

## **Fifty Great Pianists on BBC's Radio 3**

As part of the BBC's Piano Season, I found myself acting as continuity announcer and program presenter/compiler rolled into one on Radio 3 in a series called 'Fifty Great Pianists'.

The broadcasts were at 08.30 daily between 17 September and 28 October. Each consisted of a brief verbal introduction by me, followed by a short recording of one pianist. Then later during the morning during Essential Classics, Rob Cowan or Sarah Walker would include the same pianist in a more extended work. For scheduling reasons, occasionally two pianists would be coupled on the same day.

For me it was an opportunity to organise my thoughts regarding my personal heroes and heroines - both past and present. But it was also a considerable challenge because I had never been a broadcaster in this particular way before.

Giving interviews is one thing – the interviewer usually leads the way, and is either good or otherwise at creating a situation in which one is able to comfortably say something pertinent. Contributing to a round table discussion is another form of broadcasting with which I am very familiar – again the way is led by a chairman, who is usually a consummate and experienced broadcaster him or herself. However, this was different. When verbalising alone, the key qualities required of confidence, coherence and clarity tend to go into decline without the stimulus of a more experienced broadcaster to bounce ideas off and vice versa. I discovered that my fairly long experience in giving pre-concert talks before many of my own recitals did not help me feel less nervous of the microphone.

My brief was to write a series of fifty short introductions, edited and tweaked at the time of recording, and recorded in batches of around 10 at a time – in the event in London (Broadcasting House), Birmingham ("The Archers" Studio in the Mailbox, where The Archers' sound props that were in the studio were very intriguing...) and Manchester (Media City). As an inexperienced and untrained broadcaster, and I found myself essentially taking on the role of continuity announcer on the most intellectually sophisticated radio channel of the world's greatest broadcasting corporation.

Having said that, the producer, Chris Wines, whose inspiration it was to create the series in the first place, is himself an old hand at announcing on radio – particularly on BBC Radio 3. He is also an old friend and colleague, and he inspired and encouraged me to the point that I now want to do more of the same. He was able to guide me through the process and help me avoid the pitfalls that I would have been guaranteed to fall into otherwise.

The main one is an inexperienced broadcaster's tendency to gabble. It is the verbal equivalent of rushing when playing the piano. In the latter case, it is mitigated by several decades of experience, but continuity announcing was a whole new world. Chris would constantly have to tell me to slow down as we recorded the short introductions one by one. I tried to keep reminding myself of certain politicians, with their extraordinary ability to pace what they say so that it sounds as if it means something – to speak slowly, clearly and without any embarrassment at all about either the content or the long silences (in fact, to use the latter positively).

However, the most important and over-riding issues were:

One: how to choose the pianists

Two: how to limit the number to fifty

Three: how to compose something pertinent to each and every artist without repetition.

I felt the latter point to be very important. I realised after I had composed the list that I instinctively look for the same essential qualities in the different artists I love and admire, as we all would. There was a danger that I would end up introducing them all in the same way.

I always valued great artists' natural desire to put the music, the composer, and the listener first; to give to the listener an opportunity to share the artists' love of the music and to shed light upon it. This is the opposite of the sort of performer who tries to stamp his/her own personality upon the composers' creation – for his or her 'star' quality to be more important than the music. I do not want to hear or read about 'the wonderful Such-and-Such's Chopin' or any variants upon it; I want to know about 'Wonderful Chopin played marvellously by Such-and-Such' (or some similar sentiment). The pianists were chosen on this basis – they all play as if they are the servants of the music and the listener, Egomaniacs and spoilt brats were left out – however talented they are – because in their case that talent ultimately goes to waste, overwhelmed by the superficial desperate desire to be noticed.

It has also struck me across the years that the Viennese Classical Composers (Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert) plus Bach and Chopin form the backbone of all Western European Classical piano music and are the most difficult to play in a way that lives up to the level of the composers' inspiration.

