

Paul Lewis to perform all five Beethoven piano concertos at the Proms

By Jessica Duchen

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Classic challenge: Pianist Paul Lewis

To play one Beethoven piano concerto at the Proms looks like good fortune (as Oscar Wilde could have said, had he known), but to perform all five is – well, another matter altogether, especially with four different orchestras and conductors. Such is the task facing Paul Lewis, 38, who's almost certainly the best-loved British pianist of his vintage.

It's hard to imagine how he finds time to breathe. His family life alone is demanding: he and his wife, the Norwegian cellist Bjorg Vaernes Lewis, have three children aged five and under. But he has already recorded and performed the complete 32 Beethoven sonatas, his recording of the five concertos is just out, and when he begins his series of Proms he will have been back from a tour of Australia for just a week. The prospect, Lewis says, is every bit as daunting as it sounds. "But I'm also quietly excited," he adds.

For a performer, he adds, the Proms can compare to no other festival in the world. "When you walk out on stage and see a full Albert Hall, it's electrifying," he says. "And if you've done your homework, it's electrifying in a good way. You feel people very much there with you."

If he has a favourite among the five Beethoven concertos, it's the Fourth, which he will play in the first concert back-to-back with the First. "It's a complex animal," he says. "It's by far the biggest challenge in terms of performance – you absolutely need to see eye to eye with the conductor and the orchestra. It makes life difficult, but that's why we do it."

So how does a pianist cope with performing two concertos in one night, possibly with jet-lag? Lewis's survival kit will include chocolate and, surprisingly, a Vicks Inhaler: "There's nothing that works better for clearing the head if you feel tired, stressed or a bit foggy."

Paul Lewis performs the complete Beethoven concertos at the Royal Albert Hall, London SW7 on 21 & 29 July, 6 August & 6 September (0845 401 5045)