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# Perpetuum mobile

Agility of both mind and fingers is key to the success of Clare Hammond, reviving repertoire and taking music out of the concert hall and into schools and prisons, as she tells **Peter Quantrill**

**P**atterns, says Clare Hammond. Learning a new piece, especially if you're committing it to memory, and the clock is against you, is all about finding patterns. 'If you can find patterns in a piece of music, it speeds up the learning process rapidly. I've developed lots of systems for getting notes into my head quickly.'

As someone who seems to eat repertoire for breakfast, Hammond should know. Her concert diary and recording catalogue features an array of composers all the more astonishing when you bear in mind the sheer diversity of her activity: as a concert pianist, of course, but now as a musician devoted to bringing music to new audiences, in schools and prisons, through the Gloucestershire Piano Trust.

More of that to come. Back to the score. 'If you take a simple Mozart sonata,' she says, 'being aware of how it's structured, what the theme is, the second subject, how they come back, and in which key: these patterns speed up the learning process rapidly, and the memory becomes more resilient as well, because you have something to rely on, other than just physical memory. I spend a lot of time breaking pieces down, especially with contemporary music that I'm not planning

on memorising. It's still really useful to see which units are repeated, how they change when they're repeated, where they occur on the keyboard.'

'I don't think there has to be a specific system,' she continues, to reassure those of us without her analytical turn of mind. 'I think everyone can develop one that works for them. It depends on how your brain is wired, and how it best takes in information. But I would say that it's really helpful to do a lot of work away from the piano. I spend time on trains or at the end of the day, sitting on a sofa with a score: going through it in my head, not looking at the score itself, and not moving my fingers, because then I'm developing a memory that's independent of the physical memory, and that makes it much more robust.'

## Not enough notes?

A strong association with the BIS label – seven albums and counting – has not prevented Hammond from making records elsewhere, especially of the modern British and Polish repertoire for which she feels a special affinity. But then the range of those BIS albums, on their own, testifies to a voracious

‘My mind tends to work quite quickly, which can be a great strength. That’s why I can learn pieces quickly. But speed of thought also has its pitfalls, and you have to be aware of those’

(and discerning) musical appetite. Three of them fly a flag for overlooked names from the past: Josef Mysliveček, Hélène de Montgeroult and Cécile Chaminade. Two others focus on long-standing friendships – with Andrzej and Roxanna Panufnik, and with Kenneth Hesketh.

‘Once you have the notes for a new piece under your fingers, then it’s very exciting to create a sound world that hasn’t been heard yet and over which you can have quite a lot of influence as well, particularly when composers are writing for you with your playing in mind. That’s a lovely thing, because it’s often quite a reciprocal process, and I find that very exciting.’

What is it that draws her to Hesketh’s music? ‘Both Ken and I have quite a frenetic mental energy. It still comes through in my playing, and it’s something that I can immediately tap into with his work: the rapidity of the notes, the complexity of the textures, is almost like a direct mapping of the mind. For many years, I didn’t touch Mozart because I couldn’t cope on stage when I didn’t have enough notes to play, and that’s changed over the past couple of years. The piece that Edward Finniss wrote for me is much sparser, and it’s much more about sustaining lines. Ten years ago, I would have found that very challenging. I am, fortunately, still developing as an artist and expanding areas of repertoire that weren’t so natural to me initially.’

Hammond’s inquisitive search for new repertoire (either new to her, or brand new) is infectious, and yet she neither talks nor plays as though rarity were a goal or a prize in itself. In her repertoire, Mozart and Rachmaninov have their place, too: her September diary included K467 with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and Rachmaninov 2 with the Philharmonia. If she thinks a score is worth her time learning and playing it, then it’s worth our time spent listening.

The latest fruits of Hammond’s musical spirit of adventure is a trio of British concertante pieces: all under-recorded, quite distinct from each other, all exploring what a piano concerto might sound like, at a time when the very concept of the genre had been sidelined. By the middle of the last century, Rachmaninov had seemingly brought the Romantic concerto tradition to a definitive end point; modernists had little use and less time for the piano as a vehicle of heroism and lyricism. As Hammond remarks in her own booklet essay for the new album, all three pieces challenge the 19th-century model of ‘a bravura soloist pitted against an orchestra’, each in their own way.

In fact the only full-blown concerto on Hammond’s new album is also the most lush and lyrical, the 1955 work by Tippett which evokes the ecstatic world of his *Midsummer Marriage* opera while tapping veins of expression from Beethoven to the English madrigalists. Tippett himself remarked that the Piano Concerto had to wait for ‘a younger generation of pianists’; Hammond is one of several ►►





## INTERVIEW



Clare Hammond with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and conductor George Vass in Maida Vale Studios

contemporary pianists (such as Steven Osborne) to conquer the challenges of the work and reveal its many beauties.

