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Interview with Pascal Rogé





“Even when I was a child, music was already an elixir of life for me – and as natural as eating and drinking.”

“Saint-Saëns has to sparkle like champagne!”

The French pianist Pascal Rogé talks about his first love, Debussy's landscapes and painting with music

C. Bechstein: Monsieur Rogé, there is no ignoring your interpretations when it comes to French piano music. Does one have to be French to be able to play this repertoire?

Pascal Rogé: Of course not, but it helps. You need a certain lightness to play Debussy, Poulenc or Ravel. The profundity of Beethoven or Brahms is foreign to French music, although it is anything but superficial. Feelings are transported differently; for example, dark moods never sound despairing. Saint-Saëns is difficult to understand outside French cultural circles because although his music seems serious, it is very cheerful and entertaining at the same time. Saint-Saëns does not leave behind an impression like a heavy Bordeaux; rather, he sparkles like champagne.

C. Bechstein: And what do you associate with Debussy, whom you discovered when you were only eight years old?

Pascal Rogé: Debussy was an extraordinary experience for me from the outset. I felt as though his music was a canvas for my own inner pictures. Of course, there is a structure in Debussy's pieces, but it is not the central theme. If you really want to play Debussy well, you learn more by looking at a Pissarro painting than by sitting down at the piano. Whenever I play Debussy, I see colours and landscapes, I smell fragrances. Debussy shares this sensuousness with Ravel and Fauré, although they paint with quite different colours. Of course, the music of Schumann, Schubert or Mozart is also colourful, however in their compositions the musical structure is in the foreground. This is an essential difference which explains why I feel like a painter when I play the French repertoire. I consider the freedom of interpretation which I

then have to be a great privilege. Debussy sounds different to me every evening – because even when you use the same colours, the resulting picture is never the same. I don't force my own ideas on the audience; after all, the listeners should discover their own, very personal pictures in the music.

C. Bechstein: What role does technique play in your “sound paintings”?

Pascal Rogé: There comes a point where you reach the limits of technical concepts. Instead of explaining to my students: “Here you should only use half a pedal, there you must watch the balance,” I prefer to use phrases like: “This should sound light, and that dark. Think of the blue sky, think of moonlight.” When I play myself, I forget about technique.

C. Bechstein: You are not a friend of live recordings. What do you have against preserving an unforgettable evening?

Pascal Rogé: I love playing in front of an audience. And I go into the recording studio with the same enthusiasm. However, I believe you shouldn't mix these two kinds of performance. The audience, the room, the acoustics, my mood that evening – these are all part of a live performance. A recording cannot reproduce all that. If you go to a concert, you enjoy the moment; when you put on a CD you can analyse what you hear. They are two completely different approaches. In the recording studio I can work like an author who writes, rejects and changes. Only the result counts in the end.

C. Bechstein: You grew up with music: your grandfather was a violinist, your mother an organist. Were you forced to take music lessons as a child, or did you discover the world of sounds on your own initiative?

Pascal Rogé: Even when I was a child, music was already an elixir of life for me – and as natural as eating and drinking. I learned to read sheet music very early on, and when I first went to school I was amazed to discover that no other child was learning to play a musical instrument. I regarded our piano at home as my toy, and when my mother gave lessons she always had to lock the room, because I always wanted to show her pupils how easy it is to play well.

I was no more than six years old when I heard my mother play Poulenc's organ concerto – an experience that engraved itself deeply into my soul. I already fell in love with this music at that time – and I get that indescribable feeling again today whenever I hear Poulenc.

C. Bechstein: This year you were musical director of the “Incontri in Terra di Siena” for the third time. What appeals to you about this artistic programme which is so full of contrasts?

Pascal Rogé: The countryside in the Val d'Orcia in Tuscany is fantastic – the most beautiful surroundings imaginable for a chamber music festival; above all it is very intimate. I love the family-like atmosphere in which the rehearsals and concerts take place. This year the music ranged from Argentinean tangos to Baroque music as well as to Korngold and Hindemith. The beautiful thing about chamber music, of course, is the dialogue with partners – although I'm never interested in conceptual discussions but in shared feelings.



Champions' League

1:0 for Bechstein: new advertising campaign for the long-established company

"I feel at home all over the world because I have everything I need with me."

