.

INDEED, 'GOING BACK' IS AN important feature of the festival, since every player whom I encountered there has said that they intend to return. Robert Turnbull, who has a village house in Lagrasse, is the event's founder and a pianist who once toyed with a musical career before settling on the safer shores of journalism. He insists that his performers should linger and mingle for the duration of the festival, and the result is a web of new friendships, based on shared enthusiasms, that transcend career rivalries.

The ethos of En Blanc et Noir is that of an intimate gathering of like-minded souls. How Turnbull will handle the ongoing logistics of this as the festival's popularity grows remains to be seen. He needs to be cautious of expanding too quickly as this would risk losing the whole charm of the enterprise, which lies partly in the place and the scale of the thing, but also in the fact that this a wonderful forum for young pianists to let their hair down and take risks.

The web of friendships that I've been a part of since going to the festival also means that my critical hat doesn't really fit very well in such a convivial setting – so I shall lob it away once I have mentioned the Schumann *Kinderszenen* of Adam Balogh (whom I *didn't* in fact meet). This was the most ravishingly nuanced, sensual yet cultivated Schumann I have ever heard. As for showing daring, a good example was the return to Lagrasse last year of the still ludicrously young François Moschetta, whose intelligent, wide-ranging programme encompassed Kurtág, a Bach French Suite and Beethoven's Op 109 – possibly his most 'French' late sonata… There go those stereotypes again. ♪

This year's edition of En Blanc et Noir runs from 6 to 11 July 2017. Visit the festival website for full programme details: www.enblancetnoir.com

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UK

LONDON

Barbican **Daniil Trifonov** 21 Jan
Shoreditch Church **Melvyn Tan** 6 Dec
Wigmore Hall **Sunwook Kim** 25 Oct; **Alexei Volodin** 2 Nov; **Martha Argerich** and **Alberto Portugheis** 12 Dec; **Beatrice Rana** 16 Jan; **Luca Buratto** 23 Jan

With 15 minutes to go before **Daniil Trifonov**'s recital at the Barbican, I reckoned I had just enough time to buy some cough sweets a few streets away. The fellow on the till was maddeningly slow and the queue was getting restive, with the exception of a relaxed young man in bomber-jacket and jeans just ahead of me. He half-turned: there was Daniil Trifonov, clutching a jar of honey. Shouldn't he be togged-up backstage, poised and ready to play? 'No problem, it's OK,' he smiled. What was the importance of the honey? 'For energy.' While patiently waiting his turn as if he had all the time in the world – and nothing much to do – he talked about his programme and the encores he would play, finally strolling off as cool as cucumber.

He was only four minutes late striding on stage immaculate in tails, before giving the most gruelling programme I'd heard in months, and he was immersed in 'Von fremden Ländern' before he'd even properly sat down. His touch had a laid-back delicacy as he progressed through Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, giving each a charming characterisation without over-inflating its quality as a miniature, and weighting his chords with rare refinement. Then, like a racehorse released from the paddock, he was off into the same composer's *Toccata* Op 7, going full pelt with a demonic virtuosity that seemed effortless.

Next came the more serious business of *Kreisleriana*, which he had interrogated with such thoroughness that what emerged seemed at times like a new work. There are many ways in which it can be played, but he found some I had never encountered before – sudden plunges into mystery, moments of unexpected intimacy. He made the most of this fanciful and many-faceted work's implicit licence to experiment with moods and effects. One could have disputed some of his readings, but the overall result was fascinating. The last movement's comic imbalance between the hands came over with lovely tenderness. A striking element of his playing was that while his body was lurching all over the place, his hands remained in near-constant contact with the keyboard.

© DARIO ACOSTA

Daniil Trifonov brings old-fashioned showmanship to Stravinsky's *Petrushka*

He opened the second half with five Shostakovich Preludes and Fugues – their knotty and astringent counterpoint delivered with scrupulous precision; and he rounded things off with *Petrushka*. If some of its effects were smudged, and Stravinsky's line of thought too much pulled about, it still crowned the evening with some old-fashioned showmanship. He was playing on a Fazioli, but the pluses of that brand were here negated by a very ill-set damper, which meant that when a damped chord ended it was with an ugly twang.

As I have observed more than once in this magazine, Trifonov's besetting sin has hitherto been to destroy the magic of his performances by grisly encores, many being his own compositions. This time he didn't make that mistake, giving us two Medtner pieces instead. Yet his spell was more effectively ruined than usual: we emerged into the foyer to be ear-blasted by some grotesquely over-amplified rap. An essential part of any concert experience consists of the ➤

© MARIE STAGGAT

echoes it leaves in the mind, and this repellent aural shock comprehensively trashed all possible echoes: I've never seen an audience so unanimously keen to get the hell out. This, it seems, was the sound-check for a DJ event. One understands that Trifonov's concert overran, and we know how urgently the Barbican and the Southbank Centre need to cultivate new audiences, but somebody in charge should have ensured that there was a decent 15-minute gap between musical heaven and musical hell. If there was nobody in the building with the requisite authority to enforce this, there most certainly should be in future.

The Schumann which the young Italian pianist **Luca Buratto** played to celebrate his win at the Honens Competition was the Opus 17 *Fantasie*, and his was a very full-blooded account. But the rest of his programme was even more interesting. He began with Byrd's keyboard arrangement of his *Pavana Lachrymae* – the rich ornamentation of the melody sounding like clusters of over-ripe fruit on a modern instrument (another Fazioli) – but Buratto followed that with an account of Adès' *Darkness Visible* which worked unusually well. This piece is what Adès describes as 'an explosion' of Dowland's song, and it turns on the contrast between the overtones created by heavily-struck single notes and rapid repetitions of pianissimo notes. And since the hands were mostly very far apart, it made a perfect introduction to Beethoven's *Appassionata*, with its often empty middle register.

Here Buratto's playing was masterly. The first movement was unhurried but powered by an exhilarating forward drive, and it eventually attained magnificence; the closing Allegro was like one single, unstoppably smooth surge. I felt short-changed by his Andante, which had none of the grave mystery Beethoven surely intended, but its dry clarity represented virtue of a different sort. Back on Adès territory, we then got a finely calibrated account of *Traced Overhead*. A programme note indicated that Buratto likes jigsaw puzzles, which could partly explain his Adès obsession.

In his youth, **Melvyn Tan** made his name as a period-performance fortepianist, but in later life, he has reverted to the piano and its mainstream Romantic repertoire. To celebrate his 60th birthday and the 40th anniversary of the founding of Spitalfields Music, Tan gave a recital tailor-made to honour that institution's former executive director Judith Serota, and in the 18th-century church where many of its concerts are held.

Variations for Judith: Reflections on 'Bist du bei mir' is a collection of very short variations on an aria which Bach originally adapted for his wife Anna Magdalena: most of the composers are one-time artistic directors of the Spitalfields Festival, plus Richard Rodney Bennett, Peter Maxwell Davies and Thea Musgrave, each of whose pieces had something special about them. Then came three tours de force: Judith Weir's *I've turned the page*, dazzling in its liberated invention; Jonathan Dove's tumultuously exhilarating *Catching Fire* getting its London premiere; and Liszt's *Three Concert Etudes*, delivered by Tan with ease and grace.

Finally back to the Wigmore for three triumphs and a turkey. **Martha Argerich** is admirably loyal. She frequently plays under the baton of ex-husband Charles Dutoit, and shares a four-hand keyboard with ex-partner Stephen Kovacevich, as she did in last year's Proms with her childhood friend Daniel Barenboim. But she was ill-advised to use a four-hand recital to celebrate the 75th birthday of fellow Argentinian **Alberto Portugheis**, who shared a teacher with her in childhood, and who at one point co-ran a London restaurant with her. Quite simply, he wasn't up to it, and it was painful to see how the poetry we got from her end of the keyboard underlined the lack of it from his.

Alexei Volodin is noted for his virtuosity, but the usual critical superlatives can't measure up to his latest London performance. 'Shakespeare in Music' was the title, and each of its elements was a winner. Prokofiev's *Ten Pieces from 'Romeo and Juliet'* emerged startlingly fresh and brilliantly differentiated; after which Volodin played Rachmaninov's transcription of Mendelssohn's *Scherzo from 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'*. Here Rachmaninov's own pronouncement was faithfully honoured: 'You can give these works colours. That is the most important thing for me in my piano interpretations. So you can make music live. Without colour it is dead.' In Medtner's *Fairy Tale* in C-sharp minor, the air was thick with densely interwoven melodies, thanks to this unassumingly formidable Russian, who closed his recital with Rachmaninov's seldom-performed Piano Sonata No 1 in D minor.

The South Korean pianist **Sunwook Kim** may have won the Leeds Competition in 2006, but we don't hear him often in London, which is a pity. Mozart's Rondo in A minor and Schubert's Sonata in G major D894 constituted the engaging first half of his recital, but his *Hammerklavier* blew us away with a warrior-like opening movement and a finale which made wonderful sense of Beethoven's labyrinthine line of thought.

Idly tuning one lunchtime into Radio 3, I found myself in the middle of a performance of the *Goldberg*s which instantly riveted me. It had force and an underlying tenderness; there was a blissful absence of didacticism, of anything tricksy in the tempi, and of any playing to the gallery; the whole work was so unerringly judged that I waited eagerly to hear the name of the perpetrator. It had to be someone in their maturity, but it clearly wasn't Schiff, Hewitt, or any of the other usual suspects. Step forward 23-year-old **Beatrice Rana**, a Radio 3 New Generation Artist from Italy, whom I will henceforth make strenuous efforts to hear live.

MICHAEL CHURCH

BBC New Generation artist Beatrice Rana

HUDDERSFIELD

Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival
St Paul's Hall and Bates Mill **Richard Uttley/Ensemble Adapter with Antonis Anissego** 26 Nov; **Mark Knoop with soprano Juliet Fraser** 27 Nov

Following his sell-out performance last year, **Richard Uttley** returned to Huddersfield for another outstanding recital, featuring premieres of pieces by cutting-edge contemporary composers. For Eric Wubbels' *Psychomechanochronometer* (2013/15), on what sounded like a prepared Yamaha, Uttley created a mechanistic wonder, with catatonic displays and entropic ending. There was more than a suggestion of affiliation to New Complexity, American branch. The world première of Michael Cutting's *I AM A STRANGE LOOP V* (2106) – the latest of a series – was by turns haunting, by turns blistering noise assault. Uttley performed on a Fender Rhodes, while two reel-to-reel tape decks recorded and played back slowly degrading loops of his lines. Using the Rhodes at times like a vibraphone, Uttley created fractured or devastated sounds of 1970s jazz-rock. This was real glitch electronica, not the pianistic imitation in Wubbels' piece. For Chaya

Czernowin's percussive, episodically shimmering *fardanceCLOSE* (2012), Uttley turned finally to the concert Steinway.

Georg-Friedrich Haas's *Ein Schattenspiel* ('A Shadow Play') from 2004 was clangorously sublime, reflecting the composer's fundamental concern with the inner nature of sound. As in Cutting's piece, the pianist interacted with a recording of what they'd just played, but Haas created a quartertone difference between recording and interpretation, causing some very disturbing self-imitations and reactions. All musical cultures are interested in vibrations, says Haas – thus Western orchestras have 16 first violins, and each individual note on the piano has three strings. On an emotional as opposed to acoustic level, however, his music is motivated, he says, by the 'huge feeling of guilt' resulting from a Nazi past. His grandfather, Fritz Haas, was a renowned architect and staunch Nazi, and the composer recently revealed that he supported their ideology till he was 21.

In a performance the same evening at Bates Mill, Richard Uttley gave the UK premiere of Christian Mason's engaging *In a world of invisible waves: a butterfly* (2016). This confirmed the pianist's rich, subtle musical intelligence.

In the same Bates Mill concert, the German/Icelandic group Ensemble Adapter, with **Antonis Anissego** on piano, gave the UK premiere of Bunita Marcus's *Music For Japa*n for flute, cello, harp, piano and percussion. It was good to hear something written by, rather than for this composer (Morton Feldman's *For Bunita Marcus* is performed more often than her own works). The results were delightful, like a more energised, melodicised and rhythmicised or metrical Feldman – not that he lacks those qualities, of course.

In their St Paul's Hall song recital, soprano Juliet Fraser and pianist **Mark Knoop** performed new works written for them by Bernhard Land and Michael Finnissy, exploring concepts of collage and remembrance. Finnissy's *Andersen-Leiderkreis* drew on Hans-Christian Andersen stories, but revealed the less appealing side of his prolific output – esoteric and cerebral in a bad sense, and fascinated with its own wealth of allusion. Bernhard Lang's 'The Cold Trip, part 2' belongs to the long cycle called the *Monadologies*, 'meta-compositions' based on historic scores – in this case the later songs from Schubert's *Winterreise*, creating palimpsests of Schubert's original textures. The results were both engaging, and musically profound.

