BENJAMIN MARTIN

Who or what have been the greatest musical influences in your life?

Some of the most musically influential personalities I have known are pretty modest about their own formidable abilities and certainly deserve mention, namely Angelo Villani, a pianist of extraordinary communicative power who resides in London, and my father Christopher (of whom I believe I can make objective mention) who, alongside his extraordinary musical instincts, has a wealth of experience (he performed with Dohnyani, whose playing he thought extraordinary) and helped develop my knowledge of music beyond the piano literature. Also of great significance for me was a lengthy correspondence with author David Dubal – always hand-written letters! – who lent inspiring insights into the artist and society.

Which composers do you most enjoy performing? Why?

I am particularly drawn to music composed before the invention of our modern piano was made plain. This is partly because the creative sensibilities of many early composers – which, to some extent conditioned by the keyboard's limited range, achieved much through the *suggestion* rather than realization of a sound-world – greatly appeals to me. Couperin, for example, is a pure impressionist in his *Les Barricades Mysterieuses*. The work undulates like a chorale heard underwater; the harmonies constantly shift, never fixing to one place. And so the work succeeds in conveying a powerfully abstract image through a relatively narrow spectrum of sound, timbre and volume. This relates to another reason for my performing such music on the modern piano: namely, that a work like *Les Barricades* breathes a conceptual power, a timeless quality that transcends periodic considerations. Its creative foundations seem not the property of the material realm (that is, dependant upon authentic instrumentation), but rather the imagination. However this certainly does not hold true about Couperin's output in general since much of it is highly ornate, and reliant upon a particular kind of sound not found on our modern instrument.

I adore Chopin but don't perform his music very often, mainly because given how much he is played it seems a monolithic task to consider re-introducing his music on one's own considered terms. You see, even that sounds arrogant! His music is so moving, so *personable,* that many are seduced into feeling that Chopin is their own private property. I don't know of another composer who could express such morbidity, *complain* so beautifully as Chopin. James Huneker, for me an unsurpassed writer on music, wrote of his glorious Fourth Ballade: "It is the mood of a man who examines with morbid, curious insistence the malady that is devouring his soul" (1966, p. 161). Exactly, but it is expressed through the music with such exquisite poignancy.

Bach is of course unique and although I don't perform his music very often I am greatly devoted to him in private. His work reflects a man of extraordinary spiritual and intellectual gifts, one who possessed an uncanny instinct of comprehension, such that everything that occurs in this life must somehow have struck him with equal weight; the trivial, tragic, and everything in-

between invoked, as a condition of life, a kind of spiritual celebration. Montaigne wrote about Cato the Younger that his soul was in such harmony that "touch one of his keys and you touch them all" (1993, p. 375). This is absolutely true of Bach (and of course also of Montaigne).

Haydn I am increasingly eager to perform. He is a most subtle master, so rewarding if one is receptive to his minute changes of mood. Thomas Aquinas once wrote that it is greater to be worthy of honour than to be honoured; to me this maxim embraces Haydn's modest genius and temperament perfectly.

I have a predilection for performing music that is unduly neglected, such as Villa-Lobos (his extraordinary *Prole do Bebe Suite 2*, like much of his output, remains out of print), De-Falla (whose comparative neglect remains incomprehensible to me), and also certain English composers such as Bax, a true poet who does not always succeed in musical terms, which paradoxically lends the music its power (after all, English culture derives much of its authority from things left unsaid). I am also drawn to the music of certain Tudor composers such as Gibbons, for reasons similar to those mentioned earlier in relation to Couperin.

Certain composers of a philosophic nature beguile me, the kind who, despite the odds, cannot but help try to convey clear ideas through music. Their efforts strive to go beyond mere *suggestion* of a concept: they wish to convey something quite *specific*, albeit in the abstract. Busoni was such a writer, hence the reason his music generally leaves people somewhat bewildered. There is an essential idea trying to get through, but alas, it does not quite translate. I greatly admire Busoni, and often perform a paraphrase I wrote on his opera *Arlecchino*, which has some electrifying music. I think Ives was one of the few composers who succeeded as a philosophic-type of composer, although he was, as Bernstein put it, equally an impressionist. And Berio's *Sequenza IV* is a monumental effort that *almost* – but not quite in my opinion – succeeds as a work of pure conceptual imagination.

Do you include works by Australian composers in your repertoire?