Image: Nick Granito (1)

C. Bechstein: You are travelling for most of the year. Don't you miss your New York home?

Pascal Rogé: Not in the slightest. I feel at home all over the world because I have everything I need with me: books, computer – and my music stored on three iPods. I love travelling and always try to stay a few days longer in one place so I can have a really good look round. I would find it quite depressing if I got to see nothing but airports, concert halls and hotel rooms.

C. Bechstein: The last time you were in Berlin you also gave a concert at C.Bechstein's.

Pascal Rogé: Yes, it was a wonderful experience. I hadn't played on a Bechstein for many years and I was very impressed by the fullness of its sound. In the past Bechstein was mainly associated with chamber music, but the new generation of grand pianos is just as well-suited for music by Prokofieff or Rachmaninoff. A great piano brand is back.

C. Bechstein: Monsieur Rogé, thank you for talking to us.

His name is inextricably linked with French piano music, and reviews acclaim "the best playing of French repertory in the world today." Pascal Rogé grew up with Debussy and Poulenc, Satie and Saint-Saëns. As a small boy he loved to play the piano and could read sheet music before he could handle the alphabet. At the age of eleven he performed with an orchestra for the first time – in Paris, his home town. He was subsequently admitted to the Paris Conservatory, where he won first prizes for piano and chamber music. At the age of 17 he made triumphant debuts in Paris and London, and at 20 he won the famous Marguerite Long-Jacques Thibaud Competition.

Pascal Rogé, who sees himself as an "ambassador of French music", is travelling for most of the year, giving solo concerts and performing with the world's great orchestras. For three years he has been the musical director of the "Incontri in Terra di Siena" – a chamber music festival held in Tuscany every summer. His prize-winning recordings include Saint-Saëns and Ravel concerts conducted by Charles Dutoit.

The Rogé Edition on the Onyx label with works by Debussy is continually growing. In February 2008, as an addition to the CD "George Gershwin: Concerto in F, Maurice Ravel: Concerto in G major", Oehms Classics will be bringing out Ravel's "Concerto for the Left Hand" and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" and "An American in Paris" – again accompanied by the RSO Vienna conducted by Bertrand de Billy. One example demonstrating Pascal Rogé's passion for chamber music is a CD on Ysaye Records with works by C. Franck in a recording with the Quatuor Ysaye Quartet.

The bad news (although it's nothing new) is that music is badly neglected as a subject in our schools – partly because of a lack of capacity and partly because the importance of arts teaching is no longer recognized. The good news is that young people are taking up music nevertheless, and their desire to play an instrument is greater than it has been for a long time. C. Bechstein advocates taking children seriously and giving them suitable incentives. The piano maker's priority here is not to promote an elite but to show children how much fun it is to play a musical instrument. Next year, therefore, there will be Bechstein cycles for the piano which will specifically target young people.

Children under twelve already have free admission to Bechstein piano recitals in Berlin, Hamburg and Düsseldorf. C. Bechstein is currently attracting attention with an advertising campaign developed in cooperation with the renowned public relations and advertising agency Scholz & Friends – who have been at the top of German creative rankings for many years. The three advertising motifs show boys and girls playing the piano and are aimed at parents with children of (primary) school age. The message is clear: nothing is more fun than playing on a Bechstein piano. Football, skateboarding, even the family dog take second place. What the well-composed pictures cannot get across is that Bechstein instruments sound good even when they are not played perfectly, and that they are extremely robust partners.



Heading for Expansion

Positive assessment at the annual meeting of shareholders

Without doubt, Germany is the best-selling market for C. Bechstein AG's range of brand products. However, the steps taken in the previous year to promote sales in export markets are also showing initial results. Bechstein America, LLC began its operations at the beginning of the 2007 financial year; its Bechstein Piano Centre in Manhattan will be officially opened with programs on the 18th through 20th of September. C. Bechstein now also has a Center in the Ukrainian capital, Kiev – read more on page 8. Bechstein AG's partner network for production and distribution is also being developed further. For example, all the shares of Bohemia Piano, a Czech maker of upright and grand pianos based in Jihlava (Iglau) and Hradec Kralove, were recently taken over by C. Bechstein. Since May of this year Bohemia has been operating under the name of "C. Bechstein Europe". Bohemia's products round off C. Bechstein's range, and the close cooperation will lead to an increase in production and efficiency.