With these two givens, I was therefore tempted to not only choose pianists who are or were in their hearts humble and saw themselves as vessels through which

the music passed (a wonderful phrase from Stravinsky) - whose priority was to reveal the music (rather than themselves) to the listener in its greatest possible light - but also pianists who did so in the above-listed most difficult music. The result was that those composers were represented more than any others, played wonderfully by a variety of humble but great artists, about which one had to create fifty varied and different introductions.

Regarding the choices themselves, I was given a free hand, and I had to set myself criteria on which to base them – either that or I would have ended up with presenting a list of far too many artists. However, I felt it was important that this should not merely be a list of famous names. I believe all we music-lovers could all list fifty obvious all-time greats, and many of the lists would be pretty well identical. There was no point in that, as BBC, Chris, and I all agreed.

I felt strongly that I should not include artists with whom I had a personal relationship – for example, artists with whom I had been a contemporary student. This was obviously because my feelings for their playing would inevitably be subjective, and it also guarded against the possibility that there would be some friends who found themselves left out and suddenly weren't friends any more. This ruled out my wife Elaine, my long-term two piano partner and our Best Man Martin Roscoe, and many other friends and colleagues from across a long period, for example Peter Lawson, Stephen Hough, Steven Osborne, Noriko Ogawa, Barry Douglas, Vladimir Ovchinnikov, Cristina Ortiz and several others.

I did, however, feel that it was appropriate to include my one-time teacher Yvonne Loriod – partly because of the huge inspiration she and her husband Olivier Messiaen were to me at one of the most formative stages of my development, and also because she is very sadly not alive any more. The same criteria applied to Sir William Glock, but unfortunately the recording I wanted of his – a performance at the 1974 Proms of Mozart's Piano Quartet K 493- was not possible because of broadcasting protocols. I was very disappointed not to be able to include him after having held in my memory for years a quite wonderful performance of Schubert's *Die schöne Müllerin* he gave with Robert Tear his own Dartington Summer School in 1976 – another of those formative experiences.

The subject opened out in a big way when I realised that I could include artists who were not alive anymore; I could go back to the beginning of the recording era. Suddenly I had a list of at least two hundred, and I then had the task of reducing it, as the limit of fifty was fixed. I was very sad to lose what was the majority of them, but it certainly focussed my mind.

I wanted to include artists who were not necessarily well-known, but who had inspired me greatly, even if that experience was limited to only one performance or recording. However, it was also to include household names that had inspired me right from the start of my musical awareness. Thus, just to pluck two pairs out of the list - Sergei Rachmaninov and Sequiera Costa, Alfred Cortot and Gabriella Montero – were included, two of them because they have inspired me personally at one point, the other two because they tower over the history of piano-playing during my lifetime and before it and have inspired me at all points.

We decided on the title of "Fifty Great Pianists" - not "Fifty Greatest Pianists" – entirely to imply that the list did not represent my complete list of favourite pianists, and that I would like to have included many, many more. In addition it did not represent an order of preference. These artists - internationally famous or less well-known alike - were simply great pianists in so many different ways.

Then there was the choice of works, which had to be of a maximum length of twelve minutes; thus Gilels' Beethoven 4<sup>th</sup> Concerto, Curzon's Emperor, Richter's Scriabin Sonata No. 5 – for me three of my 'essential' choices – were ineligible. I could make a very extended list of recordings of longer works that we simply couldn't fit in, but as there are already two long lists below, I will leave that to readers' imaginations.

Another issue was whether or not the recordings were in circulation or in the BBC library. As everything is now apparently indexed with the epithet 'Song' in the library, I cannot imagine how one sets about finding it, but we somehow did in most cases. [Can you imagine? : "Please enter the name of the artist/band/group, the name of the song, and any other information relating to the item you are looking for". 'R. Wagner. Götterdämmerung. Solti.' Error: item not found. Do you mean [close match] Robert Wagner, Hart to Hart Theme Tune? If so, you can't have it, because it's American and was shown on ITV." Yes, OK – I know that the actor didn't write the music, but let's just suspend reality for enough time to savour the stupidity of the system.]

