EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED

Fresh from recording the complete Beethoven piano sonatas, Andras Schiff talks to **Jessica Duchen** about his changing view of the cycle, his Hungarian heritage, performing on the West Bank, Mendelssohn - and what he's doing next

Roberta Magenti/ECM Records

András Schiff is that rare phenomenon, a musicians' pianist: his artistic values are uncompromising and absolute. Born in Budapest in 1953, he studied at the Franz Liszt Academy with Pál Kadosa, György Kurtág and Ferenc Rádos, and with George Malcolm in England. Early competition successes, including a prize at Leeds, helped to propel him into the public view in his early twenties, and he has long been powerfully associated with the music of Bach. Nevertheless, his activities extend to all branches of music, directing festivals, accompanying Lieder singers and conducting. He has just finished recording the complete Beethoven Sonatas.

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Q: You've finished recording the complete Beethoven piano sonatas. How do you feel?
The recording is done, but the concerts continue. Four American cycles finish in the spring; then I will have 20 cycles behind me. I still feel it's work in progress. The journey is never finished. I've made progress, but now the works are resting, and when I look at them again I will see even more in them. I don't want to live without that. As long as we are healthy and alive, we should play this music!

I am grateful to destiny that I could do this cycle and that I have had the opportunity to do it many times: these works need repeated performance, the experience of going through the cycle from beginning to end with an audience. I really believe this is concert music, for listeners; it's not written in solitude to be played in solitude.

Playing the cycle, you see the interactions between the sonatas, their similarities and differences – it's amazing that Beethoven can be so dramatic, yet some of the sonatas begin and end very quietly. They can be incredibly intimate confessions. The F sharp major op.54 is a jewel, but it never really works with an audience – yet it was among the ones Beethoven liked the most.

Do the sonatas emerge differently every time?
Your concept doesn't change, but certain details do. There have to be adjustments according to the instrument and the venue, such as the size of the hall and whether it's empty or full. Those things influence slightly the choice of tempo, because a pace that works wonderfully in your studio will not work in a reverberant hall. Music is not theory, it has to be a living experience, and something that is not coherent and not understandable is not valid.

Among the last six sonatas, is there one to which you feel especially close?
When I was young the sonata I loved the most was op.109. That hasn't really changed, except that now I like the other five sonatas just as much! I think op.101 is a phenomenal piece of music, almost a pre-echo of Schumann. The second movement of the C major Fantasy and the second movement of op.101 are very alike.

I have learnt to love the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata. Many people revere and respect it, but very few people love it. It's forbidding and excruciatingly difficult, but I did discover elements of humour in it. I do not see this Sonata as something carved out of marble, but as a revolutionary, explosive piece. If you take his metronome marks seriously, and I do, then it is not ponderous at all, but wonderfully inventive. Even the great Adagio, if you play it at metronome mark 92, is not static but a flowing piece in which something is always happening. There is a sense of action, response and progression.

Opp.110 and 111 are the last two sonatas that I learnt. Maybe I have an unnecessary respect for them, but I felt I had no right to touch this music before I was 50, and I didn't. It's better to have too much respect than too little.

Is your fondness for op.109 related to the fact that its last movement is so close to the Bach *Goldberg Variations*?
Yes, it's true – absolutely. Except that when I first played op.109 I didn't even know the *Goldberg Variations*. That came later. I love variation form and Beethoven's a master of this. But I also love fugues because of Bach, and throughout the Beethoven sonatas you encounter many references to Bach, especially in his late works with fugal writing. A spiritual, almost religious quality is certainly present in late Beethoven, alongside humour. In op.110 the Scherzo quotes two popular street songs, and a few moments later you have a quotation of Bach's *St John Passion* – with these two elements side by side, it's almost schizophrenic.

You've just celebrated your 30th anniversary of playing the *Goldberg Variations*...
There are many works I feel very close to, but if I had to pick one it would be the *Goldberg Variations*. The Wigmore Hall remembered that I had played it there first 30 years ago and suggested I could repeat it. So we did it – and they very kindly gave me the Medal of the Wigmore Hall, which is a great joy and honour. It was a ▸


Schiff and the Beethoven sonatas: 'This is concert music – for listeners'

Yutaka Suzuki

< beautiful occasion. I have a special relationship with the Wigmore, and I often think it's not a coincidence that I live where I live in London.

