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New

an Pace came to prominence in the early 1990s on the back of a new wave of British pianists all interested in transcendent virtuosity and new music that stood outside the mainstream, Pace – alongside James Clapperton, Rolf Hind and Nicolas Hodges – wrestled works by Iannis Xenakis, Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy and John Cage like a true heavyweight, while discovering that the less note-heavy music of Morton Feldman and Howard Skempton held its own sorts of complexity.

Ten years on, Pace is more feted in continental Europe than at home. He regularly partners the Arditti Quartet in its European concerts, while his 2003 CD of French composer Pascal Dusapin's piano concerto, *À Quia*, with the Orchestre de Paris under Christoph Eschenbach, was a career highlight, but one that stressed an uncomfortable truth – Pace has *never* performed with a major British symphony orchestra. His uncompromising approach and unapologetic intellectualism puts him out of kilter with the present fad for blurring art and entertainment. As the BBC sexes-up its Proms coverage with a Sudoku competition in the interval, Pace issues Marxist programme notes with his concerts; and he champions young composers he believes have something to say, often putting them in the context of central European masters like Mauricio Kagel, Helmut Lachenmann and Beat Furrer.

'Lachenmann said that listening has to do with "the denial of habit",' Pace explains, as we ponder what it is listeners find so provocative about his playing. 'Music can conform to tried-and-tested experiences, or it can try to supplement them. I very strongly favour the

latter option and I'm looking to find music, and play it in such a manner, as somehow connects with the real world around, but also seeks from within other realms of experience. I'm interested in bringing out what is *extra*-ordinary in a work, while attempting to do so in a way that isn't so detached as to become esoterically meaningless.

'Simply doing whatever is contrary to conventional wisdom is an idly manneristic way of achieving that in performance. A lot of performances, especially in Britain, are designed to allow audiences to bask in a titillating experience. That's not what I want as a listener, and I could never deliver comfortably something I wouldn't want to listen to myself. I'm not interested in trying to seduce audiences; rather, I want to encourage them to actively engage with, think about, the music I play and the interpretation offered – if they don't want that from a concert, then stay away from mine.

'Music – new and old – uses processes of fragmentation and discontinuity, drama achieved

either through the juxtaposition of highly delineated musical materials or, conversely, by exploring expressive regions for longer than might be expected, or the use of dynamics, articulation and textures that exceed the boundaries of "central ranges". I refuse to tame those important aspects in the interest of producing a more easily digestible product. But that doesn't mean a necessary predilection for extremes; one of my favourite composers is Brahms, in whose music one finds a highly individuated and distinct approach to harmonic and thematic processes, sometimes significantly at cross-purposes from the expectations provided by the genres within which he works. There is very little that is simply filling or decoration, and this approach was extended further by Schoenberg. Miniatures for piano by either composer are not merely elaborations of singular affects, but rather very wide-ranging, intricate and challenging psychological dramas.'

PACE WAS BORN in 1968 in Hartlepool, a town in the north-east of England where culture was hardly considered a priority. Musically, he was obliged to fend for himself, but by the age of eight was already busking through opera vocal scores at the piano and realising that he was an instinctive sightreader. Finding recordings of Cage's *Concerto for Prepared Piano* and *HPSCHD*, Stockhausen's *Kontakte*, *Gesang de Jünglinge* and *Momente*, and both of Furtwängler's *Ring* cycles in his local library gave him a formative taste of how music could remove him from the here-and-now. At ten, Pace went to Chetham's School of Music and – via a period studying mathematics at Oxford – relocated to New York for two years, where he studied with György Sándor at the Juilliard



Photos - this page and opposite - © Luis Castilla

radical

For some, Ian Pace has inherited the mantle of avant-garde piano pioneers like David Tudor and Aloys Kontarsky; for others he's a hell-raiser who takes the piano in directions they'd rather it didn't go. Whether you're with him or against him, he's a force on the British music scene that's impossible to ignore, as Philip Clark discovers



School. Pace feels that his roots in northern England give his music making a different perspective to what he describes as 'the ephemeral and ornamental music of the public-school world of the current British musical establishment'. His 2001 disc, *Tracts*, presented composers with a view of British music that's not in hock to stereotypes of pastoralism. If he feels natural empathy for Birtwistle rather than Knussen, that's the distinction. But how does Pace answer the accusation that, with a Chets-Oxford-Juilliard background, he's now guilty of kicking the very establishments from which he's benefited?

