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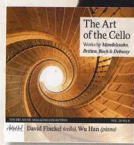
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“ Young players today think they’ve got to have everything perfect, but when I was young I took appalling risks ”

THE BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE INTERVIEW

Piers Lane

BBC Radio 4's **James Naughtie** meets the Australian pianist, whose sense of exploration and willingness to take the occasional gamble has led to worldwide success

PHOTOGRAPHY: RICHARD CANNON

Piers Lane has some good advice for young pianists at the start of their careers: 'Expand your repertoire. Take risks.' He's convinced too many of them are striving too consciously for perfection, with the result that they're scared to take a leap.

'I meet a lot of young pianists who are fantastic players, but they're very cautious already,' the Australian tells me. 'They're middle-aged when they're 22. It's so competitive these days that they think they've got to have everything perfect all the time. No. You've got to have flair. Go for it. Don't worry about risk. When I was young, I took appalling risks.'

So, of course, I ask him to tell me about one of his hairiest moments. 'I came in from a dinner party late on a Thursday

night in London and there was a message on the phone. An artist playing at the Barbican on the Saturday had to cancel to go to St Petersburg. Could I play the Mozart C major Concerto, K467?' The trouble was that he'd never performed that well-known concerto, No. 21. 'I had to learn it overnight, and I did. That was quite hairy. But when you're young you should be able to do that. Learn quickly.'

That, he says, is the kind of thing that a young player should be willing to do. 'A lot of these younger people going in for competitions – they don't expand their repertoire quickly enough. One of the prime things is to add as much as possible. Remember that memory is a muscle. Use it. Keep learning, keep adding.'

Lane's interest in young players is all the keener because of his long-time involvement in piano competitions. He's artistic director of the Sydney International Piano Competition in his homeland (in which he first came to prominence in 1977 when still in his teens) – in which role, he was shocked to find that in the last competition there was only one entrant from the UK. 'Of course, the British



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Going for it:
'I learnt Liszt's Sonata
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pianists who're at the top really *are* at the top. They're fantastic. But I do worry about music education here. One entry! The same, incidentally, from France.'

So we turn to his own youthful experience, about which he is naturally reflective, having just passed his 60th birthday (celebrated in a joyous recital in January at his favourite venue, Wigmore Hall). Born in London, the son of two pianists, he grew up in Brisbane. The memories of his youthful excursions are sharp: finding the score of Grieg's Concerto when he was nine, for example, and trying to get to grips with it straight away.

By the time he was 12 he had broadcast as a pianist on ABC and was already heading towards a solo career. It was at that time that he remembers hearing a great player for the first time: John Ogdon, just before the tragic breakdown in the British pianist's health. 'He played the *Hammerklavier* brilliantly. And then for an encore the feathery Chopin Étude Op. 25 No. 2. And that taught me what great piano playing was all about – to go from a mighty Beethoven sonata to the delicacy of Chopin and make them both sing. Wonderful.'

Throughout this period he had the advantage of parental guidance: 'My own dear father sowed the seeds.' Though a late starter, not sitting at a piano until he was 15, Lane's father became a formidable teacher of composition, the principal mentor, for example, to the Australian composer Brett Dean, whose *Hamlet* was the star turn at Glyndebourne last

summer. One of his enthusiasms was English music, and it was he who first handed his son John Ireland's Piano Concerto. 'I was fascinated by the arpeggios – one hand on white notes, one hand on black, creating these wonderful effects. And dad introduced me to the Bliss Concerto at the same time. Eventually, I was the first one who played it in New York after Solomon. So, I have so much to be thankful to my parents for.'

He thinks the other advantage, strangely enough, was growing up in Brisbane. 'I didn't have any preconceptions.' If he'd been a talented young player in London or Paris, it would have been different. When he fell under the spell of the famous teacher Nancy Weir, he was still fairly innocent. 'I found the Liszt Sonata in my parents' cupboard, took it to her and said I had something by Liszt. She asked me what it was. "A sonata." I had no idea it was the acme of the Romantic repertoire.'

But Nancy didn't blink. 'She said – go and learn it. So I did, in 12 days or so, and played it for our class.'

The time with Weir also introduced him to the pianistic tradition. She'd been a pupil of Artur Schnabel, who always taught in masterclass style. 'She told me that when she was 13 he asked her to play the Brahms Op. 10 Ballades. When she'd finished he turned to the class and said they'd never hear the pieces played better.'

