



New balance

Peter Jablonski talks to **Peter Quantrill** about how quarantine has helped him recover from career-threatening injury and discover a new world of repertoire

Peter Jablonski has had more reason than most of us to use quarantine as a time for going back to basics. In 2018 the Swedish pianist was diagnosed with ‘frozen shoulder’ syndrome. It took 18 months of patience and therapy before he could even think about resuming a career that has taken him around the globe countless times, heaping up honours, awards and a considerable discography (first for Decca, now Ondine) along the way. Then Covid-19 arrived.

Rather than cabin fever, time shut at home has given Jablonski a healthy sense of perspective. Having a partner (Anastasia Belina) who is also a musicologist helps, he tells me: ‘She keeps throwing repertoire at me that I have never heard of!’ At her encouragement he picked up the overlooked music of Alexey Stanchinsky, a Russian contemporary of Scriabin

who died at the age of just 26 having suffered from mental health crises for some years. A new Ondine album is the happy result of his study, and a natural sequel to the collection of Scriabin’s Mazurkas released two years ago.

In his exploration, Jablonski begins near the beginning, with a rhapsodic but precocious Sonata started by Stanchinsky at 16 and completed before he entered the Moscow Conservatoire for lessons with the rigorous contrapuntalist Sergei Taneyev (for more details, see Belina’s richly enlightening booklet essay). ‘Yet it sounds as though he is plunging the depths of life experience in the piece,’ says Jablonski.

Some pieces are earlier still, such as the Chopinesque *Tears* which features in this month’s Scores. As someone who has spent three decades immersed in repertoire at the hyper-virtuoso end of the scale – Tchaikovsky concertos and Scriabin

sonatas – does Jablonski have any advice for the rest of us? ‘There is a tendency to overthink music that is quite lyrical, quite easy, without too many notes. I repeated this piece more than any other for the recording. At first I tried to invest every note with meaning. I listened back and found that it sounded so stilted. I tried playing it faster – but it can be very difficult to find the right mood in a simple piece. So I would just go for simplicity.’

Stanchinsky the time-traveller

How their music lies under the fingers can tell us much about composers as pianists. ‘On a gymnastic level,’ Jablonski finds, ‘you can tell that Tchaikovsky was no virtuoso from the awkward nature of his writing. Even though it sounds phenomenal – and sometimes it is phenomenally difficult – a lot of Liszt is actually quite comfortable compared to Brahms. According to Prokofiev, Stanchinsky was quite the pianist. He studied with Konstantin Igumnov, who was one of the great pedagogues of his day, and he gave a recital including the *Don Juan* Fantasy of Liszt, and for him to even attempt that piece he must have had a sufficient technique.’

Stanchinsky’s father died in 1910, and the 21-year-old composer then suffered a year-long breakdown. The Op 1 Sketches he wrote afterwards have taken a special place in Jablonski’s affections. ‘I had to spend quite a bit of time on them before I even remotely understood them, not that you ever understand music like this.’ They use complex polyrhythms – multiple time signatures – which prefigure the work of modernists like Ligeti and Nancarrow; yet instead of chaos they describe a strange place where Bach, Art Tatum and Rachmaninov seem to meet in passing and find common themes.

Some of the Sketches will make their way into Jablonski’s next recitals, whenever they take place, along with other quarantine discoveries such as the Polish composer Grażyna Bacewicz (who may get an Ondine album to herself one of these days). For a second-half barnstormer he recently dusted off his old score of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. ‘I hadn’t looked at it for over ten years, and I had a shock. I saw my tour dates when I played *Pictures* back in 1995: 22 times in a month! There wasn’t much time for playing anything other than what you were asked to play. Young artists often get forced between a rock and a hard place. And with a modern career there isn’t always enough time to swim in this wonderful world of interesting repertoire.’

Releasing pressure

Age and experience go hand in hand. Horizons narrow in one regard but widen in another. Jablonski remembers: ‘Back in 1994 I was practising the Tchaikovsky concertos for Decca – and I was learning the Second and Third at the same time because I hadn’t played them before – when I developed tendonitis in my right hand. It got so bad I had to cancel a month of concerts. I went for ultrasound treatment. And at that age you think you are invincible, so I didn’t think more about it. But little shoulder problems slowly crept in.’

Then came the frozen shoulder, requiring massage, hot-water treatment, a chair with a back (‘like Radu Lupu’) and yoga. ‘I have to look after myself now – 30 years of touring is an unhealthy business!’ Having just turned 50, Jablonski doesn’t start work in the morning without a warm-up: simple, slow trill exercises, C-D, both hands, in every fingering possible.

Restricted movement at the keyboard, however, has rekindled a love-affair with Mozart: he is learning a sonata each month.

During lockdown, practice has become the stuff of life rather than being squeezed in between tours to Japan and North America. ‘I practise with a schedule. I write it down the evening before, even how long I’m going to spend on a particular piece. It forces me to do the work, and then if it needs modifying up or down the next day, at least you know where you are. I practise big pieces in sections, and then I put them together like building blocks. I have colleagues who just play – which is fine for them. But I need to know that I know the piece, and then I can solve micro-problems along the way.’

‘I have never worried about whether I could climb a piece technically but about whether I could remember it – and in slow movements more than the fast ones’

Micro-problems – like the fugue of the ‘Hammerklavier’ Sonata, which Jablonski is learning properly after 25 years of on-and-off practice. Late Brahms, Anton Rubinstein and Ronald Stevenson are among other passions released by new-found time and muscle freedom. He is also getting to grips with a new concerto written for him by Patrick Hawes, the composer of Classic FM charting albums in a quintessentially English neo-pastoral style such as *Blue in Blue* and the *Lazarus Requiem*.

While an appetite for all this new repertoire evidently gets Jablonski up in the morning, it needs learning and embedding in preparation for a time when concert life resumes. He takes an attitude to the slog of memorisation which is evidently informed by experience. ‘I know people who page-turn in their head. I could usually play each hand by itself from memory. That’s the level I wanted to know it before I walked on stage. But I think we should do whatever we’re comfortable with. I have never worried about whether I could climb a piece technically but about whether I could remember it – and in slow movements more than the fast ones.’

Jablonski recalls a pivotal recital in his last year at the Royal College of Music in London. ‘My future agent and representatives from Decca had been invited. And I lost my way completely in Scriabin 9. Completely. Luckily it was Scriabin 9. I had time to think: “My career is over, I’ll become a tennis player instead.” I probably lost it for two seconds – but I got the contract. I think most of us have a story like that.’ As for the near future: ‘Of course there’s a hunger for live music-making – but will people want to sit cheek by jowl in the Royal Festival Hall? Who knows?’ ■

The score of Stanchinsky’s Tears appears on page 36. Peter Jablonski plays the track on this issue’s covermount. His new album of Stanchinsky is available on Ondine (ODE1383-2). Visit www.peterjablonski.com for further information and news on upcoming engagements.