In view of these measures, which have strengthened C. Bechstein's market position, it came as no surprise that the company was able to present an extremely positive report on the financial year at this year's annual meeting of shareholders, which was held at the Berlin C. Bechstein headquarter on 6 July 2007. Turnover in 2006 was 6% up on the previous year, and profit for the year was 26% higher at €1.5 million after tax, so that the percentage return on sales was over 5%. Of course, the shareholders will also benefit from this solid growth with a tax-free dividend payout of 35 euro cents per share – the equivalent of a net yield of around 4% (compared to 3.7% in the previous year). This represents an increase of 5 cents per share compared to the previous year.

Duinity

They play flawlessly together, their technique is breathtaking, and their enjoyment of playing music together seems endless. Anthony and Joseph Paratore are regarded as one of the best piano duos in the world today – and have been for over thirty years.

"When the two begin, a witchcraft of correspondence begins. Such complete uniformity of phrasing, breathing and trills – as they play with, despite and across each other – is simply amazing ..." wrote master-critic Joachim Kaiser after a concert by the Paratore brothers in Munich's Cuvilliés Theater. That was over thirty years ago, shortly after Anthony and Joseph Paratore had won first prize in the piano duo category at the International ARD Competition. Since then, the two sorcerers have kept audiences spellbound worldwide. They storm with somnabulatory assurance, breathtaking virtuosity and obvious pleasure through musical dream landscapes – and offer their listeners a "musical exchange of blows of the most exquisite kind" (Süddeutsche Zeitung). No mountain peak seems too high, no path too steep for them. It is as though they were savouring every nuance – and as though absolute technical perfection and flawless dialogue were the most natural things in the world.

One might think that Anthony and Joseph Paratore were twins, joined in intuitive, mutual understanding. In fact, at the beginning of their musical careers the two brothers, who studied at Boston University and the Juilliard School in New York respectively, went separate ways. It was only after a performance for a charity concert at the end of their studies that they decided that from then on they wanted to play together. They were encouraged to do so by their teachers, their father and not least by the positive response of their audiences.

Anthony and Joseph Paratore not only play flawlessly together, they are also a verbal unit. Even so, they stress that pianists are often very egocentric and loath to adapt. Thus, playing the piano as a duo is a particular challenge. What is the most difficult thing to overcome? Different ideas on a piece of music or an interpretation? Technical hurdles? Communication problems while playing together? "Most people think the most important part of duo-piano playing is to play accurately together," the Paratore brothers write on their homepage. "This is not our main concern. Playing rhythmically in sync and being technically exact is for us a given, a fundamental point for a piano duo. It is much more difficult to phrase and interpret the music together thereby making one musical statement." One of the most difficult hurdles is "the joint execution of a rubato," i.e. the free changing, acceleration or delaying of a tempo. According to Anthony and Joseph Paratore, many of these challenges can only be overcome by instinct. They doubt whether siblings find this easier. Ultimately, harmonious interaction is a question of chemistry: "Either it works or it doesn't!"

Of course, the two keyboard magicians don't rely exclusively on their musical instincts: intensive practice – both at home in Boston and on joint concert tours – is a fixed coordinate in their daily routine. That means "several hours a day preparing ourselves for concerts, rehearsing new pieces, or working on our repertoire." And because their repertoire extends from Bach to Brubeck, the two of them probably spend more time at the piano than many a bank clerk at his desk. Isn't there a danger of falling into a routine



„...and offer their listeners a musical exchange of blows of the most exquisite kind“.

Süddeutsche Zeitung

“...best two-man orchestra in the world...”

“Either it works or it doesn’t!”

after so many years of playing together? The reply comes promptly: “The only time you can use the word “routine” is for our rehearsal plan. We experience every concert we give as a challenge, it’s always exciting – and always spiced with a little spontaneity.” The “best two-man orchestra in the world” enthral its audience with elegance, poetry and a lot of wit. Their own virtuosity is never an end in itself, but is there to serve the work they are performing – whether it’s Brahms’ “Hungarian Dances” or Dave Brubeck’s “Points on Jazz”. The now 86-year-old jazz musician was so impressed by the Paratores’ playing that he personally dedicated his eight-part suite to them. Other contemporary composers have written entire works for the piano duo, among them Wolfgang Rihm, Manfred Trojahn and William Bolcom. The Paratores demonstrate their enormous versatility with sorties into jazz, as well as their own arrangements and transcriptions. For example, they have created a new version of Prokofieff’s “Peter and the Wolf” for a concert in a family environment.

