

DEEP CONNECTIONS

Pianist and composer Dejan Lazić shares his experience of writing and premiering his first large-scale work, the Piano Concerto in Istrian Style, Op 18



I STARTED PLAYING THE PIANO at the age of six and at the age of nine I also started taking clarinet lessons. However, after watching Miloš Forman's film *Amadeus* at the cinema (my very first movie!) I decided that I wanted to write my own music as well. In the beginning I concentrated on smaller, simpler pieces for either solo piano (*Kinderszenen – Hommage à Schumann*) and various chamber music formations (*Conversazioni; Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite*; a String Quartet). As time passed I started to work on more complex orchestral pieces like *Sinfonietta*, Op 6 and *The Storm*, Op 14.

Of course, it took time until I reached the point where I personally felt ready to embark on a large project like a piano concerto. I started working on the *Piano Concerto in Istrian Style*, Op 18 in early 2011 and, due to a busy schedule as a concert pianist, I finished it only a few months before the world premiere at the Aspen Music Festival in the US, which took place on 23 July this year.

I have shared many wonderful musical experiences with Robert Spano, the festival's music director, and I am very grateful that he is such a strong supporter of not only this project of mine but also new music and contemporary composers in general (we also premiered and recorded my piano and orchestra arrangement of the Brahms Violin Concerto in 2009 with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra). Needless to say that performing my own and very first Piano Concerto with Spano conducting, as a part of such a prestigious music festival, was a truly unique and special experience for me.

THE CONCERTO IS BASED on Istrian folklore and the surrounding musical traditions. Istria is a peninsula in the north west of Croatia that juts into the Adriatic Sea near the Italian city of Trieste. I was born in the Croatian capital, Zagreb, but spent many vacations in Istria so am very familiar with its Roman cities, beautiful coastline and amazing cuisine. Despite the fact that this region is situated so near to Slovenia, Italy and Austria – and therefore to Slavic, Latin and Germanic spheres of influence – its musical culture and traditions have remained thoroughly idiosyncratic.



In both vocal and instrumental traditions, Istrian folk music is typically two-voiced, with the melody harmonised in thirds. There are frequent shifts into asymmetrical meters (5/4, 7/4, etc) and because traditional Istrian folk music uses an untempered scale, the folk harmonisation sounds rather exotic to Western ears. This was a wonderful source of inspiration for me that brought extraordinary opportunities but also tremendous challenges.

The concerto is scored for a relatively large symphony orchestra and is conceived in five interlinking movements: *Overture*, *Intermezzo*, *Cadenza ad libitum*, *Canon and Rondo on Istrian Folk Tunes* and *Finale*. The entire work (its duration is approximately 35 minutes) is also a tribute to many great pianists and composers who have inspired me all these years as a musician and whose works I regularly perform on stage. Beethoven, Brahms, Rachmaninov, Ravel, Bartók, Britten, Lutosławski – they all are in there. I have also used number of well-known musical cryptograms that employ German note names, where 'H' corresponds to 'B flat'. These include 'D-S-C-H' (Dmitri Shostakovich), 'B-A-C-H' (Bach), 'A-S-C-H' and 'A-B-E-G-G' (both referencing Robert Schumann).

The five movements are linked through two contrapositive motifs that appear, disappear and reappear throughout the piece and are audible in many different forms, registers, colours, tempos and

rhythms. The second movement is set out like chamber music and provides a strong contrast with the first movement, which is very *concertante*, yet symphonic and virtuosic at the same time. In the third movement, *Cadenza ad libitum*, the soloist can partly or entirely improvise, just as the great Viennese School composers Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven did when they performed their own concertos themselves.

The fourth movement is dance-like and folkloristic, probably the most 'exotic' movement of the piece. Again, it provides a heavy contrast to the rather brief *Finale*, which is opened by the strings with a resolute quintuplet figure based on another musical cryptogram – 'F-A-E' (Frei aber Einsam, which translates as 'Free but lonely'). This was the ultra-Romantic mantra of the 19th-century violinist Joseph Joachim (dedicatee of the Brahms Violin Concerto, which I arranged five years ago) and a motif employed by (among others) Robert Schumann.

After almost four years of work, it was so wonderfully rewarding to see both the musicians of the orchestra and audience enjoying this music, from the very first rehearsal with orchestra to the premiere – there really could hardly be any bigger compliment for me than this. 🎵

Dejan Lazić performs a solo recital at the Queen Elizabeth Hall at London's Southbank Centre on 11 December as part of the International Piano Series