ANDY HAMILTON

FRANCE
BORDEAUX

Festival l'esprit du piano Andrei Korobeinikov 15 Nov; **Nicholas Angelich** 17 Nov; **Paul Badura-Skoda** 20 Nov; **Philippe Bianconi** 21 Nov

The seventh annual Festival l'esprit du piano in Bordeaux, southwest France, produced 10 concerts over as many days this year and attracted an average of more than 1,000 attendees each.

The event got off to a rocky start, with the cancellation of Boris Berezovsky's opening recital due to back pains. Artistic director Paul-Arnaud Péjouan found himself with just 24 hours to scramble around Europe and find a replacement. He reached **Andrei Korobeinikov** in Vienna late at night and made a deal by phone. By chance, Korobeinikov had Berezovsky's principal piece of programming in his repertoire – Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata.

Korobeinikov arrived in Bordeaux just in time for a change of clothes and a quick run-through. His performance showed no sign of stress, however, and only drew criticism for his Adagio sostenuto movement of the *Hammerklavier*, played at a tempo so slow it barely hung together. Otherwise his playing pleased the capacity crowd in the Bordeaux Auditorium, and he was happy to play four encores.

The highlight of the Festival was **Nicholas Angelich**'s performance of the Beethoven *Emperor* Concerto, with the soloist displaying his silken arpeggios in a combination of flash and sensitivity. The final concert was a surprise hit, the underrated French pianist **Philippe Bianconi** producing a stunning version of Robert Schumann's monumental *Davidsbündlertänz*.

The Bordeaux event is unique in its relative brevity compared to the sprawling Festival de la Roque d'Anthéron and the rival Piano aux Jacobins. Péjouan resists expansion as he feels that demand in Bordeaux is fulfilled by the existing 10-day format. He has been increasingly successful in attracting big-names: Lang Lang, Arcadi Volodos, Aldo Ciccolini, Ivo Pogorelich, François Dumont and Denis Kozhukin have all played here. He approaches his favourite pianists personally and invites them to choose his or her favourite repertoire. Headliners in 2017 will be the Norwegian Leif Ove Andsnes, Van Cliburn gold medalist Vadym Kolodenko and the respected South Korean Kun-Woo Paik.

The Esprit brand is now also established in China, where Péjouan operates with a separate structure and a group of Chinese sponsors.

MICHAEL JOHNSON

US
BOSTON

Jordan Hall Sa Chen 29 Sept
Symphony Hall Yefim Bronfman 6 Oct
Sanders Theatre Lera Auerbach/ **Ya Fei Chuang** 23 Oct
First Church Cambridge Kristian Bezuidhout 28 Oct
Jordan Hall Denis Matsuev 29 Oct
Symphony Hall Hélène Grimaud 8/17 Nov

According to Fou Ts'ong, four pianists stand out in the flood of talent currently flowing from China: Lang Lang, Yundi Li, Yuja Wang and Sa Chen. At 36, **Sa Chen** is the oldest and the least celebrated of this remarkable quartet, but she is just as talented as the other three.

Sa made a belated Boston debut in a recital sponsored by the city's Foundation for Chinese Performing Arts. Despite arriving from Beijing only hours earlier, she gave superb performances of Chopin, Debussy and Liszt. She immediately captured the air of rapture, which opens Chopin's *Barcarolle*, embarking without impediment on a gondola trip that explored the work's yearning and voluptuousness.

Since Debussy is so closely related to Chopin, it was scarcely a surprise that Sa was just as masterly in 10 selections of the French composer's *Préludes* from Books I and II. These were among the best performances of these pieces I've heard since Richter, Michelangeli and Moravec were in their prime. Sa's subtle use of the pedal, disciplined by an acute ear and a precise technique, vividly recreated the composer's imagined landscapes. After the interval, she concluded the programme in a blaze of glory with Liszt's B minor Sonata.

Soviet-born Israeli-American pianist **Yefim Bronfman**, joined the Boston Symphony and music director Andris Nelsons in the local premiere of Jörg Widmann's *Trauermarsch*. This piece is a one-movement piano concerto (in the form of a funeral march) that requires a huge orchestra, including three percussionists performing on more than 30 percussion instruments. It grows from a plaintive beginning, featuring

the solo piano, into a morass of agonised sonorities in which even the mighty Bronfman had to struggle to be heard. Scarcely 25 minutes in duration, I was grateful when it ended.

After three years in Boston, I finally attended a programme by the city's second orchestra, the Boston Philharmonic, and its music director Benjamin Zander. What brought me there was the presence of **Lera Auerbach** in an all-Russian programme that included Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. The 43-year-old, Russian-born Auerbach is among the finest pianists of her generation – a group that includes the likes of Leif Ove Andsnes, Evgeny Kissin and Hélène Grimaud – and I assumed, falsely as it turned out, that she would be the soloist in the Rachmaninov.

Auerbach is an anomaly in our age: she's equally gifted as a pianist, a composer, a poet and a sculptress, and her name was on the programme because the orchestra was giving the local premiere of her 14-minute tone poem, *Icarus*, originally written as the final movement of her 2007 Symphony No 1 (*Chimeras*). It's an exhilarating, intensely dramatic work that is imaginatively scored for large orchestra (in addition to the usual winds and strings, it calls for two harps, four percussionists and a very busy Theremin player). I think it's one of the best pieces I've heard by a living composer, and was given an excellent reading by the orchestra's associate conductor, Benjamin Vickers.

Zander, who conducted the rest of the programme, did not give did not give pianist **Ya Fei Chuang** helpful support in the Rachmaninov. She tried to perform the 20-minute *Rhapsody* in a light-fingered, almost French manner, but was hobbled by Zander's over-loud, rhythmically awkward, and occasionally out-of-tune accompaniment.

A few days later, fortepianist **Kristian Bezuidhout** played a Haydn-Beethoven recital in the Boston Early Music Festival series (First Church in Cambridge) with phenomenal virtuosity, musicality and temperament. His phrasing, remarkably free yet utterly natural, included everything from dramatic pauses to freewheeling improvisation. He used the characteristics of the older instrument – he played a model patterned after Viennese instruments by Bösendorfer (1828) and Graf (1830) – to make listeners hear familiar music in a fresh way. In Beethoven's Op 10 No 3, for example, he was able to take the opening Presto at a sensationally fast tempo because the instrument has a lighter, faster action than modern grands. In the great slow movement, he was able to resist the temptation to play too slowly – in any case impossible to sustain on Beethoven's instrument. Rather than being sweetly sentimental, the effect was nobly tragic. There were similar revelations in the 37-year-old South African-born musician's performances of the same composer's *Pathetique* Sonata and Haydn's Variations in F minor.

© CHEN SI

Sa Chen: yearning and voluptuous in Chopin's *Bacarolle*

The following evening, **Denis Matsuev** was able to exploit the far greater range of the modern pianoforte to dazzle the listener in 19th- and 20th-century works. This Russian virtuoso, now almost 40, is often accused of overpowering the music he programmes, but I have never found that to be the case. There was nothing heavy-handed about Matsuev's performance of Beethoven's Sonata No 31 in A-flat Op 110. The work is new to Matsuev's repertory and his interpretation will surely deepen in seasons to come, but his conception of the piece is already a convincing one.

Matsuev's concert also featured one of the most exciting performances I've heard in years of Schumann's *Symphonic Etudes*. There was enormous rhythmic drive, extraordinary virtuosity and the ending was simply phenomenal. It was one of these rare occasions when one understood why Schumann chose the word 'symphonic' for his title.

Hélène Grimaud made a long-awaited return to Boston to join Andris Nelsons and the BSO for a two-week Brahms mini-festival, which included all four of the symphonies and both of the piano concertos. Grimaud was scheduled to play the Concerto No 1 in D Minor on four evenings, followed by performances of the Piano Concerto No 2 in B-flat on four subsequent evenings during November. Unfortunately, she became ill after the 17 November performance that I attended, and had to cancel the final two performances.

Nevertheless, she was in magnificent form. If the performances of the D minor Concerto were slightly superior to the latter work, I suspect that was because the first is the superior piece. Grimaud may be her generation's finest Brahms player, and I don't know of anyone who plays the B-flat major Concerto better. One of these days, Grimaud should return to Brahms solo piano works to give the performance of the composer's *Variations on a Theme by Handel* for which her fans have been waiting.

Only a few days after Grimaud, another great pianist, **Menahem Pressler**, joined the BSO and guest conductor Morits Gnann for performances of Mozart's valedictory concerto, No 27 in B-flat major K595. In his 93rd year, Pressler continues to be a miraculous Mozartean. When he walks on stage, he looks his age; when he sits down to play, he is ageless. Each phrase was carefully sculpted and the notes rolled off his still agile fingers like perfectly formed pearls. When most pianists – even some of the great ones – play this piece, it sounds as if it's not Mozart at his best. When Pressler plays it, I'm willing to believe that this is the composer's last will and testament.

STEPHEN WIGLER

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Stardust memories

The eclectic composer and pianist Francesco Digilio has been treading in the footsteps of one of his musical heroes, David Bowie, making painstaking piano arrangements of the rock legend's oeuvre. *Claire Jackson* reports

DAVID BOWIE ONCE SAID HE thought he would mainly be remembered for his wide-ranging hairstyles. It was a modest response to an inane interview question. In reality, of course, Bowie was an iconic figure who had a deep impact on the British cultural landscape. His early death (aged 69) last year prompted an outpouring of commemorative works from artists, musicians and writers wishing to pay tribute – and now an Italian pianist has painstakingly arranged Bowie's oeuvre for piano.

© DIGI BEAT PUBLISHING

Francesco Digilio: 'Bowie elevated rock music to an art form'

Francesco Digilio is a lifelong fan of the 'British genius': 'Bowie is an artist I've always followed very closely,' the Puglia-born musician explains. 'I loved his extravagances; he was a volcano of ideas. His writing ranged from folk and electronic to glam rock and soul. All these styles influenced me as a classical pianist.'

Bowie's untimely passing prompted Digilio to take up an idea that had been germinating for several years, and he began transcribing Bowie's music for piano. 'It wasn't easy,' Digilio laughs, 'there is a variety of atmospheres and colours in the songs. It was hard to translate for keyboard.' Nonetheless, pieces such as *Space Oddity* do manage to capture the timbre of a bigger ensemble. Digilio uses the full range of the piano, moving from an initial focus on the middle octaves to represent the vocal line, through to the extremities of the keyboard to signify instrumental development.

Purists may struggle with some of the transcriptions – after all, there is only so much that can be translated from multiple instruments to a single keyboard. The opening to *Life on Mars* lacks the atmospheric intensity of the original, for example, and *Changes* is a little saccharine. However, the open-minded listener will find this collection has plenty of bite. *Lazarus* is poignant and moving; Digilio's interpretation of the modulating passages is glorious. The arrangements of *Rock 'n' Roll Suicide* and *Ashes to Ashes* also work well on the piano, particularly the undulating motifs of the latter. Bowie's melodies are so lyrical it's easy to forget these pieces ever had words.

The transcriptions were recorded towards the end of 2016 and released as *A Tribute to David Bowie*. The process was an opportunity for Digilio to deepen his connections with the late popstar's output: 'Bowie has always been an inspiration for me. I hear something new every time I listen to one of his songs. He is hypnotic, and makes you travel with your mind. He elevated rock music to an art form'.

Digilio started playing the piano when he was seven years old. At 18, he began composing in earnest, and moved from Corato, in southern Italy, to Rome, where he collaborated with singer Bobby Solo, songwriter Fred Bongusto and instrumentalist Lino Patruno, among others. 'My main influences are Bacharach, Einaudi, Yiruma, Moby and Bowie,' says Digilio. Today, the pianist works primarily as a producer, creating jazz, smooth jazz and new age records. Digilio also has a base in London, through his publishing arm Digi Beat, which has over 15,000 titles in its catalogue. The music is distributed online, mainly via streaming platforms.

Meanwhile, Digilio's latest album, *The Shades of Smooth Jazz*, was released earlier this year, featuring guest alto/soprano saxophonist and flautist Eric Daniel, who has performed with Tony Bennet, Ella Fitzgerald and Stevie Wonder. This time, his inspiration comes from very different sources, including leading saxophonists Euge Groove, Walter Beasley and Kim Waters, infused with evocations of Sardinia's rugged landscape.

Francesco Digilio's A Tribute to David Bowie *can be downloaded from iTunes and Napster or streamed via Spotify and Deezer*

WORKING ABROAD: SOME TIPS

The prospect of travelling abroad to make music – and to do so on a professional basis – is a dream of many musicians. In this article, the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM) takes a look at some of the things you will need to think about if you might be offered the opportunity to work abroad. Circumstances will differ, so in addition to any of the tips and suggestions we make below, be prepared to get expert advice.

We would advise in all cases to get any proposal for work abroad in writing, and for you to have time to consider it fully (including taking advice, if necessary).

Musical engagements come in all shapes and sizes, and this is true whether at home or abroad. So the first thing to think about is the duration of the engagement, and how long you will be away.

If you are contemplating a short-term engagement, make sure you are satisfied with arrangements **before** you accept a contract. Here are some things to think about.

Travel out and back from the destination country: Who is responsible for organising travel – you or the other party? Who will pay for it? Make sure that whatever you agree is properly reflected in a written agreement.

