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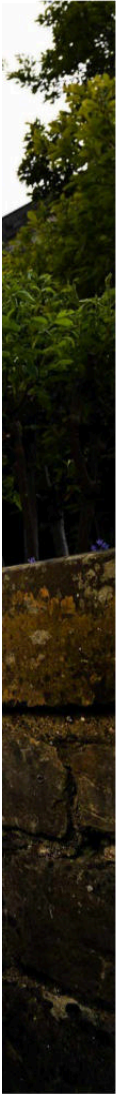
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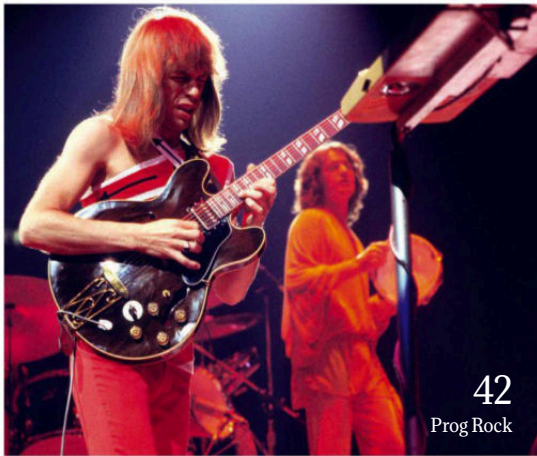
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Prog Rock



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“ At this moment in time we don't need more virtuosos. We need musicians to engage with the philosophy of music ”

THE BBC MUSIC MAGAZINE INTERVIEW

Federico Colli



Since his Leeds Competition win in 2012, the Italian pianist has been forging his own interpretative path. He talks culture, ideology and sartorial style with **Michael Church**

PHOTOGRAPHY: **BENJAMIN EALOVEGA**

With his silk cravat and perfectly cut suit, Federico Colli took the stage like a dandy for his Southbank debut in 2014, and that quality was also in evidence when he began to play. His gesturing in the air was an artform in itself: during pauses his hands fluttered like swallows, sometimes swooping down almost to the keyboard then soaring up, as though having second thoughts before landing on a fastidiously placed chord.

But there was a singular artistry underpinning all this: Colli, after all, had been the winner of the Salzburg Mozart Competition in 2011 and of the Leeds International Piano Competition a year later. And in his hands Mozart's Sonata in G, K283 opened like a spring flower; he seemed to brush the keys rather than

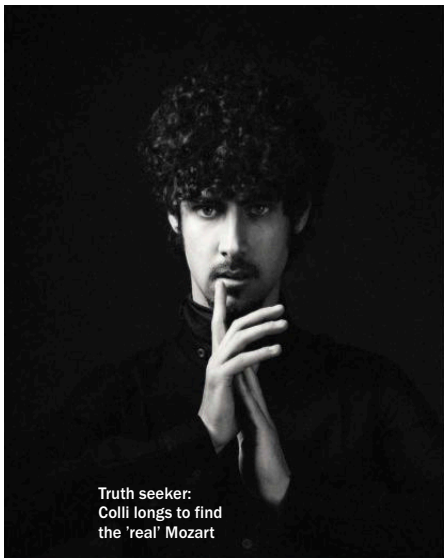
strike them, and he was sparing with the pedal. Beethoven's 'Appassionata' emerged immaculately controlled and at white heat, while Schumann's First Sonata became so quirky that it might have been a brand new piece, yet it was true to Schumann's spirit.

Fast-forward ten years to a recital at Wigmore Hall, where Colli is unveiling some surprises with Mozart's Sonata in A, K331. Unfamiliar flourishes and grace notes are beginning to adorn the *Menuetto*, and the smooth five-note motif which conventionally opens the *Alla Turca* becomes a jerkily skipping figuration. The first note is now an *acciaccatura* – a 'crushed' note – which creates a DUM-titi-DUM-titi-DUM rhythm, completely altering the character of the piece.

All this reminds me of the extraordinary love-letter to Mozart which Colli inserted into the liner note of his first Mozart CD for Chandos (see box, p34). Here he insisted that he didn't take gratuitous liberties with his interpretations. He simply sought clues to performance through in-depth historical research and interrogations of the score, which could lead him down academically forbidden paths. ▶







Truth seeker:
Colli longs to find
the 'real' Mozart

How shall I address you?

Colli's letter to Mozart: an extract

Dear Mozart

You are the reason why I started playing the piano. When I suffer bouts of melancholy, or when I feel vibrant enthusiasm or peaceful joy, your music is there for me. When playing your music I can bring out the sincerest and frankest side of my personality.

For many years your music has been taught and played with what an 18th-century authority described as 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur'. But this cannot be the last and definitive word.

I am trying to find another approach, one totally opposite. I study your biography and your personality, and the cultural atmosphere you breathed, and those things allow me to evoke the most truthful stories and images which are the starting point for my research into your music. Images and stories arouse in me emotions, and only when I feel these emotions am I ready to open the score again, to trace within it the signs you left, the interactions among parts, the intervals, the rhythms and dynamics. This is a total reversal of the normal process. I start from the unreal world of images and stories, and that world gives consistency and coherence to the real world of the score.

What do I lose by this? An interpretation with which everyone agrees. And what do I gain? The chance to relate to the score with deep and unprecedented freedom.

Who knows, dear Mozart, if I am walking along the right path? I keep questioning my heart, and listening for an answer.

