



PETER
DONOHOE
AT 60

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With a forthcoming Prokofiev recording and his 60th birthday approaching, **PETER DONOHOE** has much to celebrate in 2013, finds *Jeremy Nicholas*

PETER DONOHOE CBE HAS commandeered a corner of the restaurant, laptop open before him, mobile pressed to his ear. A large suitcase is beside him, a smaller one balanced on top, an overcoat strewn over that. He sits in his temporary office in a short-sleeve shirt, working on the details of future engagements. Donohoe is a familiar figure, with his trademark goatee and receding hairline. Apart from the now white beard, it's a look that hasn't changed much since he first came to international recognition 30 years ago, when he was awarded joint second prize in the International

Tchaikovsky Competition with Vladimir Ovchinnikov (no first prize was awarded). He has a lieder recital tonight and is travelling to Russia tomorrow morning for a series of concerts.

He'll probably see Ovchinnikov, now director of the Central Music School of the Moscow Conservatory. Donohoe has many friends – and an enthusiastic following – in Russia. He has always loved the atmosphere of the concerts there. 'There's something about the Russians that makes them associate very easily with the performing arts,' he says. He'll be playing Mozart's F major Sonata K332 and Ravel's *Miroirs*, with a second half of ▶

Haydn's 'English Sonata', and Prokofiev's Sonatas Nos 1, 3 and 6. 'One and three are only 12 minutes in total, and anyway, you can do longer programmes in Russia because their attention span is greater,' he says.

Which leads neatly into the reason for our meeting: Donohoe's forthcoming recording for Somm of all nine of Prokofiev's Piano Sonatas. It's music with which Donohoe has long been intimately acquainted, having prepared a definitive edition of the scores for Boosey & Hawkes back in 1985. The second CD will include the bonus of the Cello Sonata, in which Donohoe is joined by Raphael Wallfisch. 'This is my first shot at Nos 1 to 5 and 9,' he says. 'I've done 6, 7 and 8 before. In fact I've done 6 twice before. The first time was immediately after my competition in Moscow. I did an LP for EMI of Rachmaninov's Etude Tableau in E flat minor, Prokofiev's Sixth and *Petrushka* (which were all in the competition). And then in about 1990, also for EMI, I made a CD of 6, 7 and 8 – which they kept secret, like they tend to do. They were all released – it's just that they never told anybody. It's a fairly familiar story.'

Donohoe has the kind of wry, deadpan humour that comes from having been there, done that and got several T-shirts. He speaks rapidly, fluently, in a soft northern accent. 'I was an exclusive artist with EMI from 1986. It came to an end because we didn't see eye to eye on marketing and also because they were downsizing. Now they're doing almost nothing. But it was a good period and we made some good recordings. And they did, at that time, know how to let an artist develop. They didn't nurture me but they did co-operate over my repertoire – like the three Bartók Piano Concertos, which I did with Simon [Rattle] – instead of wanting the usual stuff.'

In fact, Donohoe made several outstanding recordings of unfamiliar fare for EMI even before he was signed exclusively. These included a Britten disc with Rattle (*Diversions*, *Young Apollo* and *Scottish Ballad*), Dominic Muldowney's Piano Concerto with Mark Elder and all three Tchaikovsky Concertos with the Concert Fantasy. 'The Tchaikovsky 2 was one of the first uncut versions, and for

the middle movement [which has most of the cuts] we had [Steven] Isserlis and [Nigel] Kennedy. Not bad!'

Donohoe's friendship with Simon Rattle has been of seminal importance. Significantly, he was the soloist with the Berlin Philharmonic in Rattle's opening concerts as music director. He talks of the conductor with obvious affection. 'Wikipedia seems to think the relationship began when he took over the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in 1980. Quite wrong. The first time I met Simon was in 1974 when the timpanist of the Merseyside Youth Orchestra was sick for Rattle's first ever performance of *The Rite of Spring*. I was asked to fill in. I

Donohoe: whether there is a certain sort of music that suits him; whether we hear him at his best in the edgy, rhythmic, percussive, acerbic repertoire of the 20th century: Prokofiev, Bartók, Gershwin, Stravinsky and the like. Is that a fair question?

'I'm more confident in it because it's easier. If the kind of pianist who feels more comfortable in Bach and Mozart were to play more Bartók and Stravinsky, they'd find it easier as well. It's just that they don't expose themselves to it very much. The early 20th century is the period that made me want to be a professional musician. It's also the most immediately obvious from the point

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wasn't in the orchestra but I was studying percussion quite seriously at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM). I was the drummer in a rock group at the time. I've been in all sorts of weird directions. I learned the tuba, double bass, clarinet, viola, violin and then this thing, the piano – which was one of the few things I was good at. Anyway, I was asked to do *The Rite*. I brought along a friend of mine to do the other percussion part which was also vacant. And Rattle conducted. He would have been 19. I'm about six months older. It was one of those life-changing events and that's when the partnership began. When he was associate conductor at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, they wanted him to do the Grieg with me, but I persuaded him to do the Stravinsky Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments. I always found Stravinsky infinitely more approachable than Grieg. The Grieg always terrifies me.'