Visas, work permits and other paperwork: Again, what is required by the local authorities, and who will arrange and pay for it? This can be a particularly complicated area and you will need to satisfy yourself that all arrangements have been made properly.

Passport: Check that your passport is valid for the full duration of your engagement. You should also check if there are any other conditions which might apply: for example, some countries require that a passport be valid for a minimum of six months from the point of entry. You may be required to take an additional (and costly) visa to satisfy this requirement – sometimes at the point of entry, and where you may be required to pay in local currency rather than by card.

For further guidance, see the UK Government's Travel Advice at www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice – you will be able to search by country and within each, you can find out entry requirements.

It is also a good idea to have a copy of your passport in some form, perhaps a photocopy as well as an electronic copy. Make a scan of your passport (plus any relevant visas) and store it on a cloud-based service such as Dropbox, iCloud or any of the many secure file storage services available from which you can access your stored documents from anywhere in the world. You may need some evidence to prove your identity if your passport is lost or stolen.

Insurance: Are you covered properly for health, loss and other expenses? Is this covered by you or the other party? If the other party is arranging insurance make sure you understand the terms and conditions of the cover and how to make a claim.

Instruments: If you are taking your own instrument with you, what are the transportation arrangements and again, who is responsible and who pays? Check that your instruments will be covered by an appropriate and adequate insurance. Also check what happens if your own instrument becomes lost or damaged and a replacement is needed to fulfil the engagement: who will arrange and pay for this?

Accommodation and subsistence: You need to know what the arrangements are before you accept a job.

Incidental travel and other costs: How will you get to the venue from your accommodation? Will you pay? Can you claim it back? Or are there other arrangements? What about laundry?

Much of the foregoing will also apply if you are offered work which requires you to live abroad for any period of time (as opposed simply to visiting in order to fulfil some specified dates).

There are some other things to consider too. If you are working on a permit, what rights do you (and your family, if they have accompanied you) have to remain in the country if you leave the job, or are dismissed? Make sure you are clear on all these details **before** signing a contract.

Being out of the country for certain periods could impact on your tax affairs at home. Again, we would suggest getting some advice for your circumstances: there are rules about whether you are resident or non-resident for tax purposes which are triggered by the length of time you live and work abroad.

You can find a useful introduction to this subject on the UK Government's website at www.gov.uk/tax-foreign-income/residence.

Check accommodation arrangements closely. If you are not going to be in a hotel, where will you be staying and who will arrange it? What are the arrangements for deposit, rent in advance, bills and so on?

Think very carefully before committing to a contract where it specifies that rent and other overheads are deducted from your earnings: we have seen contracts of this kind. What happens if the accommodation is unacceptable to you? Can you make your own arrangements? You may still be obliged to hand over any deductions from your pay if you have accepted this as term in your contract.

ISM members can seek advice from our in-house legal team and legal and tax helplines.

JOHN ROBINSON
Head of Service Delivery and Systems
www.ism.org

Paderewski *The American Recordings*
The complete Victor recordings 1914-1931
APR 7505, 5CDs, 5 hrs 30 mins
●●●●

APR's five-CD album of Paderewski's complete Victor recordings (1914-1931) throws down the gauntlet. No pianist since the days of Lisztomania was so lionised. Even a glimpse of Paderewski's noble profile as he sped past in his 'royal' train caused women to faint. Liszt may have possessed 'a smile like a dagger in sunlight' and prompted animated discussion as to whether his eyes were blue or violet, but Paderewski's scarcely less legendary charisma could seduce even the most hardy, determinedly critical concertgoer.

Those who commented on fundamental flaws, of distortion, technical weakness and even 'charlatanism,' ran the risk of being labelled pedants, unable to appreciate the finer things (or persons) in life. Since Paderewski's legions of admirers included such luminaries as Myra Hess, Clifford Curzon, Edwin Fisher and Ronald Stephenson, who is to disagree?

Again, Paderewski was seen as the master of 'the grand manner,' of a rich and sadly defunct tradition where the spirit rather than the letter of the score was all-important. To claim, as an American journalist once did, that the Brazilian pianist Guiomar Novaes was 'the Paddrooski of the Pampas' was to pay the ultimate compliment. Even more recently, the novelist Beryl Bainbridge wrote that as a child, she recalled shaking Paderewski's hand as an inspiring and unforgettable experience. So the legend lives on, fuelled by ever-increasing wonder and speculation.

In recordings, however, appearance and reality divide. APR's invaluable document tells us that Paderewski's finest hours occurred before he entered the studio. True, there are flashes of what I assume to be his former greatness, yet for the most part these performances are a tired and unstable reflection of past glory. The repertoire is almost exclusively devoted to miniatures, the favoured format of the time, making one long for something more substantial. Even so, it is hard to imagine Paderewski in, for example, the profound reaches of Beethoven's Op 111 or, by contrast, in the virtuoso glitter of Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto No 4 (works central to his early career).

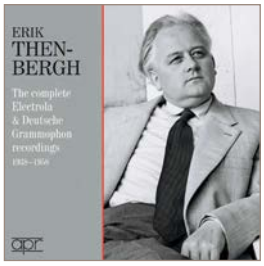
What is extraordinary is that Paderewski transcended his mentor's damning estimation: Theodor Leschetizky may have told him, 'You will never be a pianist,' yet he went on to become, after Liszt, the most celebrated pianist of all time. Rudolf Ganz hit the paradox fair and square: 'You listen to some of his old recordings and he was perfectly awful. But when he was on the stage, he had such a magnetic personality, and this is what shone through.'

Alas, time has not been kind to the recordings. Even when you accommodate yourself to a vagary no longer accepted, the constant de-syncronisation of the hands – almost as if the composer had written *quasi arpa* over every romantic theme – it is impossible not to be reminded of Leschetizky's verdict evident in a continuous sense of strain and instability. There are, of course, exceptions when Paderewski breaks free from his faulty, belated training: Liszt's 'La Leggerezza' (including a flashing coda by the pianist himself, later partially emulated by Moiseiwitsch) is alive with glistening passage work, fully in accord with the music's title.

He can be gracious and lightly tripping in his own Minuet (there are four versions to choose from) and there is genuine aplomb in his *Cracovienne fantastique* (it became a speciality of his student, Małcużyński). There is a nice sense of the quizzical nature of Schumann's *Prophet Bird* and there is no lack of eloquence in the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata. These, however, are mere glimpses.

The inclusion of part of a speech given on the anniversary of Paderewski's American debut ('I have given you my heart… May God bless all and everyone of you,' etc) amplifies and confirms the legend. Mark Obert-Thorn's transfers are masterly. The entire project is of an absorbing historical interest.

BRYCE MORRISON



Erik Then-Bergh
The complete Electrola and Deutsche Grammophon recordings 1938-1958
APR 6021, 2 CDs, 154 mins
●●●●●

This album ranks high among the glories of APR's already glorious series. The German pianist Erik Then-Bergh hardly achieved the fame of compatriots such as Backhaus or Kempff, but as this album clearly shows, he was a pianist of both a formidable command and deep sensitivity.

There is nothing in him of the showman. Indeed, in the Bach-Busoni *Chaconne*, he surpasses Michelangeli (the most celebrated of this work's interpreters) in richness, humanity and in sheer interest – a far cry from what I have sometimes called Michelangeli's 'Prussian Officer severity.' If as one critic put it, 'you don't play the opening of Beethoven's opus 101 Sonata as if it was the most beautiful music in the world there is something wrong,' then Then-Bergh provides a truly seraphic answer. The sense of desolation he achieves in the Adagio is followed by a finale sufficiently exuberant to remind you of the over-fanciful Helen from E M Forster's *Howards End* who saw goblins and dancing elephants in the music.

Then-Bergh is no less attuned to Schumann's romanticism at its most feverish (faster, faster and still faster, his instruction at the close of the Sonata in G minor's first movement). As encores he gives us Reger's *Silhouetten* which take Schumann's schizophrenia still further. He is surpassingly beautiful in Chopin's B major Nocturne (few others have emphasised the opening's harmonic audacity to such a magical degree): here there is 'something of the night' in the most imaginative sense. Finally, Reger's massive and daunting *Variations and Fugue on a theme of Telemann* and the Piano Concerto, where every seemingly insurmountable obstacle is conquered with unwavering mastery and commitment. Transfers are excellent (less so in the Variations), and there is a long and informative accompanying essay and interview. This is largesse on a grand scale.

BM

Bach The French Suites
Murray Perahia (pf)
DG 479 6565, 2 CDs, 92 mins
●●●●●

Clarity and pureness of articulation, coupled with impeccable musicality, have long marked Perahia's Mozart; here they illuminate Bach in his first release for the 'Yellow Label'. Perahia has made his mark in Bach previously: superb recordings on Sony of concertos (ASMF), a top-of-the-field *Goldberg Variations* and excellent English Suites. This release is of a similarly exalted level, the superb recording-perspective warm yet fully supporting Perahia's textural transparency. Perahia does use pedal, but expressively.

Hearing the six French Suites in one sitting underlines the profound humanity of this music. To describe Perahia's delivery as non-interventionist would be to do it a disservice, but this does sit at the opposite pole from Gould: the performances are fully about Bach, not Perahia, shining with honesty. Technically, every Suite is impeccable, not just in terms of surface delivery but also in touch and rhythm. Repeats are observed, with spontaneous-sounding decorations added on second airings.

Perahia's uses pedal in the Allemande to the First Suite (D minor) to conjure up transcendent worlds. Poise and dignity mark the Courante, but there is something else there too: an unstated but underlying tension supporting the narrative; in sympathetic response to this, the disturbances to the Sarabande's peace are unmistakable.

It is the Sarabandes in each case that form the still centre of the Suites, and it is here that Perahia seems to isolate the very heart of Bach's world. Perahia's achievement is to convey the glorious diversity of Bach's invention in these works: the famous Gavotte of Suite No 5, deliciously despatched, lies next to a limpid Laure.

An indispensable release, not just for lovers of Bach, but for all musicians of whatever shade.

COLIN CLARKE

Mozart Piano Concerto No 17 in G major K453; Piano Concerto No 25 in C major K503 **Mitsuko Uchida** (pf/cond); Cleveland Orchestra
Decca 4830716, 67 mins
●●●●

Mitsuko Uchida is the rare pianist who started her career at a peak yet has still found room for continued improvement over the years.

This fifth and final instalment of a CD series with Uchida leading the Cleveland Orchestra from the keyboard follows a distinguished Mozart concerto cycle from 30 years ago with the English Chamber Orchestra and Jeffrey Tate (originally released on the Philips label). The earlier set benefited from Tate's spry, gremlin-like wit and the ECO's pellucid, pristine sound textures. In her thirties, Uchida already showed a mature grasp of Mozartian style, structure, and phrasing. At times her playing was a bit winsome and self-consciously miniaturised, minor flaws no longer audible 30 years on. Her playing is now, if anything, even richer than before, with emotions more deeply expressed. It is the Clevelanders who sound somewhat over-deferential to the soloist.

To state the obvious, Mozart's conceros in G major K453 and and C major K503 benefit from the presence of a great Mozartian on the podium to govern such matters. Artists imbued with the Mozart idiom, including Murray Perahia (Sony 1914112), Richard Goode (Nonesuch 79608), Zoltán Kocsis (Philips 456577) and Vladimir Ashkenazy (Decca 443727), have memorably recorded his concerti from the keyboard, but the presence of a conductor of the order of Sándor Végh, András Schiff's recording partner (Decca 448140) can be revelatory.

So while Uchida's achievement deserves a place of honour alongside Goode, Kocsis and Ashkenazy, other pianists on record who have benefited from great conductors in Mozart concerti inevitably pip her at the post.

BENJAMIN IVRY

Anselm Hüttenbrenner *Geisterszenen* ('*Ghostly Scenes*'); **Schumann** *Ghost Variations* WoO 24
Julia Rinderle (pf)
Helbling 2717444, DDD, 79 mins
●●●

The Austrian pianist and composer Anselm Hüttenbrenner (1794-1868) is remembered for his friendships with Beethoven and Schubert, but he also produced works of mid-Victorian charm such as these *Geisterszenen* (1850), offered in what is billed as a world premiere recording by the German pianist Julia Rinderle. Born in 1990, Rinderle has studied with Ludmila Lissovaja, Ingmar Schwindt, Roland Krüger and Jan Jiracek von Arnim. A devotee of chamber performance, her repertoire ranges from Bach to John Cage, Luciano Berio and Gilead Mishory.

Although by 1850, Hüttenbrenner may have been haunted by the spirits of his two famous friends, his *Ghostly Scenes* are sprightly and confident, prefiguring Saint-Saëns' *Danse macabre* in their upbeat sense of enjoyment, albeit lacking the latter's Parisian urbanity. Rinderle is a fluent, winning advocate. Not the most consequent music, its charm nonetheless prolongs the celebratory mood of Schubert's social circle.