'That's an inevitable charge and not one that should be dismissed lightly,' Pace elucidates. 'Yes, I benefited from that privileged position, but I see people who've had to survive without that and life can be very tough on them. The Britain I know is complex and divided. I don't see Finnissey, Fernyhough, Dillon or Richard Barrett as freak individuals within British society; actually, I believe their work has more to do with a wider culture that in the 20th century also produced [filmmakers] Alfred Hitchcock and Lindsay Anderson, [novelist] B.S. Johnson, [poet] Basil Bunting, and the Sex Pistols.'

'I perceived very early on at Chetham's how certain types of social backgrounds were implicitly equated with the possession of refined musicality, seen as the hallmark of a "true artist". I reacted very strongly against that and all the aesthetics it implied. It contradicted so much of what I felt about Beethoven, for example; his fervent refusal to censor his work

to the vagaries of aristocratic or petit-bourgeois taste. I feel in almost every work of his conviction, intransigence and open-eyedness; he let taste follow him rather than the other way round. The sometimes harsh perspective of nature impinging upon consciousness in the 'Pastoral' Symphony is as far away from contemporary musical landscape painting as is Finnissey's *English Country-Tunes*.

'When I hear people insist that music must be "beautiful" or "musical", I ask what exactly do those terms mean? I suspect they refer to an aesthetic that consolidates an ornamental status for music. But I think that's a construction imposed upon music, rather than being an innate property of the music itself. One of the reasons I've been interested in studying historical performance practice has been to locate ways in which there are striking discrepancies between conception and later appropriation in a work. These ideas about music were certainly not something I got from Chets.'

PACE'S EXPERIMENTATION

with reinterpretations of standard repertoire has been the most controversial area of his work.

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Although commentators are largely prepared to accept his interpretations of Finnissey and Xenakis, where careful emphasis is given to balancing inner-parts between foreground and background and where polyrhythms are carefully delineated so that they can actually be heard, those same parameters applied to Beethoven or Liszt have rarely been forgiven. Pace's default piano touch is often characterised as harsh or brittle but, for Pace, the touch is the point.

'When people talk about a "beautiful tone" or of "depth of tone", they're often referring to a ▶

◀ conjunction of stylistic attributes in playing,' he claims, 'This includes the foregrounding of one voice above others, a general sort of mild legato, continuous use of the pedal while changing it for harmonies. This produces a "beautiful" and sometimes sumptuous effect, but that is one type of sound among many.

'What the default tone should be varies enormously depending on the music; I often use an extremely legato and rich sound in some Chopin, Debussy, Dusapin, some Finnissey, but people tend to remember the times when the tone isn't as they expect. A lot of the music I play, from my point of view, demands a higher degree of drier playing and more selective use of the pedal than is average at present, but that's not a rigid ideology. Boulez writes at the end of the Second Piano Sonata to *pulveriser le son* and when Pollini plays this I feel the demands of producing a "beautiful sound" constrain him from achieving what the composer requires. There's harshness in Mozart too – think of the sadistic way the emotionally vulnerable character of Donna Elvira is ritually humiliated in *Don Giovanni*, and how the mocking music exacerbates such an effect. Liv Glaser, in her fortepiano recordings of Mozart sonatas, really brings out the harshness of the sudden dynamic shifts, in huge contrast to the elegance she communicates elsewhere; it's anything but mantelpiece Mozart.'

THE YIN AND YANG of Pace's musicianship – his belief in extreme accuracy operating hand-in-hand with his desire to aim for the edgy, sometimes dark underbelly of a piece – is encapsulated by his background in mathematics and his time as a Sándor student. Although Pace denies maths has made much direct impact on how he plays ('the discipline of rigorous argument and logic in maths is more important to some of my work as a writer and musicologist,' he says), Sándor was central to his development.

