

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH

ASHLEY WASS

Talking with Yvonne Georgiadou



Have you ever counted the number of times you came to Cyprus for a concert?

No, but I must be well into double figures now!

It's always a great, the greatest, pleasure to have you back. What makes the Pharos Festival so special?

Genuinely, there are so many things that make the Pharos Festival special. The laid-back atmosphere, the weather, the location of the hotel, the inspiration of the sea, the magical ambience of the Manor House at Kouklia and the great Cypriot salads and grilled meats. But perhaps the reason I really look forward to returning every year is the chance to see dear friends and colleagues again - fellow musicians, the Pharos team, audience members and even hotel staff. Of all the places I visit for concerts on a regular basis, this is probably the one where I feel most relaxed and at home.

Pick your favourite work from this year's programme.

Ravel's Piano Trio. It's the King of trios. Nothing else even comes close.

In one of our conversations a couple of years ago I remember you expressing your wish to start experimenting with unexplored repertoire. We've seen the first evidence in your solo album with the Pastoral transcription for solo piano. As you said transcriptions are not for everyone. How was that received by the audience and critics eventually?

I think transcriptions will always divide opinion, especially when the transcribed work is as famous the Pastoral. Moreover, I didn't record it on a modern piano; instead I chose a fortepiano dating from the 1820s which made for a very unique sounding performance. I think it's fair to say the critical reception was split - some loved it, one or two hated it - which was exactly what I expected. I quite like challenging people's perceptions with provocative projects and I'm perfectly happy to accept criticism if and when it comes my way; it's more than worth it for the sense of discovery one experiences when undertaking unusual ventures. Nearly all my public performances of the Pastoral have been given on a modern instrument and the reaction from audiences has been overwhelmingly positive. Liszt's transcription is one of the hardest things written for the piano and the sheer physicality and theatricality of it seems to excite.

It certainly excited The Shoe Factory audience a year ago when you appeared for a solo recital. Now you are visiting Cyprus for the Festival but in six months you will return again as part of the Trio Apaches. How did it all start with them?

I officially formed the trio in the summer of 2012 with Matthew Trusler and Thomas Carroll, both of whom also have very successful solo careers. First and foremost, the group's based on friendship - we have tremendous fun both on and off stage - but we also share an interest in expanding the trio repertoire and exploring quirky collaborations. For example, we're planning future projects with actors and performance painters; to us this is much more exciting than constantly touring the same old Beethoven and Brahms trios that have already been played and recorded a gazillion times. It's tricky fitting concerts and rehearsals into our busy individual schedules, but we're all determined to make the trio a major part of our lives. The name, by the way, is taken from a Parisian group of artists, musicians, writers, poets and critics in the early 20th Century that included Ravel and Stravinsky. They took great pride in referring to themselves as 'artistic outcasts', a moniker we're more than happy to adopt! The French translation is 'hooligans'; most people tell us it suits us well!

And soon came the La Mer project...

The first piece we ever performed as an official group was The Seafarer Trio (with narrator) by the wonderful British composer, Sally Beamish. We fell in love with it and immediately decided to make it our first recording project. We searched high and low for a sea-related partner-piece, but came up empty-handed; that's when we had the idea to ask Sally to transcribe Debussy's La Mer. At first she thought we were mad, but we soon persuaded her it had to be done and she cleared her diary and set to work. The end result came from a process of close collaboration and we're delighted with how it sounds; one could easily imagine it was always intended as a piano trio and we're certain it'll become a major addition to the repertoire. We've already recorded both works - with Sir Willard White narrating The Seafarer - and the disc is due out in September.

Surely, this required a lot of resources...

Needless to say, funding such an enterprise didn't come cheap, so we created a scheme - a kind of 'club' - called Les Amis de La Mer. The premise is quite simple; there are 90 pages in the piano score of Sally's transcription and we're 'selling' each of them for £90. In return, sponsors get their names printed in all future editions of the score and receive a signed copy of their chosen page. It's been a remarkably successful idea and we're quite proud of its inclusive nature. We didn't want to rely solely on the philanthropy of a wealthy few - this scheme provides an opportunity for everyone to support the creation of new art.

That is actually a great initiative and I am sure a lot of people would love to have their names printed on the pages of such a great work – I am very proud to have my name printed in one of the pages of the last movement, but tell me, have you ever felt tempted to try out really contemporary music?

Well, I've premiered a few new works over the years, but nearly all the contemporary music I've played has been quite accessible in its structure and style. Take Sally's works for example - they're very concise and communicative on first hearing. Commissioning is something I've become very interested in, both for the trio and as a soloist, and I've recently commissioned another British composer - Huw Watkins - to write a piano suite for me to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the publication of Alice in Wonderland in 2015.

Sometimes I am wondering, don't musicians lose touch with their basic instincts if they are involved too much with contemporary music?

Well, I guess it's true that many specialists in modern music display little interest or empathy with classical and romantic traditions. I approach contemporary repertoire with the principle belief that it's nearly always expressing the same basic emotions that are found in the music of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries; the only difference is the language in which they're communicated. I'd like to think my performances of modern music have informed and improved my interpretations of the core repertoire. And vice versa, of course.

So what pieces you revisit when you want to stay in top performing shape.

I don't really have any! In fact, I try to make sure I have a fair amount of time - even in the busiest of patches - away from the piano. Keeping the mind fresh and invigorated with other interests and activities is much more important than most people realise.

You have always been a great pianist but I must admit, ever since your daughter was born, I feel that your expressivity has blossomed. We will never forget the exquisite way you performed Liszt's Petrarch Sonnets in last year's Festival while your daughter was sleeping outside. How has parenthood affected you as a performer?

Thank you! I hope and believe I'm constantly improving as a musician, but exactly how and why can often be a mystery. However, becoming a parent forces one to understand oneself better and I guess the process of self-discovery can only be positive when it comes to musical maturity. At the end of the day, all our major life experiences - falling in love, having our hearts broken, losing a loved one, becoming a parent - deepen our expressivity and, when channelled productively, galvanise our powers of communication.

How does baby Amelia react to your practising?

Her current favourite game is to run into my studio, pull my arm away from the piano mid-phrase and run away again. I can only assume she's hinting at something!

What would you advise her if one day she announces that she wants to be a musician?

No, no, no! I'd love for her to understand and appreciate great music, but there are far easier lives to be led than that of a musician.

So how many hours does she allow you to practise when you have a big concert?

My wife's pretty good at keeping her entertained when I'm busy and stressed. We try to divide child-care depending on our schedules - it's not easy!

You decided to abandon London a few years ago for the country? The transition I remember was a bit difficult but how does it feel now?

It's honestly the best thing I've ever done. I still have to travel into London most weeks and that can be quite tiresome, but it's a small sacrifice to make for living in such a beautiful and peaceful place. I feel it's so much healthier to be in an area where I'm not constantly surrounded by music and musicians; it helps me switch off and remain fresh of mind. Most importantly though, we're so happy we're raising our daughter here instead of London. She has a lovely garden to play in and fields, forests and hills just seconds away. It's awesome.

What are your plans after Cyprus?

It's a hectic period; lots of concerts - both solo and trio - in the UK, and trips to France, Australia and Amsterdam all before mid-June. All being well, it'll be family holidays in July!

Finally, a message to all those who control funding for the arts.

"Music, when healthy, is the teacher of perfect order, and when depraved, the teacher of perfect disorder." (John Ruskin)