Schumann's *Ghost Variations* (1854) expresses a tragic void, akin to Schubert's hurdy-gurdy man in *Die Winterreise*. This forlorn spirit is conveyed with understated simplicity by Rinderle, underlining the difference between amusing parlour ghosts and inescapable tragedy. The innate torment audible in this work, Schumann's last before disappearing into madness, has some of the questing, disconnected quality of fragments written by the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Although not a popular work, Schumann's *Geistervariationen* has been championed by Grigory Sokolov, András Schiff (ECM New Series 2122/23) and Michael Endres (Oehms Classics OC366), among others. Rinderle does not match the emotional impact of these predecessors, but her limpid reading is persuasive.

BI

Schubert *Impromptus* D899; *German Dances* D820; *Moments musicaux* D780
Lars Vogt (pf)
Ondine ODE 1285-2, 67 mins
●●●●●

The first set of Schubert's *Impromptus* and slightly earlier *Moments musicaux* make regular bedfellows on disc but rarely as beautifully played as by Lars Vogt here. If ever there was an instrumental advert for 'Schubert and the essence of melody', to re-use Hans Gál's marvellous phrase, then this is it. Vogt's rapt, mellifluous playing catches the essence of Schubert's invention in an atmosphere of almost overwhelming calm, yet equally these performances reflect the drama and power in the individual pieces.

The *Impromptus* make an intriguing set, with its whole greater than the sum of its parts. At just over 28 minutes in this account, they are no mere miniatures or salon pieces and yet are no sonata either, even if (as Vogt comments in the interview that serves as a booklet note) the four pieces might be interpreted as a sequence of variations. The title *Impromptus* suggests an improvisatory element to a wonderfully through-composed suite.

By contrast, the *Moments musicaux*, while making a pleasant set, are more a collection of individual pieces some of which have achieved great popularity as recital encores or independent pieces. Vogt's approach is in essence no different here, underscoring the interconnections between the six *Moments*, which he views as two interlocked triptychs, the first moving from A-flat to F minor via C, the second returning to A-flat via C-sharp minor and F minor. It all makes absolute sense. Separating these are the six *German Dances*, emphasis on the sensitive.

This is the finest Schubert piano disc I have heard in years.

GUY RICKARDS

***Wonderland*: Grieg** Piano Concerto Op 16; Selection from *Lyric Pieces*; *Peer Gynt* – 'Solveig's Song'; 'In the Hall of the Mountain King'
Alice Sara Ott (pf); Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra/Esa-Pekka Salonen
DG 479 4631 GH, 66 mins
●●●

Wonderland kills two birds for Alice Sara Ott's one stone: to work with Esa-Pekka Salonen, and her longstanding love of Grieg's music. The ubiquitous Concerto has been in her repertoire for over a decade and this recording was made, after two concert performances, in January 2015 – with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra on scintillating form, beautifully recorded.

How to be original in a work (the first concerto to be recorded, indeed) that is *so* familiar? Some will be struck – as I was at first – by the contrast between the dynamic opening orchestral chord and the ensuing, rather languorous first solo for the piano. It sounds dangerously slow and mannered; yet a few random comparisons (Derwinger in the 1868/72 original on BIS, Malling and Fingerhut on Chandos) show that others have taken not dissimilar approaches. Ott's interpretation is never wilful but tries too hard for novelty and falls short of, say, Andsnes, Kovacevich (my current favourite) or Kholodenko's new recording. Nonetheless, if one heard this in the concert hall, one would not feel short-changed. On disc, it may become a little wearing in time.

The selection of 10 of the 66 *Lyric Pieces* (drawn from six of the 10 volumes) together with two movements from *Peer Gynt* makes a lovely follow-on, embracing the very different wonderland of Grieg's miniatures. They are nicely played, although Ott's tendency to leave prolonged pauses at the end of phrases imparts a stop-start feel to some, of a piece with her rubato in the Concerto. Again, the performances face stiff competition and if you want a selection of these, opt for Andsnes on EMI, recorded on Grieg's own piano in Troldhaugen, no less.

GR

***Homages*: Busoni** Transcription of Bach's Partita BWV 1004: 'Chaconne' **Chopin** *Barcarolle* in F-sharp major Op. 60 **Franck** *Prélude, Choral et Fugue* **Liszt** 'Venezia e Napoli' from *Années de pèlerinage* S162 **Mendelssohn** Prelude & Fugue in E minor Op 35/1; Prelude & Fugue in F minor Op 35/5
Benjamin Grosvenor (pf)
Decca 4830255, 67 mins
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Benjamin Grosvenor's fourth Decca album, entitled *Homages*, is an intriguing series of tributes. Busoni's massive re-working of Bach's violin *Chaconne* is followed by Mendelssohn's devotion to Bach, while Franck's *Prélude, Chorale et Fugue* emotionally recalls old forms. Chopin's *Barcarolle* is an idealised image of Venice, while Liszt's *Venezia e Napoli* recalls early Italian folklore.

Grosvenor's first Decca issue appeared in 2012, so it is hardly a case of a record a day keeps the doctor away. He makes you wait, but the wait is gloriously worthwhile: however deeply considered, all these performances sound thrillingly spontaneous.

Grosvenor is already a master of grandeur and of the subtlest range of colour and nuance. His pianism is something to marvel at, yet everything is achieved in the service of a poetic vision of rare integrity. His Bach-Busoni, delivered with extraordinary eloquence and command, ranks with the finest accounts on record. Mendelssohn can scarcely have had a more devout or dazzling rendering, and not since Cortot has Franck's *Prélude, Chorale et Fugue* been recorded with such fervour and interior magic. Not one to shy away from the heroic side of Chopin's multi-faceted genius, Grosvenor takes the *Barcarolle*'s climax by storm before allowing it to sink into an ethereal reverie. In *Venezia e Napoli* he captures all the dark operatic drama of the central 'Canzone' while the 'Tarantella' emerges in a blaze of Neapolitan gaiety and sunlight.

Decca's sound is as natural as it is wide-ranging. At the age of 24, Grosvenor surpasses the transient fame of so many famous competition winners with aristocratic and transcendental ease.

BM

Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No 2 in C minor Op 18; *Morceaux de fantaisie* Op 3; *Vocalise* Op 34/14; Romance in A major; Valse in A major
Alexander Tharaud (pf); Sabine Devieilhe (sop); **Alexander Melnikov**, **Aleksandr Madzar** (pfs); Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra/Alexander Vedernikov
Erato 019029 595469, 67 mins
●●●●●

This disc is a real surprise. I can hear the eyebrows being raised: 'What? Rach 2, the *Vocalise*, a smattering of early pieces for two hands and six?' Well, yes, because the *two* hands here belong to Alexandre Tharaud, one of the ablest, most insightful younger pianists who has delighted in previous issues of Bach, Couperin, Scarlatti, Debussy, etc.

The Second Concerto is played with beautiful precision and pace. No over-romanticised dawdling or playing to the gallery here. Tharaud clearly believes in the music's quality, as does the RLPO, on splendid form under conductor Alexander Vedernikov. Together they bring out the music's innate drama and beauty without grafting on artificial emotion. It's a superbly balanced recording, too, the piano placed nicely (but not unnaturally) forward; and just listen to the wonderful clarinet solo at the start of the Adagio sostenuto. The Finale is an utter delight, a marvellous fusion of art and entertainment. This is the finest modern rendition I have heard since Hough's live Dallas performance with Litton (Hyperion 67501/2).

The five *Morceaux de fantaisie* Op 3 (1892) are an imaginative set transfigured by the hugely popular Prelude in C-sharp minor. Tharaud integrates it within its proper surrounding in a flawless account. The other fillers are on a slightly lesser plane, the famous *Vocalise* (1915) not quite on the same level as its most famous renditions (Moffo, for example). The two six-hand pieces from 1891-2 were written for three Russian sisters to play together and are slight, making a rather downbeat conclusion – a waste of the three eminent pianist Alexanders.

GR

***Encuentro*: Falla** *Siete canciones populares españolas; Suite de 'El Amor Brujo'; Garcia Lorca Canciones españolas antiguas*
Estrella Morente (sop), **Javier Perianes** (pf)
Harmonia Mundi HMC 902246, 69 mins
●●●●

Much of the best-known Spanish music was written by foreign hands – Rimsky-Korsakov's *Capriccio*, Ravel's and Chabrier's Rhapsodies, Debussy's *Ibéria* – so it's a good to come back to Spanish music by Spanish composers. Falla remains the Spanish composer par excellence and the tunes of his *Seven Popular Spanish Songs* (1914) are so well known from their various chamber and orchestral arrangements (there's even one by Luciano Berio) that one sometimes forgets they originated for voice and piano. They remain an object lesson not only in how to integrate folk material into art song but in the much-overworked (and often overlooked) concept 'less is more'. Falla's accompaniments are enormously expressive, yet their subtlety comes from the pared-down lines and textures, features the great poet Federico García Lorca sought to emulate surprisingly effectively when he made his own set of *Old Spanish Songs* around 1930.

Javier Perianes proves a winning accompanist to flamenco singer Estrella Morentes, whose earthy, breathy, tones – sounding here like a nightclub Lieder singer – give the songs, including the wonderful 'Cancion del fuego fatuo' in the fourth movement of the *El Amor Brujo* suite (1925), a wonderful piquancy and authenticity. For those used to, say, Teresa Berganza's beautifully refined renditions (there's a marvellous account with Gerald Moore from 1960 on YouTube) these may come as a shock, albeit an invigorating one. Perianes makes for a virtuosic advocate in the suite. Tempi in some of the numbers may seem a little sedate at times, but the urgency is there when needed, for example in 'Jota,' 'Polo' or the vibrant 'Ritual Fire Dance'; so too is delicacy, as in 'Nana.' Recommended.

GR

***American First Sonatas*: Reinagle** *Philadelphia Sonata* No 1 in D major **MacDowell** Sonata No 1 in G minor, *Tragica*, Op 45 **Griffes** Sonata **Siegmeister** Sonata No 1, *American*
Cecile Licad (pf)
Danacord DACOCD 774, 71 mins
●●●●

This first volume in Danacord's series devoted to American piano music spreads its repertoire wide, from the first of Alexander Reinagle's *Philadelphia Sonatas* – the first piano sonata composed in the US, in 1786 – to Elie Siegmeister's wartime triptych of 1944. Reinagle (1756-1809) was actually born in England to Hungarian and Scottish parents and the *Philadelphia Sonatas* were composed shortly after his arrival in the then still young United States. The bipartite Sonata No 1 clearly shows that Reinagle knew his Haydn and Cecile Licad's nimble playing displays his melodic acumen very nicely.

The inclusion of Edward MacDowell's *Tragica* Sonata (1893) rather than Ives' epic 1905 Sonata is a better fit for this programme. Licad has the measure of MacDowell's four well-constructed movements and if these do not seem overly tragic in character that is more the nature of the music – *Sonata drammatica* might be more apposite – than her performance, which ranks well with other rivals such as Amato's (Altarus).

Griffes' three-movement Sonata (1918-9) shakes things up as it should, through its direct expression, formal concision and rhythmic drive. This is perhaps the most recorded work here, yet still not really well known. Licad is less comfortable in the opening Feroce movement than the finest of her rivals (Lewin on Marco Polo, Landes on Koch), but the rest of the sonata is nicely shaped. So, too, is her account of Siegmeister's *American* Sonata – a work that grows in stature as it proceeds after a slightly inconsequential opening allegro. Good sound from Danacord.

GR

Schubert Piano Sonatas No 19 in C minor D958; No 16 in A minor D845
Louis Schwizgebel (pf)
Harmonia Mundi Aparté AP133, 70 mins
●●●●●

I heard Louis Schwizgebel performing Schubert's Sonata No 19 in his International Piano Series recital at St John's, Smith Square last year. His light (first half) and shade (second half) programme paired one of Schubert's most 'Beethovenian' creations, with Beethoven's rarely performed *32 Variations in C minor*, to which the Schubert sonata's opening motif alludes.

Listening to this disc, I was struck by Schwizgebel's natural affinity with Schubert, as well as his developed and mature interpretation of this marvellous work. So, too, his nuanced account of another Schubert sonata with heavy shades of Beethoven: No 16 in A major. Schwizgebel succeeds in bringing out the Schubert in this music, too. Terrific sound, warmly recommended. GR

Chopin 24 *Préludes* Op 28 **Schumann** *Fantasie* Op 17
Horacio Gutiérrez (pf)
Bridge Records 9480, 66 mins
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Cuban-American pianist Horacio Gutiérrez has never quite achieved the recognition his recordings suggest he might deserve. One hopes this release will turn the tide, for despite immense competition in this repertoire, Gutiérrez triumphs. The Chopin *Préludes* have a hall of fame that includes such luminaries as Pollini and Argerich. Gutiérrez has his own strengths: his sound is absolutely beautiful, his technique impeccable and his musical grasp of the cycle's trajectory is beyond doubt.

