

Musical polymath

Claire Jackson meets Karim Said: pianist, conductor and thinker

THE CHRISTOPHER NUPEN DOCUMENTARY FILM *Karim's Journey*, broadcast internationally in 2008 and released on DVD last year, captures the first stages in pianist Karim Said's career as he leaves his native Amman and moves to the UK to take up his education at the Purcell School. The film leaves Said in 2007, as he is about to start at London's Royal Academy of Music. He is already a rounded musician: a competent conductor, chamber music devotee and master of the keyboard.

Fast-forward seven years to the present day. Said is now 25 and about to embark on another major leg of his journey: his debut album. Opus Arte, a specialist in film releases, has chosen Said as one of the first artists to feature on its new series of CD recordings after the pianist impressed at a recent Southbank Centre recital.

Dispatched to Potton Hall recording studio in Suffolk, Said is ensconced in a challenging programme of 20th-century piano music curated to mark the First World War centenary. Listening on headphones behind the soundproofing proves an extraordinary experience. Janáček's Piano Sonata is confessional and raw: Said deals with the sparse textures and strict tempos with intelligence, observing each marking yet still giving a personal interpretation. Schoenberg and Webern follow, the Steinway model D needs retuning soon after. Enescu's Piano Suite No 2 proves an unbridled joy, the indomitable triplet figurines perfectly painted, the voice leading clear and pure. Said is at ease with this complex repertoire, recording each work in one take – adjustments will be made in the following days, away from prying eyes.

BACK IN LONDON, WITH THE RECORDING SAFELY in the can, Said and I meet on a rare sunny day for a glass of lemonade. Was it a conscious decision to select this esoteric programme? 'Traditionally, you go for more mainstream repertoire and then specialise,' says Said. 'But I've been playing the Berg Chamber Concerto since I was 19 [Said made his BBC Proms debut playing the work with Daniel Barenboim and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in 2009] and I've played all the solo works by the composers of the Second Viennese School, so it's not unusual for me. Early expressionism is one of the most exciting times in music because composers were testing the waters and no one was sure what was coming next.'

But a debut disc of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern? Isn't that quite, well, risky? 'For me it's a natural progression. I've played a lot of Bach, Beethoven and some Mozart as well, but I've worked in this particular language for some time.'

Said's pianism has clearly developed since the Nupen documentary, which Said admits he's 'only watched twice': 'Once, when it came out, we watched it in his [Nupen's] living room, and then I watched it once more when we decided to release it as a

DVD. When I first watched, it was unbearable to see myself, but I appreciate that it is an extremely well made film. Christopher was not intrusive at all; there must have been three or more cameras at any one time but it never felt like that.'

Said is also an active chamber musician and conductor. He is in the process of putting together an ensemble, the Da Vinci Players ('at the moment we are 20 people, but I hope to expand to a small chamber orchestra soon'), which will launch formally in 2015. The first programme will feature Mendelssohn and Boulez (who is one of the group's patrons). 'It's amazing that Mendelssohn died in 1847 and Boulez wrote his first work in 1947,' ponders Said. 'It's just under a century, but music changed so much in that time. These are such important musical figures; both are composer-conductors, both founded festivals and launched orchestras. "Musical polymaths"; I call them.'



Said is a modern-day musical polymath – although he is far too modest to suggest that himself. The overarching theme of *Karim's Journey* is Said's voracious appetite for all facets of music, be it jazz, conducting, composing or performing. He doesn't compose now, nor keep up the jazz, but he agrees that his formative training fed his musicality. 'Because I was born in a country where Western music isn't as well known, I didn't have the same divide as one does here [in the UK]. In my case, it really stimulated the way I looked at a score.' It's this understanding of music in a wider context that characterises Said as an artist. Barenboim, who was a supporter of Said in his fledgling years, once commented: 'What you can't learn, he knows already.' Said's deep intelligence and fascination with musical constructs, paired with his enviable technical abilities at the piano, set him apart from his contemporaries. Watch this space. ♪

Karim Said's debut album Echoes from an Empire is out 2 January 2015 on the Opus Arte label. Karim's Journey is available from www.allegrofilms.com