

A tribute to Pierre-Laurent Aimard on being awarded the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize

Ladies and Gentleman, late in June 2016 there was an important – and, indeed, sad – event in my country, a departure whose ramifications are still being felt and whose loss might be regretted for years to come. I am, of course, referring to the end of Pierre-Laurent Aimard's tenure as artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival, a position he had held – with tremendous success – since 2009.

Pierre-Laurent was, in many ways, a surprising choice to run the festival founded 69 years ago by the very first recipient of the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize, Benjamin Britten. Aimard was the first non-composer to be artistic director, though living composers were of course at the heart of his programming - featured figures included Lachenmann, Birtwistle, Murail, Knussen and Carter (who appeared in his centenary year) as well as numerous younger composers from across the world. Perhaps his greatest coup was persuading Pierre-Boulez to be in residence in 2010, something that would have been unlikely earlier in the festival's existence.

But what set Aimard's seal on his time at the festival, more than his skill in luring the world's top creative figures to East Anglia – more even than the repertoire he programmed, with discernment and originality in every aspect - was of course his own performing. The content of his own recitals was typically varied and adventurous – juxtaposing Bach, Scarlatti, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Schumann with Debussy, Stravinsky, Scriabin, Janacek, Bartok, Schoenberg and Webern alongside Stockhausen and Kurtag or Stroppa and Anderson, all played with equal fantasy, sympathy and generosity of spirit. A highlight in his final year was a complete performance of Messiaen's mammoth "Catalogue d'Oiseaux" spread over 24 hours, presenting each of the 13 movements at the precise time of day when the birdsong the work transcribes takes place in nature. So, the opening few movements were played in the exquisite Suffolk landscape at 4 in the morning. As if by miracle, the East Anglian skies cleared at the required hour, and the rising sun bathed the audience in light in precise conjunction with Messiaen's iridescent dawn harmonies and birdcalls...

But one has to ask: what makes it possible for a pianist – I repeat, not a composer (and a French pianist at that!) - to win over this British festival audience to such an extent that they will get out of their beds at 3 a.m. to hear a demanding masterpiece of modern piano literature *outdoors*?

Well, first of course, there are the fingers. They seem to be capable of anything. It is this facet, amongst others, which has attracted innumerable composers - and most famously Ligeti - to write for him. Our pianist became the Hungarian composer's close friend and principal exponent for the last decades of his life, and I wonder if half of his celebrated Etudes would have been conceived without Aimard. Phenomenal manual dexterity, breathtaking accuracy, spectacular control of touch, infinite gradations in dynamics, supreme rhythmical precision, and,

when required, immense power – with these capacities Ligeti found the ideal interpreter, someone who could give life to the intricate and magical illusions he wanted his music to conjure.

But Pierre-Laurent is also a musician who thinks: his mind directly informs and inspires his playing. Not all performing musicians are intellectuals, and indeed philosophical speculation can sometimes inhibit the spontaneity and élan required in a performer. But Aimard's musical culture is wide and very deep, and many diverse influences have contributed to his education and growth as a musician. After initial studies in Lyon, Paris and London, and beyond his encounters and collaboration with so many important post-war composers, Pierre-Laurent also has deep roots – both musical and otherwise – in Eastern Europe: especially in Hungary, Russia and Yugoslavia. His friendship with Alfred Brendel has surely affected him considerably. Nowadays his playing is as familiar to audiences in Budapest as it is in Brussels, in London or in Lucerne, Badenweiler or Barcelona. He has also taught generations of students in Cologne and has made his home in Berlin. So this really is an *echt*-European figure, one whose persona and artistry have been nourished from every corner of the continent.

