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INSIDE SHEET MUSIC

THE RAYMOND VARIATIONS
BY STEPHEN POTTS
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terms deter
listeners?

LISE DE LA SALLE

Seriously eloquent

CHIMES OF FREEDOM

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protest in 1968

PERFECT FOURTH

Completing
Schumann's
last sonata

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Rachmaninov

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POSITIVE
INFLUENCE

From transcriptions by Liszt and Busoni to new commissions from her own contemporaries, the brilliant young French pianist Lise de la Salle tells *Stephen Wigler* how J S Bach has inspired her programming across three centuries of piano repertoire

FIRST HEARD ABOUT LISE DE LA Salle when she was 10, around a year after her first public concert – a live broadcast on Radio-France. I went on to follow her recording career, starting with an album of challenging Rachmaninov and Ravel works, released on the Naïve label when she was just 15. She has gone on to make several brilliant recordings of some of the most fearsomely demanding works ever written for the keyboard. Yet it wasn't until her recent recital at New York's Town Hall that I finally heard this extraordinary pianist, who turns 30 this month, in person.

I was struck by the fact that de la Salle, in spite of her fearless mastery of the piano, was actually rather shy in addressing her New York audience. Nevertheless, she was an eloquent guide to a recital that focused on Bach, including works that were intended as homages to their great progenitor by composers from Liszt onwards, extending right up to the present

day. She explained how Bach inspired other composers, who took his music in unexpected directions. About the two Liszt works on the programme, for example, she noted that in his transcription of the organ Prelude and Fugue in A minor, he could remain absolutely faithful to the spirit and letter of the music, but that in his *Fantasy and Fugue on the Theme B-A-C-H* (the German nomenclature means B-flat, A, C, B-natural), he could also write, as de la Salle put it, 'an incredibly crazy piece!'

'The *Fantasy and Fugue* can be dangerous,' de la Salle told me over lunch the day after the recital. 'You have to be careful not to make it sound too bombastic early on – otherwise the fireworks at the end become meaningless. You have to do much more than merely show how fast and loud you can play.' The evening before, she had played the piece with conviction and power, and with a sound that was, even at the highest dynamic levels, so carefully shaded and nuanced that there were discernable distinctions between the merely very loud and the almost ear-shatteringly loud. The clangour was both tremendous and beautiful.

During her performance, I kept on being reminded of de la Salle's description of this *Fantasy and Fugue's* 'crazy' qualities. As she surely intended, her description highlights the extraordinary originality Liszt achieved in this late work, in which the ornate decoration of masterpieces such as *Après une lecture de Dante* and the Sonata in B minor is cut to a minimum. In addition, the use of melody is more austere; the counterpoint implicit rather than explicit; and the rhythmic structure ever more fluid and experimental as the work becomes wilder and wilder, and as explosion follows explosion. There may be a handful of pianists (one thinks of Marc-André Hamelin) who might possibly be capable of playing this music with slightly more transparency and clarity. However, I can't think of anyone since Cziffra in his prime who so brings out its Hungarian inflections, its colour and drama.

By the tumultuous conclusion of the performance, de la Salle's Steinway was so knocked out of tune that the 20-minute interval did not provide sufficient time for the technician to do his work. That wasn't a problem for the audience, most of whom

were still catching their collective breath after the *Fantasy and Fugue*. After more than 10 minutes of additional work, the technician walked off stage to applause, and the piano was ready for Liszt's transcription of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in A minor. This work, incidentally, was the only piece on the programme not to be found on de la Salle's much-acclaimed recent disc, *Bach Unlimited*, which contains only one work of 'un-hyphenated' Bach, the *Italian Concerto*, which opened the recital.

THE MUSIC OF BACH AND LISZT have been constants in de la Salle's life since even before she began giving concerts as a precocious student at the Paris Conservatoire. Her second recording, made when she was 16, was devoted to the music of both composers and included a performance of the Hungarian's transcription of the Prelude and Fugue BWV 543. It was chosen as *Gramophone* magazine's CD of the Month and Editor's Choice on its release in 2005.

'It was that Prelude and Fugue that started me thinking about Liszt and Bach together,' she says. 'I've been playing the transcription almost my whole life. It was one of the first "hard" pieces I learned when I was still a child. Most people would not think of their music together. They are so extremely difficult and each is so powerful in different ways. But they both know the instrument so well that they fit the human hand wonderfully. The music of Schumann, for example, is wonderful, but not obviously pianistic: he's great, but extremely awkward to play. Bach, of course, was not writing for the modern piano, but the way his music fits under your hand is amazing and playing his work is indispensable for possessing genuine mastery of the instrument. Understanding his scores, with their astonishing capacity for making you hear so many voices at once is the basis for playing everything and understanding the structure of nearly everything written after him. For me, his music represents the perfect combination of rigour, sensuality and emotion.'

The idea for de la Salle's *Bach Unlimited* programme and disc started percolating a few years ago when she was playing several



Lise de la Salle: redefining the structure of the traditional piano recital

Bach-inspired pieces, including Busoni's transcription of the *Chaconne*: 'I wanted to find a programme for a recital disc based on Bach's music, but one that didn't involve a complete set of his pieces or a mere selection from his works,' she says. 'Then it occurred to me that in the three centuries of music since Bach, so many composers have used his music in ways that reflect his influence.'

The Prelude and Fugue BWV 543 was one of six transcriptions of Bach's organ pieces the Hungarian made during his intensive study of Bach's music in 1842 and which initiated the tradition of creative borrowing from Bach. De la Salle noted how closely and remarkably Liszt managed to transfer the complete pedal part to the left hand while preserving the original character of the remaining

structure. And then she contrasted this faithful transcription with Liszt's much later (completed in 1870) *Fantasy and Fugue on B-A-C-H*.

