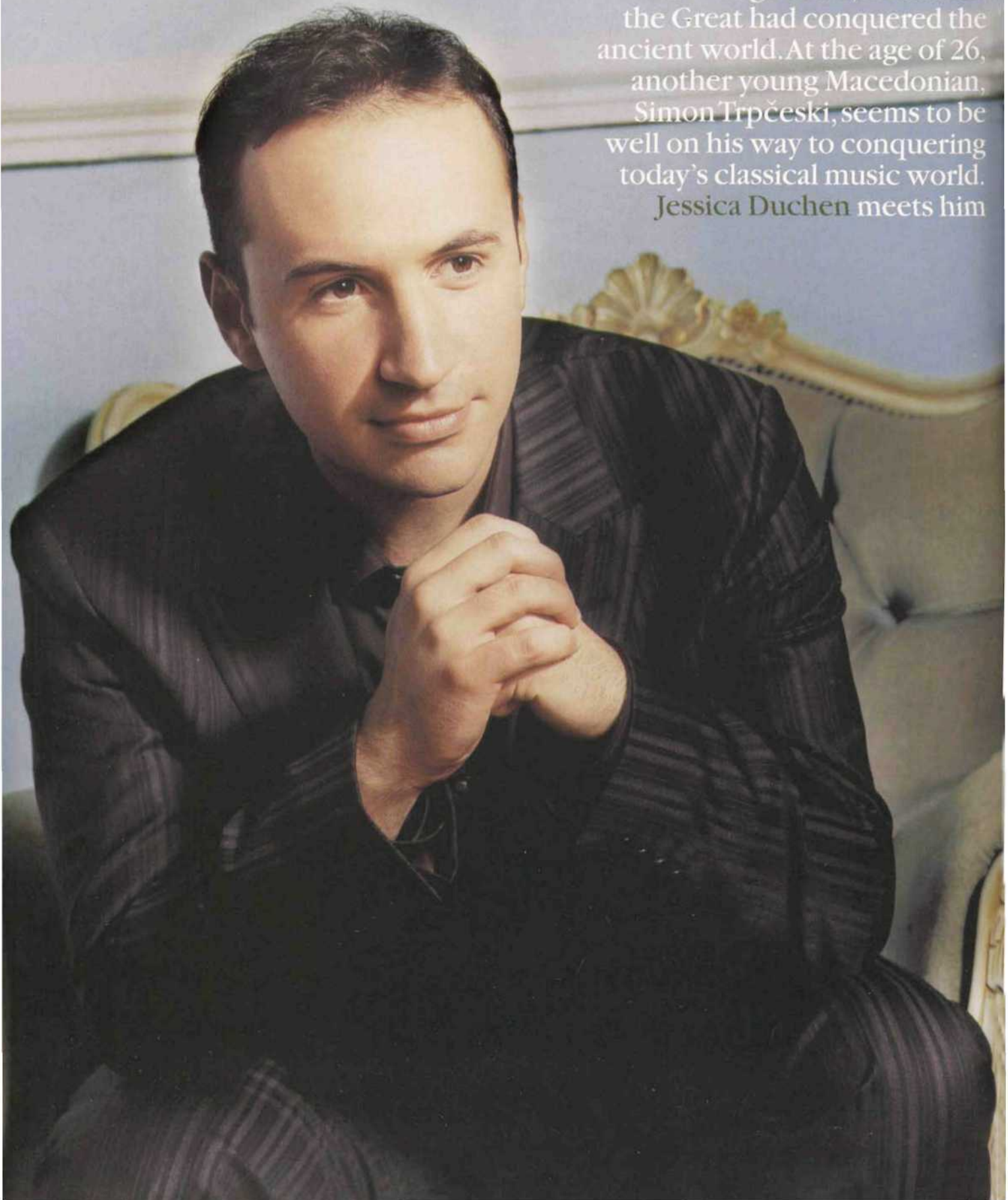


Simon *the Great*

At the age of 32, Alexander the Great had conquered the ancient world. At the age of 26, another young Macedonian, Simon Trpčeski, seems to be well on his way to conquering today's classical music world. Jessica Duchen meets him



Few pianists have captured their audience's hearts as quickly as has Simon Trpčeski. Hailing from Skopje, Macedonia, at just 26 Trpčeski is the darling of pianophiles at every level. He scooped the Royal Philharmonic Society's Young Artist Award in 2003; his EMI debut disc won Editor's Choice and Debut Album accolades from *Gramophone*, and

along the way he consistently draws the kind of reviews of which most musicians his age can only dream. 'People will be auctioning tickets for Simon Trpčeski soon,' said the *Independent*, following his sensational Proms debut in 2004.

