



# THE PEOPLE'S PIANIST

Concert pianist Piers Lane is the complete package. Popular with audiences, promoters, orchestras and fellow musicians, and with more than a hint of X factor, as London correspondent **Jane Cornwell** found

**"P**atience. Determination. Energy. Steady nerves. The willingness to fill in at the last minute..." Piers Lane counts off the qualities required of an international concert pianist on his long, fine-boned fingers. "And personality," he adds, flashing a smile. "There are many gifted people out there who don't have big careers because people don't necessarily want to work with them. So really, talent is only a percentage of what it takes."

Which is easy for him to say. With 76 different concertos under his white-tie-and-tails, including many rarities by European and British composers – the London-based Australian is internationally recognised as one of the world's finest players. A pianist with the sort of God-given ability that spellbinds audiences, wraps them up in reverie, sees them rise as one before he even hits his final note. His

interpretations of everybody from Bach and Bliss to Schumann and Scriabin have enraptured critics in all 40 countries he has performed in. "No praise could be high enough for Piers Lane," gushed the UK's *Gramophone* magazine, "whose playing throughout is of a

with him. He has played with orchestras from the ABC and the BBC, and Symphonies and philharmonics in America and Britain, Australia and New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Singapore and Sweden. A who's who of conductors have appreciated his versatile

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superb musical intelligence, sensitivity and scintillating brilliance." Sure, he's put in the hours, and done his share of filling in. But talent? Oh yes, Lane has it in spades.

Just about everyone, it seems, wants to work

and seemingly effortless technique; Sir Andrew Davis, Sir Charles Mackerras, Maxim Shostakovich. He has accompanied soprano Cheryl Baker and baritone Peter Coleman-Wright, and the Swedish diva Anne Sofie von





Otter on her invitation. He has an enduring recital partnership with British violinist Tasmin Little, enjoys his collaborations with Aussie composer/violist Brett Dean. Oh, and he is also in great demand as a chamber music player. Which is fitting, really, since the Australian Festival of Chamber Music, held in Townsville each July, has just made him its artistic director.

His schedule for the forthcoming year is packed, exhausting even to read. "I just genuinely love music, which is what sustains me," says Lane, sipping green tea in his living room in Putney, a genteel Thames-side 'burbs known for its village-like ambience. He bought his terraced house for a song not long after decamping to London from Brisbane in 1979; home is where he practices, too. A grand piano – a Steinway – and an upright digital Kawai dominate a space that features, variously, framed photos, CDs, a state of the art stereo system and bookshelves filled with music books.

"Sometimes it can be a hell of a drag to have to practise and travel and live out of a suitcase yet again," Lane continues amiably. "But when you connect with the music and have that experience onstage and with audiences afterwards, it's always worth it. Always."

Lane inherited his love of music from his parents. His first piano teacher was his Townsville-born mother, Enid Lane, who met Piers' father Alan on the last day of auditions at London's Royal College of Music. For a while she taught piano at Putney Girls High School, not too far from where her eldest son – of five brothers – lives now. The couple returned to Australia when Piers was a baby so that his father, Alan, could take up at

position teaching piano at the Queensland Conservatorium, where he eventually became Director of Studies.

Lane grew up listening to the likes of Chopin, Mozart, Schumann. Encouraged by the tutelage of an array of legends including Dr William Lovelock, Dr Nancy Weir and the Seattle-based Hungarian Bela Siki – with whom he studied after winning Most Promising Pianist, aged 18, at the Liszt-Bartok competition in Budapest – he embarked on a life-long love affair with the Romantics.

"The Romantic period is the acme of piano playing," says Lane, who inaugurated the Hyperion label's Romantic Piano Concerto series with concertos by Moszkowski and Paderewski. "The piano hasn't changed a great deal since that time. Those composers understood the piano so well, knew how to get the best out of it. For me Chopin is a real pianist's composer. And I've been playing the Liszt Sonata for 30 years now and I am still finding relationships between the themes that perhaps I didn't recognise before."