One or two of my requests were not even recorded. When recalling certain great live concerts given by artists whom I respected, I was hoping that they had also recorded the works that stood out, and occasionally they had not.

Several people wrote in complaining that men were in the majority in the series, and the same was hinted at one point on Twitter. Yes. But the women who were included were wonderful artists who happened to be female. The list was not chosen on the basis of inclusivity – I did not consider gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, or race, and in all honesty it never even crossed my mind

to even think about these things until the complaints started rolling in. No, Martha Argerich was not included because she is a woman, but because she is a fantastic pianist.

In order to preserve the equality of the 'fifty', here is not the place to write much detail about the individual artists.

However, I did receive several complaints about having included one particular pianist whom the complainants had never heard of. I was distressed at the fact that this seemed to be the main reason I shouldn't be including this artist. After the distress had subsided, I settled down to explaining that I had come across a promotional compilation CD that included a work I was learning at the time; it was such an inspiration to me in a way that recordings rarely are that I felt I must include it.

I will name one artist who seems to have got the goat of one or two people. I tweeted the following around ten days before the end of the series:

“Gearing myself up for the metaphorical ear-bending from cyberspace expected as a result of tomorrow's choices of Great Pianists.” [Little did I know....]

The next day, the choice was revealed:

“Sorry this is late in the day 2 Great Pianists today: Oscar Peterson and Lang Lang - in both cases, how can human fingers do that? ”

Then came this from someone I will call JR. I will refer to myself as PHD:

JR – PHD “schnabel, arrau, horowitz, richter, fischer, berman, tureck, lewis, schiff, uchida you chose lang lang. please! 11 to go....”

I could imagine him with the back of his hand on his forehead; some people sometimes get very Rita Hayworth when they perceive that another has respect for something they don't. I tried to diffuse his contempt with:

PHD – JR “Steady on J\_\_\_\_. Perhaps you should re-visit the broadcast announcement before dissing Lang Lang - or anyone else.....”

“.....or re-read paragraph 2 of this: <http://www.peter-donohoe.com/en/news/fifty-great-pianists-bbcs-radio-3> ...

And he came back with:

JR – PHD “‘dissing’ I think not. With an open list prepare to debate. 1000's of musicians to chose [sic], I disagree with lang lang ”

PHD – JR “It was never intended as a debate. Everyone will have a view. I could make a list of hundreds with no order of preference....”

“... I was limited to 50. To create a predictable list of universally accepted gods was not my brief.”

“See my post of 23 hours ago. Q.E.D. ”

And the episode continued:

JR – PHD “individuals not familiar with the piano may see the list as definitive. Such responsibility must be taken seriously”

[So, not at all patronising then – neither to me nor to the poor, ill-educated ‘individuals’...]

“...predictability? the irony is that lang lang was the most predictable choice ”  
[Charming, I’m sure you will agree.]

PHD – JR “That it is not a definitive list has been pointed out enough times. However, thanks for the advice.....”

“.....I will try to take such a project seriously next time.”

JR – PHD “I am glad to hear this. I hope you do take the project seriously next time.... ”

PHD – JR “All right Mr. R\_\_\_\_\_. That's enough now. Conversation closed.”

However, only on my side of the conversation was it closed. There ensued a string of suggestions – actually more like instructions – as to whom I should choose or should have chosen, despite the whole series having been decided weeks before. I resolved not to enter into any further exchanges so I didn’t respond to these advisory tweets. There were a few neutral ones, including something about Horowitz. I did not enter into any further childish exchanges.

Then, after some days, came the corker:

JR – PHD “..... Regarding not replying to my tweets- accepting criticism with grace is an area to develop”

And by then, another protagonist had entered the fray. We will call him DP:

DP – JR & PHD “Wasn't aware that this series needed vetting before it went out... ..perhaps His Lordship should accept someone's right to an opinion without criticising... an area to develop”

JR – DP & PHD “It didn't. Peter has his opinion & I have mine.”

[With thanks to DP for allowing me to quote him.]

