

## **DANGEROUS LIVING, WITH J.S. BACH**

### **A short interview with Jessica Duchen**

I've long been an admirer of the extraordinary South African pianist Daniel-Ben Pienaar, whose recordings of Bach and Mozart in particular have struck me as profound, original, fresh, thought-provoking and utterly authentic in terms of the spirit of the music. Among his many roles, he teaches at the Royal Academy of Music and Benjamin Grosvenor has often cited him as a vital mentor. Daniel-Ben has just recorded the Bach 48 Preludes and Fugues (out now on Avie) and a few weeks ago he performed them whole at Kings Place. I asked him for an e-interview about this, but he wanted to wait – sensibly enough – until that particular hurdle was out of the way. Here is our resulting Q&A.

**JD: Daniel-Ben, most of us have enough trouble playing just one fugue, let alone 48 of them plus preludes. How does it feel to perform them – the prospect beforehand, the sustaining of energy through the concert and then the aftermath?**

**DBP:** There are some things that will never become easy and this is one of them. My recent concerts at King's Place in London were a new experience for me – I had never played the two books back to back on consecutive evenings. I think it is impossible to completely banish worrying about a memory slip somewhere along the line no matter how 'in the bones' the music sits, but the bigger challenge for me was to make peace with living dangerously in other ways too: sustaining the greatest possible variety of pacing, dynamics, phrasing, pedalling and touch throughout the 96 pieces (sometimes at physical extremes) to really make palpable the encyclopaedically inclusive nature of the work to an audience – its diversity of characterisations, of emotions, atmospheres and colours, of musical ideas – in a truly pianistic way.

That means leaving very little room for 'digging in' for security, for putting up safety nets by defaulting to moderate tempi or comfortable tonal calibrations wherever difficulties present themselves. Living with

that level of risk can be frightening but the rewards when things go well are so much finer! I have no idea whether I was successful on this occasion, but I certainly enjoyed working at it – and would love to perform the cycle again!

**JD: How would you describe your approach to Bach performance? Do you think it's necessary to adhere to traditions or do you prefer to free yourself of all preconceptions about the music?**

**DBP:** I do not think one could safely make any rules about Bach performance (or any other for that manner) – that is, as long as you think that playing piano is, at its best, an artistic endeavour! Good artists have always confounded or subverted given expectations. How one frees oneself from the sense of adhering to a set of conventions or commonly accepted mores is a complex issue though. It is almost inconceivable to me that, doing something as intricate and beautiful as playing the piano, one could NOT be deeply interested in the work of eminent exponents present and past (imagine a chess player who claims to be uninterested in the great matches of the grand masters!). Exploring the expressive means and ideas of these artists in some detail, one inevitably ends up having to face the anxieties and challenges of influence. Finding a playful freedom and a fresh sense of the intuitive beyond that remains the ultimate goal but getting there is an often arduous process. So, in short I would say I am less interested in the dictates of particular traditions than I am in the highly personal playing of some of the great exponents of those traditions, and the specifics of that. I think at this point in pianistic history it becomes possible to see the two things as separate to a certain degree.

**JD: Some might argue against playing Bach on the modern piano. What would you say in favour of it?**

**DBP:** See my answer above! Playing the music on the 'wrong' instrument, if it happens to be the queen of instruments – an instrument

which has a reputation above any other for successful transcription and transformation, even transubstantiation (!), and can perhaps boast a more illustrious roster of great practitioners than any other (save the voice) – opens up a set of artistic possibilities quite distinct from those open to musicians playing on instruments of Bach's day. The sensitive pianist does not merely take into account the instruments and practices of the late baroque but also of subsequent eras. This becomes a rather wonderful way of engaging, through Bach's rich scores, with all sorts of histories and thus with that which remains timelessly human in the music. In any case those who still argue against playing Bach on the piano can only do so on grounds of personal taste. The whole 'hardware' debate is in fact one that is really quite a bit in the past, and as far as I am concerned came to decisive end with the priorities outlined in Laurence Dreyfus's "Early Music Defended Against Its Devotees". Those who still think there is an intellectually coherent argument contra playing Bach on the piano are simply horribly behind the times!

**JD: We understand you've recorded the 48 – and we look forward to hearing it. What was it like, doing that? Are you a Glenn Gould in the studio, seeking perfection, or do you prefer to record each piece in a single take?**

**DBP:** I love recording above anything else and I love editing my own recordings. I have to start with a very clear idea of what I want to achieve which normally entails a framework within which I play as spontaneously as possible. I record many possibilities within that set of clearly defined parameters and 'harnessing points', and decide later how I would like to use them, after listening to how things come across on tape. It is therefore incredibly important to me to edit my own recordings! Few people realise just what a difference the choice of takes, and the exact point where an edit is made, can effect. A lot of recordings end up almost as much the artistic work of the producers and editors as of the players! Editing my own work means my recordings are entirely composed of my own musical decisions. As far as long takes and short takes are concerned, I do both depending on what's required and

depending on the conditions under which I work on a particular day. It all depends on what is more likely to yield the kind of result one is after.

*jessicamusic.blogspot.com (sourced February 2021)*