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## CHARLES OWEN

Turning 50 with a new album of Liszt

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# Pilgrim's progress

The pandemic has been a transformative experience for British pianist Charles Owen, who celebrates his 50th birthday this year. He takes us on the musical journey that led to his new Liszt album and looks forward to leading the latest instalment of the London Piano Festival.

**Michael Church** reports

It is a truism to say that lockdowns have changed the face of music, but their effects on Charles Owen's life have been many and various. 'When the first lockdown came, and all my plans went out of the window, I decided I had to keep practising the repertoire I had been meaning to play, but wasn't,' he says. 'It's heart-breaking when you work on a piece for performance, and then can't do so. I let myself be drawn to Schumann and Liszt, who helped me through.' The first fruit of that process has now appeared – his album of Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage, Première année: Suisse* coupled with *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude*.

Owen's relationship with those works goes back to when, as a teenage student at the Menuhin School, he discovered them through Alfred Brendel's recording and film. 'I was mad about the music,' he says. 'But then I didn't play it for 25 years, until I was invited to give a recital at Julius Drake's Machynlleth Festival in Wales. And then the first lockdown intervened.'

Recording Liszt at Menuhin Hall: 'Playing *Années de pèlerinage* you become a pilgrim yourself'




But he went on practising. 'Playing *Années de pèlerinage* you become a pilgrim yourself, travelling through its landscapes until you come to the bells of Geneva – I find it very moving to play. And I love the way Liszt took Schubert's songs and made them his own in piano versions. The fourth – 'Au bord d'une source' – is an almost direct quote from 'Auf dem Wasser zu singen'. I was also fascinated by the way Liszt took a long time to get to the version of the work that we now know. The other reason I was drawn to it was that I've always loved the Alps, and I've walked through many of the scenes which Liszt's music evokes. And if you add to all that, being at home and unable to travel, these pieces became an escape.'

Meanwhile he had always wanted to learn *Bénédiction*, 'but with small hands like mine, Liszt's giant stretches make it painful to play. I have had to smuggle some of the right-hand notes into the left hand'. As he demonstrates on my piano, the smuggling is impossible to discern by ear. 'I love the very long melodic lines in the piece, with three different voices – starting with the baritone, then the alto – it's like being in a paradise garden in a medieval painting. The final page is one of the most profound moments in all piano music.' He also loves the work's literary connections with Alphonse de Lamartine, whose title Liszt borrowed for his own cycle. 'I also responded to the work's evocation of what it feels like to be beginning a new life – which was another lockdown parallel.'

In his own case the lockdowns took him to fresh literary realms, discovering Dickens, and also back to a childhood passion: 'Huge jigsaws, preferably of works of art. I love seeing how the colours, lines, and shapes connect, just as they do in music.'

In his view, for many musicians the pandemic has been a mirror, a great leveller. 'And it's been a lesson in how the pressure of a forthcoming performance can create adrenalin. In the tough winter lockdown I really struggled to stay positive. Many musicians stopped practising completely and gave up. Others did a bit of posting and streaming, and yet others – naming no names – went ridiculously over the top, posting on social media every day.'

Kirill Gerstein, he says, was in this respect an honourable exception, playing chat-show host and putting other musicians in the spotlight and letting them shine. 'Many actors and musicians feel defined by who they are on stage, and when they are not on stage they are

A photograph of a middle-aged man with a shaved head, wearing a dark grey suit jacket over a white shirt. He is seated at a piano, with his right hand resting on the keys and his left hand partially visible. The background is a bright, out-of-focus interior space. The text is in a red, italicized serif font.

*'I think of myself as  
a slow-growing tree  
with deep roots'*

SIM CANETTY-CLARKE



lost – their mental health is threatened when they're not getting applause. But at the same time, some musicians simply couldn't function for financial reasons. I have been fortunate in that while my income disappeared, my partner, who works in the City, has a good job.'

As far as young musicians are concerned, Owen says the present situation compounds the already huge challenge of making a career. As a professor at the Guildhall, he is painfully aware that the vast majority of his students will not make their living from performance. This is partly because many of the smaller music societies have folded, thanks to successive Tory governments' imposition of 'austerity'.

'For many of them, Covid was the final nail in the coffin. But it's also to do with the structure of the profession. There are, and always have been, many wonderful artists who are never heard, who never get a chance to play in a major concert series. The same small group of people hoover up almost all the opportunities, and it's extremely hard to get into that group. And the gatekeepers are all interconnected. From the entire conservatoire world there are usually just one or two students each year who go on to make a living as soloists. So we have to ask ourselves, is it morally right that we should go on teaching people for a sector which will not accept them?'

'In 15 years of teaching, I've only had two or three students who have gone on to make a respectable career performing at a high level.' The irony, he adds, is that there are more applications than ever to study music. 'When a second violin vacancy occurs in one of the big London orchestras, there will be three or four hundred applicants. It's never been so competitive.'