No one told me that agreeing to do this BBC series would lead to this kind of crap. But I should have known, I guess. I think I know which aspect of JR is ‘an area to develop.’

[Perhaps older readers will remember Terry Wogan’s campaign to stir up debate about “Who shot JR?” in US TV’s “Dallas”? I don’t know what made me think of that.]

Quite amusing in one way, of course. But there is a serious side to this. For one thing, it was not intended as a debate, as I tweeted. I was honoured to be invited to air my viewpoint to the listening public; it was not intended as an opportunity for others to lobby for their favourites – however valid their choices may have been, or indeed how invalid mine may have been.

And Lang Lang is worth singling out here because he was the only one of the fifty who provoked an abusive response – at least that I am aware of. The episode has wider implications – Lang Lang is probably the most commercially successful classical pianist in the world at this moment, and a high level of success is always divisive. In general, my instinctive feeling is that, in such cases, the notoriety and outrageousness of the personalities involved, and their musical ideas, are often much more the reasons for both the success and the divisiveness than is the artistry. However, I believe Lang Lang to be something very different. I don’t see anything outrageous, self-conscious or insincere in his music-making. Indeed, it is his genuineness that makes him what he is, and what I admire about him most. I don’t have to agree with his musical ideas to respect them and to separate them from his basic pianistic talent, which is, quite simply, incredible. Anyone who tries to argue otherwise is either not listening, jealous, or indulging in pseudo-intellectual snobbery.

The degree to which people become fundamentalist about their likes and dislikes shouldn’t surprise me after so many years, but it still did on this

occasion. Also, the degree of insensitivity to whoever might be reading this ridiculous Tweeting is arresting. Amongst many other things, I have the pleasure of being followed on Twitter by Lang Lang, which means that he may possibly have read ... “you chose lang lang. please!” On the other hand, of course, Lang Lang’s meteoric career has placed him way above having to worry about such snipes; in fact he inspires disdain from many quarters, not least from pianists themselves, and he has obviously learned not to take it seriously.

Having said all that – even if my choice was wrong, to dismiss Lang Lang or anyone else in that way I find inappropriate; I am distressed that social networking gives ill-informed and arrogant opinion an airing to the world at large. “You should ignore it”, many will say. I don’t agree. Perhaps I should have ignored it right from the start, but entering into the exchange was actually a learning curve for me, which I am glad I experienced. And pretending that something doesn’t distress you when it does is counterproductive.

[I just saw this tweet from Salman Rushdie: “I have fought for free speech for decades. I don't see a threat to it in Leveson. Disagree? That's fine. Insulting my integrity is not.” Exactly. Go, Salman. I realise that the comparison is not actually parallel, but maybe it is slightly similar?]

Anyway, enough about that one artist. I am not going to go into the details here of why I chose any of the others. To me they are all magnificent in their own different ways.

A recurring source of concern – to me and to many listeners alike - is the number of other pianists who were not included. Here is a list – still not exhaustive – of several of those, along with works that I would like to have heard them play – obviously amongst many, many others:

Pierre Laurent Aimard - Debussy Preludes Volume 2  
Dmitri Alexeev - Brahms Vier Klavierstucke op 119  
Piotr Anderszewski - Webern Variations  
Leif Ove Andsnes - Brahms Sonata 3  
Claudio Arrau - Liszt Reminiscences de Don Juan  
Winifred Atwell - Black and White Rag  
Emmanuel Ax - Schonberg Concerto  
Sergei Babayan - Rachmaninov Sonata 2  
Gina Bachauer - Liszt Piano Concerto 1  
Dalton Baldwin - Poulenc Fiancailles pour Rire (with Elly Ameling)  
Leonard Bernstein – Gershwin Rhapsody in Blue (conducted from the piano)  
John Browning - Barber Concerto  
Shura Cherkassky - Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto 2

