PHILIP GATWARD

Creative stimulation

Clare Hammond introduces her new album of British piano concertos, including Britten's Diversions, commissioned for the left hand by Paul Wittgenstein

To the uninitiated, the idea of a piano concerto written for left hand alone seems an impossibility. Concertos are difficult enough when you have two hands at your disposal. How on earth could you manage with one?

While many solo left-hand piano pieces have been written either as remedial technical exercises or merely to show off, most of the left-hand piano concertos that exist were created in response to injury. Three were written for the Czech pianist Otakar Hollmann, whose right palm was shattered by a bullet in the First World War, and three for the American pianist Leon Fleisher, who lost the use of his right hand to focal dystonia. By far the most prolific commissioner, however, was Paul Wittgenstein, brother of the philosopher Ludwig, who lost his right arm in the First World War and commissioned 19 of the 49 existing left-hand piano concertos.

These concertos include masterpieces by Ravel, Prokofiev, Richard Strauss, Hindemith and Korngold, with each composer approaching the genre a different way. Most sought to 'conceal' the one-handedness, writing thick, complex textures that give the impression that two hands are playing. However, some revelled in a 'one-handed' sound, not shrinking from limitation but celebrating the creative inspiration it can provide. Indeed, when transcribing Chopin's Études for solo left hand, Leopold Godowsky wrote that 'working within self-imposed limitations convinced me that economy of means leads to a superior form of concentration'.

Britten's *Diversions,* Op 21, is one work that celebrates the performer's one-handedness. Britten was commissioned to write a left-hand concerto by Wittgenstein in July 1940. Initially enthusiastic about the project, he set to work immediately and wrote a piece in variation form. The orchestra plays the theme, Variation 1 is a piano cadenza, then each subsequent variation explores a different aspect of piano technique. With the exception of the Cadenzas, which are as exuberantly virtuosic as anything you will find in the left-hand repertoire, the pianist mostly plays single-line melodies. There is no effort at concealment. It sounds simply as though the soloist is using one hand.

While many concertos pit a soloist against an orchestra, Britten adopts a more democratic approach. Alongside single-line melodies, the pianist spends much of the time playing arpeggiated accompanimental motifs as part of the orchestral ensemble. The stereotypical 19th-century concept of a 'virtuoso soloist', for whom the orchestra provides little more than a scenic backdrop, is irrelevant here.

Diversions is a superb piece, full of life and wit, and one of the greatest written for left-hand piano. It did not, however, find favour with its dedicatee. While he may not have made this explicit, Wittgenstein had commissioned Britten to write a concerto primarily as a showpiece. He was more naturally drawn to Romantic repertoire, thick textures, lush harmonies and the ideal of a heroic soloist battling against an orchestra. Rather than celebrating his one-handedness, he sought to overcome it by doing as much as any two-handed pianist could.

Wittgenstein came from a wealthy family and was able to offer generous commission fees. (The fee for *Diversions* alone represented half of Britten's income in 1940.) As a result, perhaps, he felt that he could demand more and he became well known for his high-handed attitude towards composers. Wittgenstein frequently modified the scores of the works that he commissioned to better suit his own needs, to an extent that seems remarkable now, and which was conspicuous even in the

context of his own time. He was particularly concerned about what he viewed as 'over-scoring', fearing that he would not be heard, and often cut orchestral parts.

Fresh from heated disputes with established composers such as Ravel, Richard Strauss and Prokofiev, Wittgenstein had no qualms demanding that the young Britten thin the orchestral parts of *Diversions*. He stated that the orchestral parts were too strong, creating 'not only an unequal, but a hopeless strife'. In his mind, the piano resembled 'a cricket chirping between two roars of a lion'. Most importantly, he believed that heavy scoring 'not only contradicts the aim and sense of a concerto; it also throws an undeserved bad light on the unfortunate soloist. [They will say that] the pianist has no strength.'

Britten was unimpressed, writing to his publisher Ralph Hawkes that he was 'having a slight altercation with Herr von Wittgenstein over my scoring – if there *is* anything I know about it is scoring & so I'm fighting back. The man really is an old sour puss.' He put up a spirited defence and it seems that the orchestra played the parts as written at the premiere in Philadelphia in 1942. On tour subsequently, however, Wittgenstein cut orchestral parts liberally, removing the trombone, horn and bass tuba from the *Toccata* and cutting everyone but the harp and solo piano in the *Chant*. The first 11 bars of the *Adagio* were originally scored for mixed wind and strings. Wittgenstein rewrote the entire passage for solo piano.

These apparent transgressions, however, pale in comparison to the alterations Wittgenstein made to the solo piano cadenzas. Britten's original versions are challenging enough, but Wittgenstein took single-line melodies and trills and rewrote them in octaves, and instead of single-note glissandos he inserted complex, chromatic arpeggiated flourishes to the top of the keyboard, chromatic scales in fifths, and glissandos in octaves with added triads. He even added extra cadenzas between variations.

These additions were more challenging to play than Britten's original. If well executed, they would have been impressive technically, yet the overtly chromatic harmonic language and Romantic flourishes that Wittgenstein uses stick out like a sore thumb. As one might expect, Britten was alarmed by the liberties Wittgenstein took and wrote to critic Albert Goldberg that he had dashed to Philadelphia for the premiere, only 'to hear Wittgenstein wreck my *Diversions*'.

It is easy to criticise Wittgenstein for this heavy-handedness. He was clearly a difficult man to work with, yet he also had an almost unique perspective on the left-hand repertoire. There were very few performers working in this field, and Wittgenstein was continually trying to prove himself alongside two-handed players. Pianists are often concerned that they will be drowned out by an orchestra. When this happens regularly in a two-handed work, the soloists can blame a composer for heavy scoring. If a left-hand player is inaudible, audiences may assume it is due to weakness on the soloist's part. Even his sister, Gretl, asserted that Wittgenstein 'insists on trying to do what really cannot be done'. His determination to succeed against such odds, with so little support, was in itself admirable.

Wittgenstein also adhered to a late-Romantic aesthetic where it was not just accepted but expected that a performer would alter a composer's score. After receiving one too many requests for alterations from Wittgenstein, Ravel asked him to sign a legally binding contract stipulating that he would play his Left-Hand Concerto as it appeared in the score – but Wittgenstein refused, saying all pianists make such modifications when playing concertos. Imagine trying to assert this to composers today!

Wittgenstein commissioned many solo and chamber works, but his concerto commissions align with his primary goal of advancing his career. He had the financial means to hire orchestras, book large halls and support international tours, which ensured both larger audiences and greater publicity than if he had restricted himself purely to solo recitals. On YouTube, you can find a Pathé news clip from 1933 of Wittgenstein performing excerpts from Ravel's Concerto, with Ravel conducting. Wittgenstein is clearly visible throughout while Ravel, conducting the orchestra, is almost fully obscured by the raised lid of the piano. The excerpts selected are those where the piano is either more prominent than the orchestra or plays a solo cadenza. It clearly reflects Wittgenstein's belief that in a concerto 'the soloist plays the principal role and the orchestra should not pay too much attention to itself'.

We may not admire such egotism, and it clearly aggravated the composers that he commissioned, yet we must be grateful to Wittgenstein for a repertoire that would be much impoverished without his efforts. The challenges of performing a left-hand concerto are manifold, and the stamina required is extreme, yet to see how limitation may stimulate creativity is energising. In Britten's *Diversions*, left-handedness is seen not as a burden but as inspiration in its own right, as something to celebrate. **IP**

For our review of Clare Hammond's BIS album of British piano concertos, including Britten's Diversions for the left hand, turn to page 60