

the way music draws upon and reflects our lives, even at an early age.

**Who was the first composer you fell in love with as a child?**

Definitely Chopin! I fell in love with Dinu Lipatti's classic 1950 recording of Chopin's *Waltzes*, and remember trying to emulate him in several of those pieces (unsuccessfully I might add). Even though my repertoire these days is not necessarily focused on Romanticism, I am still very attached to Chopin's music.

**Where do you find artistic inspiration?**

If I knew the answer then inspiration would be constantly available and thus ultimately non-existent; special moments often arise when you least expect them, even while contemplating seemingly mundane objects or activities. I enjoy reading widely and engaging with a range of art forms, as well as reflecting on my artistic practice and its relation to the world around me. Teaching younger artists and playing chamber music with colleagues are also essential.

**Please tell us how you approach each piece on the Music Toronto program. What is it about CPE Bach's *Fantasia in F-sharp Minor* that speaks to you?**

CPE Bach was a true musical game-changer, "exploding" traditional Baroque idioms in a mercurial style driven by contrast of character and emotion. The Baroque counterpoint of musical line and its relationship to the classical art of rhetoric is replaced by a counterpoint of musical idea and a poetic outlook. There's something liberating and improvisatory about playing this typically quirky *Fantasia*, which often veers angularly from one harmony to another in ways that echo sublime poetry, foreshadow Romanticism, and shatter any lazy notions we might have about 18th-century convention. This music reminds me that despite the implicit specificity of musical notation, we are dealing with open texts. Perhaps this is why my time recording CPE Bach's keyboard music some years ago was such a happy one.

**What fascinates you about Schumann's *Kreisleriana*?**

The second record I owned as a child (after Lipatti's *Waltzes* that is) was Martha Argerich's recording of Schumann's *Kinderszenen* and *Kreisleriana*, and I remember the opening of *Kreisleriana* making a particularly strong impression on me. Much later I read ETA Hoffmann's collection *Kreisleriana*, which provides a fascinating if often sarcastic and comical view of the fictional young 19th-century *Kapellmeister Kreisler*. I have often enjoyed pondering how this literary work (and indeed others by Hoffmann) might have inspired Schumann's composition, which for all its rhapsodic surface feels and sounds completely organic to me.

**I don't come to it with really strongly conceived notions. Principles yes, but there's so much that can happen, that might happen.**

**What drew you to Kaija Saariaho's *Ballade*?**

I was beguiled by its darkness and brooding. It seems to conjure up a dimly lit space of great emotional intensity, even over its relatively short duration.

**What are some of the challenges of Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*?**

Everything here is much more difficult to produce than it sounds! The florid passagework, complex harmony and Ravel's typical "over-laying of the hands" all have their technical challenges. The *Toccata* finale is probably more difficult for me than *Scarbo* from *Gaspard de la Nuit* - whereas the latter has the possibility of rich, quasi-romantic sonority and copious resonance to facilitate the pianistic acrobatics, the *Toccata* needs a meticulous clarity, great lightness, and an almost

crystalline quality. All the while there needs to be an elegance and decorative refinement characteristic of the French Baroque.

**And of Medtner's *Sonata No.9 in A Minor*?**

Medtner was a master of form and through-composition (taking Beethoven as his inspiration); Rachmaninoff thought of him as the greatest living composer of his day. This *Sonata* is perfectly crafted, as one might expect, but for all its tumult and angularity, it ends somewhat inconclusively. The music is tonal, formally concise, but nevertheless open-ended, tricky to bring off. I feel as though it leaves us with more questions than answers - it is a challenge to performer and listener alike.

**What do you find most rewarding and challenging in your professional life?**

I demand a lot of myself as a performer, and rarely feel as though I have achieved what I set out to achieve artistically. When I feel I have come close, it's an intensely rewarding experience. Sometimes the challenge of particular repertoire proves addictive: I have been performing Ligeti's *Piano Études* for a number of years and am due to record them later in 2019. They are without doubt the most difficult piano pieces I have ever worked on (more so than Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata*), and there's a thrill to practising them even if the process is painstaking and requires great patience and perseverance.

**I'm intrigued by the fact that through your mother you are a direct descendant of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidic Judaism. Music and dance are so ingrained in the Hasidic spirit, what part, if any, does that lineage play in your musical life?**

My Jewish heritage is very important to me, and certainly my love of nature and of music seem to chime very well with the Baal Shem Tov's ethos. But I also have "musical genes" from my father's side (his grandfather was apparently a very fine amateur pianist). It's hard for me to dissect what comes from where. ●

*Paul Ennis is the managing editor of The WholeNote.*



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