Despite what may seem a lack of modesty on her part, it's clear that the relationship was central during his



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Piers Lane in 1995

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New York date:
Lane plays Czerny in
Avery Fischer Hall, 2004

years of discovery. 'I was so hungry. I heard the Schulz-Evler *Arabesques* on 'The Blue Danube', and thought it wonderful so tried to get the sheet music. I couldn't believe that it was out of print – the concept seemed so strange. Then my German teacher handed me a piece of music one day, saying that it would fox me. Would you believe it – it was the Schulz-Evler! So that's been a lucky piece for me.'

It proved his entry to recording for the Hyperion label, as in the 1980s the company's resident piano enthusiast Mike Spring heard him play that arrangement in a Queen Elizabeth Hall recital and on the strength of it invited him to join their new project, The Romantic Piano Concerto. This series has proved a happy hunting ground, although Lane is aware of the constant danger of being pigeon-holed. 'You get people who are anxious to box everyone in – "he only plays rarities", or something. Such nonsense. But I think I've been able to avoid that.'

The confidence of his early years has allowed him to roam the repertoire, building up a huge concerto range, and to explore the contemporary repertoire with relish – for example, in the work of the Australian composer Carl Vine, whose Second Piano Concerto was written for him. Coincidentally, on the day we are talking he is working on Vine's latest concerto, written for two pianos and orchestra, called *Implacable Gifts*, for the premiere in May. I ask what it sounds like. 'I don't really know. I'm expecting two movements to arrive tomorrow.'

Vine, he believes, is a musical communicator – the gift that really matters. 'I remember when I played his Second Concerto, several players from the LPO came up to me afterwards and said how wonderful it was to have a piano concerto that they enjoyed playing. It was immediately accessible to the audience. Music must communicate. Brett Dean has his own language and sometimes it's difficult to get – but you feel its coming

'People are anxious to box everyone in, but I think I've been able to avoid that'

from a tradition and so it's worth getting into it. Language isn't always the arbiter of success, but communication certainly is.'

This brings us back to young players: 'Sorting out technique is obviously fundamental. But being aware that music is communication is just as important in the end. It's got to speak to people. You can be incredibly talented, but if you don't like playing for people it isn't going to work. People sometimes say talented kids can't be expected to be emotionally mature at the piano. Maybe. But they'll still have something to say, even at nine years old, if they have that communicative ability.'

He muses about great pianists he has known. Solomon again. 'Listen to him

playing Beethoven's Op. 106 Sonata and it's extraordinary: the way his mind has claimed the music; finding connections and explanations that are dazzling.' This from the player who, according to Lane, had to be pushed on stage to play the Bliss Concerto because he was so nervous.

And then, Dame Myra Hess – 'my musical grandmother'. Lane is artistic director of Dame Myra Hess Day at London's National Gallery, a reminder of the extraordinary concerts she organised there during World War II, seven days a week, when the gallery's collection had been removed to safety in caves in North Wales. They were a triumph (as well as a feat of endurance for Hess), and an inspiration to the audience who queued round Trafalgar Square to get in. With a close friend, the composer Howard Ferguson, she organised one of the most popular classical music entertainments anyone could remember – though at the beginning she doubted if the enterprise would get off the ground, and only when a thousand people turned up at the door for the first concert did she realise that she had been right all along.

Lane's commitment to finding new audiences is absolute – although he wouldn't dream of calling it 'outreach' – and he relishes the opportunity to play new music, or to visit places that are well off the beaten track, like the wastes of Alaska, where he recently went with the American cellist Zuill Bailey. 'We toured to places that had never heard classical music before. We went ten miles up a frozen river, sliding down all over the place, to a school where the kids there had never seen a cello. We were on an island in the Bering Strait – population 200 – where they were fascinated by our music. I played the *Appassionata*, and some more Beethoven. Zuill played Bach suites. We were rock stars. The head teacher said he'd never seen kids react like that to anything. Anything.'

We're back to communication. Soloists, he says, have to create their own ways of doing it. 'Agents will help, but artists have to create careers for themselves.' And his secret? 'Health and stamina are terribly important. What percentage of a career is talent? I don't know. But I know what you certainly need: the desire to keep it going for a long period of time. I still have that.'