The question remains which way do they prefer to play: four-handed on one piano or with two pianos? Each form has its advantages and disadvantages. With two pianos, balancing the sound between the two instruments can be a problem. Moreover, the different sound characteristics of the two instruments have to blend into one ideal overall sound. On the other

hand, there is no problem with space, as opposed to when they share one instrument. “For some passages we have to use the most impossible fingerings and do almost acrobatic contortions.” Such skirmishes are compensated in the middle range, where communication is easier. These two sorcerers would probably also manage without any words at all, so it is hardly surprising that they like both duos and duets equally. And anyway we, the listeners, wouldn’t want to miss out on any of their magic tricks.

New releases:

In November 2004 a concert was held at the Alte Oper in Frankfurt under the motto “From Bach To Brubeck”. The recently released CD Brubeck meets Bach (Sony) documents this concert and features the Dave Brubeck Quartet, Anthony & Joseph Paratore and the Bach Collegium Munich. On CD1 you can hear Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra in C-minor BWV 1060 with the Paratore brothers, and the Brubeck composition “Points on Jazz” for two pianos and chamber orchestra.

Due for release by Universal in October: the Paratore brothers’ recording of Liszt’s Piano Sonata in B minor, Camille Saint-Saëns’ Variations for Two Pianos on a Theme of Beethoven op. 35, and Arnold Schönberg’s Chamber Symphony op. 9, adapted for four hands by Alban Berg.

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10 questions for Anna Gourari

What – apart from music – puts you in a good mood?

Reading, visiting interesting exhibitions; I also love to paint. By the way, music has never had the function of putting me in a good mood.

What insults your ears?

What does silence mean to you?

At rare moments, silence is inner certainty – free of emotion and passion.

What is the most pleasant compliment you have ever received as an artist?

“You don’t make music, you *are* music.” Werner Herzog (*German film director. Anna Gourari played one of the main roles in his film “Invincible.”* – Editor’s note)

What would you be if you weren’t a pianist?

I might have got involved in history and philosophy, or tried my hand at the visual arts.

What was your musical Big Bang?

What colour is music for you?

“You can’t paint pure wind or the full moon.” Taisen Deshimaru (Japanese Zen master. – Editor’s note)

What would be your ideal audience?

When people give me their time – the most valuable thing they have – I am infinitely grateful, and at every performance I try to give them something special in return.

A piano only has 88 keys, no more than 7 octaves – and yet this limited scope represents an infinite cosmos. What does this instrument mean to you?

It is nothing more and nothing less than an “instrument” of wordless communication. The only important thing is the “language”, the music.

Your favourite CDs?

At present my favourites are Andrés Schiff’s brilliant live recordings of the Beethoven sonatas: in musical, human and spiritual terms an indescribable experience.

When Anna Gourari won first prize at the renowned Clara Schumann Competition in 1994, the distinguished jury praised her “almost mystical piano playing”. Critics enthused about her “perfect blend of fiery attack and poetic magic,” with which the Russian pianist held her audience spellbound. Since this first great success, Anna Gourari has performed regularly as a soloist and chamber musician in Europe’s major music centres – and has appeared as a guest at renowned piano festivals. For those who would like to experience Anna Gourari’s “flirt with the keys at the highest level” live, she will be playing on 9 November at the C. Bechstein-Center Berlin. On the programme are works by Brahms, Widmann and Hindemith.

“Art is not just a nice little extra – it is the umbilical cord that connects us to the divine, it guarantees our humanity.”

Nikolaus Harnoncourt

Does music make you more brilliant?

Can Mozart help improve intellectual performance? Does Beethoven improve the brain's ability to think? And how important is musical stimulation for children's learning development? Research into the effects of music on the brain has the answers.

“A Brain Full of Mozart” said a headline in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*; an article in *Spiegel* mentioned the “rewards of music”, and the *New York Times* tried to find out “Why Humans Need The Sound Of Music.” Researchers into the effects of music have known for a long time that Oscar Wilde was wrong when he said: “Music is useless and that is what makes it so valuable” if indeed the quote really is from him. We all feel how music can influence our mood, but the question occupying scientists from various disciplines is: “Does music promote intelligence?” Professor Willi Stadelmann, Director of the College of Education of Central Switzerland stresses the importance of early musical stimulation for the development of a child's brain – and for learning. But he also points out that the miracle effects suggested by some press headlines “cannot be achieved to such a degree of generalization.” The more modest claim that music makes you smart – and the hasty conclusion that a person's IQ can be increased with a little help from Mozart – leads us on the wrong track.