While he also harbours a passion for, say, Bach and Beethoven – his CD collection is a classical connoisseur's fantasy – he acknowledges that he probably plays more Romantic material than anything else. But though his recordings of rare and neglected Romantic music have arguably made his name, Lane would rather avoid being labelled as anything.

"People love to put you in a box," he sighs, "and I hate boxes of any sort. Sometimes, because of my records, concert promoters think that's all I play when actually with concerts it's the opposite. It's a constant battle." Even when interpreting the Romantics, Lane

firmly believes in breaking the mould, in busting out of the box when the need arises. "Period playing became very dry a couple of decades ago. People were trying to be incredibly true to the text, reading everything as hints by the composer. I mean, you know from working with modern composers, how often one gets the wrong message. It does make you think about this 'authentic' movement, really," Lane has had works written for him by Colin Matthews, Dominic Muldowney, TK Murray and others, and he will be premiering a new work by Brett Dean in Townsville.

"There has to be personality in playing," he continues, eyes flashing. "Your interpretation of what is intended is there but you have to go with your own artistic integrity and truth and live by it. It's extraordinary, too, how much depth classical music has. The more you work on a piece, sometimes over decades, the more it has to give."

Lane's passion for music is obvious. The more he talks about it – and Lane loves to talk – the more animated he gets. His personable demeanour is all part of an onstage charm that sees him chatting away to audiences between pieces, introducing his subjects with insight and wit. This sometimes means that people feel they know him when they don't. "You played with more emotion when you looked like Percy Grainger," wrote one Number One fan a few years ago, aghast when Lane had his trademark reddish blonde curls shorn. But it also makes for both an enjoyable and an illuminating night out.

Lane's spoken word introductions started in the mid-1990s, the legacy of his position as friendly, approachable Professor of Piano at

London's Royal Academy of Music. "I've been on the staff there since 1989 but this year I am sharing just one post-graduate with another teacher because I am so busy."

In 2000 a BBC Radio producer caught one of Lane's concerts, and signed him up as a writer and presenter. The result was a 54-part series, *The Piano*, which he researched till the wee hours, poring over the reference books on his bookshelves. Now, he says, his artistic director role at the Australian Festival of Chamber Music will add yet another string to his bow. Lane takes the baton from indefatigable festival founder Theodore Kuchar, who is retiring after 16 years of

There's a 12-date national and regional tour with the Australian String Quartet (Dvorak), a *Musica Viva* solo recital in Melbourne (Alkan, Ravel, Chopin), a Medici concert in Brisbane (Chopin) in honour of his mother, and of course a Sydney recital exclusively for *limelight* readers. And much more. Then he's back again in July, in Townsville, to helm the largest festival dedicated to chamber music in the Southern Hemisphere. "Since it's my first year as artistic director," he muses, "I should probably play a little."

His presence will coincide with the release of two new Hyperion recordings: songs by Frederic Delius with the Australian soprano

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service. "Various people were invited to apply and I was chosen. I'm delighted because I have always adored chamber music. It's great to make music with other people, and to be able to program a top level festival like this as well!" he beams, pleased.

Having quelled his homesickness with regular visits to Australia – "I've gone back endlessly and kept friendships up and grown an audience there and been able to live between two countries in a way" – Lane is equally delighted to be touring more extensively than usual in the months to come. April sees him with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra (Beethoven's *Emperor*), and April and May with the Queensland Orchestra.

Yvonne Kenny, and a recording of rarely played concertos by Alnaes and Sinding with the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra under Andrew Litton. He plays these, as he always plays, with colour, generosity, even a little flamboyance. "I'd love to be compared with the old Romantic players," he says at one point. "Going back to Rubenstein and Horowitz and the great players of the past. Rachmaninov, Joseph Hoffman... going back further to Cortot. They're the people who inspire and liberate me."

The pianists with patience, determination, energy, personality and talent? "The very ones," says Piers Lane. "The really great players have it all." □

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