Yours, Federico



Meeting Colli in the Samuel piano showrooms the next morning, I ask if his *Alla Turca* alterations – and his extraordinary (and controversial) 14-second pause after the opening note of the *Fantasia* in C minor – were made in that same heretical spirit. 'Not at all,' he replies. 'Neither of those pieces has an original manuscript. All we have are first editions, which were the editors' interpretations of the manuscripts. An editor can make a change which seems small, but which can radically alter a work.' Moreover, he says, in 2017 a musicologist found a piece of paper handwritten by Mozart in an obscure Hungarian library, which turned out to be part of the original manuscript of K331. 'And there were many differences between that and the first edition, small but significant points of articulation, tempi and dynamics.' Hence what we heard at the Wigmore.

But he's keen to dispel any notion of his being an attention seeker: 'I am not wanting to make something new and unusual when I wake up in the morning. I research, I study, I look at the sources, I look at books to create the culture: all

these things give me ideas. And these ideas can show different meanings in those masterpieces.' This goes, too, for the other composer with whose music Colli has indelibly made his name – Scarlatti. 'For him too we lack manuscripts, which means we have to depend on editions which can even differ about the notes. For Scarlatti we have to look at the musical culture of the time. We must be free, and accept the beauty of this freedom.'

In sartorial matters, however, Colli is indeed an attention seeker, even in interviews. When I meet him he's in a symphony of browns and yellows as though ready for a fashion shoot. The size of his wardrobe is legendary – his girlfriend once counted 36 cravats – and he loves matching colours and textures. But in his view, this is not a frivolity: 'When you go on stage, it's not just your music which is important. It's also how you look and behave. A concert is a ritual, and we are in a sense missionaries, and must communicate something sacred.'

Colli's childhood ambition was to be a meteorologist, but he took his music deadly seriously. He played 'Für Elise'



Consummate showman: (far left) Colli at the International Piano Series at St John's Smith Square, London, 2016; (left) his inspirations Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli and Domenico Scarlatti

in his first concert, and the video of that showed him bursting into tears after playing – 'because I had made a mistake. I felt I had a duty to the music, and I had let it down. From that moment on, I became a maniacal perfectionist.' It was appropriate that his hometown should be Brescia, as that was also the hometown of his hero Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, whose pianism is his ideal. 'His way of playing was so unique, so peculiar, so special, you can't reproduce it. His super-relaxed, super-precise articulation is like that of a mechanic, but it's never mechanical.' Who else does Colli admire? 'Listening to Mikhail Pletnev, I always discover something new. He's a master of phrasing. And his *pianissimi* – just a little bit more than silence – are astonishing.' Any others? 'Sokolov, for great ideas and never compromising; Radu Lupu for Brahms.'

Since there never was an Italian school of pianism, it was necessary that Colli should find one elsewhere, hence the series of Russian émigré tutors who shaped his talent. 'Artistically I am half Italian and half Russian,' he says. 'But my technique is entirely Russian. The Russian school

always wants to see images behind music.' Can he give an example? 'When I was studying Tchaikovsky's First Concerto, my teacher stopped me at the first movement's second theme and asked if I had read *Eugene Onegin*. Because if I hadn't, I wouldn't understand the music.'

Is producing the Russian sound not a physical matter? 'Yes, and that sound starts from your lower back. It passes through the shoulder, then through the arm, then the wrist, then

'It's not just the music that's important on stage. It's also how you look and behave'

arrives at the tips of your fingers. Your body must be relaxed, and you must be aware of the power which is supporting you in producing that sound, which should live in the air. And you must sustain it with your whole body. It must be warm and deep, never crude, never dry. By using the body in a theatrical way, you can help the listener understand the music.'

Meanwhile, Colli is one of the lucky few (including Scriabin, Messiaen, Hélène Grimaud and Víkingur Ólafsson) with a secret extra weapon in their armoury: synaesthesia. When asked how it works for him, Colli unhesitatingly reels off his list of correspondences: 'C is light blue, D is green, E is blue, F is yellow, G is red

and B is purple. E flat major is an electric blue, A flat major is the tonality of the genesis of Venus – warm gold or orange, or else the desert yellow, deep and warm.' He scrutinises the colour of the works he plays like a research chemist.

He sometimes practises 10 hours a day, and he builds his repertoire with slow deliberation, working on Beethoven, for example, at a rate of one sonata per year. And Brahms? 'Yes, I adore him, but as Russian musicians say, you cannot play Brahms before you're 40, because you can't understand him till then. For him, you also need to have real physical strength, and be a big Genghis Khan.' As for Chopin, he sighs: 'I've studied him a lot, and played the Ballades and Scherzos and a lot of the Études – and like Mozart he uses simplicity as the key to his music. But while with Mozart you can be saved from bad taste by the style and theatricality, Chopin can't save you from bad taste – you have to have a pure soul to play him. I love his music, but it doesn't love me.'

After a pause, Colli throws out a curious idea. 'Chopin is not a rational composer, but I am a rational musician. I love to put everything into rational categories.' After ruminating on that, he pulls up short with a further lapidary pronouncement: 'I am a virtuoso; I can play anything I want, but at this moment in time we don't need more virtuosos. We need musicians to engage with the philosophy of music.'

And that sentence opens a door to what has been Colli's overriding preoccupation for the past 10 years: that German philosophy could be harnessed to strengthen the performance of classical music, with the concept formulated by Beethoven's contemporary Hegel being a perfect example of how such harnessing can work. Hegel's idea was that everything could be translated into a process of 'thesis, antithesis and synthesis'. And as Colli convincingly argues, that idea is perfectly embodied in the first movement of Beethoven's 'Appassionata'. As this remarkable philosopher-pianist and I start tossing out other musical examples for similar analysis – including the 'Waldstein' and 'Hammerklavier' – it becomes clear that this bringing to bear of one art on another can be a surprisingly fruitful process. Discuss. 🗨️