



EYES

WIDE

OPEN

Audiences love Piers Lane's beautiful tone, emotional directness and vast, imaginative repertoire. No wonder Hyperion chose him to record their Virtuoso Romantic series. Jessica Duchén meets the Australian pianist

DPerhaps it's a paradox, but the best people to put on a piano competition jury could just be those who don't really approve of such events. The Australian pianist Piers Lane is among the distinguished line-up who'll be judging the finals of *Pianist* and Yamaha's Competition for Outstanding Amateurs in November, and his viewpoint suggests he'll be very good at it indeed: 'I have mixed feelings about being a juror. In principle I don't like the idea of competitions for music. But if you want to influence results the way you feel they should go, you've got to be there!'

Lane has served on juries around the world, but this autumn's London-based contest is a competition with a difference, the applicants being non-professionals eager to make their mark with what is essentially a super-charged hobby. It's the second time the competition has been held; the first, two years ago, revealed an astronomically high standard of performance among candidates who ranged from a piano tuner to a management consultant. 'I talked to Kathryn Stott and Martin Roscoe after the first one, where they'd been on the jury, and they were flabbergasted by the level,' Lane recounts. 'Many of those people could have been professional.'

What will he be looking out for in the finals? That's where the clause about not quite approving of competitions comes into play. 'I'm sure that those who reach the finals will be very technically adept and hopefully they'll have chosen repertoire that suits them. So one will be looking for what one's looking for at any concert - the communication of something profound about the music. I remember, from when I was a young competitor myself, that you sometimes forget that jurors want to be entertained, uplifted and moved as much as any other audience member. It's people who do that who impress them. In one international competition, a formidable Russian judge said, "This is a competition, not a concert" - implying that the criteria are different. Some judges are looking for pianistic skill and for someone reliable who can do anything. But in the end one wants someone who moves one.'

The Putney prodigy

Lane's own playing certainly leaves audiences entertained, uplifted and moved. There's an enchanting enthusiasm about his performances, and an unaffected friendliness about the way he'll happily stand up and introduce a piece to an audience as if they're sitting in his front room. His repertoire is enormous, moreover, encompassing all kinds of musical byways that other pianists might never have even heard of; that Laneian enthusiasm has communicated itself through everything from Chopin to Stanford, Liszt to Delius, and more. Solo works, transcriptions, chamber music, duos with the violinist Tasmin Little, concertos, Lieder accompaniment - it's all there, delivered with phenomenal beauty of tone, clarity of texture and a warm, emotional directness that induces his fans to come back to concert after concert for more.

Lane's fascinating history, oddly enough, began in the same pleasant suburb in which he lives now: Putney, south-west London, where his mother taught the piano at the Putney High School for Girls. 'She'd travelled to London from Australia wanting to study the piano; she was very young, came from a tiny town in north Queensland and had no contacts,' Lane explains. 'And on the ship she met a cousin of the Australian composer Arthur Benjamin, who gave her a letter of intro-

duction to Benjamin, who then recommended that she study with his star pupil, Lamar Crowson, for six months before doing her audition for the Royal College of Music' She followed his advice; and on the day of the audition she met a tall young Londoner, whom she met again on the first day at college when they'd both been accepted. He was to be Lane's father. 'So I was gestated in Putney,' Lane says with a laugh, 'and it's so bizarre that in 1983 I came back to live here and I've been here ever since.'

The family settled in Brisbane when Lane was a small child; his mother became his first piano teacher. The extent of his talent was soon obvious and he gave his first public concerts when he was only ten. A variety of teachers followed, notably Nancy Weir, who, a former prodigy herself, had been a pupil of Schnabel in Berlin at an early age, yet also adored the Russian-

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style flair and imagination that was rather the opposite of the great German pianist's approach. 'She was great friends with Shura Cherkassky and thought it might have been more fun to study with Josef Hofmann than Schnabel,' Lane declares.

When he was 18, Lane took part in an international piano competition in Budapest and duly won it. 'I met some incredible musicians in Hungary, including the great pianist Annie Fischer, who's always been one of my heroines,' he says. 'She gave me a ticket for my first Wagner opera, which I heard in the Budapest opera house from a box next to the one normally occupied by Communist party heads. Afterwards, she and her sister picked me up in a limousine and took me to a restaurant where the waiters all recognised her and bowed to her! It was heady stuff for an 18-year-old.'