The Schumann poses no technical challenges for Gutiérrez, even in the tricky skips; yet it is his interpretative mastery that once more shines through. The final movement is heard as one long, blossoming line and he finds a transparency of texture throughout. The recording and documentation are top class. Highly recommended. CC

Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No 1 in B-flat minor Op 23; *Nutcracker Suite* (arr Pletnev) Op 71a **Alexandra Dariescu** (pf); Royal Philharmonic Orchestra / Darrell Ang
Signum SIGCD 441, 53 mins
●●●

Presto Classical's website lists 283 recordings in all formats (including duplications) of Tchaikovsky's First Concerto, making it one of classical music's most crowded markets. Any newcomer needs to be extra-special to make their mark, with scintillating performances and interesting couplings, such as Yevgeny Sudbin's from 2007 (BIS, coupled with Medtner's Concerto No 1), or Beatrice Rana last year (Warner Classics, with Prokofiev's Second). Alexandra Dariescu takes an interestingly small-scale view of the concerto, concentrating – as did Rana – on the lyrical side, but less compellingly throughout in an interpretation that drags a little at times.

Pletnev's transcriptions from *The Nutcracker* (published in 1978) are nicely, even intimately, played (though lacking Pletnev's fantastical imagination) but at 53 mins long, the disc is not over-generous. The sound is first-rate, the Royal Philharmonic on good form, too. GR

Reubke Piano Sonata in B minor **Liszt-Busoni** *Fantasy and Fugue on 'Ad nos ad salutarem undam'* **Hamish Milne** (pf)
Decca Eloquence 482 2574
●●●●●

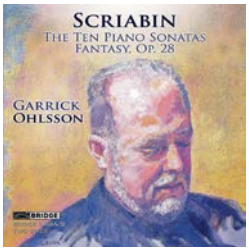
First issued in 1977 this ranks among the greatest of all debut recordings; an astonishing feat of towering strength and musical conviction. Both Reubke (whose tragic death at the age of 24 robbed the world of a major talent) and Busoni offer daunting tributes to Liszt, making this coupling as apt as it is enterprising. Hamish Milne's pacing of every teeming note, let alone phrase, allows for a gloriously full unfolding of so much dazzling rhetoric. As both works roar to their massive close the mind reels at Milne's unfaltering focus and command. Opulent in both recorded sound and performance this re-issue is a memorable tribute to 'a memorable session' (Milne). BM

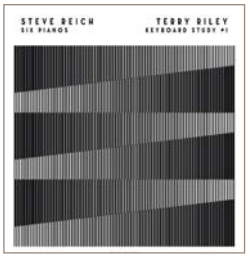
Castro Piano Concerto Op 22; Cello Concerto; *Oithona* (Poema Sinfónico) Op 55 **Rodolfo Ritter** (pf) Vladimir Zagaydo (vc); Orquesta Sinfónica de San Luis/José Miramontes Zapata
Sterling Records CDS1106-2, 63 mins
●●●

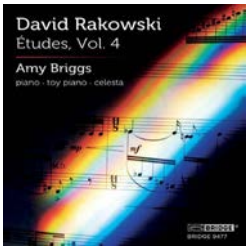
The cruelly short-lived Ricardo Castro (1864-1907) penned the first examples of a piano concerto, symphonic poem and cello concerto composed in South America, according to Sterling's laudably extensive booklet notes. The Piano Concerto of the mid-1880s is dedicated to Reinecke. A pianist himself (he gave the Mexican premiere of the Grieg Concerto), Castro writes idiomatically for the instrument. Highly Romantic, he unleashes Lisztian roulades in the first movement, while the central nocturne-like Andante is imbued with a Chopinesque lyricism; the finale is a polonaise. This is a live performance, and there is the odd miss from Ritter, but the caveat really comes with the orchestra, which needs more depth and whose high violins can be edgy. CC

Scriabin Piano Sonatas Nos 1-10; Fantasy in B minor Op 28 **Garrick Ohlsson** (pf)
Bridge Records 9268, 2 CDs, 148 mins

This is a glorious recording. Complete cycles of Scriabin piano sonatas are not as frequent as one might like, yet this comes







up against a significant recent one, from British pianist Peter Donohoe (Somm). The later sonatas in particular (Nos 7-10) provide some of the most sophisticated, challenging music written for the piano. The cycle's trajectory is from the post-Chopin harmonies and Lisztian rhetoric of No 1 (interpreted superbly here by Ohlsson) to the heady otherworlds of the *Black Mass* and *White Mass*.

Ohlsson has the ability to pinpoint the emotional temperature and aura of each sonata precisely, and this is his greatest strength. The sensuous Fourth, the crepuscular Fifth and the powerful, muscular Sixth are all bullseyes, while the impetuosity of the Seventh and the enigma of the Eighth are stunning. The Tenth is almost impossibly beautiful; the Fantasy acts as a relaxant after the sensuous overload of the later sonatas.

Playing of humbling virtuosity and a superlative grasp of Scriabin's language: a must-have. CC

Reich *Six Pianos* **Riley** Keyboard Study No 1 **Gregor Schwellenbach**, **Erol Sarp**, **Daniel Brandt**, **Paul Frick**, **John Kameel Farah**, **Hauschka** (pianos); Lukas Vogel (delays)
Film Recordings 24972, 32 mins
●●●●

Issued on the occasion of Steve Reich's 80th birthday, this rendition of *Six Pianos* was recorded separately by the six pianists, each using their own piano. An intriguing idea, perhaps, but it fails to supplant the classic versions by Piano Circus (Argo) and Steve Reich with 'his musicians' (DG), mostly due to the tinny recording quality. Nevertheless, this remains a precisely realised account edited by Gregor Schwellenbach (himself one of the pianists) and mixed by Jan Brauer at Gym Studios, Berlin. The release's website (www.film-recordings.com/sixpianos) offers a supplementary experience.

There is an aleatoric aspect to Riley's *Keyboard Study 1*. Again, modern technology gives us 'Riley for 2017', just as *Six Pianos* represents 'Reich for 2017'. Repeated patterns seem to extend themselves forever; here, Schwellenbach is the keyboardist with Lukas Vogel in charge of 'delays'.

Well worth exploring, and an interesting historical supplement to Reich's own version of *Six Pianos*. CC

Rakowski *Etudes, Volume 4: Nos 71-90, 93, 97* **Amy Briggs** *(piano/toy piano/celesta/voice)*
Bridge Records 9477 77 mins
●●●●●

David Rakowski (born 1958) writes incredibly well-crafted music that is shot through with lightness and a sense of humour. I have come across one instance of his Etudes before, Nos 21 and 30 (on Sung-Soo Cho's *Maximum*, *Minimum*, *Modern* from Albany) and was impressed, so it is good to have a whole disc to consider: there are 100 Etudes in total.

To pick some highlights: Rakowski's *Fireworks* (Etude 80) is directly influenced by Debussy; Etude 82, *F this*, concentrates on just one pitch, transforming the piano into a drum. Rakowski uses a wide variety of musical genres as jumping-off points, including progressive rock (Etude 86) and minimalist techniques (Etudes 71 and 84); the pianist is also asked to speak in Etude 74, while Schumann is important to Etudes 75 and 97. The *Berceuse* (Etude 87) is heard in two versions, for toy piano and celesta.

Amy Briggs is a superb exponent, fully immersed in Rakowski's very individual music. Recommended. CC

Celtic Airs **Barry Douglas** (piano); Eimear McGeown (Irish flute/whistle); Catriona McKay (Scottish harp); Chris Stout (Shetland fiddle)
Chandos CHAN 109434, 72 mins
●●●●

Evocative and beautifully realised, this is a terrifically life-enhancing collection of folk arrangements by the pianist Barry Douglas,. Eimear McGeown is a superb Irish flautist, and her own medley that kicks off the collection is absolutely beautiful.

Wistful melodies are inevitable in compilations such as this: *Brendan's Air* is a soulful thing of beauty, while Douglas' solo piano take on *The Foggy Dew* rises to a Rachmaninov-like, granitic climax. Some arrangements allow Douglas' virtuosity to fly (*The Fields of Athenry*). But it is the sounds of Chris Stout's fiddle and Catriona McKay's Scottish harp that give the collection its flavour of authenticity.

A companion to the Chandos disc *Celtic Reflections*, also featuring Eimear McGeown, this is a highly atmospheric release. CC

Erroll Garner: *Ready Take One*
Garner (pf); Jose Mangual (congas); Jimmie Smith (drums); various double-bassists
Sony/Legacy CD 88985363312, 66 mins

Erroll Garner was a great artist-entertainer, who would have echoed Louis Armstrong: 'The main thing is to live for that audience, 'cos what you're there for is to please the people.' Stylistically, Garner (1921-77) matured in the period of transition between Swing and Bebop eras, and this synthesis persisted in his work, though as the *Grove Dictionary* comments, he 'stands largely outside the main tradition of jazz pianism.'

On these newly-unearthed recordings, released at the height of his popularity between 1967 and '71, the Garner sound typically included a conga player, making the group a piano quartet. There's deliciously behind-the-beat playing on *Confessin'*, and a beautifully oblique introduction to *Caravan* – one of Garner's characteristic devices, and an outstanding track. He still finds something new to say on his most-performed composition, *Misty*, but on *Stella By Starlight* and *Latin Digs* we're closer to smooth jazz. In the pianist's improvisations there are many familiar phrases – Garner had routines; but when he is on top form, the sense of excitement and joy generated by his music-making is immensely worthwhile. ANDY HAMILTON

GREAT INSPIRATIONS

One of the most ambitious contemporary music projects in recent years, *250 Piano Pieces for Beethoven* brings together 250 composers to write works for Beethoven's 250th birthday in 2020. *Colin Clarke* takes up the story so far…

AMONG BEETHOVEN'S MANY creative legacies is his role as a great innovator of his time, pushing at the boundaries of musical form and technical possibilities of performance. He would no doubt, therefore, have taken huge satisfaction in knowing that his 250th birthday in 2020 has inspired 250 new compositions for piano.

Susanne Kessel, the curator of this ambitious undertaking, has drawn on her own links with Beethoven as a basis for the project: 'As a musician and a citizen of the composer's birthplace, Bonn, I felt a natural obligation to contribute my own project to the anniversary celebrations for Beethoven. He is the most performed composer in the world, which means that his works are international currency. My aim is to let composers of our time share their musical ideas in the form of a commemorative publication. Beethoven said: "Music comes to me more readily than words." So, why not let many composers develop their ideas about Beethoven?'

Kessel has already given Schumann the same sort of treatment, albeit on a more modest scale. 'In 2010, for Schumann's 200th birthday I invited eight composers to write piano pieces, each as a comment on one of the fantasies of *Kreisleriana*. This new piano cycle I called *Kreisleriana 2010*.'

The current Beethoven project is work in progress. So far, 82 pieces have been completed and Kessel updates the website regularly. The works will published in 10 volumes, each of 25 pieces, by Editions Musica Ferrum with accompanying CDs on the obst-music label, based in Cologne

In his prefatory 'Mapping Beethoven's relevance today', composer Rainer Nonnenmann puts a case for seeing Beethoven himself as 'one of our avant-garde contemporaries'. An important outcome of the project will be to renew our acquaintance and experience of Beethoven's music through the prism of these commissioned works. 'Beethoven was a visionary,' says Kessel. 'His music was so far ahead of his time. Nearly two centuries have elapsed since his death, yet today, the ingenuity of his music remains overwhelming. It's thrilling to figure out which specific aspects are still fascinating for our composers. Their ideas are sometimes surprising – they direct our attention to aspects of certain pieces or Beethoven's biography. If after hearing one of the new piano pieces you listen to the original work by Beethoven, you hear it anew: it's like dusting down our senses.'

Kessel has premiered all of the works so far, which has been an enormous amount of work for one pianist. As she says, there are 'so many different approaches and styles. Each composer has his own fundamental position within the creative music world.' Premieres take place in Bonn: 'The whole project is a gift to Beethoven, so it is important to unveil it there.'

The publisher behind the Beethoven 250 project, Nikolas Sideris, makes the daring

Susanne Kessel: 'One of the most important legacies Beethoven left us was his deep longing for artistic freedom'

© DAVID KREMSER


© SUSANNE KESSEL

Ernst Julius Hähnel's Beethoven Monument on the Münsterplatz in Bonn

claim that 'all contemporary techniques of playing the piano have been represented'. Given time, I suggest, Beethoven might also have found his own way to most of them. Kessel agrees: 'The means of musical expression are under development at all times. Beethoven himself described music as "the mediator between intellectual and sensuous life". In the 21st century, many composers search constantly for new sounds. It's very likely that Beethoven would use these same techniques if he were alive now. The linguistic means of art never reaches a status quo.'

An example might be the unusual instructions that come with the German composer Harald Muenz's *Beethovenamstück*. Kessel gives a vivid description of what is involved: 'Muenz's piece starts with a dramatic element – I enter the stage with a pile of Beethoven scores, slam them onto the piano, and tear out one page randomly which I then turn round and sight-read, upside-down. I see this as an ironic comment on the way we often place composers on a pedestal without realising that their music is about creativity.

'One of the most important legacies Beethoven left us was his deep longing for artistic freedom. For that reason, I don't give the composers a prescriptive brief. My concept is to initiate a piano collection with a large variety of ideas and approaches towards Beethoven.'

