

A class above the rest

CHARLES OWEN IS HAVING a busy summer. It began with a monumental recital at Wigmore Hall in June, a journey of exploration into the very heart of the piano repertoire. Featuring Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*, Op 54 in D minor, Brahms's *Klavierstücke*, Bartók's Piano Sonata and Schubert's Piano Sonata in A, D.664 (Op 120), attendees were struck by the artistry and attention to detail on display. Then, Owen gave a private recital at Steinway Hall to mark the unveiling of the new Montblanc pen created in honour of Steinway's founding father (*see p8*). A whirr of festival dates followed, including an appearance at the newly formed Festival En Blanc et Noir in Lagrasse, France, against a backdrop of rumbling skies. There were also numerous recitals with his duo partner Katya Apekisheva. Did I mention that Owen is currently on 'holiday' from his day job as professor at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama?

Fans of Owen's pianism (and there are many, including a dedicated troupe who turn up to every concert) admire the meticulous nature of his interpretations. His performances are underpinned by an unwavering musicality that is enhanced by close attention to the score; listeners are immediately aware that great works have been analysed by the mind as well as the fingers. This focus is extended to programming, and Owen has curated a special collection of pieces

Claire Jackson meets Charles Owen, who performs a special recital in London this September as part of IP's new concert series, Rhinegold LIVE

for his Rhinegold LIVE recital, including Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses*, Bach Partita No 1 in B-flat BWV825, Nico Muhly's *Hudson Cycle* and *Short Stuff* (which will be the London premiere) and a selection of Debussy preludes.

'For me connections are essential,' explains Owen. 'Mendelssohn's *Variations* have clear links with the Bach. And there's an obsession with pattern in both Bach and Muhly – Nico is very much in the tradition of Philip Glass and minimalism and has a lot of contact with Bach.' Bach's works are very influential in Owen's life. 'If I'm going through inner turmoil in my life I turn to Bach,' the pianist reveals. 'The mathematical balance can be very comforting. When Bach's being sad, it's never about the individual, like in Chopin or Schubert, it's always about higher powers.'

It's this love and respect for the composer that has made Owen one of the foremost British Bach interpreters of his generation. 'I've always loved Bach but it's only in the last ten years that I've really focused on his repertoire,' says Owen. 'There are certain works that are terribly intellectual, austere and esoteric. But, for example, in the fifth Partita as well as the intellectual I try to bring out the dance pulsations, the swinging rhythm, and the voices partying. In visual art it's Brueghel's peasants dancing.'

'András Schiff makes the music sing and dance – the counterpoint is incredible and the ornamentation is beautiful. But I've heard students copy him – literally note by note – but that's like wearing someone else's clothes. Rosalyn Tureck and Gould are also big influences on me, and John Eliot Gardiner.'

Rhinegold LIVE strives to bring classical music to a different audience. To that end, the recitals are 'rush-hour' concerts, beginning at 7pm. Prior to that, audiences are invited to a free drinks reception and the event is concluded with a short Q&A with the artist on stage. Programmes are approachable, without being dumbed down, and musicians play 'in the round' so that audience members experience the music at close quarters. Excitingly, thanks to the support of local businesses – including *IP* neighbours Peregrine's Pianos who provide a shiny Schimmel grand piano for each recital – the concerts are free of charge. The

hope is to share wonderful concerts with the local and wider community, and possibly gain new classical converts in the process.

'Classical music is like literature, certain authors are hard and you might not be ready at 21, 30 or 40 or 50, but there's a moment when you might 'get' it,' muses Owen. 'I read Thomas Hardy when I was younger but I revisited his work recently and it felt completely different. Great art doesn't come in bite-sized chunks and that's one of the challenges of the modern age: you've got to work at it.' Owen thinks the Partitas are the perfect entry point for newcomers to Bach, and is especially excited to bring this work to Conway Hall. He also suggests 'the English suites or

my aunt, who still owns the piano. My aunt had a scholarship to the Royal Academy to study singing with the great Roy Henderson, but she turned it down to be a missionary in Africa. Hearing her mezzo voice in church inspired my love of the human voice and lyricism. A local church organist taught me piano – the lessons were 50p! – he was very strict, but the thing that was most tough was that at Easter he had a wall of Easter eggs all perfectly preserved in their wrappers!'

Owen went on the study at the Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey, followed by the Royal College of Music and never looked back. It was at college he met his duo partner, Katya Apekisheva, who *IP* readers may remember was the cover artist in issue

Indeed, Apekisheva could be seen cheering Owen on from the sidelines at his recent Wigmore Hall recital. Owen is an integral part of the piano community – his former tutor Imogen Cooper continues to be a guiding influence – and, as well as Schiff, he holds current cover star Mitsuko Uchida in high esteem. It is an honour to present Owen as part of the Rhinegold LIVE series and I hope you will join us on the 9 September for what promises to be a wonderful evening. 🎵

Charles Owen plays at Conway Hall, London, on 9 September. Drinks reception starts at 6:15pm; recital at 7pm. Reserve your free ticket at www.rhinegoldlive.co.uk



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Italian concerto – because there is joy in the music.'

OWEN IS THE SON OF A clergyman and grew up with his mother playing hymns in church. 'She had a little piano that was given to her mother as a twenty-first wedding anniversary present – a Bosworth upright,' he remembers. 'I learnt on the Bosworth with

15 (Sept/Oct 2012). 'The best relationships in life happen by chance,' says Owen. 'I was leaving the Royal College of Music in 1993 and Katya was joining. We met at a few parties and we were in a few competitions together – then she invited me to Moscow to a festival at the conservatoire. We played two pianos just for fun and it clicked. We didn't plan to be a duo but it's extraordinary; there's absolutely no rivalry.'



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