'The latter fugue is clearly an open homage to Bach, but it transforms the structure in unexpected ways,' she says. 'It was at that point that the path to the programme seemed clear to me. One generation later, at the end of the 19th century, in his transcription of the *Chaconne*, Busoni pushes the piano to even further extremes. Then I chose two pieces from the 20th century: Francis Poulenc's *Valse improvisation sur le nom de Bach* and Albert Roussel's Prelude and Fugue. Finally, because I felt the listener needed breathing spaces and because I wanted the programme to come into the 21st century, I commissioned my friend Thomas Enhco

to write four little pieces, all of which jump off from famous Bach works, including the *Italian Concerto* and the *Chaconne*.'

BACH UNLIMITED IS ACTUALLY THE second 'concept' programme that de la Salle has devised. During her recent six-week tour of North America, she was playing (along with performances of Beethoven's Concerto No 4 in G major) another recital programme organised around a single idea: 'I call it my transcendental love programme,' the pianist says. 'It's a selection of diverse pieces that reflect the many stages of love, from the happy life and the peaceful love that you find in Liszt's transcriptions of Schumann's *Widmung* and *Frühlingsnacht*, to his darkly dramatic transcription of Wagner's *Isoldes Liebestod*. Then there is Schumann's *Fantasie in C*, which, especially in the first movement, depicts the tortured love between Robert and Clara. And, of course, 10 pieces from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, which take the listener on a passage from the innocence of first love, through passion and ultimately to the finality of death.'

De la Salle is one of a number of prominent pianists – her somewhat older contemporaries include Leif Ove Andsnes, Hélène Grimaud and Evgeny Kissin – who are attempting to redefine the structure of the traditional piano recital, which has remained pretty much unchanged since those of Hans von Bulow, Anton Rubinstein and Clara Schumann in the second half of the 19th century.

'Putting programmes together was easier in the old days,' de la Salle says, 'because nowadays we – or at least the media – want a gimmick. I must say, even though I do it myself, I hate it! I deeply believe that music has to be enough. But if I *do* tell a story, it has to be a good one – a story that both the audience wants to hear and I want to tell. For me, the important thing is to travel through different composers at different times and different emotions.'

In her decisions about repertory, de la Salle says she always follows her emotions

'Bach's music represents the perfect combination of rigour, sensuality and emotion.'

LYNN GOLDSMITH





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in choosing what to perform. 'You have to be really feeling that the time is right. Liszt, Bach, Beethoven, Ravel and Rachmaninov are composers to whom I have always felt close and they have always been central to my repertoire. I added Schumann's music somewhat later, when its crazy passion became something with which I felt I could identify. Schubert's music is another matter. I think his music is great and I love it. But I need to feel it's the right moment before I start to perform it, and I don't think that time has yet arrived.'

The wisdom of her choices is apparent from her nine recordings to date – most of them released on the Naïve label. Nearly all of them are superb. Her set of Rachmaninov's four concertos and *Paganini* Rhapsody, for example, is one of the very few complete cycles recorded by a woman, and it ranks – alongside those by Ashkenazy, by Andsnes and by the composer himself – among the finest on record.

Since she turned 18, de la Salle has been without a teacher and making her own decisions about her career and her repertoire. 'I've been very lucky in having the right teachers at the right time,' she says. 'The first one was when I was four. She was a warm and wonderful woman. There were almost two dozen of us in her class and while I had only about 20

minutes alone with her each week for four years, she made me love the instrument and want to play it.'

When de la Salle was eight, her first teacher sent her for private lessons at the pre-college division of the Paris Conservatory. 'I was with my second teacher for only two years, between the ages of eight and 10, but she was just as important,' the pianist says. 'When I went to her, I was playing a few small pieces by Clementi; two years later I was playing Ravel's complete *Miroirs*.'

Her next step was to become a pupil of Pascal Nemirovski, with whom she worked between the ages of nine and 18: 'He taught me how to practise and – as the most important part of that – he taught me how to listen to myself,' she says. 'This is not as simple as it sounds. You can be so busy that being in touch with yourself is very difficult, but it's what makes it possible for you to continue to grow. I needed to learn to be myself. I have learned much from the conductors I have worked with and from my friends, and also from other pianists. The best school is old recordings – and you can find almost everything on YouTube.'

Who are the pianists from whom she has learned the most? 'Sviatoslav Richter is the supreme figure among my heroes,' she says. 'But there are also Horowitz, Wilhelm Kempff and Annie Fischer for Beethoven;

'Making music for me is making people feel emotion'

Géza Anda for Chopin, especially the Études and the Préludes; and Dinu Lipatti, especially for Mozart. After pianists, I listen mostly to singers and orchestras. Maria Callas is a great favorite. She was all emotion, and that's what I want most for my playing. Callas and Richter could be ugly, but it was always in order to express emotion. Even as a kid I felt that music should always make a strong statement. It's supposed to make you feel something, and that's what I enjoy about Callas's singing and Richter's playing.'

Playing the piano in public is an art, she says, 'not merely a matter of looking for the right recipe to play all the notes. Technique is important, but not the goal. Making music for me is making people feel emotion. When I listen to Richter, Horowitz or Lipatti, I am moved and touched. And that's what life is all about. When I'm in touch with the audience and the composer,' she says, 'it's not merely communication.' She suddenly seems startled by the words coming out of her mouth, as a further thought takes shape: 'It's really like a kind of communion.' 🎹

*Lise de la Salle's Bach Unlimited is now available from Naïve Records (V5444).
www.lisedelasalle.com*