As a composer I have a writer's habit of taking certain of my pieces to the stage. This can create problems. Some years ago I agreed to give a live phone interview as a lead-up to a concert in Perth, which was to include the premiere of my Third Sonatine. The interviewer noted that the program also included music by Couperin and Handel among others, amounting to what the interviewer must have thought sheer effrontery on my part. His opening question – or rather, statement – was "Well you certainly don't shy away from esteemed company when introducing your works!". To which I didn't know how to rightly respond. Ought I surround my music with drivel in order to avoid the charge? But then I would likely have to fend off a contrary accusation, like "Well I guess you don't want to suffer the ignominy of programming your music alongside works that might show you up!", and so on and so forth. Damned if you do, damned if you don't! As is typical of me, all of this fizzing through my mind, I said something which veered off course, and so I got the "He, he", meaning the points went to him.

I am quite a fan of the late Keith Humble, having volunteered and recorded his Sonata for the Australian Music Examinations Board. He could be a meticulous composer. I remember him from National Music Camp back in the early 1980s; he was quite a funny fellow. Whenever he saw me he used to say "Why aren't you practising?", then he'd chuckle.

How do you approach the learning of a new score? And what are the essential considerations in interpreting a score?

I don't have any system when it comes to learning a new work, my only criteria is that I am not rushed and consequently forced to 'cram notes into my head'. I

leave that for the specialists! If I adhere to any maxim of thought, it would be Busoni's, who wrote "What the composer's inspiration necessarily loses through notation, his interpreter should restore" (1911, p. 84). In other words, the score is a set of symbols ultimately incapable of expressing what inspired the composer in the first place. William James put it memorably, albeit on a different spiritual theme, when he wrote "Religious language clothes itself in such poor symbols as our life affords" (1992, p. 13n).

It is therefore, to my way of thinking, not sufficient to merely learn the notes and indications of a piece without developing a *concept* about it. To me this is a precondition for performing *any* work, and it necessarily takes time. Essentially – to recall something Leon Fleischer said – one should have something to think about and focus upon at every possible instance – whether it be the sense of phrase, elasticity of line, internal rhythm, atmospheric tension through pedalling, or contrapuntal nuance through voicing – in order to immerse oneself in the music. It is no good just thinking (or praying) last minute "Ok, now just think about the music". Good luck! That is to try and take one of the most demanding of disciplines – the practice of one's musical *values* – for granted, as though it were a source of inspiration that can be expected to simply occur.

Now of course a concept needn't take the form of a program about a work, since for many composers this would involve an inappropriate superimposition. The poetry of a Chopin Ballade, for instance, might take on the wrong dimensions. And so, in the case of Chopin, one could seek to identify with his unique style of narrative and internal drama, one usually free of signposts. To become acquainted with a writer's sense of gesture is something deeply fascinating. I once performed Chopin's F minor Ballade in a master class for Eugene Istomin, who spoke about the inherent, 'balletic' gesture of a certain passage, remarking that he would perform the passage with the exact same gesture irrespective of who wrote it. Some might think this blasphemous, yet nonetheless he definitely hit upon something. From a philosophic perspective, Istomin's view runs that a certain *type* of passage (not falling into technical categories, like scales, but rather implied *gestures*) can possess certain inviolable physical laws, the property of which belong to art, not the composer. Here you have a distinction of very powerful and idealistic connotations (along the same lines as Busoni's assertion that music was born free, and to win freedom is its destiny), and a prime example of a person's musical values.

Another way I sometimes try and 'get inside' a piece of music is to orchestrate it for a different combination of instruments. I once put myself to a test – it was very confronting – whereby I transcribed Ravel's Pavane for a small ensemble. Of course he did it himself, but I hadn't heard it for decades, and so it was simply an experiment to see whether my sense of an appropriate 'sound-world' for his Pavane would turn out remotely similar to his. I became increasingly nervous towards the end of my effort, but fortunately enough my chosen instrumentation turned out to be almost identical, and differences in timbral registration and so forth didn't transpire so terribly as I had feared.

What do you see as major challenges with regard to stylistic interpretation?