So how much truth is there behind the so-called “Mozart Effect” – i.e. the claim that listening to classical music permanently increases our intellectual performance? In the early nineties, two American scientists – Gordon Shaw and Frances Rauscher – believed they could prove this claim. Tests with students in California showed that their ability to think spatially improved after listening to a Mozart sonata. Listening to Beethoven or Beatles songs does indeed lead to a short-term improvement in performance. Recent research by neurobiologists and psychologists, however, has been unable to prove any long-term effect, let alone an increase in a person's intelligence quotient.

“It is trivial but clearly necessary to point out that there is no such thing as *the* effect of one type of music on *the* human being,” stresses Professor Hans Günther Bastian from Goethe University in Frankfurt-am-Main. The music educationalist emphatically warns against using music as “a universal way for pushing up IQs, a social therapy, or a cure for athlete's foot.” So Mozart has no effect? That's not true either – nobody disputes that actively making music can have a positive affect on the nerve-cell network in the cerebral cortex. After all, playing a musical instrument is one of the most complex of human activities. To play a piece from sheet music, the abstract image of the notes has to be converted to the fine motor activity of the hands, which, in turn, have to tackle completely different tasks. Professor Stadelmann emphasises that learning an instrument – if started at an early age – has an intensive influence on the micro-structure of the brain. For “brain plasticity is very pronounced in childhood.” Anyone who plays an instrument or reads sheet music will sharpen their senses and train their concentration. Children who play a musical instrument get more enjoyment out of learning. As Hans Günther Bastian is aware, the long hours of practising a musical instrument helps you develop perseverance and a will to achieve. Furthermore, music promotes social skills. In “Music Education and its Effects,” a long-term study carried out in Berlin primary schools, Hans Günther Bastian was able to show that significantly fewer pupils were excluded in classes where children played music than in the control groups. People who play music together with other communicate with each other, learn from each other and are creative together.

This reduces aggression and reinforces a feeling of responsibility. Thus, the best form of social policy is an educational policy that utilizes the positive power of music without simply using it as a means to an end. According to Hans Günther Bastian, music education should “first and foremost promote children's enjoyment of music, their enjoyment of beautiful things, playing and creative self-discovery.” Furthermore, “the reason for getting involved in music is primarily and always the music itself!” The great conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt is of the same opinion. He is against all forms of instrumentalizing arts education. “Art is not just a nice little extra – it is the umbilical cord that connects us to the divine, it guarantees our humanity.” Our children need new play space – and this doesn't mean children's rooms stuffed with computers, video games and MP3 players.



Global Player

C. Bechstein wins new audiences – by opening two centers, in New York and Kiev

The location couldn't be better: the Metropolitan Opera House and Carnegie Hall are within walking distance, the Hudson River and Central Park just a few minutes away. 207 West 58th Street is the address of the New York C. Bechstein Center, which opened a few days ago. Here, in Manhattan's piano shopping district, Bechstein is doing something new – much more than providing top-class grand pianos and excellent uprights. New York's music-lovers will experience the C. Bechstein Center as a place for top-class concerts – featuring renowned artists and promising young musicians for whom this will be an ideal forum in which they can present themselves to the public. As the company's first

major branch in the US, the New York Center will function as a hub, serving the American and Canadian markets and fostering contacts with artists, universities and other educational institutions which C. Bechstein wants to support with the kind of commitment the company already shows in Germany. There is also reason to celebrate in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. In May, in the elegant and exclusive residential and business district near the famous Pecherska Lavra Monastery, C. Bechstein's partner Lysoform opened an elegant salon which will set new standards in the Ukraine. The opening was attended by all the dignitaries from the music colleges and universities, as well as the cultural and political scene. Pianists from the Kiev Music Conservatory and competition winners, played works by Mozart, Schumann and Prokofiev.

The atmosphere in this city on the Dnepr, a centre of the arts and sciences, is one of a new beginning – and Bechstein is very much a part of it.

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