



Serving Music – Pierre-Laurent Aimard

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When the French pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard was taken up into the circle of musicians in the newly-formed Ensemble intercontemporain by Pierre Boulez in 1976, no one could foresee that he would carve out the extraordinary career which has meanwhile taken him to all the major concert stages and important festivals in the world, as a soloist and a chamber musician with a wide-ranging repertoire. Over the course of 18 years, Aimard, as a member of what quickly became one of the reference ensembles for music from recent decades and the present day, was involved in numerous world premieres, concerts and recordings featuring 20th-century music, often with solo performances. With its wide range of challenges, the ensemble provided the ideal framework to satisfy the interest in contemporary music that had awakened early on, and grown during his musical training. Nonetheless, having matured as an artist in this field, he took the risk of leaving the ensemble in 1995 to pursue a solo career and projects of his own. Since then, in addition to contemporary music, his repertoire has gradually expanded to include Classical and Romantic works, even extending back to Bach's music for keyboard instruments.

The course of Aimard's career – his studies with Yvonne Loriod and the years with Ensemble intercontemporain – is the origin of various attributes that characterize his stance as a performer. The first of these is his treatment of recent and current music as something completely natural that – for all the different and novel qualities that led to the name 'New Music' – is by no means separated from that of the past by any rejection or rupture. Another aspect is a musician's ethos that applies the same standards to every musical performance, whether of works by George Benjamin, Marco Stroppa, Elliott Carter, Charles Ives, Claude Debussy, Robert Schumann or J. S. Bach – and that means the very highest standards. This is the stance that defines the work of Ensemble intercontemporain and was one of the motives for founding it: to finally enable performances that truly did justice to the works of the present day. Finally, he displays an approach to interpretation that – once again, regardless of the specific type of music – focuses entirely on getting to the heart of every score, intellectually and emotionally, in terms of its pianistic presentation as well as questions of form, structure and sound.

Pierre-Laurent Aimard embodies a type of performer for whom there is only *music*, not disparate musics, which is an absolute exception in times of increasing specialization and fragmentation in musical life. From this perspective, Bach's *Art of Fugue* is music in the same sense as Elliott Carter's *Night Fantasies*, and Schubert's G major sonata D 894 is no different in its status from Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*, Pierre Boulez's Third Sonata or George Benjamin's *Shadowlines*. Asked by Cyrill Stoletzky in 2012

whether his work as a contemporary music performer gave him a 'different' perspective on traditional repertoire, Aimard replied: 'For me, reflecting – or rather interpreting – means serving both the music of yesterday and that of today'. Thus every music ultimately demands the same stance of the performer. Serving music includes, for example, searching for each work's specific sound. But it can never simply be a matter of perfection; rather, Aimard states, the sound must adapt to a particular style, to a work: 'For example, very clear and articulated in Bach, songlike and intimate in Schubert, colourful in Debussy, explosive in Boulez. If the instrument, its tuning, the pianist's playing and the acoustic all converge and match up, there is a chance of approaching one's ideal.'

In cases where a sense of the music's sound world and form of pianistic presentation first have to be found, however, where – as one finds especially often with the most recent music – there is not yet a tradition of sonic realization, he seeks collaboration with the composer, a habit that has remained with him to this day from his time in Ensemble intercontemporain. This, he argues, gives him a better understanding of what to emphasize in his interpretation. In this context, there are two composers who took on a special significance for Aimard: firstly Olivier Messiaen, with whom he had been in close contact since studying with Yvonne Loriod (Messiaen's wife), and for whose music he is currently considered one of the foremost performers; and secondly György Ligeti, who was greatly taken with Aimard's pianistic skills. In a conversation with the chief music critic at the *New York Times*, Anthony Tommasini, Ligeti once said about the pianist: 'I was impressed by his good technique, the extremely high level of his artistry and our mutual understanding. I decided he would be the best pianist for me, and I heard him give lectures and courses on my music which prove that he knows it better than I do.'

If one attempts to characterize Aimard's pianistic approach to works, one category in particular comes to mind: that of gesture. Building on stupendous virtuosity, his playing puts the gestural squarely in the foreground. It is this musical gesture that turns a mere succession of sounds into a directly graspable unit, and this is surely one aspect of what Ligeti emphasized about Aimard's artistry in the interview with Tommasini: on the one hand, he has an extraordinary ability to depict music, in terms of events taking place simultaneously, as a form of layered space. On the other hand, he is able to place an entire piece before our ears, as if showing us an object whose end – that is, where it is going – already seems present at the beginning, and whose start we still sense in its last moments. In both cases, the individual element is conceptually embedded in a whole and becomes directly appreciable in the role which it plays therein.

Some examples would be Aimard's interpretation of the eleventh piece from *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* (1942-43) by Olivier Messiaen, entitled 'Première communion de la Vierge'. Here the listener is given the impression not of a process, but rather of walking along a sounding architecture with their ears. Thus, at the very beginning, we hear the extremely contrasting spheres of the chordal 'theme of the God' in the left hand, the whirling right-hand figures in the top register, and the series of eighth-notes following on from the theme's final chord in the register between them, as clearly differentiated levels. The form of the whole, quite appropriately considering the title of the cycle, transpires as a succession of 'views'. Or: György Ligeti's *Entrelacs*, the twelfth

piece from the second book of etudes (1988-94). Aimard – the piece’s dedicatee – succeeds here in making the gradually-unfolding multiplicity of rhythmic layers audible with staggering clarity, like the strata of a geological formation.

The second horizon, namely his stupendous virtuosity and, perhaps even more significantly, his power to shape musical works, have also made Pierre-Laurent Aimard a sought-after teacher who enjoys passing on his skills and knowledge at the Conservatoire national supérieur de musique in Paris as well as the Cologne Academy of Music, not to mention numerous master classes. This is also what drives his enthusiasm for, and commitment to *Explore the Score*, the interactive internet project by the Ruhr Piano Festival, which allows one to experience him performing and commenting on Ligeti’s piano etudes.

Aimard’s all-encompassing perspective on music, in which a recent work is as self-evidently natural as the music of past centuries, also reveals itself in his programming, whether as artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival (2009-16) or in his own solo concerts. Not infrequently, they confront works historically far apart with each other, creating a dialogue in which each lets the other speak.