Van Cliburn - Tchaikovsky Concerto 1  
France Clidat - Liszt Les jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este  
Harriet Cohen - Hubert Bath Cornish Rhapsody  
Imogen Cooper - Schubert Sonata in G Major D894  
Lamar Crowson - Faure Piano Quartet  
Georges Cziffra - Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody 2  
Nikolai Demidenko - Chopin Concerto 1  
Misha Dichter - Stravinsky Petrushka  
Barry Douglas - Mussorgsky Pictures at an Exhibition  
Keith Emerson - Take a Pebble (live performance by ELP from 1974)  
Maria Eudina - Mozart Piano Concerto K488  
Sergio Fiorentino - Liszt Funerailles  
Rudolf Firkusny - Dvorak Piano Concerto  
Edwin Fischer - Bach Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue  
Samson Francois - Saint-Saens Concerto 2  
Andrei Gavrilov - Rachmaninov Concerto 3 (Live 1974 Tchaikovsky Competition Final)  
Sir William Glock - Mozart Piano Quartet K493  
Anthony Goldstone - Schubert Impromptus  
Gary Grafmann - Chopin Ballade 4  
Benjamin Grosvenor - Liszt Concerto 2  
Frederich Gulda - Play Piano Play (Gulda) or Beethoven Concerto 4  
Werner Haas - Gershwin I got Rhythm Variations  
Monique Haas - Ravel Left Hand Concerto  
Clara Haskill - Mozart Piano Concerto K 466  
Myra Hess - Franck Variations Symphoniques  
Angela Hewitt - Bach 48 Book 2 No 14 in F sharp minor  
Vladimir Horowitz - Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody No 19  
Stephen Hough - Liszt Au Bord d'un Source  
Jose Iturbi - Granados Allegro di concierto  
Byron Janis - Liszt Piano Concerto 2  
Maria João Pires - Mozart Concerto K595  
Terence Judd - Liszt Tarantella  
Julius Katchen - Brahms Paganini Variations  
Peter Katin - Chopin Nocturne No 15  
Cyprien Katsaris - Beethoven/Liszt Symphony 6  
Alicia de Larrocha - Albeniz Iberia  
Peter Lawson - Elliot Carter Sonata  
Colleen Lee - Rachmaninov Paganini Rhapsody  
Reinbert de Leeuw - Messiaen Quartet for the End of Time  
John Lill - Brahms Concerto 1  
Louis Lortie - Beethoven Concerto 4  
Charles Lynch - Prokofiev Concerto 1  
Witold Malcuzyński - Chopin Concerto 2  
Dennis Matthews - Beethoven Concerto 1  
Noel Mewton-Wood - Bliss Concerto  
Mrs Mills - Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend  
Benno Moiseiwitch - Mendelssohn Scherzo (A Midsummer Night's Dream arr Rachmaninov)  
Tatiana Nikolayeva - Shostakovich Prelude and Fugue No 13 in F sharp major  
Noriko Ogawa - Prokofiev Concerto 3  
Garrick Ohlsson - Kriesler/Rachmaninov Liebesfreude

Stephen Osborne - Tippett Piano Concerto  
Vladimir Ovchinnikov - Liszt Etudes Transcendentales  
Kun-Woo Paik - Mendelssohn Songs without Words  
Mikhail Pletnev - Tchaikovsky The Seasons  
Jean-Bernard Pommier - Mozart Concerto K467  
Andre Previn - Ravel Piano Trio (with Julie Rosenfeld and Gary Hoffman)  
Thomas Rajna - Granados The Lover and the Nightingale  
Hans Richter-Haaser - Beethoven Sonata Op 31/2  
Martin Roscoe - Beethoven Waldstein Sonata  
Charles Rosen - Debussy Images  
Konstantin Scherbakov - Shostakovich Prelude and Fugue No 3 in G major  
Andras Schiff - Bach 48 Book 1 No 15 in G major  
Artur Schnabel - Beethoven Sonata Op 111  
Pia Sebastiani - Schumann Concerto  
Grigori Sokolov - Bach 48 Book 2 No 22 in B flat minor  
Dang Thai Son - Chopin Mazurkas Opus 59  
Susan Starr - Bach French Suite No 5  
Gabriel Tacchino - Rachmaninov Concerto 2  
Valerie Tryon - Mendelssohn Andante and Rondo Capriccioso  
Tamas Vasary - Liszt Sonata in B minor  
Eliso Virsaladze - Schumann Humoresque  
Yuja Wang - Bartok Concerto 2  
Friedrich Wührer - Beethoven Concerto 3  
Lilya Zilberstein - Prokofiev Concerto 1  
Krystian Zimerman - Chopin Valse Brillante Op 18.