In his *Sinfonia Concertante*, Walton often gives the piano a supporting or responsive role to the orchestra's angular discourse: 'as soon as I hear the opening notes,' says Hammond, 'I get fired up: it has tremendous optimism and enthusiasm. The scintillating left-hand *Diversions* were Britten's answer to a request from Paul Wittgenstein – and not one which found favour with the notoriously high-handed (as well as left-handed) patron. Having done her doctorate on the library of Wittgenstein's commissions, Hammond is uniquely placed to bring intellectual as well as pianistic authority to the *Diversions*.

### Life in boxes

It would be easy, if rather predictable, to make this one of those 'How on earth does she do it?' features. I fancy you will struggle to name more than a handful of pianists pursuing an international career while being a mother of school-age children. The reason for that scarcity rather speaks for itself. For musicians especially, separating out the elements of 'work-life balance' is not so much a challenge as a misconception. 'I try to focus on one thing,' says Hammond. 'I have certain hours in the day where I'm focused on parenting, others on playing, and others on admin. And I have to be very quick at switching between them.' She has a supportive husband who shoulders the burden of care when she is away, but her need to apply discipline and compartmentalise the different areas of her life, so that one does not overwhelm another, will strike a chord with many of us.

Hammond grew up in Nottingham: by coincidence, the home city of our editor, Erica Worth. Early piano lessons sparked no special enthusiasm until, aged eight, she saw an orchestra in action at the Royal Concert Hall. 'Something just switched. I felt a visceral, emotional connection with the music, and at that point I decided I wanted to do it professionally.' She took up the oboe and played in the Nottingham Youth Orchestra, alongside her piano studies. 'Playing the cor anglais solo in the *Concierto de Aranjuez* and Rachmaninov's Second Symphony – those became formative experiences, too.'

She went on to Cambridge, intending to read mathematics while keeping up the piano. Riding two horses like that soon taxed her, and she switched to music. 'I hadn't been tempted to apply to do it at university, because I didn't find the A-level music syllabus interesting at all. But university was a very different kettle of fish.' The Cambridge emphasis on fugue and analysis isn't for everyone – indeed, it is now for almost no one at all, given the degradation and closure of university music-courses everywhere – but Hammond once more took to her studies. 'They gave me a good grounding in the range of music that there is – and essay-writing gives you the skills to do all the peripheral things that you need to do as part of a career.'

### Networks of engagement

Postgraduate study with Ronan O'Hora at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama took Hammond into a 'hot-house atmosphere' of intense competition. 'At university,



Photos © Patrick Young



I was learning how to think and how my brain works. At conservatoire, apart from the piano itself, I was learning how I responded under stress and how to protect my mental health. You have to find ways of protecting yourself.'

How did she find those ways? 'Well, initially I completely failed to develop any! I naturally verge on the anxious, and I'm a perfectionist. So when I was in that environment, I put a lot of pressure on myself. I wasn't very good at resting. And that continued for several years, until I had a sort of minor breakdown.' Cognitive behavioural therapy proved 'incredibly helpful, to reset a lot of things.'

A family move to Gloucestershire prompted her to give school concerts 'just as a way of meeting people locally and becoming more connected with a specific area, rather than skating around everywhere, which can be a danger of the touring lifestyle.'

Then, after the birth of her second child, Hammond suffered post-natal depression. 'That was quite serious, and I had to go for a different kind of therapy, but I've emerged feeling so much stronger mentally.' Beyond therapy, she went in search of a new challenge 'to kick me out of those repetitive thought-cycles that can pull you down.' She arranged to visit a local prison. Introducing and playing Schubert, 'I was amazed by how powerful music can be in that environment, perhaps especially when people have no prior experience of classical music, or haven't witnessed live music before.'

The Gloucestershire Piano Trust extends this work beyond ad hoc events, with the present aim of arranging up to 36 concerts each year at primary schools, in collaboration with Gloucestershire Music, and 10 concerts at prisons across the South-West and Midlands. Setting up the Trust as a registered charity has absorbed a lot of time and energy ('the admin has been horrendous!'), in search of both funding and a network of engagement. The reward is a sense of community. 'And I'm very grateful for that. Life is much more vibrant and vivid when you're connected to people.'

Through suffering and addressing depression, Hammond has learned certain tools not just to cope but to share with others. 'When I'm giving a masterclass, we often have a "Q and A" at the end, and it's almost always mental health that people want to ask about. Having been through that and dealt with it, as far as one can, that's been a really positive experience in the long term, however unpleasant it was to undergo at the time.'

When we spoke in July, Hammond was about to travel to Québec, to give masterclasses at the Domaine Forget Festival and Academy. 'I try to take a holistic approach, because what's going on inside has such a massive effect on how you play and the style of your playing. I used to take tempi that were far too fast, because inside I was worrying all the time. My mind tends to work quite quickly, which can be a great strength. That's why I can learn pieces quickly. But speed of thought also has its pitfalls, and you have to be aware of those. A human is a complete package, and I think good teaching approaches all the parts of that package.' ■



*Clare Hammond's new album of concertos by Britten, Tippett and Walton is available from 10 October, both to stream and to purchase, on the BIS label (BIS2604). Visit [gloucestershirepianotrust.org.uk](http://gloucestershirepianotrust.org.uk) and [clarehammond.com](http://clarehammond.com) for further details.*



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