

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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An interview with Andreas Staier

“Catching the rhythm”

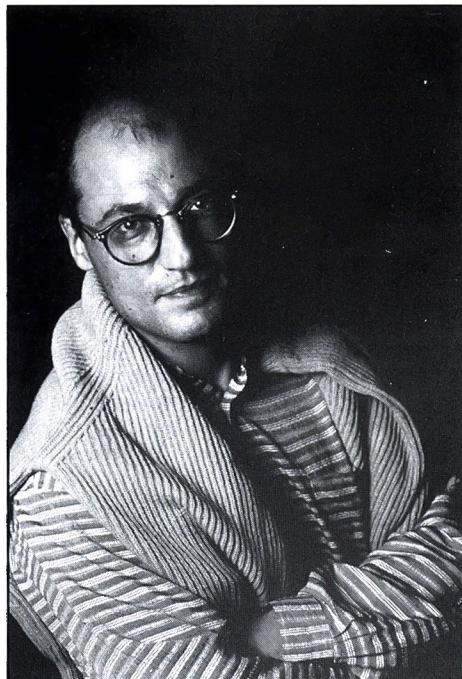
DAVID BRAY

ANDREAS STAIER, who was in London to give two concerts at the Wigmore Hall—one a performance of Schubert's song-cycle *Die Schöne Müllerin* with tenor Christoph Prégardien, the other a solo piano recital of music by Haydn, Schubert and Dussek—is a softly-spoken but extremely articulate player, very clear about his intentions, rigorously intellectual in his approach to music-making. The word intellectual is meant without any negative imputation: his playing is always of the utmost vitality and imagination, and he would be the first to say that a theoretical understanding of music actually enlivens it. Staier is one of only very few keyboard players able to juggle the different demands of playing harpsichord and fortepiano, which he does with seeming ease. How does he do this, and does he find any tension in this duality?

“I studied the modern piano first at the Conservatory [Hanover College of Music] and then when I started to play the harpsichord I didn't play the piano for several years—this is one thing that I regret, because when I began I found it very difficult. I try to plan my schedule so that I do blocks—a few weeks of harpsichord then a few weeks of fortepiano—but of course it does not always work out so simply. It takes me three or four days to get used to the change from one instrument to the other, to acclimatize: not so much to the technique, because somehow the fingers can do it, but to the sound and the aesthetic.

“I like the sound of the harpsichord. It is the most perfect of instruments: its mechanism is so simple, so pure. That is what attracted me to it—the sound is so beautiful. The harpsichord sound is always better than that of any fortepiano. But I am more attracted to the piano repertoire, and that is why I try to do both.”

Staier was playing a 1839 Streicher in his London concerts. I asked him why he chose such a late instrument for the pieces he was playing. He explained that Baptist Streicher was in many ways a rather conservative maker so that the sound was not especially different from earlier Viennese instruments. (Johann Baptist, son of Nanette Streicher, the founder of the Viennese piano firm,



Marc Borgegreve

patented a down-striking action and is also credited with the invention of the so-called Anglo-German action.) Staier far prefers original instruments to copies, though he says that practicalities often have to take priority. It is not possible in a recital such as his Wigmore concert to use the different pianos which would ideally be the most appropriate for each of the pieces: no concert promoter would tolerate such an expense and logistical headache! So much for pianos; what about his preference for different harpsichords?

“I prefer Italian and German instruments most of the time. I used not to like French harpsichords at all—I did not like the copies that I had played—until I played the Taskin that is in Edinburgh, at the Russell collection. That is a lovely instrument, and I do sometimes play French instruments now.” For the Scarlatti recordings Staier used a German instrument: “In some of the pieces I needed two

manuals, which you do not have on an Italian [harpsichord], and there were some German instruments in Spain when Scarlatti was there: there were two Zell harpsichords from Hamburg, for instance, one of which was in the court where Scarlatti was. We know so little about Spanish instruments and even Spanish music—Spain is only just opening up and they are beginning to do the sort of research that was carried out here at the turn of the century, producing the monument editions and so on. There was for example the keyboard tutor to the king: just as the queen had Scarlatti, so the king had his own tutor but nobody knows about him. You have to go to Spain to find out about him."

"I never used to practise and when I went to the Conservatory I only just passed the entrance audition"

Staier has no plans to focus more on one instrument than the other, and his current schedule still manages to preserve an effective balance between both harpsichord and fortepiano. He is spending a great deal of time at the moment on chamber music, with his ensemble Les Adieux, and on work with Christoph Prégardien. Schubert is a composer for which Staier has a particular fondness, and he says he is lucky to have been able to work so much with a singer as good and as sympathetic as Prégardien. He recorded *Winterreise* some years ago with the baritone Michael Schopper, but this has so far been unique. Was there a conscious decision to work with a tenor rather than a baritone?

"With a baritone you have to make so many changes to the music—it is difficult on the fortepiano when the songs have to be transposed down. The accompaniments are already so low. They do not go very high: you could transpose them upwards without any difficulty. Sometimes, in some songs, it does not matter, but in others the low notes are very important. I dislike having to make this compromise in Lieder." What about the sound itself: is the lighter tone quality important, especially for the songs of Schubert, since he had a high voice himself and wrote for such a high voice originally? "I think I prefer it. The tenor is the best voice, for narration especially: it is very clear—you think of the Evangelist in Bach and so on. But no, it is not the sound especially."