And here is the actual list of those broadcast in the Fifty Great Pianists series:

John Ogdon - Shostakovich Concerto No 2  
Clifford Curzon - Mozart Concerto K488  
Murray Perahia - Bach English Suite in A major  
Bernard Roberts - Beethoven Sonata Opus 14/2  
Benjamin Britten - Schubert Winterriese with Peter Pears  
Ferruccio Busoni - Chopin Preludes  
Egon Petrie - Busoni Elegy All'Italia  
Solomon Cutner - Grieg Concerto  
Yvonne Loriod - Messiaen Prelude No 8 "Un reflet dans le vent"  
Alexander Brailowsky - Chopin Ecosaisnes Op 72  
Anne Quefelec - Ravel Concerto  
Walter Gieseking - Debussy L'Isle Joyeuse  
Alfred Cortot - Liszt La Leggierezza  
Manana Dodjashvili - Schumann Abegg Variations  
Mannahem Pressler - Beethoven Ghost Trio  
Halina Czerny-Stefanska - Chopin Concerto 1 (attributed to Lipatti)  
Wilhelm Backhaus - Beethoven Sonata Op 10 No 3  
Radu Lupu - Schumann Humoresque  
Zoltan Kocsis - Bartok Rhapsody Op 1  
Ingrid Haebler - Mozart Concerto K453  
Geza Anda - Mozart Concerto K503

Vladimir Ashkenazy - Liszt Feux Follets  
Wilhelm Kempff - Liszt Spozalizio  
Alfred Brendel - Mussorgsky Pictures at an Exhibition  
Art Tatum - Tea for Two  
Anton Kuerti - Brahms Sonata 3  
Richard Goode - Schubert Sonata in C minor D958  
Fou Ts'ong - Chopin Nocturne Op 48 /1  
Gabriela Montero - Brahms Klaveristuck Op 118 No 3  
Rudolf Serkin - Brahms Concerto 2  
Peter Serkin - Messiaen Vingt Regards No 6  
Glenn Gould - Bach Italian Concerto  
Sequiera Costa - Chopin Etude Op 25 No 6  
Maurizio Pollini - Stravinsky Petrushka  
Daniel Barenboim - Beethoven Sonata Op 78  
Martha Argerich - Ravel Scarbo  
Arthur Rubinstein - Schubert Impromptu Op 90/4  
Lang Lang - Albeniz Fetes a Dieu de Seville  
Oscar Peterson - Who Can I Turn To? (Live from the Barbican 1984)  
Sergei Rachmaninov - Chopin Waltz Op 42  
Emil Gilels - Bach Prelude in B minor (arr Siloti)  
Sviatoslav Richter - Schumann Traumes Wirren  
Evgeny Kissin - Prokofiev Etude Opus 2 No 3 in C minor  
Lazar Berman - Liszt Transcendental Etude No 10 in F minor  
Daniil Trifonov - Chopin Barcarolle Opus 60  
Alexander Melnikov - Shostakovich Preludes and Fugue No 11 in B major  
Valentina Lititsa - Rachmaninov Etude Tableau Op 39 No 6  
Bela Bartok - Beethoven Kreutzer with Szigeti  
Annie Fisher - Mozart Concert Rondo in D  
Dinu Lipatti - Ravel Alborado del Grazioso

The first list is not complete, and I am sure many people would love to add to it. However, it has been a learning curve for me to realise that there have been so many wonderful artists and performances stretching across the recording age. When 'fifty' was first mentioned to me, my instinct was to wonder if I would be able to find enough, and look where I ended up.....

If you have been, thank you for reading this.