*Rehearsing Adès with Katya Apekisheva: 'There's lots of laughter in our rehearsals, but also great concentration'*



VICTOR ERIK EMANUEL

His own career has been instructive. 'I think of myself as a slow-growing tree with deep roots. I didn't have a flashy start, and I didn't go in for the big competitions. I didn't feel ready for that in my 20s. I was 31 when I made my solo Wigmore debut, and in any case I never felt drawn to that world. I preferred to collaborate with other musicians. Over the past 20 years I have worked with some of the greatest string players on the planet.' Watching and listening at the Menuhin school to Kathryn Stott – now one of his favourite duo partners – was of seminal importance.

Fluent in Russian, he has long been a Russophile, and his biggest pianistic influence has been the inspirational Russian Chopinist Irina Zaritskaya. 'She didn't have a big intellect when it came to analysing scores, but she went into tremendous detail over how to practise, and how the piano is played. She had the most amazing sense of tactile connection with the instrument, and of how to extract colour. Every lesson with her was unforgettable. She opened a whole universe for me. Without her I wouldn't have been playing professionally today.'

His other big influence was Imogen Cooper, and by extension her tutor Alfred Brendel. 'As a student I learned a lot from Imogen, and even today we play to each other, trying things out. She's a very kind, very demanding, and wonderfully supportive presence.'

Owen's shining light during the first lockdown was the Fidelio Café in Clerkenwell, an imaginatively run venue offering recitals with food attached, which opened for top-flight chamber music before any of the concert halls did. Now his shining light is once more Kings Place, where the now-annual London Piano Festival which he and the Russian pianist Katya Apekisheva founded five years ago is about to begin.

Invited to set up and run this festival, Owen replied that he would much rather do that in harness with Apekisheva, and this year they will share the bill with a glittering group. First the Venezuelan pianist and celebrated improviser Gabriela Montero will provide a live film score to Chaplin's short film *The Immigrant*. Apekisheva then gives an all-Schubert programme focused on his late works, followed by a two-piano gala led by Kathryn Stott and Finghin Collins. Rounding off proceedings is a lecture by the mathematician Marcus du Sautoy on symmetry in nature, architecture and music, as exemplified by Bach's *Goldberg Variations*; Owen closes the festival with a performance of that work.

As Owen and Apekisheva tell it, their formation as a duo came about by pure chance. 'We never planned to be a duo,' says Owen with slight bemusement. 'It just happened very gradually, like all the best things in life.' It actually began with a two-piano Shostakovich performance in Moscow, 'and we hit it off from the start. We started spending more time together, playing for each other – you know how lonely life is for a solo pianist – and we both have a huge love of chamber music. We found ourselves getting more and more invitations to perform together, especially at Kings Place.'





VICTOR ERIC EMANUEL

So how do they work as a duo? 'It never feels like work. Not for one second has it ever felt like drudgery. We practise together, and we work slowly. We combine voices, or do left-hand parts alone; we play all sorts of games, with a huge attention to the balance of sound.' The pedalling is usually done by whoever is lower, but sometimes they swap the pedal. 'There's lots of laughter in our rehearsals, but also great concentration. The secret is breathing together, as it is in all chamber music.'

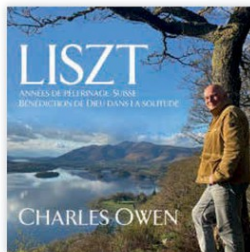
They play on two pianos when they can get them, and in most ways prefer that to a single one. 'You need to get the feel of each other by first playing side by side, but we've graduated from that to sitting opposite each other, which allows eye contact. With one piano having the lid off, we can see each other reflected in the other lid. Going from playing side by side to that is like throwing away the rubber ring and going freestyle – scary at first, because when you are separated by two nine-foot instruments you are very far apart. No duo playing in that arrangement is ever one hundred percent synchronised, but the sound is quite different, more special, when you are *in flagrante*, if I may put it like that.' And it's all about listening, he adds. 'Sometimes we'll say right, now we are going to play together, but we will listen – very consciously – only to the other person.'

Yet as solo performers these players could hardly be more different: listening blind, you would never confuse one with the other. So how do they meld? 'We have a lot of shared

strengths,' replies Owen. 'Some are more developed in me, others in her. One thing Katya has, to an extraordinary degree, is absolute evenness of tone, an extreme refinement of touch. And that is what she demands from me as well.' But his strong point is pedalling: 'One thing Imogen Cooper has taught me – and she got it from Brendel – is subtlety of pedalling: how to use half-pedal, quarter-pedal, flutter-pedal. But as Katya says, in Russia that was just not taught. The pedal was either on or off.'

As a slow-growing tree now aged 50, Owen is ensuring that his roots are well watered, with a personal trainer in the park, regular sessions of 'reformer' Pilates, and a 'spinning' bike which has strengthened his body and hence his sound. And he has consistently continued to bring out records: 'At least one every two years. I want to keep that up for at least the next three decades.' **IP**

Performing Mozart with  
Nicholas Collon and the  
Aurora Orchestra



Charles Owen's new Liszt album is now  
available from Avie Records (AV2476)

The 2021 London Piano Festival will run at  
Kings Place from 8 to 10 October  
[londonpianofestival.com](http://londonpianofestival.com)