Now there are even more firsts in the pipeline: this winter Trpčeski is making his South Bank recital debut in the International Piano Series at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, and he'll be performing with the London Philharmonic Orchestra for the first time since the orchestra accompanied the competition final that shot him into the limelight five years ago.

Trpčeski's playing combines the best of many worlds. He manages to create that rarest of pianistic delights, an individual sound - bright, singing, strong, well-articulated, but always flowing and engaging. There's a sense of tremendous personality - but his vivid individuality is never pushed forward at the expense of fidelity to the composer and the score. His latest recording, an all-Rachmaninov CD that marks his arrival in EMF's mainstream, bursts with kaleidoscopic colour and conviction.

I caught up with him backstage at London's Wigmore Hall after a June BBC lunchtime concert. The Wigmore has a special significance for him, as it was his debut recital there in 2001 that did so much to consolidate the acclaim he'd drawn at the London competition. 'The visceral energy of the Prokofiev [Sonata No 7] brought the house down,' wrote Geoffrey Norris in the *Daily Telegraph*, 'the Tchaikovsky [Pletnev's transcriptions from *The Nutcracker*] induced gasps of wonderment at the sheer wizardry and panache. But it is not simply that he has a phenomenal technique. Crucially, he has the innate

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musical intelligence to know how to apply it and, at the same time, can convey such joy in doing so.'

Most musicians would probably rather take a nap than be interviewed after performing a demanding programme on a steaming hot afternoon, but Trpčeski seems fresh as the proverbial daisy. Bubbly, charming and refreshingly 'normal', he is keen to stress, on one hand, how lucky he feels to be where he is today; yet he is equally eager to explain that he's anything but a young man in a hurry.

'I'm not rushing in my life,' he declares. 'Everything will come in its own time and I don't want to be under pressure. The LPO is coming this winter; I've already played four times with the Philharmonia; the Proms came; and this season I'm playing with the New York Philharmonic for the first time. Why rush? The music is there to enjoy and I think about the music, not the music business.'

There's plenty to think about in the music he has chosen for his South Bank recital. It's an extraordinary programme, incorporating Brahms's op 117 and 118 piano pieces, Scriabin's Second Sonata and both of Debussy's books of *Images*. 'You will not believe me,' he exclaims, 'but all of it is new to my repertoire! The Debussy is complex, subtle music, full of different colours. I'm looking forward to performing it in London and, as always, I'll try just to enjoy it.' He should have ample opportunity to enjoy his LPO date as well, taking centre stage for the exuberant Shostakovich Piano Concerto No 1 on 2 December under the baton of the LPO's dynamic young principal guest conductor, Vladimir Jurowski.

Fresh and unaffected

Trpčeski's evident enjoyment of music making, and his fresh and unaffected manner of communicating it to his audience, must account for much of his meteoric popularity. He was only 20 when he stole the show at the 2000 World Piano Competition, London. Although he was the audience's hot favourite for the top prize, the jury ultimately placed him second. It wasn't exactly a disaster. 'It probably seemed more dramatic to everyone else than it did to me,' he laughs. 'First of all, I was very lucky to be chosen to take part at all. There were 600 applicants and only 24 places in the competition!' The most important thing, he says, was to be in the final, by which time the competitors have been whittled down to just three.

'Obviously if you're in the final you are going to get one of the three prizes, but I wasn't thinking about that. I was in a Brahms sandwich - the other two were playing the Brahms First Piano Concerto and I played Prokofiev's Third. I was enjoying it very much, and I think the audience could see that. When they announced the results, I was second and there was an extremely uncomfortable feeling from the audience, which must have been awkward for the first prize-winner and the jury. But anyway,' he adds with an extra •

If you were...