THE COMPOSERS' RESPONSES TO Beethoven are markedly varied. I particularly like composer Justin Lépany's description of Beethoven 'hewing the forms out of a marble block.' Kessel comments, 'One of the best-known characteristics of Beethoven is that the creative process always took him much effort and nothing came easily to him. Lépany refers to Beethoven as a "sculptor", repeating the same motive over and over. Finally he finds a solution and floats into a new world.'

The collection covers a remarkable array of styles, from film music to jazz and contemporary. It's almost like looking at Beethoven through a kaleidoscope. 'I would like to show that not just classical musicians were inspired by him,' says Kessel. 'Mike Garson, for example, who was David Bowie's keyboardist for 40 years, has a strong affinity to Beethoven. Beethoven himself liked folk music from many countries. Sometimes I have the feeling that we sort of lock him up in classical concert halls today. Adorno says: "The task of art today is to bring chaos into order." Fabulous advice!'

Garson describes his piece on the slow movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata as 'comprovised': 'I used the exact structure of the piece just like a jazz standard and played what I heard in my inner ear.'

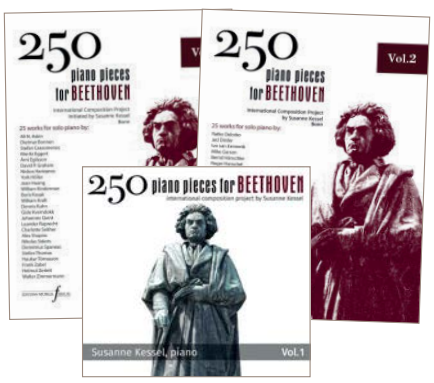
Building this project around compositions for the piano is particularly apt, given that Beethoven was a virtuoso pianist who expanded the boundaries of piano technique. For example, the angularities of late Beethoven seem embedded in York Höller's *Weit entfernt und doch so nah*. Does Kessel see this as a reflection of Beethoven's own musical language and personality? 'Perhaps it is appropriate to consider two compositional aspects separately from each other: writing a piece as a "comment" on Beethoven; and the personal style of a composer. Höller's piece, for example, clearly reminds one of Beethoven with its principle of permanent development, as well as with typical rhythmical and formal structures: dotted rhythms, trills, extreme registral distances, etc. In this short piece it is amazing how Höller has created a modern Beethoven "compendium" with so many recognisable elements.'

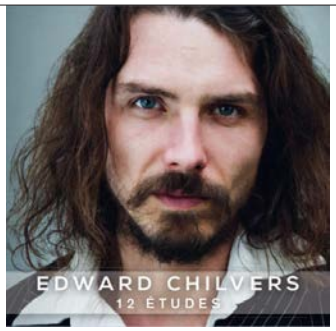
Some of Beethoven's most famous pieces are completely transformed: *Für Elise* seems a particular favourite. Moritz Eggert explains the title of his contribution, *Hämmerklavier XXV: Abweichung (Hommage à Beethoven)*. 'The piece has two layers: the outer layer is the ostinato of interlocking scales and seemingly in the foreground. The "inner" layer consists of the minute deviations of the main stream established in the piece. *Abweichung* in German actually means deviation. For me the idea of deviation becomes more and more important in a world increasingly dominated by soulless algorithms or manipulation by a variety of sources – fake news, for example.'

Have such big ideas also widened Kessel's horizons as a performer? 'I am in the middle of an extraordinary journey of discovery, exploring contemporary music as well as exciting ideas about the work and life of Beethoven. This journey will go on at least until December 2020, perpetually practicing and permanently diving into new musical waters. This is clearly an indescribable privilege for a musician and I am learning much about each composer's personal approach towards music and life. Beyond doubt: music can only come to life where there is a high level of artistic energy.' ♪

Volumes 1 & 2 of 250 Piano Pieces for Beethoven *are available from Editions Musica Ferrum, supplemented by Susanne Kessel's recording of Volume 1 on the obst-music label.*

www.250-piano-pieces-for-beethoven.com





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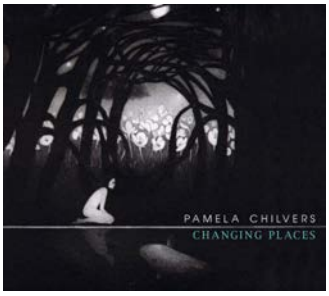

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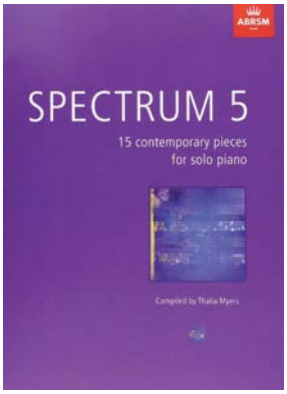


***Spectrum 5*: 15 Contemporary Pieces for Piano**
Compiled by Thalia Myers
ABRSM
ISBN 978-1-84849-6813-5

The indefatigable pianist Thalia Myers immediately made a profound impression when she launched the first volume of *Spectrum* pieces back in 1996. Her brilliant and inspirational concept was to invite a collection of the world's leading composers to write miniature pieces that could be rewarding and fulfilling material, not only for professional performers but also for young pianists and players from upper intermediate level (approximately Grade 6) and beyond. With the likes of Graham Fitkin and Karen Tanaka on board, student performances at local festivals and examinations almost immediately featured pieces from *Spectrum*.

Over the past 21 years, Myers has continued with follow-up volumes, including music suitable for the early grades, and other volumes of particular character: there is an international edition, along with others for piano duet, violin, cello and grade-specific anthologies.

This new volume is a treasure trove of fantastic material with a slight bias towards the post-Grade 8 player. Having said that, Tanaka's Khachaturian-influenced 'Masquerade' has already made a big impact via its inclusion in the current ABRSM Grade 6 syllabus, energetically sweeping forth with gusto and character. Also technically accessible for intermediate players is the sparsely textured 'Code' from Fitkin (inspired by Debussy's 'De pas sur la neige') and Chen Yi's 'Bamboo Dance II' (energised rhythms reminiscent of her extremely popular Grade 5 'Staccato Beans'.)

Elsewhere, it's hard to resist the motoric excitement and thrills evident in Gavin Higgins's 'Awika', the spacious fantasy present in Philip Caskian's rhythmically subtle 'Swale', and the Bartók-like ferocity and characterisation which makes 'Commuterland' (Cheryl Frances-Hoad) so persuasive.

Entirely different is the 'easy listening' aesthetic adopted in Gabriel Jackson's 'Imaginary Birds', which cunningly and characterfully evolves from material reminiscent of Debussy's second *Arabesque*. Poul Ruders' wrong-floating rhythms and ritornelli make 'Schrödinger's Kitten' a challenge, but it's effectiveness in performance could be considerable.

Then we have a quaint neo-Baroque fusion, with gentle jazz in Howard Skempton's 'Aside'; a thrilling kaleidoscope of colour in 'The jig is up' by Harold Meltzer; Huw Watkins' 'Prelude', a wonderful essay in how variety of accentuation can make a piece memorable; and a striking instance of just how terrifying the bass register of the piano can be in 'Angelfield' by Victoria Borisova-Ollas.

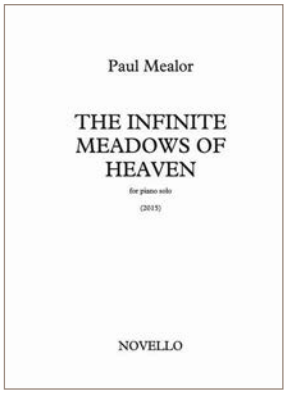
The collection is completed by Michael Finnissey's 'Beethoven Robin Adair', which is touching and surprising within a hushed dynamic range; Timothy Salter's exquisitely detailed 'Shimmer' – a real vehicle for touch development; and Helen Grime's sonorous and declaratory 'The Silver Moon.'

In short *Spectrum* has become an ever-expanding series of bagatelles at the cutting edge of live music-making today.

The Book of Piano Magic
Intermediate Piano Solos by Peter Rudzik
Lakeview Publishing (Peterrudzik.com)
ISBN 979-0-9001505-4-7

The Canada-based Polish pianist and pedagogue Peter Rudzik has already produced an attractive and beautifully detailed anthology for younger pianists in his *Truly Astounding Animals*. This is another, equally tempting selection of nine miniature tone poems for budding pianists. All the pieces are inspired by magic, which should appeal to young players in our *Harry Potter*-obsessed era.

The level of detail in each piece is impressive, with painstakingly precise articulation marks, creative and sensible fingerings and careful suggestions for pedalling. With an admirable range of mood, tempo and colour (try contrasting the harp-like sororities in 'Beautiful Fairy' with the woodwind/string alternations of 'Carefree Wizard' or the study-like 'Playful Gnomes'), there is much here that is attractive as sight-reading material for the more advanced, as well as for repertoire-building with younger players firmly in mind. A positive and confidently polished new addition.

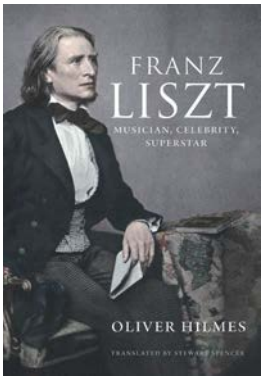


Paul Mealor: *The Infinite Meadows of Heaven* (2015)
Novello NOV295361
EAN 5020679158968

In 2011, 2.5 billion listeners enjoyed Paul Mealor's motet *Ubi Caritas* at the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. Mealor's success and popularity has led to chart-topping hits for his music in the classical and pop charts (including the Military Wives Choir's 2011 Christmas No 1 single *Wherever You Are*).

The *Infinite Meadows of Heaven* is a deeply touching, accessible and potentially popular three-minute miniature dedicated to Yvonne Mathias, the wife of Mealor's mentor and fellow Welsh composer William Mathias. The mood and style of the work immediately reminds one of Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*. Only time will tell if Mealor's work will have the same enduring appeal as that of Pärt, but certainly its timeless, quasi-minimalist feel, tranquil simplicity and (most importantly of all perhaps) technical accessibility for pianists of even modest abilities, augurs extremely well. A welcome addition to the catalogue.

MURRAY MCLACHLAN



Franz Liszt: Musician, Celebrity, Superstar
By Oliver Hilmes
Yale University Press
368 pages, £25

The subtitle of this remarkable book – Musician, Celebrity, Superstar – at once tells you where the chief interest of author Oliver Hilmes rests. Liszt was, indeed, all of these things, bewilderingly multifaceted and of superhuman strength and achievement. Yet he also paid a heavy price in his journey from 'Le petit Litz' (as the French, to his annoyance, called the young prodigy) to 'Le Grand Liszt,' marked by a rapid and increasing contempt for his role as, possibly, the greatest of all pianists. As his fame grew, he was betrayed by those supposedly closest to him (the 'green-eyed monster' of jealousy and incomprehension) and his final years were dogged by ill-health, alcoholism and a despair reflected in music of a dark-hued austerity. As Alfred Brendel put it, his was an odyssey from 'l'exuberance de coeur' to 'l'amertume de coeur' (exuberance to bitterness). Above all else, Liszt fulfilled his father's prophecy that he would be compromised by a succession of women who clung limpet-like to his outer glamour and charisma, their social rank (one a countess, another a fake countess, another a princess) belying their mediocrity when refracted through the prism of Liszt's brilliance.

Yet a paradox arises when you consider Liszt's vanity, his 'egotistical sublime', his 'taking his success as a matter of course' and 'with overmuch countenance'. Stung to the quick by his rejection, the romantic novelist Countess Marie d'Agoult declared him 'a Don Juan parvenu', asking, 'What do I have in common with an amiable good-for-nothing, a fair-ground entertainer?' Yet if both she and Princess Carolyne Sayne-Wittgenstein ('a *monstrum per excessum*') sought to entangle Liszt in their intellectual confusion, they remained forever in love with a figure who, Houdini-like, eluded their clutches: D'Agoult produced a scabrous novel, *Nelida*, with its all-too-recognisable portrait of Liszt; the princess, meanwhile, produced her 24 unreadable volumes, *Des causes intérieures*.

Liszt's genuine (if passing) love for such persons tells you much about his contradictory nature and essence. Simultaneously attracted and repulsed by a lifestyle that veered recklessly from the active to the contemplative and vice-versa, from his knowledge that 'the world wants rubbish' to a desire to flaunt his worldly acclaim, he ended his days as little more than an ignominious player in Wagner's glory, his music widely derided, its true range and quality only recognised long after his death.

Finally, if it is true that a musician's truest biography lies in his music, Oliver Hilme's engrossing study tells you that biographical considerations are essential to an understanding of Liszt's stature.

BRYCE MORRISON

Half a Century of Music: The Correspondence of Artur Schnabel and Therese Behr-Schnabel 1900-1951
Edited by Britta Matterne and Ann Schnabel Mottier
Wolke Verlag
3 volumes, 2072 pages, £75

As this collection establishes, the Austrian pianist Artur Schnabel (1882-1951) and his wife, the contralto Therese Behr-Schnabel (1876-1959), collaborated on musical matters other than producing a son, the teacher and performer Karl Ulrich Schnabel (1909–2001).