His subsequent teachers included another Hungarian, Bela Siki, in Seattle, Washington. Lane has always maintained a fondness for 'that Hungarian tradition that is wonderfully intelligent and lucid, very aware of structure and not tampering with the music in any way - very clear-sighted.' But he also had lessons with Jorge Bolet, 'in the grand Romantic tradition' and, back in London, with Yonty Solomon, the South African pianist who had been a student of Dame Myra Hess. 'I grew up with recordings of Hess and always felt a tremendous spirituality in her playing, a depth of emotion and lack of fussiness, besides beautiful tone and wonderful voicing. Yonty I think has many of those same qualities, though there's a different sort of texture in his playing from Myra Hess's. He has a wonderful imagination for sound.'

Variety show

This variety of influences helped to lead Lane into an equally great variety of activities when he started out in the profession. For instance, he found himself serving as accompanist to the students of Erich Vietheer, the most sought-after vocal coach of the time. 'I used to accompany lessons for people like

If you were...

...a fictional or historical character, who would you be?

I'd like to be Franz Liszt, though I don't think I am!

...a book?

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides

...a film?

Some Like It Hot

...a piece of music?

The Schubert octet

...a food?

Roast lamb with flageolet beans

...a wine?

Vintage Châteauneuf-du-Pape

...a tempo?

Allegretto

...a quality?

I'm a good listener

...a fault?

I find it hard to say no

INTERVIEW

Yvonne Kenny, with whom I've recorded Delius songs, and Felicity Lott, Felicity Palmer, Philip Langridge, Ann Murray - they were all with Erich at the time, so I had some amazing experiences learning all that operatic and song repertoire, but also learning about rubato, breathing, going with the flow of music' Viether was the partner of the great Lieder accompanist Geoffrey Parsons, Lane adds: 'Geoffrey taught me how to make an omelette. He used to give me lunch every day and while we worked upstairs he'd be rehearsing downstairs with people like Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Jessye Norman. It was an amazing house to visit. I used to play from 9.30 in the morning to 6.30 at night, followed by an enormous gin with a bit of tonic! And what one learned there was irreplaceable.'

Growing up in Australia with a pianist mother and an academic musician father, Lane had always taken certain areas of repertoire for granted that his peer group might never even have encountered. His openness and sheer curiosity produced some musical seeds that came into bloom years later. 'I had no limitations in my mind about repertoire because I didn't come from a particular school of playing or from a particular method,' he explains. 'Lots of things I discovered purely by chance. My parents had stacks of music and I used to sight-read all the time. I remember turning up at Nancy's one day, saying I thought I'd found a rather good piece by Liszt, a Sonata in B minor. And Nancy just calmly said, "Yes, it is a rather good piece." I said, "I think I'll learn it." And she never let on! I learned it in a week and played it at a concert practice at the conservatorium, and so had it in my repertoire from the age of 17. She never mentioned that it's considered the acme of piano music of that period or that it was fiendishly difficult - and that was great, not to have that limitation imposed on my thought.'

'At 16, I heard the pianist Isador Goodman playing the Schulz-Evler transcription of *The Blue Danube* on TV. I was bowled over and tried to buy the music, but it was out of print. But miraculously the next year, I played for my German teacher and he said 'I've got a piece that'll fox you,' and brought out a battered old copy of *The Blue Danube*. I couldn't believe it. So I learned it and it's been very lucky for me. I played it in a recital in the Queen Elizabeth Hall in the late 1980s. Four years later, I came home to a phone message from Mike Spring of Hyperion Records, saying that Hyperion had decided to initiate a series of rare Romantic piano concertos recordings and he thought I might be interested. I rang up the next day and asked him, "What do you want to do? Things like the Moszkowski concerto?" And he nearly dropped the phone, because that was exactly the piece he wanted. So I did the first recording in the series, which has become very popular since. Mike had thought of asking me because he was at that recital where I played *The Blue Danube* and thought this was the sort of pianist they'd want for the series. You never know what's going to flower later on.'

