



Pianist Clare Hammond tells *Jessica Duchon* why it is high time the keyboard music of Josef Mysliveček is rediscovered

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WHAT'S IN A NAME? MORE than you might think – especially when nobody can spell or pronounce it. According to the British pianist Clare Hammond, who has just recorded Josef Mysliveček's complete keyboard works for the BIS label, this issue may inadvertently have contributed to the 18th-century Bohemian composer's long neglect: 'It was true even in his own lifetime,' she remarks.

More detrimental, though, was the long spell behind the Iron Curtain,

when Western scholarship around Czech composers was inevitably limited. Now, though, the barriers have gone, and it is high time Mysliveček was rediscovered. Hammond has been throwing herself into the process of his rehabilitation with the full complement of her technical and intellectual prowess.

The new recording represents an unusual direction for her. In recent years she has developed a powerful reputation in 20th-century and contemporary music, for instance co-curating a festival



for Sir Andrzej Panufnik's centenary in 2014 and tackling numerous world premieres. In January 2019 she gave the first performance of *Uncoiling the River*, a new concerto by British composer Kenneth Hesketh. She also experienced a whole new field when she was selected to play the young Miss Shepherd in the film of Alan Bennett's *The Lady in the Van* (2015): 'They needed a pianist with blue eyes,' she states modestly. Stepping back into the 18th century is a whole other matter.

In her view, Mysliveček is well worth the effort of excavation, not least because he was one of the most important influences on his younger contemporary and close friend, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Born in Prague in 1737, the son of a mill owner, he gave up the prospect of going into the family business in order to devote himself to music. Studies in Venice helped him develop great facility in opera, but that is only one element in his vast catalogue: it also includes 55 symphonies, 26 operas (including second versions of some), dozens of chamber pieces, a healthy complement of concertos for different instruments and several volumes of keyboard works.

Hammond wryly remarks that the latter were 'designed with accomplished young ladies in mind', though musically inventive and engaging, but that the concertos were a more challenging prospect, and not only in terms of technique. 'With the second concerto, it seemed likely that nobody had heard it since his own day. It's an extraordinary feeling to play something that perhaps no one has touched since the composer himself.' The music, she adds, is 'much of its time. It is full of the 18th-century Enlightenment sense of optimism, which was such an important philosophical strand at that point: light, entertaining, clear and melodic.'

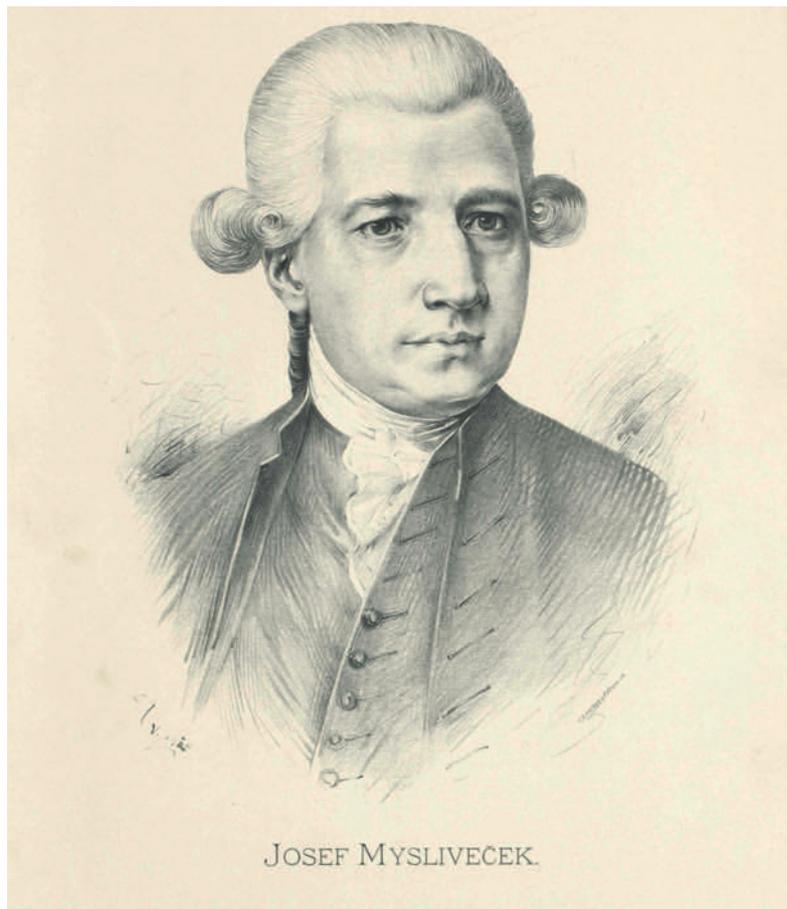
If that makes Mysliveček sound like a type of musical Pangloss – the bumbling professor in Voltaire's *Candide* for whom all's for the best in the 'best of all possible worlds' – the notion is perhaps not far off the mark. Pangloss, for all his positivity and faith, contracts syphilis and suffers the disintegration of his nose. Mysliveček

was by all accounts a dynamic, intense personality and also – Hammond hunts for a good euphemism – 'quite a lad about town'. He ultimately suffered the same malady as Pangloss.

'Mozart enjoyed a good party, but Mysliveček's scandalous lifestyle became a bit much even for him,' Hammond hints. Mysliveček spent his last years hospitalised with the effects of syphilis, suffering a distressing physical disintegration: 'It was a terrible stigma to have syphilis,' Hammond says, 'and he was badly disfigured because his nose had been cauterised in a botched operation. Mozart visited him in the clinic to which he was confined, but was so distressed by the state he found him in that he couldn't bring himself to go back again the next day.'

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Composer and libertine Mysliveček (1737-81)





Hammond recording Mysliveček with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra

Having heard that the manuscripts of Mysliveček's two surviving piano concertos were in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the first having never been published at all, Hammond spent time there painstakingly making her own performing editions. Historical research is not new to her, as she has a doctorate from Cambridge University – 'I've loved revisiting the research process,' she says.

Editions completed, though, she decided to stick to the modern piano for her recording with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra. It's not what you've got, it's what you do with it, she suggests: 'Nicholas McGegan is a great expert in the appropriate style and I've learned a lot from working with him,' she says. 'But the technique for playing the fortepiano is very different from

that for the modern piano and though I've tried it and had a couple of lessons, I wouldn't want to do it badly. The idea of "authenticity" being possible has been widely debunked now, and I think the style is more important than the instrument itself. It's important to make a piece of music into a living creation.'

Mysliveček's new lease of life seems set to continue: his story is to be the subject of a new film by the Czech director Petr Václav, scheduled for release in 2020. And revelations may lie in store regarding his influence on Mozart: Hammond's recording shows that the slow movement of the Piano Concerto No 2 bears an extraordinary resemblance to that of Mozart's Sinfonia Concertante for violin and viola. This may be only the beginning.

Josef Mysliveček: Complete Music for Keyboard by Clare Hammond will be released by BIS Records on 10 March. www.clarehammond.com/myslivecek

