

“Haydn was an earthy man. He was one of us. And I connect with that”

Roman Rabinovich tells David Kettle about his Lammermuir Festival programme

Even professional pianists know very few of them.” Pianist Roman Rabinovich is talking about the keyboard sonatas of Joseph Haydn – a cycle of which, across five morning concerts, he’s bringing to East Lothian’s Lammermuir Festival in a few weeks. “They’re not that often played – I don’t know why. Perhaps they’re partially eclipsed by Mozart and Beethoven.”

He’s right to say we hardly know them – Haydn’s keyboard sonatas might crop up now and again as a pianist’s ear-cleansing concert opener, but it’s rare for us to get to experience them on their own terms. And that’s despite the enormous riches that the composer offers in this intimate repertoire. “He composed piano sonatas throughout his entire creative life,” Rabinovich continues, “starting with simple, charming sonatinas from his early days in Vienna, ending with three grand, bravura sonatas he wrote in London. It’s been a fascinating process to choose them for the Lammermuir concerts. I’m mainly looking for variety in my programmes, and I’m also thinking about dramatic continuity.”

It’s a typically bold project from festival directors James Waters and Hugh Macdonald, who heard Rabinovich doing Haydn a few years

back and were so taken that they booked him for the five concerts. And alongside the festival’s perhaps more conventional musical offerings – other highlights in what’s a pretty highlight-packed festival include the Dunedin Concert doing Monteverdi’s *Vespers*, Dunbar schoolkids and Music Co-OPERative Scotland doing Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde*, and Varèse, Crumb and Andriessen from the Red Note Ensemble at the National Museum of Flight – Rabinovich’s quintet of Haydn recitals offers a more informal festival experience. There will be a daily update from the directors and – a festival addition that went down splendidly last year – fresh pastries from Gullane-based German baker Falko Burkert. “Of course, they’re not meant to be played as a cycle,” Rabinovich continues, “and Haydn would probably think I’m mad, but that’s also the case with Mozart and Beethoven and yet people do it all the time.”

He might not be a name on everyone’s lips – not yet, at least – but Rabinovich is a fascinating figure. Uzbekistan-born and now New York-based, he won the Rubinstein Piano Competition in 2008 and has since performed all over the world, making a name for himself for his sensitive performances and for ploughing quite a personal furrow: he made his own solo piano arrangements of three orchestral ballet classics – Ravel’s *Daphnis and Chloe*, Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* and Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet* – for his debut recording, for instance. It’s an individual approach that feeds right into his love for Haydn. “He’s

a composer I particularly adore,” Rabinovich says. “His wit, emotional depth and musical invention have been a source of inspiration for me. Unlike Mozart, who seems to come down from heaven, Haydn was an earthy man. He was one of us. And I connect with that.”

Alongside his Haydn cycle, Rabinovich also performs alongside Dutch violinist Liza Ferschtman – a regular recital partner – in sonatas by Beethoven, Debussy, Bartók and Brahms. But it’s in another, far more unusual capacity that Rabinovich broadly fulfils his festival role as artist in residence – as a visual artist, with a selection of his artwork (in traditional paint and ink, as well as for iPad and even mobile phone) on show, details of where and when still being finalised. And he’s a fine artist, too, with an eclectic output from lush, nature-inspired abstracts to exquisite line portraits of musicians and composers. “I’ve been drawing ever since I can remember,” he says. “Of course I get pleasure out of it, but it’s a serious endeavour. I take it very seriously.” How does he feel his drawing informs his music making, or vice versa? “Visual art and music have a lot in common – tonalities, textures, colours, proportions, ornaments. One art form feeds the other.” Rabinovich is a fascinating figure, and an artist in the round – the embodiment of the Lammermuir Festival’s creative, ambitious spirit. ■

The Lammermuir Festival runs from 9 to 18 September, in various venues around East Lothian, www.lammermuirfestival.co.uk

With multiple performances planned as well as an exhibition of his drawing and painting, pianist Roman Rabinovich will be something of an artist in residence at the Lammermuir Festival

