

For most people, reaching the age of 60 is a signal to take things easy, to enjoy the benefits of free travel or take that world cruise you'd always promised yourself. But pianist Paul Crossley will spend his 60th birthday on 17 May giving a recital in the Wigmore Hall. The first half of the recital comprises premieres of five new works commissioned by Crossley and in the second half he plays one of his party-pieces – Debussy's Preludes Book 2. It is a very

Party pieces

Pianist Paul Crossley has commissioned five new works for a 60th birthday recital this month, and is paying all the fees himself.

David Stevens salutes a pianist who has always taken his own path

special birthday present to himself from a pianist whose profile is perhaps not so high as it once was.

There have been three constants in Crossley's public pianistic life: the French repertoire and the music of Olivier Messiaen and of Michael Tippett. He shot to fame 30 years ago, when he gave the world premiere of a work which he commissioned: Tippett's monumental Piano Sonata No 3. That performance cemented his reputation as one of the most exciting pianists of his generation.

After reading English at Oxford and studying the piano with Fanny Waterman in Leeds, Crossley went to Paris to be in the classes of Messiaen and his wife, the pianist Yvonne Loriod. So began a profound engagement with Messiaen's music. Last month Crossley played the solo piano part in Messiaen's *Des canyons aux étoiles* in Barcelona and he is due to do the same in Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony* at this year's Proms. But, as Crossley admits, his career has gone in phases. Alongside the recitals there have been diversions into television and orchestra administration. Between 1985 and 1988 he made 17 television programmes, including the benchmark series *Sinfonietta*, devoted to seminal

composers of the 20th century, which he both wrote and presented. *Sinfonietta* set standards of intellectual lucidity and clear and measured presentation in music documentaries which have scarcely been matched since. Crossley thoroughly enjoyed his television experiences but, as he says: 'Just when I thought I was getting good at it, it stopped!'

One door closes, another opens. From 1988 to 1994 Crossley was artistic director of the London Sinfonietta, a position which gave him an invaluable overview of musical trends and an unparalleled knowledge of artists interested in the performance of 20th-century music. So how did

Crossley choose whom to commission for his birthday recital? 'I wanted some pieces from my best friends who are still around and they all said yes.' Crossley requested the works towards the end of 2002 and has paid the commission fees himself. 'I feel very strongly that performers, who usually earn more than composers, should put their hands into their pockets to support composers.'

The commissionees are George Benjamin, Hans Werner Henze, Oliver Knussen, Magnus Lindberg and Esa-Pekka Salonen. At the time of writing only

two of the pieces had arrived – Henze's intriguingly-titled *Scorribanda pianistica*, and *Olicanthus*, a slow ragtime from George Benjamin, a composer whose music Crossley has long championed. All five commissions have their origins in their composers' orchestral output. *Scorribanda pianistica*, roughly translated as 'pianistic raiding-party', plunders an earlier orchestral work by Henze which itself raided material from an even earlier work. The title of Salonen's piece is *Scheggia*, literally 'fragment' or 'chip' (as in 'chip off the old block').

How does Crossley tackle a new piece once it has dropped on to the doormat? 'I do what I always do. I hack my way through the jungle from beginning to end. I have to find a pathway through it so that I have some feeling for the shape and the climaxes. Then I get down to details.'

Crossley considers himself very fortunate that his playing career happened at the right time and concedes that it's far harder for a young performer these days to carve a niche. He has made about 50 CDs, 30 of which are still in the catalogues. He has recorded all the Ravel and Tippett solo piano music (twice) but thinks it high time that other pianists picked up the Tippett baton. At the start of his career, he had a wish-list of works to record. All came to fruition except the two Ravel piano concertos and the complete *Vingt regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* of Messiaen (he has recorded only four of the 20).

So how does Crossley see the future? While he is not wholly in sympathy with much of what is happening at the moment in concert halls or on television or radio he remains upbeat. He knows that cultural trends tend to be cyclical and that what seems to have disappeared yesterday could just as easily return tomorrow. As he gets older he finds himself reading more and also indulging his other great passion – going to see works of art. He would also like to undertake some teaching, possibly in America, so that he can pass on to a new generation of pianists something of what he has learned from working with many of the most important composers of the late 20th century.

In the meantime his love of music, especially that of our own time, is undimmed. And the composers who have written these birthday tributes are eloquent in their appreciation of his importance as commissioner and interpreter. 'There is a strong voice of almost theatrical energy in his music; you can feel the northern no-nonsense in his style, its virility, its vigour and severity,' says Hans Werner Henze. 'We want to have a lot more of it in a future of meaning and beauty.'

George Benjamin agrees: 'Apart from being an extraordinarily sensitive and imaginative pianist, Paul Crossley has been a major source for good in contemporary music for over three decades. Beyond his devotion to the London Sinfonietta – for which he played a role of central importance – he has been responsible for some of the most striking additions to pianistic repertoire in recent years, from Tippett to Takemitsu.'

Let Magnus Lindberg have the last word: 'That which is simple and clear can sometimes seem almost impossible. Paul Crossley's great contribution to music is his ability to show that there is a continuity between what was written one hundred years ago or just last week. Music is always music – this should be so simple and clear. But it takes real brilliance to make it true. Or, to be simple and clear: it's always wonderful to hear Paul play.'

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Upbeat: Paul Crossley