In particular, Pierre-Laurent is drawn to analysis, and nothing engages him more than to investigate the means, both technical and aesthetic, by which great works are forged. He would be completely at ease discussing, say, arcane contrapuntal techniques in J.S. Bach or labyrinthine serial manipulation in Berg, and has thought deeply about concepts of musical form and discourse, style and expression, phrasing and articulation. In this aspect, I suspect that one specific figure has been the catalyst – Pierre Boulez, whose music and personality Aimard has revered since childhood. Boulez's extraordinary clarity of mind and ear, his scepticism and critical brilliance, his analytical assiduity and yet, also, his vast imagination and sensitivity as both musical creator and interpreter – these attributes have always held Pierre-Laurent as if by magic. They go to the core of his existence and still inform everything he does today.

But there is more to Pierre-Laurent than the connection between his intelligence and those extraordinary ten digits. There is the *sound* he makes. One must remember that at the age of 13 he was already a disciple of Olivier Messiaen, a musical creator who regarded sound - the very stuff of music - with something akin to mystical wonder. One can imagine what an impact the ecstatic musical vision of Messiaen – as well as the devoted tuition of his wife, Yvonne Loriod – made on the young pianist, barely into his teens.

As a result Aimard has developed a highly discerning ear and an acute sensitivity to the physical reality of pianistic sonority. The smallest minutiae of instrumental construction obsess him - from keys to felts, dampers to hammers, soundboards to lids - without, of course, forgetting the acoustics, dimensions, humidity and temperature of the halls in which he performs and records. Plus, through his idiosyncratic and sophisticated approach to keyboard touch - as well as formidably subtle skills in pedalling - he has found ways of making piano strings burgeon in sound like no one else. When I performed the Ravel G-major piano concerto with him I could have sworn that, in the long solo introduction of the slow movement, the melody was being played by the 12 cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic and not a perfectly tuned, balanced and ideally positioned Steinway!

But I think I can go even a little further into what makes Pierre-Laurent such a compelling musician. This, after all, is someone whom I first met at the Paris Conservatoire in 1976, and who, unbelievably, has been my friend for 40 years.

One might imagine that, having won a prestigious international piano competition at the age of 16, his career would extend along predictable lines – effortlessly gaining a powerful agent and recording contract (this was the 1970s!) with invitations to play innumerable recitals and concertos from leading international halls and orchestras. But no, instead Aimard accepts an invitation from Pierre Boulez to join the new the Ensemble intercontemporain, and remains there – as an ensemble musician – *for two decades*.

There was of course much glory associated with this role, and the repertoire was both varied and intensely stimulating. Nevertheless the routine from week to week also involved, presumably, holding interminable drones on the latest 1980s synthesizers and executing poorly notated celesta figuration conceived by inexperienced (and not necessarily competent) young composers. And with so many new works to premiere - by figures as illustrious as Xenakis, Grisey, Berio, and Boulez himself - there was presumably limited time to prepare, let alone perform, cycles of Beethoven concertos or lengthy solo tours abroad. Plus there was sometimes, sadly, the erroneous prejudice that a performer who excels in new music is automatically suspect in core repertoire.

But why do this, at the start of a career and for so long? It's simple. Pierre-Laurent is curious and adventurous. He wants to participate in the continuing journey of Western Music from the front. He is intransigently loyal and, from the outset, was devoted to modern music and to the idea of the contemporary composer. In Pierre-Laurent these far from universal attributes have never diminished in intensity. Put simply, he has an ardent desire to *serve* music as a living force.

Does this bring an ethical dimension into his pathway as a musician? I will not judge, though I am certain that his integrity, and the beliefs which underpin it, are evident in every aspect of his playing and are transmitted immediately – without any form of self-consciousness or barrier – to his listeners. The unique passion and authority of his playing comes from this source.

One thing is for sure: in recent decades, no one has had a larger impact on the nature of piano-writing and the dissemination of modern keyboard music across the world than Aimard. In this regard, he is a historic figure – and profoundly worthy of this illustrious award. However the Pierre-Laurent I know is also a figure of courtesy and impeccable modesty, so it is likely that I am leading him into a zone of acute embarrassment. So, to save his blushes, I will conclude simply with these few words: *félicitations, bien cher ami, et merci*.

George Benjamin, June 2017