

Music of my life

Italian pianist *Roberto Prosseda* shares his pick of five inspirational recordings that combine natural phrasing, generosity of spirit and a willingness to experiment



IDON'T JUST LISTEN TO CLASSICAL music or piano recordings – I love Pink Floyd and Dire Straits – but these are the ones which had most influence on me as a pianist. I discovered Schubert Lieder through Elizabeth Schwarzkopf when I was about 16 and still studying in Latina, a little town in Italy. She and Edwin Fischer create something really special here. In *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, which is my favourite track, she is almost crying. She becomes what she is singing. She is not merely telling the story – she *is* the story. For the first time, I cried after hearing it. This recording taught me that music can bring you somewhere else, to things that you've never experienced in your real life. This is great Schubert playing because of the natural phrasing, doing just what it needs – no more and no less. The less you do, the more it comes: that's what I learnt from this recording.

When I was 18 at the Milan Conservatory, a friend who organised my debut there asked me who my favourite pianist was. I replied, Pollini. He asked if I'd ever heard of Ignaz Friedman and I said no; so he played me his recording of Chopin's Nocturne Op 55/2. I was really shocked. There was too much freedom, too much rubato. But then I listened again and heard all these different worlds of phrasing, of long lines – all played on one piano, though it sounds like three different ones. When later I came to record the piece, I even tried to play it like Friedman. It was a disaster! When I play or I teach, it's very useful to imitate and caricature other pianists – if you can do Horowitz, Lisitsa and Kempff, you cannot be too bad a pianist! But I can't do Friedman. He remains a model of refinement, of contrast, imagination and always respects the core of the music.

There were many other jazz pianists I could have chosen but Bill Evans has such a special colour. He's almost independent from the mechanical limitations of things. I chose this particular recording because it's very experimental. Everyone must experiment. Even if you fail and say 'Sorry, it was wrong', at least you must try. The idea of having more than one piano under your control has always fascinated me, and this recording is of Evans reacting to himself – recording one part then recording a second and then a third part, superimposing each on the first part, making chamber music with himself. Multiplying yourself and reacting to what you do!

Now for a fourth use of the piano: Andreas Staier. For other reasons than Friedman or Bill Evans, he was another one who opened my mind. I had a few lessons from him. The first time I met him was when I was in my early twenties and he came to Florence to give a masterclass. It was the first time I had played a fortepiano and I played Schubert and Mozart for him. His approach to historically informed performance is the one I prefer. He showed me that you can play an old instrument and be very respectful of the score and the way it was played at that time, and still make it sound modern. When I came to record the sonatas on a Fazioli, it was his sound and phrasing I had in mind.

Martin Berkofsky's recording is something very personal to me. We met in a strange way, because I was looking for a score by Mendelssohn and Moscheles – variations for two pianos on Weber's *La Preciosa*. He was the only person who had recorded it with orchestra, so I found him on the internet and wrote to him telling him I was trying to get hold of the score, could he help me find a copy. He wrote

back saying 'Hello, nice to meet you. I'll send you it!' Incredible, no? He sent me a copy of the manuscript he had bought in an auction many years before. He also sent me his recording. I did some research into this guy who had been so generous and I discovered he wasn't giving public concerts any more, just playing in hospitals to raise money for those who needed it. So we corresponded more and I told him that I was organising a project here in Italy which is called Donatori di musica (Musical Donors) which gives concerts in the cancer wards of hospitals. Berkofsky had himself recovered from cancer and he came over to Italy (he paid his own fare!) to play for our cancer patients. He mostly played Liszt and his model was Ervin Nyiregyházi. Then his cancer returned; but before he died he made this recording in 2011. So – a wonderful pianist and human being. 🎵

INTERVIEW BY JEREMY NICHOLAS

Schubert

Lieder
Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Edwin Fischer
Warner Classics 5627542

Ignaz Friedman

Complete Solo Recordings 1923-36
Pearl IF 2000

Conversation with Myself

Bill Evans
Verve V6-8526

Mozart

Piano Sonatas
Andreas Staier
Harmonia Mundi HMG508388/89

Liszt

Visions
Martin Berkofsky
Arts Music 47757-8

