

Which is your favourite piece on the disc?

The Mompou Variations is most probably my favourite. It's a nightmare to memorise, though. It has that feeling of being in a late-night bar where you're sitting at the piano and just doodling, very much on the spur of the moment. You can find Mompou himself on YouTube playing his version of the Chopin Waltz in A minor. It's absolutely gorgeous!

Tell me a bit about the gorgeous Bendel piece, which we've included in this issue's covermount CD.

Franz Bendel was a student of Liszt and a very successful composer, who wrote over 400 works. His *Hommage à Chopin* is beautifully crafted salon music, which is what he and Chopin were known for. This piece has a lovely bass line going up and down, like the middle section of Chopin's *Fantaisie-Improvisée*. That floating accompaniment has an intimacy about it (again, very much for the salon) and very delicate filigree in the right hand. There are a couple of hard bits in the middle section, in the passionate parts, but on the whole it lies very well under the fingers so it's accessible to learn.

Did many composers write music based on Chopin?

Absolutely. Rachmaninov wrote *Variations on a Theme of Chopin*. Clement Doucet wrote a piece called *Chopinata*, which is a collection of various themes by Chopin, in the style of a foxtrot! Stephen Heller wrote *Reminiscences of Chopin* based on the E minor Prélude, and there's a two-piano piece by Edward Schurt called *Paraphrase on themes of Chopin*, based mainly on the C sharp minor Waltz. It's lovely, and I've played it with Piers Lane – but yet again, a bit too 'delightful' for this disc. There are a few composers and musicians that have been influenced by Chopin, even the jazz pianist Bill Evans: one of his classic compositions called *Peace Piece* is essentially copied from the Chopin *Berceuse*. It's based on two harmonies and starts improvising. I'm not sure if the *Berceuse* influenced Evans, or even if he knew it, but the similarities are incredible.

Do you play jazz?

I don't actually listen to classical music – I listen to jazz! I also play jazz if it's been written out, like the Art Tatum solos. I can't improvise, though. I'm sure this is because I've been trained classically and too tied to the score. I love that improvising feel, however, and that's what I try to get across when I play classical music. There has to be this wonderment when I play, as if I'm discovering something wonderful and new, and I'm telling it to the audience for the first time.

Do you like playing the more unknown repertoire?

I don't actively go for this 'rarities' thing. I'm just fascinated that some composers have been forgotten. It might be the quality of their music, but then musical fashions change too. Then these composers drift into oblivion. A lot of pieces are 80 per cent good, but always have that 20 per cent dodgy bit. There are not that many compositions out there where it's genius all the way through. For me, it has to be great music from beginning to end. Life's too short!

What do you think of Chopin interpreters today?

Most of the performances I hear these days are by my students (I teach at the Scottish Academy and I'm also Head of Keyboard at the University of Chichester). I love teaching. I find everyone has a different way of approaching Chopin. The idea is to nurture that. You don't want the student to sound like you.

The one bee in my bonnet is over-peddalling, and I give my students a hard time about that. It's the lack of being able to play a true legato with the fingers. People rely on the pedal for that, and the pedal is *not* there for that. The pedal is for putting the gloss on. There has to be something underneath it that has to be controlled and beautiful.

Have you been influenced by any particular Chopin interpreters from the past?

Rubinstein's playing is a lesson in how to pedal. You never hear people coming out of a concert saying: 'Wow, wasn't that great pedalling!' If it's good, you don't notice it. Rubinstein's pedalling in the nocturnes is just amazing. Those nocturnes are difficult to pedal, yet his pedalling is mind-bogglingly good.

How would you explain rubato?

It is like watching a really good dancer doing a slinky slow dance, where you can always feel the pulse going through, but the dancer is swaying and swinging around the beat. The movements are never really fully on the beat, there's this meandering type of feel, but the dancer still feels the pulse. That's another reason to recommend Rubinstein. He doesn't do masses of rubato, but just the right amount. We should never feel 'where are we in this bar?' It has to sound like a heartbeat. If you rush off too much, it's like the heart misses a beat.

What is a typical day like?

It depends on what I'm doing. If I'm working for something that needs a lot of work, then I have to sort my day out in advance, knowing that I have to get X amount of things done. To be honest, I hate practising! It's tedious, hard work.

You never hear people coming out of a concert saying, 'Wow, wasn't that great pedalling!' If it's good, you don't notice it

– physically and mentally. I'm quite ruthless with myself. I only practise for 40 minutes at a time, then take a break, have a coffee. I want to have a life, but I live for concerts, so I have to practise. The idea is to get as much done in the least amount of time. Practising is part of my day, not my full day. I also teach. On a concert day you don't want to play a lot beforehand. Each day is different – that's why I like this job too. I will also spend a day sight-reading, going through music I have, which I find quite relaxing. You discover pieces you'd forgotten about. I think sight-reading is important and maybe that's why I learn things quite quickly. I've worked out that I think harmonically, rather than patterns of notes.

I hear you've played on cruise ships. What's that like?

I did my first cruise about 18 years ago. The first one was quite a shock and made me realise that we pianists do really live in a tarified world. Nobody gave me any guidance on what to expect. I came with all this heavy music – Scriabin's Second Sonata went down like a lead balloon! Most people were on holiday and wanted to enjoy themselves. The next time, I changed the repertoire, having realised that I had to 'sell' the pieces to the audience, almost as if to say, 'you're going to love this!'. I described what to listen out for, told them a bit about what Beethoven was thinking of at the time, and so on. You realise you are in the entertainment business. A lot of it has to do with presentation and creating a feeling of warmth with the public. I'm glad I've done it and I still do it now and again. It's also a working holiday and I can have a good time. You get into this danger of thinking it's high art, and maybe we need to be a bit more open about that and get off our pedestals. ■

Jonathan Plowright's *Hommage à Chopin* disc, with works by Balakirev, Bendel, Grieg, Godowsky, Busoni, Mompou and more, is on Hyperion Records (CDA67803). The Franz Bendel track is featured on this issue's covermount disc.