When I got this house [near Paddington] I was very taken with the idea that I can walk to the Wigmore Hall from here.

Which singers do you especially like working with?

I work with many singers, but Robert Holl is a great friend and a great favourite. As a Schubert singer he is one of the greatest. Recently we've been doing a Russian programme and it is a revelation - Shostakovich's *Michelangelo Suite*, wonderful music. And I've always loved the songs and operas of Mussorgsky, so this was a great opportunity to do some. I've also had the chance to work with marvellous singers such as Christian Gerhaher, Angelika Kirschlager, Juliane Banse and Thomas Quasthoff.

Is Shostakovich a new departure for you?

Growing up in Hungary under the Soviet totalitarian system, we were forced to admire Shostakovich; and people don't like anything that's compulsory! I still find some of the earlier music unbearable to listen to. I can't stand the 'Leningrad' Symphony and those very political pieces. They are all right if you know the circumstances, but if you just listen to it, some of it is unbelievably banal and bombastic to me. I also cannot see why some people make an equation between the Bach *Well-Tempered Clavier* and Shostakovich's preludes and fugues -1 think that's very unfair to both of them!

Yet then I discovered the late string quartets and the late symphonies, the operas and this *Michelangelo Suite* - it's really colossal. One has to revise one's opinions now and then. Not all Shostakovich is equally great. I think a composer and performer must be judged by his or her own best. If someone has written just one masterpiece, that cannot be an accident. If somebody has written a less good piece, that can be an accident. The best is what matters.

Generally, you play very little Russian music...

When I was young, I literally had to play Russian music. I was sent by the Ministry of Culture in Hungary to the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow; it wasn't my choice and for that I had to learn certain things. I enjoyed playing some pieces by Prokofiev, such as the First Concerto and Second and Third Sonatas. I also played some preludes and fugues by Shostakovich and not just the Tchaikovsky Concerto but some solo pieces - *The Seasons* and the Theme and Variations. But I wouldn't dream of playing this music now.

Schiff's future conquests include *The Art of Fugue* and the *'Diabelli' Variations*: 'I love music as much as ever, maybe more'

Learning Russian at school was compulsory, and nobody likes the compulsory. But when I started going to the USSR I learnt to love this language. I discovered Russian literature and now I'm very happy that I had some Russian. Through the language and literature one gains a different idea of the music. These Mussorgsky songs are really Dostoyevskian, in the best sense.

Last year I played some concerts in Moscow and St Petersburg. I hadn't been there since the Brezhnev years; I was afraid that I would experience something very much changed. But at these concerts I witnessed the same wonderful audiences I remembered from the 1970s. I think music, ballet, poetry, et cetera are still very important to people there.

And Hungary?

Hungary is more difficult; it's a very ambivalent relationship. I go regularly to play there because it's the country of my birth and I owe it a **lot** -1 give it credit for my education and my cultural background. But the audience in Hungary has changed a lot, and not for the better. During my childhood the educational system devised by Zoltan Kodaly was wonderful - at school everybody had to sing and dance and do folk music, so they were learning how to listen to music, and that produced

very good audiences. But now music is no longer in the school curriculum.

The atmosphere there was always bad; that's why I left - it was never a nice place for Jews to live. There is no official anti-Semitism, but there is anti-Semitism in the air. And the situation of the Gypsies is much worse than the situation of Jews. I am trying to find out if we can do something positive for Gypsies. 1 would love to do something for these people - it breaks my heart. The discrimination is not official, but there are problems because they are driven out of society or onto the peripheries; many are poorly educated and in poverty, then they are driven to crime and there is very little chance of assimilation.

Last year you gave a recital in Ramallah in the West Bank...

1 admire Daniel Barenboim and what he does there, so when he asked if I would play in Ramallah, I agreed with the greatest pleasure. It was a very quick visit, but I never go anywhere with closed eyes, so I met people, I talked to people, and 1 was impressed by the number of foreigners who worked there voluntarily, giving up everything to try to do something positive. At the concert hall, to my surprise, they have a wonderful Steinway piano! But I would have played on an upright. It was a touching occasion: lots of children attended and many people came from Bethlehem and other places that are technically very near, but it takes them six or eight hours to cross the checkpoints.