I think the word 'stylistic' poses the biggest problem of all. If a work has managed to survive say two-hundred-and-fifty years, it has done so by virtue of some inherent quality that has endured and ultimately *transcended* the contemporaneous evolvement of stylistic perspectives. To impose upon such a work stylistic practices assumed present at its inception is to superimpose entirely predictable circumstances. Once more the work shall surface, the trend, die. And so the challenge is to tear the increasingly fossilized

notions of interpretation from its current source – style – and re-introduce its natural counterpart: *identification* with the composer's intent. In fact, many current notions concerning authentic practice are simply accepted on authority, yet remain philosophically unsound and ought to be challenged. For example it is becoming increasingly fashionable to say that the metronomic indications of a composer are quite as important as notational considerations. When I hear such things I feel something is not quite right, and try to solve it.

However, faulty propositions are generally more easily asserted than unravelled, and I hope that, for the sake of clarifying the subject, the following example will be excused for its pedestrian pace. Imagine you have two notationally flawless recordings of a Beethoven Symphony that observe slightly different gradations in tempi, one of which you pass to a friend, and then you both put on headphones and listen to the work. You notate every note and its relative duration in turn down on paper (in theory – it is a thought-experiment after all!) and your friend does the same, the aim being to uncover any notational discrepancies between the recordings. You hear the final bar of your version, and nine seconds later, your friend hears the final bar of his. You compare papers, there have been no notational discrepancies with regard to duration or pitch, except that one version took a bit longer for completion than the other (essentially the differences in duration, however, are inconsequential). The performances may have been of slightly different tempi, but a comparison of both scores reveals that they are identical, hence the *identity* of the music has been similarly preserved in both versions, and so this identity – or more precisely, the musical *content* – is demonstrably not so dependant upon metronomic as notational considerations. The critical point to make here is that verification of tempo markings relies upon an *outside* source (that is, the metronome), something therefore external to the work's *internal* logic. Therefore the music is recognized more on the basis of its notation – the pitches and *their* relative duration – than on performance duration (governed by metronomic indications, granted that the tempi chosen by the interpreter proportionately interrelate).

Certain non-musical principles, such as Leibniz's maxim on the geometric concept of similarity (for the record, two figures that preserve the structure of space in such a way as to be indistinguishable when considered by themselves; in ordinary geometry length is relative: a building and a small-scale model of it are similar) can lend clarity to musical matters. The foregoing 'experiment' simply substitutes the structural content, *duration*, of a piece of music, for Leibniz's *space*. A fanciful translation, perhaps, but there's a certain thrill of adventure in going to unusual lengths to nut things out for oneself.

To what extent do you allow other performances (either live or on CD) to influence your own interpretations?

I'd like to give a clear answer on this one, but doubt that I can. I have no way of monitoring the degree by which a moving performance (or a bad one, for that matter) might influence me. However I'd be perfectly aware should I make the choice to adopt another pianist's way of playing a certain *passage*, although this very rarely happens. Having said that I think it a perfectly natural and healthy inclination, early in one's musical development, to try and imitate one's heroes. I certainly did a fair amount of that.

Have you any advice to students on the interpretation (and performance) of contemporary works (including those that use non-conventional notation)?

To my way of thinking the biggest psychological hurdle to overcome is the notion, often erroneous, that taking on a contemporary work demands some kind of higher intelligence. For a bit of perspective, here's a quote from a man hardly lacking in brains: "A melody

changes its character to a considerable degree if played backward, and I, who am a poor musician, find it hard to recognize reflection when it is used in the construction of a fugue" (Weyl, 1952, p. 52). This was written by the mathematician Hermann Weyl, certainly no fool. He was referring to basic counterpoint, to say nothing of increasingly theoretical modes of composition. It is a great pity that many of us tend to refrain from conceding this kind of thing, as I think it very likely that the widespread fear of seeming ignorant perpetuates a kind of unreality that annihilates confidence in understanding a contemporary composer's perspective. It also generates a false kind of mystification about modern art.

But I'm getting away from the point. What I want to suggest is that most composers, the cleverest among them, are simply delighted at the very thought of their works being performed, and greatly warm to anyone who demonstrates a special affinity with their music. Many are also quite open to a rhapsodic or flexible approach to their scores, so long as the passion is there. My point here is that the would-be performer should not confuse a composer's preoccupation with *craft* (whether it be attention to detail, absorption in complexity, whatever), which is a private matter, with the art of *performing* their music. All those indications in the score must amount to something beyond a dutiful exhibit.

How do you go about memorizing a score? (To what extent is memorization important?)