At first, the older, more established Behr-Schnabel assuaged her teenaged suitor's doubts. They married in 1905, and as Schnabel's career grew, she provided heart-warming, schadenfreude-filled accounts of professional disasters by colleagues. In December 1914, Behr-Schnabel recounted braving Berlin's winter weather to hear Ferrucio Busoni play: 'It was not worth it, at least not for me. My enthusiasm for Busoni is considerably cooled.' Despite an 'indescribably beautiful pianissimo', Busoni's Beethoven was 'downright awful', with every note a disappointment, while his 'caricatural' version of Schumann's 'Traumes Wirren' from *Fantasiestücke* Op 12 was 'vague and technically not pretty at all'.

On tour to the Hague in 1916, Schnabel wrote home revealing the close attention he paid to reviews: 'In an Amsterdam newspaper, which I hope to bring home, I'm insulted in the most entertaining way.' Not realising he was Austrian, critics labelled him as a Prussian with a 'Kant or Hegel' side, resulting in 'perfection, but dreary boredom'.

In 1920, Schnabel wrote from Baden-Baden to describe 25-year-old Wilhelm Kempff in recital as a 'bit past his sell-by date' (*verdorben*). Sardonic and acerbic, in 1922 Schnabel wrote from New York describing recording dates as 'cannings' that occur in a 'cannery'. He also slated the Russian pianist and Liszt pupil Alexander Siloti (1863-1945) as an 'antediluvian extinct creature … who never played well, now like a good village schoolmaster… Unspeakably funny, this spiritually bled, toothless, helpless old man!'

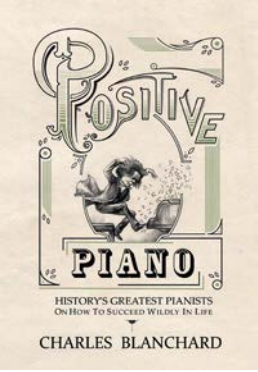
Lesser lights were also treated harshly, such as the French pianist Germaine Schnitzer, who died in 1982 at age 95. After a New York concert in 1922, she was described by Schnabel as having a 'godforsaken, scandalous [*unerhörte*] piano technique.' If Schnitzer were combined with the German pianist Elly Ney (1882–1968), he hazarded, she might amount to a full-scale artiste. Osip Gabrilowitsch, heard in 1922 in the Brahms Concerto No 1 in D minor, was 'almost asleep, effeminate'.

When performers did not irk him, places did, such as Riga in 1928, where a 'whole evening of Schubert at the piano seems

to audiences – for the most part quite ignorant – a body blow'. Eventually, Behr-Schnabel did venture praise of pianists other than her husband, lauding Eduard Erdmann (1896-1958) in 1929: 'He played brilliantly… He is a very strong personality and holds one, it's a great pleasure to hear him.' In 1945 she wrote from New York, calling Claudio Arrau a 'fabulous piano player with a bomb-proof technique'.

By 1938, Schnabel was adjusting as an unwilling exile from Fascist Europe, terming American cities 'yet another intersection of trash, beauty parlor, and kennels'. Even pianos in Los Angeles displeased him, as he noted in 1948, likening them to xylophones: 'Everything sounds like Levantine Gershwin,' a typical pun referencing the American pianist and Gershwin specialist Oscar Levant. This warts-and-all volume merits prompt translation into English.

BENJAMIN IVRY



Positive Piano: History's Greatest Pianists on How to Succeed Wildly in Life
By Charles Blanchard
Honest Knave Books & Music
480 pages, £16.55

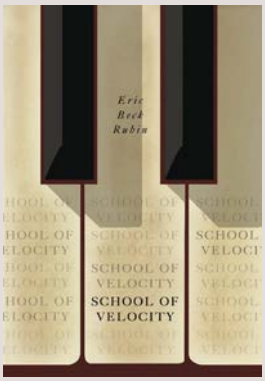
The Golden Age of pianism may be past, but the archetype of the 19th-century virtuoso still exerts a strong influence over pianists today. Whether through listening to early recordings or scrutinising letters and manuscripts, the serious pianist can learn a huge amount from immersing themselves in the intellectual traditions of the Romantic era.

Charles Blanchard is the ideal guide for anyone embarking on this journey. *Positive Piano*, self-published by Blanchard in 2015, provides a wealth of quotations from great artists and thinkers of yesteryear, helpfully organised into themed chapters that explore different facets of piano playing and artistry in general. Some of the advice is practical and specific, such as Scott Joplin's dictum 'It's never right to play ragtime fast', but most of Blanchard's material is anecdotal, figurative and highly subjective. What links it all together to form a compelling narrative is Blanchard's own commentary, which provides context for each quotation and frequently refers back to his central theme – the indispensables of pianistic success.

Blanchard's chapter on 'Social Skills', for example, tells us: 'If you're struggling with jealousy – get over it. This powerful emotion will hamper your efforts to improve yourself. Simply acknowledge the merits of others; after all, they've worked hard for them. Now get to work on yourself.' He illustrates this advice with a dozen quotations from Haydn, Schubert, Liszt at al, including the following nugget from Chopin: 'A genuine virtuoso of proved worth knows no jealousy.'

Blanchard's sources are extremely varied, running the gamut from classical philosophers and religious thinkers to modern psychoanalysts, juxtaposed with quotations from 19th-century composers, performers and intellectuals. Not every quotation is apposite, but the collection as a whole provides plenty of food for thought. Recommended.

FRANZ WULF



School of Velocity
By Eric Beck Rubin
Pushkin Press
224pp, £12.99

The story of a relationship between two young men growing up in a small Dutch town, *School of Velocity* proves an engrossing and unsettling short novel, a promising fiction debut for the Canadian cultural historian Eric Beck Rubin. Sparsely written, though rich in detail, it follows the intertwined lives of the narrator, Jan (a pianist) and his close friend Dirk, taking us from their boyhood enchantment with life, to the rocky straits of middle age and its disappointments – and for Jan a protracted, terrifying mental disintegration.

Jan, a sensitive schoolboy, is fascinated by and soon becomes inseparable from the flamboyant Dirk. Their relationship deepens into sexual experimentation, though neither is entirely gay. After they go their separate ways – Dirk to the USA, Jan to music college and thence into a piano career of sorts – there is the pain of distance, change and loss. Jan, though, meets a girl who is almost too good to be true and settles down with her.

Twenty years pass, during which they seem to be happy. But as Jan is afflicted more and more with violent auditory hallucinations that turn out to be all in the mind, so there grows the realisation that perhaps it was Dirk who was really the love of his life.

The musical side of the book is not always watertight. You can perhaps swallow some of the oddness because Jan's mental state renders the veracity of his thoughts uncertain. I found a reference to harmonic and melodic minor arpeggios harder to take; and I have some resistance to one particular literary construction on which the whole depends (no spoilers, though).

Still, the resonances of the book go deeper as one realises increasingly that nothing is as it seems; that Jan's perception, and his narration, may be fatally flawed. Perhaps the whole calls to mind the school of life's own velocity, the sense of ecstasy derived from existing in the fast lane, which Jan has absorbed from Dirk and without which he is dangerously lost.

JESSICA DUCHEN

Move to the music

For high-quality audio on the go, the Astell & Kern AK300 personal music player offers superb sound with massive storage capacity and sleek good looks. For *Rafael Todes*, it offers a perfect solution for seasoned travellers who want to take their music collection with them wherever they are in the world

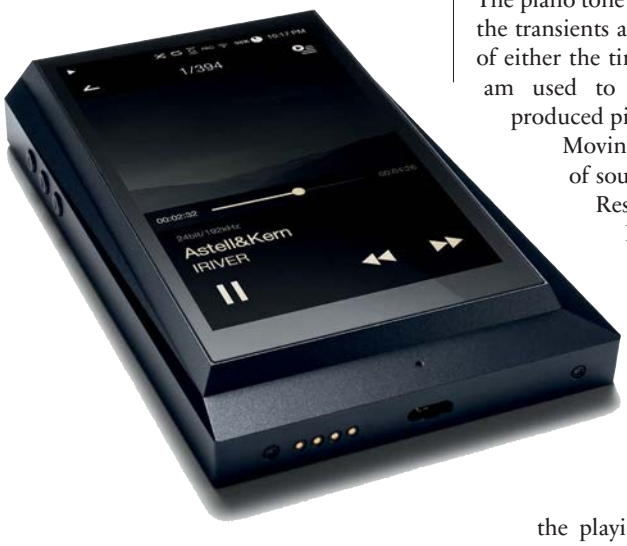
The Astell & Kern AK300 is one of a new generation of personal music players. I have written in the past about using an iPhone with a DAC/headphone amplifier, such as the Chord Mojo (reviewed in *IP* Mar/Apr 2016). The personal music player is a standalone solution. All of your music is stored on the player, and all you need to do is to plug in a pair of headphones and off you go.

The problem with iPhones is that storage is very expensive (Android phones tend to be cheaper in this respect), and if you are not connected to the internet to stream, for example on a plane or train, you are stuck. In these days of ripping a CD collection to a server or hard disk, it is simple to copy these files to a portable music player and have your music collection on tap – in a pocket or handbag. However, the Astell & Kern offers a far superior solution.

The AK300 lies in the mid-range of the Astell & Kern offering. At around £675, it is not cheap (in fact there is an entry-level AK Junior at £350 which is something of a bargain), but its facilities and sound quality make it a sonic treat. The internal hard drive can store 64GB of music, and has a memory slot for an additional 128GB of storage. So that's 192GB in total, which equates to around 275 CDs at full resolution.

The unit is roughly the size of a deck of cards and has an elegant case to protect it. The AK300 also features WiFi connectivity, so not only can it update itself automatically, it can also stream music to or from another server in the house. It has an advanced Bluetooth connection (APTX) which is possibly a simpler way to connect to a modern all-in-one unit, for example the Naim Unitiqute (see review in *IP* Sept/Oct 2016). More simply, you can connect the AK300 to a high-end DAC using a Toslink optical cable, or via a mini headphone jack into an amplifier, as a portable music library. In short, the unit is highly flexible and has many possibilities of integration into an existing hi-fi system of any era.

Ready to go: the AK300 enables you to travel anywhere in the world with your favourite music on tap



Enough of its connectivity, how does it sound? With a pair of high-quality headphones, the AK300 really impresses. Using a voltage-controlled Femto Clock, timing errors (known to audiophiles as 'jitter') are significantly reduced. This typically yields a more solid soundstage, and a smoother sound. (High jitter in early CD players was largely responsible for the bright, edgy sound for which early digital was famed.)

Using my current favourite headphone, the planar magnetic HiFiMAN HE-400i, I listened to the fabulous live DG recording of Barenboim and Argerich playing Mozart's Sonata for Two Pianos in D major K448. Streamed via Tidal it sounds punchy and involving, and it is very easy to follow the musical argument and discussion between the two players. Maria João Pires in Mozart's Fantasia in C minor K475, this time listening on the AK300's hard drive, is even more compelling than its Tidal version. The piano tone is wholesome and powerful, the transients are fast, and there is no trace of either the tinniness or muddiness that I am used to hearing from a digitally produced piano.

Moving up another level in terms of sound quality, I also tried a Hi-Res recording of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 3 with Artur Pizarro on the Linn label. Recorded at 192kHz/24bit, the sheer luxury of this format is astoundingly obvious on the AK300. The orchestral introduction is taut and focussed. The energy of the playing under Mackerras' baton really does sound like being in the hall. Most personal audio players would make this sound reasonably pleasant, but it would be like putting a variety of subtly flavoured foods through a food processor! The beauty of the AK300 is that each instrument and musical line can be heard separately, maintaining their individual characteristics within the whole.