I think I'm a good listener, so I listened to what people tell me. But it's like a case when your friends, a wife and husband, are having a terrible divorce and you hear both stories and who are you to judge? Two stories that contradict each other; each story is right; and each story is heartbreaking. As Mr Barenboim says, dialogue is important. I'm aware of the fact that you go there and play two hours of music and it's little more than nothing. But it is more than nothing; it's a gesture that shows people want to give them something and there are other approaches than the military. Music is not going to solve the problems, but it might open a few doors and windows.

Will you be marking this year's composer anniversaries, especially Haydn and Mendelssohn?

Five years ago the Wigmore Hall asked if I'd like to do a festival to mark the 200th anniversary of Haydn's death, so this will be at the end of May, with five concerts. We will also do Haydn with the Philharmonia and an all-Mendelssohn concert in June.

Haydn and Mendelssohn need championing, to different degrees; both are underrated, and I think Haydn is one of the greatest composers ever. Especially in the German-speaking world they have not realised that he had a much better time in England during his lifetime. If some of that can be rethought and re-evaluated, it could be a good thing. And Mendelssohn - again his successes were in this country. But now one has to do a lot of persuading. I adore Mendelssohn, but so often people say: 'Oh, Mendelssohn, a little composer...' How can you say that? Mendelssohn was a colossal composer! I think his talent can only be compared to Mozart's as a teenager. Think of the Octet, or the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* -1 don't think Mozart wrote such great music when he was 16. Later came his fantastic achievements in choral music and chamber music. His string quartets opp.12 and 13 are wonderful; and the last quartet in F minor is a towering masterpiece. And the piano trios! He was a musician with perfect knowledge and perfect taste, the only one in that generation who had Bachian counterpoint in his fingertips. The others had to fight for it - Schubert, Schumann, even Brahms had trouble with fugues and counterpoint. He was responsible for the Bach renaissance, the rediscovery of the *St Matthew Passion*, the first performance of Schubert's Great C major Symphony - he was the first really great conductor and a towering public figure, so of course he did not have all his time for composing. Even so, what's wrong with the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto? It's out of this world - a perfect masterpiece. Tomorrow I'm playing the *Variations serieuses*, which I only learnt last year. It's fantastic. I hope that after a year of celebrations the world will think differently about Mendelssohn.

What are your next recordings?

First, a Schumann recital: the *Waldszenen*, the F sharp Sonata, the Fantasy, and the last piece, the E flat Variations. Schumann will have a big anniversary next year, but I would be doing this anyway. I also did a live recording of the Bach partitas which will come out later this year. It's 25 years since I recorded them in the studio, I've played them many times since and my friends tell me it's different now, so it's time to try another version. And I would love, sometime, to record the most important solo works of Bartok. This is something I've lived with all my life and I hope I will get the chance.

I strongly recommend Peter Bartoks book, My *Father*. It's a very sad book, especially the letters in exile in America. He had a horrendously difficult time there; that's how he became ill. He says in one of his last letters that his biggest regret is that he has to leave this world with 'a full suitcase'. And he was not just a great composer but a scientist and ethnomusicologist - he could have travelled around America to explore American native music. I really admire this human being - his integrity was incredible. He didn't have to leave Hungary; he wasn't Jewish, he could have stayed. But he could not tolerate terror and injustice, and the Nazis' discrimination against what they called 'degenerate music' or 'degenerate art' - he said, 'If you call that degenerate, then 1 am degenerate too.' That's the right approach.

Playing in Ramallah was a touching occasion: many children attended and people came from Bethlehem. Music is not going to solve problems, but it might open a few doors

You're taking a six-month sabbatical this year. What are you planning to do?

I haven't taken a sabbatical since 1985.1 still love music as much as ever, maybe more, but sometimes I get very tired of travelling. I've just come back from a trip and if I even think of an airport, let alone have to be in one, I get cold feet. I need a rest from that. It doesn't mean a rest from music: I plan to learn new repertoire like *The Art of Fugue* and the *'Diabetti' Variations* and a lot of Schumann that I haven't played before. And to have a deep relationship with Debussy, which I've not done yet. 1 want time to read all those big books, and I want to do an in-depth course on Shakespeare. And I'm looking forward to visiting India for three weeks. Some things are musical, some less so, but everything is basically connected.

Andras Schiff will perform five concerts at Wigmore Hall in May to mark the 200th anniversary of Haydn's death. In June he will perform Haydn's Concerto in D with the Philharmonia in Bedford and London. *iA*