

ONE TO WATCH

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Twilight tone

Vincent Larderet enjoys a fast developing reputation for his capacity to strip music bare and reveal its hidden depths. He discusses his new Liszt album with **Michael Johnson**

French pianist Vincent Larderet's aptly titled *Between Light and Darkness*, a two-disc set of Liszt keyboard works, cleverly mixes old favourites with neglected gems. The result is a memorable experience, stunning in tone and forbidding in pianistic demands, linking what Larderet calls 'passion and despair, Hungarian sentimentality and religious mysticism, light and darkness.'

Released on the label Piano Classics, this album displays a freshness of approach that gives new life to Liszt's music. The first time I heard these recordings, I was captivated by the depth and beauty of Larderet's intensely personal interpretations. One admirer has described it an example of 'perfect osmosis'.

Larderet amply deserves the attention coming his way from previous highly praised recordings and tours in Asia, the United States and Europe. A self-described virtuoso, he places lyricism at the top of his objectives. 'The piano must be able to sing like the human voice,' he says.

How true is it that French teachings, which he absorbed as a student, are resistant to outside ideas? 'Absolutely true,' he says. 'French music education is very narrow. I

suffered in my younger years from these constrictions. I chose another way and have never regretted it.' Among 'other ways' he cites the long-term hard work of gaining recognition through international piano competitions and public concerts. Nevertheless, he remains an heir to the French musical tradition, having studied Ravel's work with Vlado Perlemuter's personal scores.

Favouring an intellectual approach to the complex works of Liszt, Larderet has tackled some of the literary works from which Liszt drew inspiration. He studied Victor Hugo's poem *Après une lecture de Dante* and *The Divine Comedy* by Florentine philosopher Dante Alighieri to enrich his interpretations. He attempts to recreate the musical environment of the composer's time. It is essential to go beyond playing the notes on the page, he says, and to 'master the stylistic shadings of the period'.

Larderet was immersed in music from childhood, growing up in the 'constant presence of music'. His father, who passed away last year, was a doctor of musicology at the University of Lyon and introduced him to his voluminous collection of scores. Little Vincent learned to read piano pieces, chamber music and full orchestra scores



before he could play them. He recalls loving music above all else, yet 'not with a career in mind'. Too much career focus can lead to selfish objectives, he believes.

By age eight, he was developing a talent for improvisation, and by ten he aspired to become a composer. He entered one of the regional conservatoires to study composing, focusing on post-Schoenbergian styles, particularly Berg and Webern. One of his finished works, titled *Sonatina Op 1*, was noticed by his professors. He was already in his own world. He won a first prize at the conservatoire at age 16 but shortly thereafter changed direction when he realised the difficulties ahead. He felt 'there were already too many great composers'.

Larderet considers himself a perfectionist for his loyalty to the smallest markings on the score. Some of the darker pieces in this album are 'stripped of all artificiality' he says, including *Funérailles*, *La notte*, *La lugubre gondola II*, *Unstern!*, *Nuages gris*, *R.W. Venezia* and *Schlaftos!*

He has drawn praise from audiences in Britain, the United States, China, Japan, France, Italy, Spain and Germany, among others, and his tonal qualities have been noted by the Russian journal *Muzikalnaya Zhizn* (Musical Life). A Larderet performance is 'neither piano, organ nor orchestra, but a choir of human voices', wrote his Russian critic. 'One wonders how such a young man has had enough experience to allow him to penetrate such depths.'

Recurring subjects in our conversation are virtuosity, commercial success, the limits of interpretation and where they should rank in pianistic skills. Larderet is adamant that virtuosity should always be a means, not an end. 'I am a virtuoso but always in the service of the music,' he insists. His displays of keyboard fireworks in Liszt and Ravel are cases in point. He has also made impressive recordings of works by Schumann, Brahms, Scriabin, Debussy, Berg, Ravel, Schmitt and Prokofiev, seemingly with ease.

Interpretation is another matter. It must always be reined in by an attachment to the score and a feel for

what the composer intended. 'This requires a great deal of humility,' he says. 'One must know a composer's entire output to acquire a better approach to his work.' Larderet modifies his playing to match eras, aesthetics or composers. He cites Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and Claudio Arrau as among his favourites for their purity of tone, phrasing and respect for the score.

Larderet has his own demands for tone. Now a Steinway Artist, he does not hesitate to retune the occasional rogue string in his piano during intermissions. Audiences might be surprised to see him whip out his hammer and give a pin a half-turn. He tells me he has taken courses in piano tuning, an experience that made him 'much more attentive to tone'.

Larderet has a broad and variegated repertoire dating from his early training. He likes to say he has studied everything from Scarlatti to Boulez, but now wants to pick and choose. 'I always have a list of works that I am planning to learn. I have to love a piece in order to learn it, so I refuse to take on anything that doesn't interest me.' Quoting the conductor Carlo Maria Giulini he says: 'When a work needs you, it will knock at your door'.

Does he worry about audience approval of his sometimes eclectic programmes? 'I have learned to play for myself,' he asserts. 'Too much dependence on the audience leads to seeking success above all else. I strive to serve the music and the composer.' **IP**

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Vincent Larderet's *Between Light and Darkness* is now available from Piano Classics (PCL10201) vincentlarderet.com