FORTHCOMING RELEASES

Brian Ferneyhough – Opus Contra Naturam
(live recording of world premiere)

Transit Festival Documentation CD 2007

Brian Ferneyhough – Complete Piano Works
Metier 2007

Michael Finnissey –
The History of Photography in Sound (five CDs)
Metier 2007

Mauricio Kagel – Complete Piano Works
For release 2007 (label tbc)



IAN PACE – DISCOGRAPHY

Pascal Dusapin – Etudes for Piano. À Quia (with Orchestre de Paris, conducted Christoph Eschenbach) (two CDs). *Naxos* MO 782164

Richard Emsley – Flow Forms (solo and with ensemble Topologies). *Metier* CD 92044

Michael Finnissey – Gershwin Arrangements. *Metier* MSVCD 92030

Michael Finnissey – Verdi Transcriptions; Snowdrift; To and Fro; Piano Concertos nos. 4 and 6 (2 CDs). *Metier* MSVCD 92027

Elena Firsova – Hymn to Spring. *Melodina Records* MRCD 00014a

Christopher Fox – More Light – Piano Works. *Metier* MSVCD 92022

Christopher Fox – You, Us, Me – Piano and Vocal Works (solo and with Amanda Crawley). *Metier* MSVCD 92031

Peter Maxwell Davies – Five Piano Pieces op. 2 + Hymnos, Clarinet Sonata (with Guy Cowley). *Metier* MSVCD 92055

Hilda Paredes – Cotidales (with Arditti Quartet). *Mode* 149

Alwynne Pritchard – Spring; Der Zwerg; Invisible Cities and ensemble works (with Topologies). *Metier* CD 92040

Bernd Alois Zimmermann – Capriccio; Intercomunicazione; Presence (with Peter Sheppard-Skaevered and Friedrich Gauwerky). *Albedo* ALBCD 022

Walter Zimmermann – Piano Works 1974–1988 (two CDs). *Metier* MSVCD 92057

tracts: works of Brian Ferneyhough, James Erber, Christopher Fox, Chris Dench, Richard Barrett. *NMC* D 066

'Sándor was a unique player, but one who came from a certain tradition,' he recalls. 'It's probably banal to suggest he came from a strong Hungarian lineage descending from Liszt, but I do think that's true. As a player he was very direct, very unaffected – qualities which appeal to me. And he used a wide variety of touch and articulation, and had his own somewhat "unhinged" side, which I liked. But that's not to say I slavishly adhere to all aspects of his approach – he was resolutely unsympathetic to any music after Bartók, about which we had many heated arguments, and had no interest in historical performance styles. But I've certainly found Sándor's technical approach to be applicable to the contemporary music I play – I've ingrained it very deeply, and haven't found anything, pianistically, that I haven't been able to achieve as a result.'

Pace's marathon concerts have become a fixture on the London new music scene, and at the start of 2006 he played Michael Finnissey's *History of Photography in Sound* and sections of Frederic Rzewski's *The Road* (a combined duration of some

eleven hours) in the same week. The Finnissey work – of which Pace gave the premiere – has become something of a signature piece, and alongside his forthcoming recording of it Pace is working on a book that explores its cultural reference points and compositional techniques. Writing is becoming an increasingly significant part of Pace's creative life; books on Brahms and Liszt focus on his zeal for historical performance practice, while his 'leftist critique of the "New Musicology"' is likely to be a political hot potato. Other recent recordings have included music by maverick German composer Walter Zimmerman, and the scandalously undervalued British composer Richard Emsley. Both composers work with underlying structural density that somehow yields a surface of real clarity; as such, both men are 'Pace composers'. But what makes Pace want to play a particular piece?

'I'm drawn to music that expresses something of the uniqueness of the individuals who create it and their subjective perspectives on things – that unfashionable quality of "honesty". The pressures of the marketplace mitigate against this, finding it easier to sell that which satisfies the criteria of pre-packaged musical "character". What distinguishes really fine composition are the ability and confidence to enter into a critical engagement with existing musical traditions and languages and to forge something new and individual from them. If that's a Modernist sensibility, then it has centuries of history behind it – only postmodernists seem happy to bandy about a kaleidoscope of different styles without meditation. Musical composition and performance are about more than picking items off "supermarket shelves" and displaying them to others. Stockhausen's music, or Dusapin's, or Lachenmann's or Finnissey's, all communicate something utterly personal but engage with the world at large.' ■