The Astell & Kern AK300 is a luxury audiophile item which will be a godsend to someone who wants really high quality audio on the go, without compromising on sound. It is bursting with features, including excellent connectivity and versatility, and has an elegant, appealing design. Highly recommended.

www.astellnkern.com

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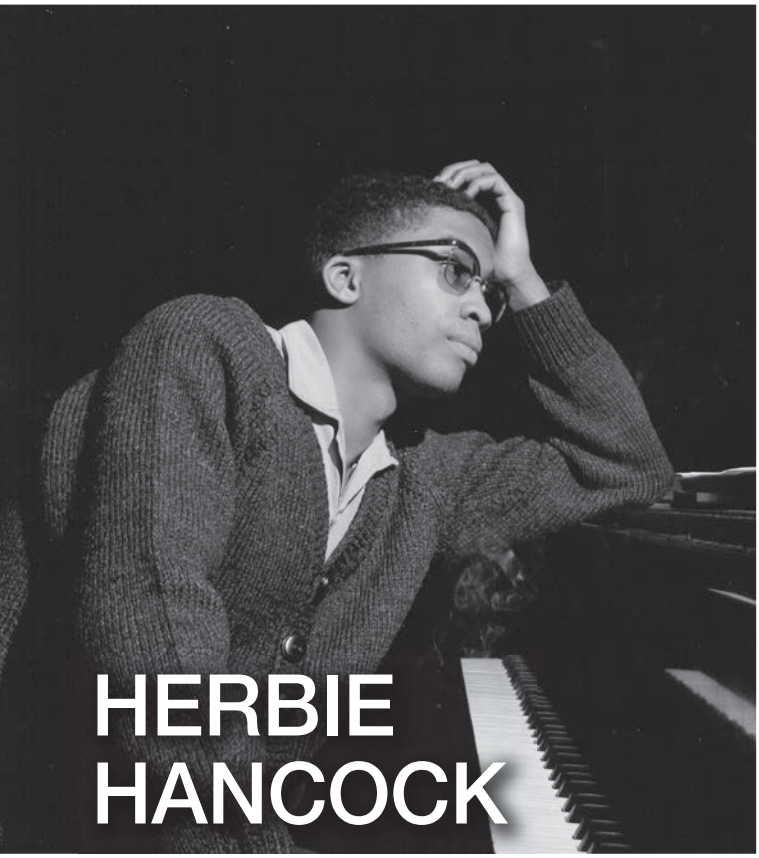

HERBIE HANCOCK

Defying traditional strictures of style, Herbie Hancock has explored the interaction between the worlds of jazz and pop music with an extraordinary degree of freedom and innovation. Having cut himself free from the apron strings of Miles Davis, Hancock developed his instinct for writing distinctive music with a huge popular appeal, sending him to the top of the commercial charts.
By *Andy Hamilton*

A new release from Sony, a three-CD set called *Freedom Jazz Dance*, features the complete available material from Miles Davis' *Miles Smiles* session in 1967. The transcendentally gorgeous piano on multiple takes of 'Circles' comes from Herbie Hancock, the band's pianist from 1963. With bassist Ron Carter and drummer Tony Williams, Hancock revolutionised traditional concepts of the rhythm section. Their extraordinary musical rapport introduced new levels of improvisational freedom.

Born in Chicago in 1940, Hancock studied electrical engineering at college, while playing in Chicago jazz clubs. Trumpeter Donald Byrd encouraged him to travel to New York and record with him on the 1962 album *Free Form*. In 1963 he made his recorded debut as leader – *Takin' Off*, with its chart single 'Watermelon Man'.

I interviewed Herbie Hancock a decade ago about his new album, *River: The Joni Letters*, which renewed an association with singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell. As we talked, he didn't mind discussing the influence of Miles Davis: 'I have a great nostalgia for the time I worked with Miles,' he explained. 'It was a period of learning for me that had a profound effect on the way I looked at music, and beyond music. The experience of working with the whole Miles Davis band, not just Miles – Tony Williams, Ron Carter and Wayne Shorter… those were my formative years.'

Hancock was only 23 when he joined Miles: 'So many of the lessons that I learned, and attitudes that I assumed during that time, shaped the rest of my life. Miles picked us, and he himself was such a great teacher.'

During his five years with the quintet Hancock also led his own groups, composed jazz standards including 'Maiden Voyage' and 'Dolphin Dance', and created the body of Blue Note recordings for which he's best-known. He left Davis' group in 1968, but continued to record with him on key jazz-rock albums *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, up to 1970. In the early 1970s, Hancock's sextet combined jazz, rock, African and Indian music with electronic instruments, notably on *Sextant* (1973). He used electric and electronic instruments more extensively, including a Fender-Rhodes piano with wah-wah and fuzz pedals.

Headhunters from 1973, and the single 'Rockit', which reached No 1 in the pop charts, showed his commercial instincts. In a reversal of roles, Miles Davis was reduced to opening the bill for him. 'It felt very strange,' recalls Hancock, 'but I had to get rid of that feeling in order to perform. I had to figure out the logic of it: I happened to have a really big record at the time, and we were drawing a pretty big crowd, and so we were the headliners. But [Miles] was getting a crowd that didn't necessarily come from the jazz tradition, and was getting exposure to a new audience – so in a way it was a win-win situation.' Nevertheless, from 1987, Hancock focused on jazz again, working with all-star groups that included Mike Brecker, Pat Metheny and Wayne Shorter.

Hancock is more important as creator of a new approach to the rhythm section, and as a composer. His piano style, though highly accomplished, isn't as distinctive as that of Bill Evans and McCoy Tyner, who had a much bigger effect on pianists. As a composer and band-leader, Hancock widened the material of jazz, both by composing classic songs himself, and by interpreting more contemporary pop material. *The New Standard*, an excellent 1996 album, used an all-star band to adapt rock and R&B numbers by

the Beatles, Prince, Simon & Garfunkel and Steely Dan.

I asked Hancock about the problem that much jazz is based on standards that audiences no longer know. 'Well, I think they know many of the songs, from their parents or grandparents,' he replied. 'I agree, it's not the pop music of today. One of the great things about jazz is that it opens up more possibilities for directions in performance – you can touch any kind of genre. Jazz has that openness, that respects other genres, and also is cognisant of the fact that it grew out of various influences itself – European and African.'

'I have a great nostalgia for the time I worked with Miles Davis. It was a period of learning for me that had a profound effect on the way I looked at music, and beyond music'– *Herbie Hancock*

Take Five: Herbie Hancock

1. 'Canteloupe Island', from *Empyrean Isles* (Blue Note)
2. 'The Eye of the Hurricane', from *Maiden Voyage* (Blue Note)
3. 'One Finger Snap', from *Empyrean Isles* (Blues Note)
4. 'New York Minute', from *The New Standard* (Verve)
5. 'Circles', from Miles Davis' *Miles Smiles* (Columbia/Sony)

Hancock is known as a technological innovator, and I asked whether albums have a future in the era of downloads. If not, isn't something being lost? 'Who are we creating art for?' he replies. 'If taste changes, we must try to shape it in a way that can lead towards something positive.' In the era of file-sharing, he asks, 'How can you maintain the lives of artists? Why would anyone want to be an artist if they can't survive by creating art? There must be other ways of approaching this, other revenue streams'. He agrees that albums are becoming more like demos, and artists are having to rely even more on live performance. Doesn't that make things harder? 'Maybe harder. But right now, I'd settle for "different"! It's time to get out the old brain and try and create a new pathway. The people who made horseshoes – a lot of them are out of a job!' ♪

Music of my life

Listening to postwar radio and television broadcasts made a huge impact on *John Lill* during his childhood in the East End of London. His serious artistry is tempered with a sense of humour, where Beethoven rubs shoulders with *The Goon Show*

© ROMAN GONCHAROV

I'VE LEARNED TO TRUST recordings but they sound exactly the same every time you play them. Personally, I prefer the concert platform where there is always room for freedom, rebirth and new ideas. However, of all the recorded versions of Beethoven's String Quartet Op 131, none has given me more satisfaction than the Guarneri's version. They give it the necessary space and solemnity and gravitas – and also the humour. The range of this composer is enormously wide, of course, and they play it with due respect. The opening says it all: it's very similar in a way to the Bach Fugue No 4 from Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, in the same key and same sort of mood. It must have been in Beethoven's mind. I first came across the work when I was very young, but I didn't come across this recording until about 30 years ago.

I discovered Claudio Arrau while I was looking at an old TV set years ago, when he was broadcast playing the last sonata of Beethoven. I didn't know who he was, but I was spellbound by his mastery. Arrau was remarkably consistent in Brahms' Concerto No 1, so I don't mind if it's Giulini or Haitink or anyone else he played it with. There are some live recordings of him – one with Rafael Kubelik – where he is even greater. All artists are inhibited to a certain extent in the studio because they know it's going down for posterity. I was lucky enough to know Arrau and he's always been my favourite pianist. I love the spaciousness of his approach to music. He's no speed merchant, though when he let himself go he could outplay anybody else. He was always very serious – needlessly so at times. He could have done with a bit more humour.

Talking of humour, I've always loved jokes, one-liners, certain characters and especially *The Goon Show*. I listen to a bit every day on the internet. I love the incredible novelty of the programme when you consider it was broadcast shortly after the Second World War. For me, there's nothing funnier than the episode called 'The China Story' where they turn up at the Teahouse of the August Moon. They've been told to knock on the door 6,000 times, and the BBC actually played 6,000 knocks getting faster and faster. And in the end it was the wrong house! It's such an important part of life, humour. It's absolutely vital: you can't go around looking like a corpse all the time...

With the last movement of Haydn's Symphony No 88 we're still on humour – but I also greatly admire Furtwängler. I think he was a truly great conductor. As with Arrau he gave immense space to passages of music which require it. The single most important element in music is tempo because it's directly related to structure. The nearest thing is the Italian request rather than any metronome mark. For instance, when you hear some people playing *allegro non troppo* rushing through at high speed, that's completely wrong. There's a big smile on the composer's face when he wrote this and Furtwängler, not known for his sense of humour, captures that very well. It's an exceptional reading. I love the tempo; I love the poise: nothing too fast, yet it's boisterous. Haydn is such an underrated composer. I love his sonatas. Many of Mozart's are not as impressive because they are more like teaching exercises.

Now for an amazing recording of Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony. Erik Tuxen is almost unknown. He started off as a jazz bandleader but, my goodness, he made good sense of this work. I was about 10 when I heard it on my parent's valve-driven radio set which needed to be charged up twice a day. We were a poor family in London's East End, in a house with no electricity for the first few years. I switched on this radio, heard this music and was hypnotised by the rhythm, the excitement and the content. That started a love affair with Prokofiev's music which has lasted and increased till now. You see, you can bend the rules but not break them: great art has to be inevitable. ♪

INTERVIEW BY JEREMY NICHOLAS

Beethoven
String Quartet in C-sharp minor Op 131
Guarneri Quartet
Philips 42234112

Brahms
Piano Concerto No 1
Claudio Arrau; Philharmonia Orchestra/Carlo Maria Giulini
Warner Classics 2564676811

The Goon Show
'The China Story'
www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AzEpRjxUg8

Haydn
Symphony No 88 in G major Hob I:88
Berlin Philharmonic/Wilhelm Furtwängler
DG 4749882

Prokofiev
Symphony No 5 in B-flat Op 100
Danish State Symphony Orchestra/Erik Tuxen
Decca 002280602

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250 piano pieces for BEETHOVEN

International Composition Project
by Susanne Kessel
Bonn 2020

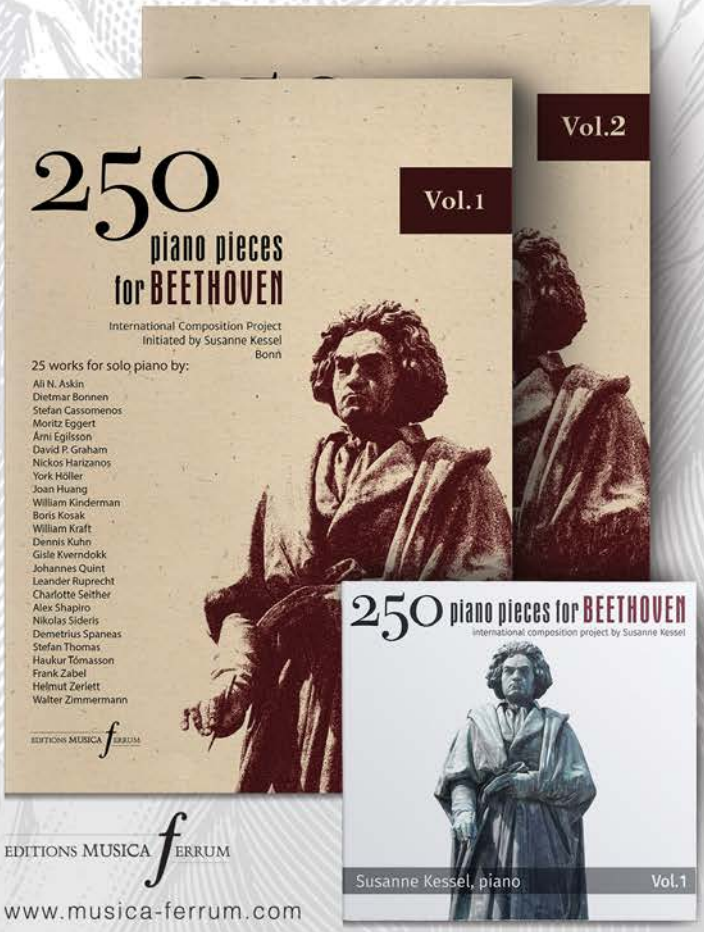
In 2013, German pianist Susanne Kessel, a native of Bonn, Beethoven's birthplace, launched the "250 piano pieces for Beethoven" project. A working tribute for the 250th birthday of Ludwig van Beethoven that will be completed in 2020.

Kessel has been inviting composers from all over the world to write short works for piano and has been premiering all the pieces in Bonn and offering concerts in other cities.

Editions Musica Ferrum will publish all the works in 10 volumes, comprising of 25 pieces each, before Beethoven's birthday in 2020. The music scores for the first and second volume are already available and the third volume will be published at the beginning of March, 2017.

The piano recording from Volume 1 was performed by Susanne Kessel and is available through OBST.

SUSANNE KESSEL
Pianist, curator and organiser



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