

Plumbing the depths

HOLGER PETERS



German pianist Burkard Schliessmann combines intellectual clarity with an intuitive sense of colour, influenced by his artistic upbringing and his parallel life as a scuba diver. **Hugo Shirley** meets this multifaceted musician

'To play the concert grand in the right way, you have to include the whole arm and the whole body'

There's no such thing, of course, as a standard concert pianist. It's nevertheless safe to say that Burkard Schliessmann is an artist who's a long way from the conventional; a pianist full of surprises, who doesn't fit any standard mould. For a start, his career at the piano is complemented by secondary careers as an organist and, somewhat further removed, as a professional diver (he has over 8,500 logged dives around the world under his belt). When we meet at Berlin's Teldex Studio, a favourite recording venue, I ask how it all started – and that's hardly conventional either.

'I was born with music,' he says. 'There were Chopin recordings by the great pianists played in the delivery room.' Not only that: his maternal grandmother bought him a Steinway when he was born. I try to ascertain some more details about her inclination to make such a gift, but Schliessmann answers only in general terms: 'My grandmother was an outstanding personality with vision. She influenced my whole life and retained her outstanding intellect right up until her death aged 96.'

It's one of a couple of occasions during our conversation when the pianist opts to answer poetically rather than offer the prose of specifics. His English is accented and

occasionally eccentric, but he speaks with the same control and economy that define his playing style. A recent recipient of the prestigious Goethe Plaque of the City of Frankfurt, Schliessmann is regularly praised for the intellectual clarity of his performances and recordings. The clarity and calm surface, one senses, hide unfathomable depths. It takes no great leap of imagination to see the parallels with his activities as a diver.

His is a mind that has clearly absorbed and synthesised influences from a young age. He describes how his early intuitive relationship with music (aged three he would return from church and play from memory the chords he'd just heard there) has been enriched by intellect. The fact that his father was an outstanding amateur painter, he says, gave him additional impressions and inspiration for the keyboard, something that fed into his innate synaesthesia. This ability to hear colours is complemented by a memory that, the pianist explains, allows him to see the music in his mind's eye as if it's simply scrolling past.

Schliessmann's formal piano studies began at eight, but he also began studying with the legendary organist Helmut Walcha in his early teens. 'At 13 I remember asking my mother for a recording of Bach's *The Art of Fugue*,' he

says. 'She presented it to me, in a recording by Marie-Claire Alain. But already in my early life, I felt this intuition that this was not my way. I forced her to return it and replace it by one by Helmut Walcha.' Shortly afterwards Schliessmann became Walcha's final student. 'He filled me with Bach,' he explains. 'He was blind, but I have been inspired by his insights, and what were the overwhelming interpretations from my early life.'

The fact that Schliessmann studied both organ and piano led to a slight confusion when it came to his final exams at Frankfurt's Hochschule für Musik. He performed his piano programme, he remembers, and clearly everyone was very happy with it. But then one of the examiners piped up: 'We're a little bit confused. You're doing the examination for organ here tomorrow, and today you've played a completely different programme on the piano!'

He officially performed Bach's complete organ works for the first time aged 21, and one of his next projects will be to record *The Art of Fugue* on the organ himself (at the St Laurenskerk in Alkmaar in the Netherlands). But he makes it clear that he is unequivocally a pianist. 'I'm a pianist, and I come from the piano,' he says. 'I always point out that you can't compare organ and piano, and they have nothing to do with one another. But you have to be a pianist to play the organ very well. To be a pianist it's about a special feeling – only pianists can have this – but this gives you a way to approach the organ and the organ literature.'

It's primarily because of Bach – the love of Bach and the need to play his works – that Schliessmann plays the organ. Bach also, naturally enough, forms the foundation of his piano repertoire. He describes himself as 'a representative of the German Romantics, and especially Chopin'. But wasn't Chopin Polish? Schliessmann's choice

of words, unsurprisingly, is no accident: for him the Polish composer is a central part of this tradition. 'Chopin comes from Bach,' he explains, 'and is a classical composer in structure. His structures are very, very clear, and very, very Classical.' Schumann, he explains, is different: although Schumann loved Chopin's music, he points out, Chopin seems to have found the Romanticism of Schumann's music somewhat exaggerated.

Both composers feature in Schliessmann's upcoming recording plans, with Chopin's three sonatas on the cards as well as the continuation of a Schumann project. The pianist's approach is enriched by the fact that he has fully dived into the swirling literary currents of Romanticism that informed these composers, and this is something he encourages his own students to explore. 'It's absolutely necessary for the intellectual background,' he explains, 'not only to understand, but also to feel it in your body.'

'I teach in very individual ways,' he continues, 'because everyone has to be taught in their own way.' And does he have a particular approach to technique? The Schliessmann philosophy is based on understanding the concert grand more as a string instrument than a percussion one. 'The only thing producing the sounds is the strings, and they are horizontal. To play the concert grand in the right way, you have to include the whole arm and the whole body.' He makes an expansive bowing gesture. 'If you do it this way, you have combined technique with music.' **IP**

Burkard Schliessmann is a Steinway Artist. He will give a recital of Bach, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Chopin on 16 March 2020 at Schloss Johannisburg in Aschaffenburg, Germany. schliessmann.com



*Schliessmann in
recital at the Alte Oper
Frankfurt*

BURKARD SCHLIESSMANN

Recipient of Goethe-Prize 2019 of Frankfurt/Main, Germany

Global Music Awards 2018:

2 Gold Medals "Awards of Excellence" (Schumann)

Global Music Awards 2018:

3 Silver Medals "Outstanding Achievement" (Bach)

Global Music Awards 2017:

3 Silver Medals "Outstanding Achievement" (Chopin)

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Jerry Dubins, *Fanfare*

"I rank this Chopin among the best available. With both the technique and intellect to do just about anything he wants, Schliessmann's strength is in the lyrical, legato melodies that make Chopin's music such a cornerstone of the piano repertoire ..."

James Harrington,
American Record Guide

"Schliessmann's playing is representative of the best of the modern school ..."

Harold C. Schonberg,
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