Staier has a prodigious technique, both in terms of brilliance of sound and virtuosity of execution, but he plays this down. "People say this but I find it surprising: I do not believe that I have a brilliant

technique. I was certainly never one of these child prodigies—in fact when I was young I had a very bad technique. I never used to practise and when I went to the Conservatory I only just passed the entrance audition. I used just to play a lot, so I was a good sight-reader, and in fact I can still sight-read very well. Then when I was there I had a wonderful teacher and I began to learn a little about how to practise. I do not do a lot of practice: I think it is better with a piece that you know not to practise too much. I like not to play a piece for a year, and then work at it for maybe an hour before I perform it. I have always a very clear idea of the way the music should sound and that means that I have to practise hard sometimes to match that image. The harpsichord I find easier to play. I think I have the technique necessary for most pieces on the harpsichord: fortepiano is more difficult and I think I probably also use too much pedal." This last point is somewhat disingenuous, since Staier's pedalling is actually one of the delights of his playing, especially in 'later' repertoire such as Schubert. On the Streicher he uses the sustaining pedal and *una corda* freely, with often magical effect, and his suggestion that the pedal blurs lack of finger-definition was certainly not borne out by his performance in London.

WHERE does his image of the music come from? He is adamant that a thorough understanding of the music is essential for a player. "The study of the theory of music is very important. I do not so much mean the way it is taught in the conservatories—music pedagogy, that is boring—but I have no time for players who say it could go this way or that, and it is only a matter of taste. I began to understand this more when I left the Conservatory." A teacher who is a colleague of Staier at the Schola Cantorum in Basle, Jespar Christensen, has influenced his thinking significantly in this area. Christensen is a tutor on the chamber music course in Basle and one of the jury at this year's Bruges keyboard competition: together, he and Staier had many discussions, analysing pieces and looking at the way in which certain pieces were put together.

"An example of this is the Bach Partitas which we talked about a lot before I recorded them. The tempi in those pieces are very interesting. We have the pendulum speeds for the original dances and a lot of them are faster than we tend to think they are today. You have to relate the speeds, not just within each suite but also when you are playing all six. I took more care with this recording than probably any other, yet it is the one of which the critics have been most disapproving: they said that some movements were too fast and others were far too slow."

THE rhythmic life of the music is something about which Staier speaks passionately: he has said before that it is important to 'catch the rhythm' of a piece—by which he means not only its forward drive, but also the rhythm within a phrase. He says, "People do not understand rhythm and how close it has to be to improvisation." This is immensely significant, and perhaps goes some way towards explaining why Staier feels that he has less affinity with French music. The rhythmic imprecision of the French manner is elusive, even self-indulgent, and Staier says that he feels he does not understand it.

What music would he like to play? "The music of the virginalists. It was this music first of all that persuaded me to play the harpsichord. At the Conservatory I did not know it—on the piano we played Bach, of course, and perhaps Couperin. I am particularly fond of Byrd, and it is something that I intend to play when I get around to it." He has not yet recorded any Beethoven. "I am only just beginning to understand how to play Beethoven. You know this music too well, since you were one-and-a-half, and everyone plays it. I did not know how I could play it so that it was my own."

He will not record any more Haydn for the time being, and is certainly not planning a complete recording of the sonatas. He is disarmingly frank about his reasons for this: "I do not agree with the craze for complete recordings. If I did all the Haydn it would be about fifteen discs. I know that when Scott Ross did the *intégrale* of the Scarlatti sonatas he came to hate the music, and I do not want to do that. There are several Beethoven sonatas and Haydn sonatas that I do not want to play. That is fine: why should I? When you get to three discs [*as he has with the Haydn sonatas on Deutsche Harmonia Mundi*] the record company says that now you have to decide whether to do a complete set or not. There are some pieces I would still like to do: the Esterházy sonatas, the A-flat sonata with the slow movement in D flat [Hob. XVI/46] and the late [C major] Fantasy."

Staier has recorded two Mozart concertos: the "Jeunehomme" KV 271 and the G major, KV 453; also two Dussek concertos and the two by Salieri, not yet released. There were plans to record the Schumann concerto in Holland: that would have been a fascinating disc and it is regrettable that it did not work out. Staier recorded two concert performances and it was intended that they would be used as the basis of a disc. But the

tuning of the fortepiano was the main difficulty: "In one of the performances the middle A went slightly out of tune, and the concerto is in A minor—that note comes in nearly every bar!—and I thought, 'That's it: no recording.' I asked friends who were at the concert if they had noticed and they said no, but if I had then the microphones certainly would have done. That is the problem with 'live' recording on the harpsichord or fortepiano, because when you get an audience in the hall it starts to warm up and the instrument begins to go out of tune, which does not happen with a modern piano. That is not good enough for a recording."

"People do not understand rhythm and how close it has to be to improvisation"

"I prefer live performing to recording. It is different—for me at least. When I am there in a studio with the microphones it is more controlled in a negative sense. I am more pedantic; it does not flow so easily."

The two concerts in London demonstrated Staier's vitality and freedom in performance: controlled yet fully alive to the music's expressive content. His accompanying is sensitive to the contribution of the singer but never subservient, and his playing seems to capture the essence of the composer in a way which is rare in any pianist, let alone amongst fortepianists. In his solo recital it was the A minor Schubert sonata which worked best—the piano sound was colourful and the phrasing of the music subtle. Clearly, the influence of working closely with a singer in the Lieder repertoire has had a profound influence on Staier's playing and in the music of a song-composer like Schubert this clearly counts.

Some people consider that Staier's fortepiano playing is better than his harpsichord playing; others say exactly the opposite. This could be said to indicate enormous success in both. Whatever one's point of view the very fact that he manages to combine the two with such assured command is a tribute to a fine musician and one who refuses to be at all narrow-minded. Staier is determined to develop his playing of each instrument as fully as possible and no one could accuse him of spreading his considerable talents too thinly. His modesty shields a powerful and forthright personality. We must look forward to his next London concerts with impatient anticipation.