Artist in bloom

Now everything is flowering, full-time. During the course of his kaleidoscopic career, Lane has made more than 50 recordings. He will be giving an all-Chopin recital at the Wigmore Hall on 2 October, including both the B minor and the 'Funeral March' sonatas. He has recently become the artistic director of the Australian Festival of Chamber Music in Townsville, North Queensland, which for 16 years has been giving music-loving holiday-makers a unique opportunity to explore the Great Barrier Reef in tandem with attending world-class chamber concerts. Special guests at Lane's first festival, earlier this year, included Australian soprano Cheryl Barker, pianist Kathryn Stott, cellist Raphael Wallfisch and pianist Bengt Forsberg, who led an exploration of Korngold's rarely performed chamber music to mark the 50th anniversary of the composer's death.



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It's held in July, Australian wintertime, so the temperature is between 21 and 28 degrees centigrade, about 12 at night, it's just perfect, and we have lots of south Australians flocking up for winter sun away from Tasmanian snow! Lane enthuses, encouraging me - and you - to book our air tickets for next year. 'That's why we have a national audience up in beautifully mild North Queensland. It's a terribly exciting new venture for me. There are 33 performers, everyone stays for ten days, and the musicians mix and match in chamber ensembles. We had a very happy time this year.' The 2008 festival will run from 3 to 13 July.

This October Lane will be busy with another innovative venture, this time at the National Gallery, where during the Second World War Dame Myra Hess boosted London's morale by presenting a now legendary series of daily lunchtime concerts. The gallery had not commemorated her achievement for 60 years, but last autumn Lane staged a Myra Hess Day there, with three concerts including performances by Hess's former pupils Yonty Solomon and Stephen Kovacevich, and some rare films of Hess in recital. The occasion proved so popular that now they're doing it again, this time with two conceits and associated films on 10 October, the anniversary of Hess's first concert in 1939. 'Hopefully it'll become an annual event,' says Lane. 'We will need to give it more contemporary significance, though, and we're working on the idea of having a day to represent an institution of art as a haven in times of conflict.'

However busy he is, Lane still finds time to continue his great love of exploring rare repertoire. 'I've always had a facility for sight-reading and for memorising easily, and I'm grateful for that,' he says. 'I love finding odd things, filling in musical holes and reading through the music that you read about in books like *The Great Pianists*- it's fantastic that now we have the chance to hear these pieces on discs as well.'

'On the whole, in concerts I like playing the great masterworks more than anything - they do give you more than the pieces that have fallen into oblivion - but nonetheless it's important to have that whole texture. We sometimes forget that history didn't lurch from one genius to the next: there's a whole fabric of music supporting them and from which they've come. It is exciting to discover all that. You come across some gems.' His next CD, due for release on Hyperion this autumn, is of the Bloch piano quintets, with the Goldner Quartet - 'astounding pieces, very effective and well worth listening to'.

And meanwhile we wait with excitement to see who Lane and his fellow jurors will discover at the final of the amateur competition. Watch this space! •

In concert

- Piers Lane performs an all-Chopin recital at the Wigmore Hall, London (2 Oct). He also appears at The Sage, Gateshead with violinist Tasmin Little (4 Oct), in a Myra Hess memorial concert at the National Gallery, London (10 Oct) and at the Como Autumn Music Festival, Italy, in recital (6 Nov). Lane will be on the final jury of P/Am/Stand Yamaha's amateur piano competition on 17 Nov at Cadogan Hall, London (box office: +44 (0)20 7730 4500). To find out more about Lane's concert engagements, visit www.giamanagement.com.

On disc

- Piers Lane's discography is vast. To view it in full, visit www.hyperion-records.co.uk.

Listen

- Listen to Piers Lane on this issue's cover-mount CD! He plays the virtuoso Tausig transcription of Johann Strauss's *Nacht/Italien* (No. 1 from *Nouvelles soirées de Vienne*) on track 22. With kind permission of Hyperion Records. The excerpt comes from the disc *Virtuoso Strauss Transcriptions* (Helios CDH55238).