

Trusting to his own voice

Louis Lortie in recital, in concertos and in new recordings for Chandos

August 2009

At a time when pianists are increasingly expected to create a niche for themselves, Louis Lortie simply prefers to have faith in the music, his instincts and his experience.

Lortie, who turned 50 this year, has an active repertoire that extends from the 18th to the 21st century; it includes all the Mozart piano concertos and he is fascinated by the piano music of Thomas Adès, which so far has somewhat remained the preserve of the composer. He regularly plays Bach, but for the moment in private rather than in public: “You need to keep something back for when you get older,” he says, not without a twinkle in his eye.

No smart manoeuvres have been necessary to put Lortie in a strong position for two forthcoming bicentenaries – Chopin’s in 2010 and Liszt’s in 2011. Both composers are well entrenched in the Canadian’s psyche (he performs and discusses their music in short videos to be found on www.louislortie.com), and they hold a place of honour in his catalogue of some 30 recordings for Chandos. He has recently returned to the label after a break of ten years. May 2010 will bring the first volume of a new Chopin series, while Years 1 and 3 of Liszt’s *Années de Pèlerinage* and a disc of the composer’s transcriptions are planned for release 2011.

On 23rd November at London’s Queen Elizabeth Hall Lortie gives a recital consisting entirely of Chopin’s Etudes, works he has described as “a kind of dramaturgy”. (He also takes the programme to Vienna, Warsaw, Bilbao, Valencia and to Italy and the USA.) “Chopin is an artist in an all-embracing sense,” says Lortie, “Colour and transparency are of the essence. With his particular combination of immediacy and vulnerability he can be very elusive, and he’s an exceptionally difficult composer to record: it’s a question of finding lyricism, of course, but also architecture and balance. He has to sing in the *bel canto* manner inspired by the operas of Bellini, but Polish folk dances also inhabit much of his music, and – with his love of Bach’s and Mozart’s counterpoint – he also demands polyphonic disciplines. At the same time, his harmonic exploration is pulling his music forward into the era of high Romanticism.”

Composers do not come more highly Romantic than Liszt, and few are as virtuosic, but Lortie considers his music well worth the effort. “One of the things about turning fifty is that you realise that you have to devote time to the things that matter to you. There is a lot of virtuoso repertoire – say the Saint-Saëns piano concertos – that I used to enjoy working at, but now I prefer to focus on music that I find more deeply satisfying.”

Perhaps surprisingly, in recent seasons the sonatas of Beethoven have become a less frequent feature of Lortie’s performing schedule, but they will again rise to the top of his agenda as he prepares to complete his recorded cycle for Chandos. Due in the studio are the sonatas opp 54, 57 (‘Appassionata’), 78, 79, 90, 109, 110 and 111, which will be included in a boxed set of the entire canon, scheduled for release in Autumn 2010. Lortie’s recording of the composer’s ‘Eroica’ Variations,

which won an Edison Award, was described by *Gramophone* in glowing terms: “His account ... is spacious and magisterial, virile yet sensitive, and the wide range of dynamic nuance and keyboard colour is there to illumine Beethoven's textures and not highlight the artist's pianism. He succeeds in communicating the power of Beethoven's imagination: the part-writing in the fugue emerges with a masterly clarity, and is beautifully weighted and balanced.”

In the UK in 2010, Lortie will also perform Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra under Yutaka Sado at Bridgewater Hall, Manchester (January 29th) and Chopin's Piano Concerto No 1 with the Bournemouth Symphony and Yan Pascal Tortelier (Poole, Feb 24th; Basingstoke, Feb 25th; Portsmouth, Feb 26th). On 27th May, having performed Mozart's Piano Concerto No 26 with the Ulster Orchestra and Kenneth Montgomery on Friday 21st, he returns to the Queen Elizabeth Hall for a thoroughly Gallic evening of chamber music, joining forces with violinist Augustin Dumay and the Ébène Quartet for Chausson's Concerto for Violin, Piano and String Quartet, partnering Dumay in Franck's glorious violin sonata, and opening proceedings with Ravel's *Valses Nobles et Sentimentales*.

Lortie keeps a home in his native Quebec, but he is now based primarily in Berlin and, following dates in the USA and France, has struck up a particularly close relationship with Kurt Masur, with whom he will perform in the coming seasons in Rome, Dresden and Leipzig. Beyond his work as a pianist, Lortie now also conducts on a regular basis – and not just from the keyboard. For the Canadian label ATMA Classique he has recorded Mendelssohn concertos with the Orchestre symphonique de Québec and also the composer's 'Reformation' Symphony.

Of illuminating importance to him is his work in masterclasses with young pianists: “I learn a great deal from teaching students ... For instance, I've found that the current approach to Chopin is becoming maybe more percussive, less obviously *bel canto*. Students are on a voyage of discovery, finding out what motivates them, but as we get older we can start to get very set in our ways. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we are the ones who always know better ... We need to learn to accept that the new generation can discover as many truths as we did.”

LOUIS LORTIE, performances in the UK 2009-2010

2009

Mon 23 Nov Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, International Piano Series
 CHOPIN: Etudes op 10
 CHOPIN: 3 Nouvelles Etudes, Op. posth.
 CHOPIN: Etudes op 25

2010

Fri 29 January Bridgewater Hall, Manchester, BBC Philharmonic Orchestra/Yutaka Sado
 RAVEL: Piano Concerto for the Left Hand
Wed 24 February Lighthouse, Poole, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra/Yan-Pascal Tortelier
 CHOPIN: Piano Concerto No 1
Thu 25 February Basingstoke, The Anvil – concert as above
Fri 26 February Guildhall, Portsmouth – concert as above
Fri 21 May Waterfront Hall, Belfast, Ulster Orchestra/Kenneth Montgomery
 MOZART: Piano Concerto No 26 in D major K537
Thu 27 May Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, with Alexandre Dumay and Quatuor Ébène
 RAVEL: Valses Nobles et Sentimentales
 FRANCK: Violin Sonata
 CHAUSSON: Concerto for Violin, Piano and String Quartet

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