This admission allows me to ask something I have long wondered about

of view of what the composer wanted. Everything is in the score. The world in which they lived very largely shaped the world in which we live today and I've always felt very close to it. Of course the music is difficult – Prokofiev is not an easy composer, nor Bartók, nor any of them – but from the point of view of knowing what they wanted, you know where you're going. The technical aspect is something you can either do or you can't. In recent years, I've become very close to Mozart, but when I was younger he terrified me – and that's because there are so many different points of view about how the music ought to be played. It is genuinely daunting to play well. Perhaps that's a way of saying it's greater music. Possibly. I guess it is.'

But Donohoe is also wary of being pigeon-holed. 'This whole thing of having a peg to hang your hat on, being identified with a certain kind of music, presents a conflict,' he says. 'I want to be a general musician. The more I know

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about Schumann, the more I know about Shostakovich. It's a very important aspect of what I do, of my whole approach.'

Donohoe's empathy with 20th-century music is reflected in a discography of great breadth. It includes nearly 20 piano and orchestra works for Naxos's British Piano Concertos series by the likes of Alwyn, Ferguson, Gerhard, Rawsthorne, Bliss, Harty, John Gardner and Thomas Pitfield. There's also been MacMillan (for RCA), Volans and Messiaen (for Chandos), Foulds (for Warner Classics) – and, delightfully unexpectedly, the four extant concertos of Henry Litolf (for Hyperion). His next project is the complete Shostakovich Preludes and Fugues, to be recorded this year. One day, he says, he'll record the Bach 48 Preludes and Fugues – but not yet. He will record a work only after he has learned to perform it with consistency: 'The closer the performances get to each other, the more ready the work is for recording. The gulf, at the moment, is too great.' In 2008 he played all 48 on Bach's birthday in one day – in Bath Abbey. 'We had a dinner break between the two books, like in a Wagner opera. The experience was quite fantastic. It's the most difficult music I've ever played.'

NEITHER OF DONOHOE'S parents was musical. His father ran a raincoat factory; his mother played a bit as an amateur. It was his Jewish maternal grandmother who brought a lot of music into the family. 'I'd never thought about it until recently,' he admits. 'I went to Israel and they said, "You're Jewish, if your mother and grandmother were." I wanted to be a pianist from as long ago as I can remember. It was always the piano. It was later on, when I was 10, that I began to take an interest in other things. My father was a shouty, temper-tantrum person and got the message across to me that whatever I did, I needed to do properly. There was no "it'll be all right". He joined a postal record club and they sent you a monthly disc. I remember it as well as anything. It was the 'Eroica' Symphony. I didn't know the piece at all but I was intrigued by it because it was rather like the 'Emperor' Concerto, which is in the same key and was rather

important to me at that time. We had a record of it by Backhaus. Anyway, the 'Eroica' came and my dad said, "You don't want that. There's no piano in it." And I said yes, I did, and I insisted that we kept it. That's where my love of orchestral music grew from. After that, I wanted to play all the Beethoven, all the Brahms.

'I went to a fantastic state primary school in Manchester with a fantastic headmistress called Miss Cockaigne. It was through that school that I went to Chetham's on a scholarship – my parents

soloist! I took that as a good omen. I said to myself, it looks like the world is trying to tell me something here, and I gave the rest up. I also got asked to replace Ilana Vered in the Liszt No 1 with the Hallé and Edward Downes. It meant learning the work in five days. Downes introduced me to Ingpen and Williams, the agents. A year previously I had been playing the tambourine in the *Carmen* Suite and trying to work out how I could get my rock group off the ground.'

Donohoe's base in the UK is 'hidden away in the middle of the countryside'.



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fully supported this – and that's how I ended up as a chorister in Manchester Cathedral before I was 14. I learnt to play the organ through the church and everything. It was wonderful. Then, when I was a second and third year student at the RNCM, I began getting professional gigs as a percussionist in operas and things like that, never practising the piano. I eventually gravitated to playing the celeste and piano for the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra, as it was then [now the BBC Philharmonic], the Hallé and several other orchestras. James Loughran asked me to play *Petrushka*, which has a big piano part in it. That came and went, and then they asked me to play the Paganini Rhapsody in the Hallé Summer Proms – in 1976, the exact month I left college. A gig with the Hallé as a piano

He will reveal only that it's 'somewhere near Kenilworth, Stratford-on-Avon'. 'I love London but it was not the place to bring up my family,' he says. 'My daughter is now 26 but back then I didn't want my child to grow up there.' He will celebrate his 60th birthday in June. 'Currently, I'm playing about 140 concerts a year. That's a lot less than it used to be. But I still feel as though I live on the stage, and I never really take a break from it. There are no big gaps in the summer or anything like that. I just like to keep going. It doesn't feel like a job to me. It feels like I'm terribly lucky to be loafing around doing something I really enjoy and getting paid for it.' 🎵

Peter Donohoe's Prokofiev Sonatas Vol 1, SOMMCD 249, will be released by the Somm label on 8 April