I think that for an artist it is crucial to develop different faculties of memory, and allow them to work in complement. Often I find that music written by pianist-composers is too easily absorbed via tactile sensation, hence committed to memory before one has developed their own considered opinion about it. This is problematic. An overly-tactile relationship with a work (it is perfectly possible to perform a Chopin étude 'musically' with cotton wool in ones ears through touch alone) leads to the music becoming shaped according to the physical 'feel' of playing, in which case one's mechanism ends up governing their musical sensibilities. This routinely results in what is commonly known as 'facile playing'. Montaigne expressed this lack of depth beautifully with regard to opinions which never reach the head but 'remain on the tongue'. But I should add that my tongue, metaphorically speaking, has been guilty of this dilemma. In my teens I committed hundreds of pieces to memory in this fashion, barely having 'registered' a single note. Since then I have developed other faculties of memory – aural, intervallic, photographic, conceptual – and usually try to configure all of them, alongside the tactile, in some way.

Perhaps this wouldn't suit everyone, but in my case, this development seems essential. For one thing my once perfect pitch has dropped a semitone. I noticed it when I hit thirty, while conducting a choir. I thought 'gee, that fellow's singing a g# and it should be a g', ran to the piano, and low and behold he *was* singing g! Quite a shock, and my sense of pitch-centre has not adjusted since. Perhaps, it was suggested, it is because of the development of the three tiny bones in the middle-ear – the ossicles – the received vibrations of pitch being now of a different frequency from when I was young, and as my memory is conditioned by that earlier frequency what I now perceive conflicts with that memory. Whatever the case I've had plenty of time to recover, and no longer really mind that much. Still, when it comes to pieces like Webern's Variations – a work which, owing to sparseness of texture, is very demanding to memorize – one *cannot* rely purely on tactile sensation or perfect pitch, but must develop a corresponding internal sense of the relationship between various intervals and gesture. In the case of Berio's *Sequenza IV*, a certain amount of visualizing (that is, photographic memory) was necessary for me to commit it to memory.

How do you structure your own practice? And what advice would you give students regarding practice?

In my experience pianistic flaws invariably stem from a false concept – sometimes self-inflicted – of physical movement. Very often the most natural solution for a passage remains a complete mystery simply because one has been taught that a certain motion is not permitted, or because one is unaccustomed to looking at their hands and arms perform in such a way, or have grown used to a tactile, physical sensation to the extent whereby a different sensation may no longer spontaneously occur. When such pianistic habits become almost second nature it is almost inevitable that the playing – without the aid of a good teacher or some essential bit of recollected information – will gradually corrode. This is the chief reason why one should perhaps be wary of the term *method*. I am fortunate enough to have studied intensively with Dorothy Taubman, whose profound understanding of virtually every aspect of pianism is best understood as an *approach*. The terms are mutually exclusive; the former implies the *application* of technique to the performance of music, while the latter *embraces* rather than distinguishes between the two. With method, principles are usually aligned with specified technical divisions. For instance, you learn a scale, and that same series of notes appears in Mozart, and so you don't need to practice it in Mozart! Fine, if you are satisfied interpreting Mozart's music through a prism of warm-ups.Perhaps the simplest way to avoid any kind of methodological dogma is ultimately to regard everything within its own musical context, and consider certain ways of playing the piano as being 'more co-ordinate', or 'less co-ordinate', as opposed to 'right' and 'wrong'.

How do you ensure that long-standing works in your repertoire remain 'fresh'?

It's never the piece, but only one's playing that get's old. Those works that I would never wish to revisit generally form a puzzle: what was it that drew me to them in the first place? Often the contrary occurs: how could I have missed the beauty of such a work as this? And if a piece feels 'on the turn' so to speak, I'm happy to let it go. It's not as though we are short of repertoire, after all.

What advice would you give someone who suffers from performance anxiety?

I think perhaps that any advice offered in this instance is best granted from personal experience as opposed to theory. On stage I am dealing with my own nervous system and psychological mechanism, and these factors, unique to every individual, are perhaps best understood from the perspective of that individual. A teacher may guide you in the right direction, but cannot be expected to provide one with this order of knowledge. In short, one's mind should be occupied with the music, in which case the preparations must be sufficient enough to resist susceptibility to distraction during the performance. Ironically, the better the technique, the greater the potential for distraction, since the mind cannot be satisfactorily occupied with accomplishing the basics (nor should it be).