...a fictional or historical character?

My fellow countryman Alexander the Great

...a book?

An anthology of French love poetry

...a film?

Roman Holiday and *The Barber of Siberia*; also *The Day After Tomorrow*, because powerful countries are not paying attention to global warming and its consequences

...a type of food?

My mother's Macedonian cuisine! But I also like Italian and Chinese

...a wine?

I'm not really a drinker but I do like French cabernet sauvignon and pinot noir, and I've been amazed by certain Spanish riojas. I also love Baileys. And vanilla coke

...a piece of music?

Céline Dion singing *These Are The Special Times*

...a tempo?

Amoroso! Or adagio, or dolce gracioso. Sometimes vivo risoluto, or furioso. Maestoso definitely included

...a quality?

Being honest

...a fault?

Sometimes being too honest

twinkle, 'I was really happy!' Trpčeski was snapped up by his current agency, IMG, on the spot and the critics lavished praise upon him. They've never stopped.

So much, then, for competitions. 'I've never entered competitions to win; I just hoped to have one more positive experience,' he insists - though he won a number of them, in Italy and the Czech Republic besides the London prize. 'I had been well informed about things that can happen in piano competitions - unpleasant stuff that can be disappointing for musicians.' The crucial matter is to keep learning as you go along: 'In the London competition, I felt I was getting better and better in every round. That was important.'

Trpčeski has been much in the forefront of British musical life since then, not least thanks to the BBC New Generations scheme for young artists. 'That was a fantastic opportunity,' he recounts. 'It gave me the chance to play several times at Wigmore, to make some recordings and to play with two of the BBC orchestras. All these new experiences were incredibly helpful and I very much enjoyed those years. We had a whole day of chamber music concerts at the Wigmore in July 2002 - all the artists played in several concerts in a real marathon starting at 11am. I was on first, playing *The Nutcracker*. That was great fun.'

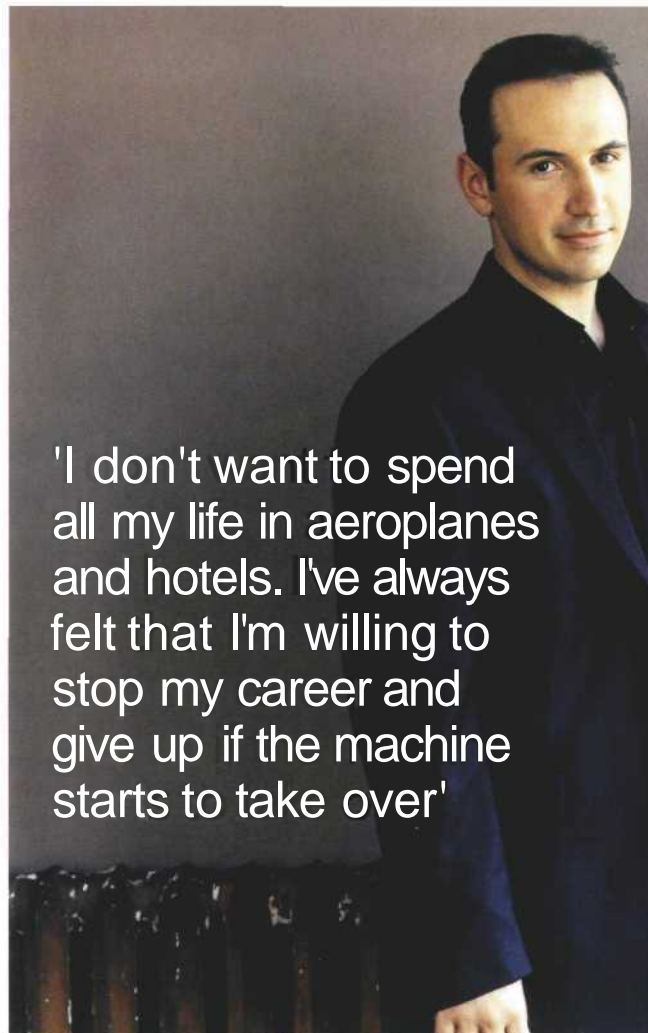
Accordion to Simon

Trpčeski's first musical love wasn't the piano but the accordion. Growing up in Macedonia, folk music played an important part in his life - it still does, and he takes every opportunity to include in his recitals a piece entitled *Prelude and Pajdushka* by Zivoin Glisic, a work written especially for him and based on traditional Macedonian folk-dance rhythms. The accordion is a central instrument in Macedonian folk music. 'But at the music school in Macedonia at that time, you could not take accordion as a subject, so as a child it seemed to me that the closest thing to it would be the piano. Now I can see that that isn't quite true. But at least there was a keyboard!'

