

Pierre-Laurent Aimard  
By Ben Finane

Pierre-Laurent Aimard's playing asserts transparency and precision as priorities. Although he is no romantic, Aimard remains an expressive performer; it is just that he strives to communicate the ideas present in the score rather than overtly inserting himself into the music, an approach he gleaned during his 18 years of working with Pierre Boulez and the Ensemble Intercontemporain. Before joining that ensemble at age 19, he spent his adolescence immersed in the sound world of Olivier Messiaen, a composer whose music he describes as his "mother language." While these experiences have earned him a reputation as a 20th-century music specialist, Aimard also maintains an interest in more traditional fare. (His current recording projects include the complete Beethoven piano concertos and Debussy's *Images* and *Etudes*.)

Following two nights of performances at Carnegie Hall in January 2002 with the Orchestre de Paris, Aimard spoke to **andante** editorial associate Ben Finane over cappuccino in the lobby of his hotel before catching a flight back to France.

**Ben Finane: How did your formative years with the Ensemble Intercontemporain shape you as a performer?**

**Pierre-Laurent Aimard:** When Boulez asked me to be a prominent member, I was very attracted because of his presence, of course, and because I wanted not only to be a soloist, I wanted to become a musician in the largest way possible. And being interested in 20th-century music, I wanted to be part of the group, so this was an ideal arrangement.

At the same time, I didn't want it to swallow all my time, energy and independence. Therefore, I turned down the full-time position he proposed and negotiated a flexible contract with him that allowed me to also perform traditional repertory and more "normal" concerts and also to continue benefiting from other experiences — traveling, meeting interesting people, furthering myself as a student. This was an enriching combination that was part of my formation. And the experience was vast because some solo pieces permitted me to play different keyboard instruments — piano, clavichord and harpsichord.

The Ensemble Intercontemporain is a group that has changed a lot. At the start, it was looking for an identity, so Boulez was directly involved and there were a lot of pieces premiered. And then a second period followed after the American tour in 1986 when the group had become more famous, more of an institution. It became a great opportunity to meet and work with a lot of top professional musicians and to make recordings. And then during a third period, the musicians became more independent and the chamber musicians, myself among them, formed a cell and were able to set the chamber-music portion of the program autonomously. So because there were several dynamic periods, I stayed with the group much longer than I would have ever expected. It was always fresh and new.

It was a great antidote to what can be the poisonous life of a soloist, especially the soloistic life too young, which I still consider to be very dangerous as it can make you very exposed when you're not necessarily ready. You really have to guard against that, but ultimately a lot of people can't and you see so many young talents that are used for a couple of years for big business and then just put away because they are ruined. This is a delicate time period, and for me the group was a way to protect myself against this sort of thing.

**BF: Ligeti says that you are "the leading performer of contemporary piano music today." Do you consider yourself especially suited for contemporary music?**

**PA:** [Laughs.] Well, I perform a tremendous amount of 20th-century music. I've always tried to emphasize it and to be involved in it because this is today's music, so it is the most urgent need, the greatest necessity. Also, I could never understand why so many people were really uninterested in 20th-century music. So my first priority as a performer is to do what most people don't do, because it's necessary — for this music, these composers and the audience as well. But I always try to combine it with traditional repertory to have a balance. So, I'm certainly a specialist, but absolutely not exclusively.

**BF: As one of its champions, what steps do you feel can be taken to encourage wider performance of contemporary music?**

**PA:** One can't force things on people. I think the best thing is to be involved as sincerely and as competently as possible in making music alive. Musicians and the audience need to know that these contemporary pieces are not foreign languages or closed, hermetic works. There is a problem in that the huge number of musical languages over the last 50 years has formed this Tower of Babel. Therefore, we have to be communicative, and people are now curious and ready to enjoy many different things. But in my opinion, it certainly can't be done with dogmatism and orders.

**BF: What appeals to you about the music of Ligeti and Messiaen?**

**PA:** Well, this is music that is very close to me. Messiaen was a kind of a mother language — I swam in this music when I was a teenager, was educated in it, so it's really part of my life. I know it sounds strange, because for most people it's the contrary. But I fell in this bowl of soup when I was very small, so I've just eaten it all my life. In Messiaen's music, I love the spirituality, the great strength of vision and energy and the ear, his ability for hearing sounds in music.

Concerning Ligeti, he came much later. I mean I loved his music, I knew his music and played it as of member of Intercontemporain, but he did not compose much for the piano until the 1980s. I started playing it during that period, and his music became some of the most important in my life because of its significance: so intense, so dense, so original, so fresh, so independent and creative, and also so deep — I mean altogether very tragic and funny. It really has everything that makes up life today. I understood that I very much needed to do some projects with his music. After that, I figured, well, the composer didn't kill me because of what I did to his music, and then a strong friendship developed. But that friendship grew from the music itself.