My nature, for better or worse, has a far-reaching susceptibility to all kinds of distractions, from the trivial to the contemplative. And so this susceptibility must be disciplined and transformed into a poetic *receptivity* on stage. Therefore nothing can be taken for granted during one's practice, no detail too small, in other words. While I am anything but immune to the feelings of concert pressure, I work to encourage my sensibilities to be consumed with the music. Above all, I can only happily commit to performing music with which I feel a very personal kind of identification, from which I may look forward to a kind of spiritual union.

How can a teacher best impart/elicit a sense of musicality in a student?

I don't know, but one must keep *trying!* I remember a lesson I had with Dorothy Taubman on the Brahms-Paganini Variations. She was demonstrating one of the slower, lyrical variations (it was an exceptional moment, she very rarely demonstrated) and played it with a wonderful elasticity and rhythmic tension, subtly dance-like. Try as I did, I could *not* do it myself! I most certainly felt it when *she* did it, through every fibre of my being, but I could not absorb it. She said that it was largely a question of *experience.* Well of course she is right; it is, and it's also true that at that time my mechanism, although quite sound, did not sufficiently 'breathe' in order to allow for such playing to occur. Now I can shape the passage in a way utterly *impossible* for me back then. Did she transmit, somehow inculcate, a degree of her fluency onto me? Did I absorb what she did, albeit over time? I can't possibly say, but certainly that experience stays with me. And I think the fact that she *seldom* demonstrated added to the impression. As a great teacher she was only ever interested in getting the *student* to uncover their potential to discover musical results, to provide their *own* example, albeit via the most meticulous pianistic guidance. That, in my experience, is the hardest thing to do, yet insofar as the development of one's artistry is concerned, it is perhaps the only way to go.

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Biographical note

Identified by *The Australian* as "the best young talent for the new millennium", pianist/composer Benjamin Martin has become known as an artist of exceptional versatility and subtlety of expression. A graduate of the Juilliard School, he has been described as "the consummate artist" (*The Age*), and as a composer, "distinctive ... arresting in style" (*New York Times*). Benjamin has received numerous awards including the Queen Elizabeth grant, first prize in the Hepzibah Menuhin Memorial Award, the Marten Bequest Scholarship and two scholarships to the Tanglewood Summer Festival (as pianist in 1987, and as composer in 1988), where he participated in classes with Leon Fleisher and Leonard Bernstein.

He has performed throughout Australia, and toured the United States, Europe and Asia, performing solo and duo-recitals with such artists as Alina Ibragimova, Pekka Kuusisto, Richard Tognetti, Dimitri Berlinsky, Janice Martin, Steven Davislim, Boris Baraz, Eiji Oue and the Utrecht Quartet. Benjamin has also given numerous World Premieres: as conductor of a work by Matthew Herskowitz in New York, the New York Premiere of Two Pianos by Morton Gould (associate artist M. Herskowitz) and Brett Dean's Elegy (with cellist Emma-Jane Murphy).

In 1993, John Browning gave the World Premiere of Martin's Three Portrait Etudes at The Alice Tully Hall, New York. His *Brazil* has been recorded by Matthew Herskowitz for the Canadian label Tout Crin. Benjamin's own music has also been performed in Europe and the United States, notably by Kristian Jarvi's Absolute Ensemble, which toured Australia in 2002. In 2009 Martin toured the United States with oustanding New York jazz musicians Jason Di Matteo (bass) and Greg Gonzales (drums) performing improvisations plus Benjamin's own music.

Closer to home, Benjamin has featured as guest artist for most festivals and concert series in Australia, including

ten Huntington Festivals, Musica Viva, the Sydney Opera House Mostly Mozart Festival, the Melbourne Festival, the Sydney Festival and the Coriole Festival.

Benjamin features in three critically accclaimed recordings for Tacet Records Stuttgart with the great German violist, Hartmut Lindemann. He is also a recording artist for Chandos and Melba Recordings, and features in an interview in a film titled 'Memories of John Browning'.

Benjamin was both consultant editor and recording artist for the most recent AMEB Syllabus release. In 2009-2010 he gave a series of talks for 3MBS titled Beyond Measure, whereby he explored certain philosophical and social aspects throughout music's history. In 2010, *Clockface* – a large work resulting from a collaboration between Benjamin and the painter-poet Matthew Hooper – received its premiere in the Sydney Chamber Music Festival, featuring Guy Noble as narrator.