His family was musical, but not professionally: 'My parents both sang extremely well and my father played a stringed folk instrument, the tambura. My sister sings in a choir and my brother writes lyrics. So we're all connected with music, but I was the only one who had the right conditions to study professionally. My parents unfortunately never had that opportunity, but they tried to make it happen for me; I'm very grateful for that. My father was a judge and my mother is a pharmacist; my brother and sister work in law and economics. I'm the baby of the family!' He doesn't play the accordion often these days, he adds, 'but it's nice, when we have parties at home, that I can play folk or pop music on the piano. I compose pop music myself sometimes.'

'I like to listen to lots of different musical styles. The great composers knew the folk music not only of their own nations but of others as well. I like to hear old Macedonian and Yugoslavian folk music - we used to be the same country - and I love ballads, soul, blues, jazz and Latin music.' Among his classical idols on record are Rachmaninov as pianist - 'Amazing!' - as well as Richter, Gilels and Michelangeli; among current pianists, he loves to listen to Lupu, Argerich and Brendel, plus younger pianists including Leif Ove Andsnes and Paul Lewis. As for pop, his taste extends to Celine Dion, Mariah Carey and Norah Jones. Even Dean Martin gets a look in.

As far as Trpčeski's own playing is concerned, however, the Russian influence has been especially vital. The Russian teacher Boris Romanov moved from the Moscow Conservatory to Skopje, and it was under his guidance that the nine-year-old Trpčeski set about his serious piano studies. 'He and his wife, Ludmilla, decided to come to Macedonia in 1991 - This was a turning point in the country's pianistic life. They gave the students there, and the teachers too, the chance to come into contact with the old Russian school - Romanov had been a student of Konstantin Igumov, among others. We were really



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lucky! I learned a lot, especially as I was studying certain things that were not usual for kids of my age.'

Many musicians of Trpčeski's age are still students, but Trpčeski has now become a teacher himself. At the faculty of music in Skopje's university, he has 14 students: 'That gives me a different pleasure from performing because it adds a totally different dimension to what I do. It's one thing to sit at the piano and play, but quite another to sit next to your student and try to find the most appropriate way to explain to them about the composer and the music. It helps me a lot in my analytical approach and I find it very interesting - not least because I am only three or four years older than most of them.'

'In the Balkan countries people are very closely connected in family life and I think this is very important. The life of an artist is not an easy one. I'm not like other artists, who are playing a lot - I do only 35 to 40 concerts a year and of course there are musicians who do twice as many. I don't want to miss the other beauties of life. I don't want to spend all my life in aeroplanes and hotels. I've always felt that I'm willing to stop my career and give up if the machine starts to take over. I'm glad that I have a stable life and that I'm a psychologically healthy person, thanks to my family.' And the rewards of this add to the musical outcome, he adds: 'My agent understands me very well, because she can see the results in my concerts.'

Trpčeski's next CD will be a Chopin programme, including the Sonata No 2 in B flat minor, one of the works that inspired such enthusiasm for him in the London competition. And although we've heard him mainly in 19th- and 20th-century repertoire so far, he's every bit as eager to play Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Bach - 'I played the Bach French Overture at my Concertgebouw recital debut,' he points out. 'But generally the most important thing to me is to follow the composer's score, because this is the basis of everything: this is what the composer gave us. We should follow that and respect it.'

'My interpretation has to be in close connection with the logic and nature of the music - and if that finds good results, then I feel I've been successful. And when I see happy faces in the audience and I know that people are satisfied, then I'm happy too. That's the most important thing.'