**BF: Clearly learning and memorizing Messiaen's *Vingt Regards* is completely different from memorizing a Beethoven piano concerto. How do your approaches to these two projects differ?**

**PA:** They *are* completely different, not only in terms of learning a piece, but in terms of preparation and interpretation, in terms of finding the sound of a piece. Even the worlds of Bartók and Ravel are completely different, though their concertos were written during the same period. They require completely different ways of generating energy, emotions, sounds, time, etc. What is so interesting is that interpreting in different styles requires completely different attitudes. So I don't think there is a global answer, i.e., for Messiaen, play this way; for this period, play that way.

There is a certain alchemy for finding all the answers, but it must be adapted for each case. So take the *Vingt Regards*, for instance. [The problem is that] there is this order to the rhythms in the songs so you really have to be an architect to build this rose window, like in a cathedral, and you have to be a fresco painter at the same time. There is the technical stuff, but then you need a vision, too. All



20 pictures have to come alive. There is a flow to each variation — spirituality, emotion, and then you're asked to carry the whole piece, so that it's one movement and not like so many small boxes.

OK, so that's a bit dramatic, but there are simply a number of things to consider and then you have to think, OK, *this* is really important. For example, a high sense of character, or comedy, is not very important with this music, whereas it is extremely important with Prokofiev or Schumann. Or voluptuous *cantabile* — this is also not [important] most of the time. [Laughs.] You have to make decisions and make use of all your tools.

**BF: How do you explain the sudden appearance of jazz in the 10th movement of the *Vingt Regards*? Is Messiaen drawing on this consciously?**

**PA:** I'm sure not. He was very irritated when everyone was calling him "Gershwin from the Continent." I think, in fact, it is a result of the combination of certain harmonic and rhythmic languages. He got there through other routes than jazz, but the result is quite similar.

At the heart of the matter, there was an urge after World War I in Occidental music to return to a pulsated music, led by *The Rite of Spring*. You can hear this in all of Bartók, Messiaen and then Ligeti. Historically, there was always emphasis on melody and harmony, but not rhythm. There was a desire to return to the roots of rhythm. Contact with *art primitif* was a great part of this regeneration, as was the mixing between different cultures. In the case of Messiaen, there is both the wild, almost physical necessity of a rhythmic life and then the knowledge of making rhythms. So when he writes straight eighth-notes and then adds his famous 16th-note with surgical precision — the result for us is completely jazzy. So I think that while we cannot avoid making this association, it was not part of his process.

Ravel had a small flirtation with jazz, but the complex, incredible harmonies that he employs are not a result of that flirtation, but rather of a parallel development within classical music and jazz.

**BF: What can you tell me about Ligeti's — and, more recently, Marc-André Dalbavie's — interest in pygmy music?**

**PA:** Pygmy music was investigated 20 to 25 years ago by ethnomusicologists. Ligeti was the first composer to be in contact with this music, to study it and to be influenced by it. Then certain composers — the generation of Gerard Grisey for instance — became interested in it. This is currently one of the richest musics in existence. The complexity of the polyphony and polyrhythms is absolutely marvelous. It's very removed from our traditional Renaissance polyphony. Many composers have been attracted to this sort of layered rhythmic writing recently, I think because it is so incredibly rich, fresh and has inspired a lot of people, Dalbavie included ... I have organized several workshops and concerts with the pygmies, and I've toured with them as well.

**BF: What other 21st-century composers are you interested in?**

**PA:** Well, a lot. I try to look at scores, hear music, keep in contact with people, keep current. Of course, my professional life reflects only a part of that. I have to make a choice: who are the composers it makes sense to play? Which composers do I play well? It's better to work [directly] with a composer when you can, because then you better understand his style. And it's better to play things that need to be played.

**BF: What do you mean by that?**

**PA:** For instance, if there is the possibility of playing the First Piano Concerto by Tchaikovsky — which I love very much, it's a great concerto — and a concerto by Birtwistle or Elliott Carter, for example, I would be very happy to play Tchaikovsky. But if someone says, "Which takes priority?" I will say, "Certainly, the other one!" because so few play it, and I want to hear it. Have you heard the Carter Piano Concerto for instance?

**BF: No.**

**PA:** Right, who plays that? So, that's the answer.

**BF: But I have heard the Tchaikovsky.**

**PA:** [Laughs] That's right, me as well. So, I think that we have a responsibility and this way of simply pandering to the market, to be manipulated by what sells tickets is just a way to be completely lazy and ... I don't like that. I think it's indecent. While we have to deal with a lot of elements and people and problems, we have to do our best not only to provide good performances but to choose repertory and to try to educate the audience. This is a big part of our function.



*If you would like to respond to this interview, please write to [letters@andante.com](mailto:letters@andante.com).*