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music

Songs in the key of scarlet

The rising pianist
Federico Colli tells
Geoff Brown how
he sees music —
in full colour

My first physical encounter with the pianist Federico Colli came just before his recital this July at the Biarritz Piano Festival. He was taking photos of Biarritz's magnificent bay, dressed in canary yellow trousers, a red cravat and a white shirt exploding with black spots (or perhaps it was the other way round). For the recital — Scarlatti, Mozart, with encores of Bach, Handel and Meade Lux Lewis's classic *Honky Tonk Train Blues* — his clothing proved rather more subdued.

However, even if Colli had sat at the keyboard in funeral black, the playing alone would still have resembled Joseph's Technicolor dreamcoat.

At the age of 30, this top prizewinner of the 2011 Salzburg Mozart Competition and the 2012 Leeds International Piano Competition is established as one of the most promising, liveliest and thoughtful pianists on the scene, especially scintillating in Mozart and Scarlatti. Both composers feature in his recital at the Wigmore Hall in London next month.

Colli's sense of colour goes far beyond wardrobe choices. He's not the first musician to associate specific colours with particular key signatures — the illustrious roll call includes Scriabin, Duke Ellington and Taylor Swift — but everyone's musical colours aren't necessarily the same.

"C major is red," he tells me emphatically. "D major is green. E major is light blue. F is yellow. G is sort of bright red, A is orange and B is [he pauses for the first time] pink!"

As for the minor keys, he picks out the desperately lugubrious E-flat minor: "Dark blue, very dark blue." Best of all, in his eyes, is the olive green of D minor, the "key of death", the tonality of Mozart's Requiem and half of Colli's Wigmore recital.

Not by chance, it's also the key of four sonatas on his recently acclaimed debut album recorded for Chandos, the first of two scheduled selections from Scarlatti's 555 keyboard sonatas. In these miniature wonders of baroque art, Colli particularly excels at bringing out the music's melancholy side, emphasising the fragility of the phrasing through the pianist's delay mechanism known as rubato. The result is like the music taking a breath.

"And it's a very important side of his music, because he was influenced a lot by vocal music," says Colli. "I studied him for a year before I made the album. Not just the music, but his personality, the historical period and where he wrote the music in Spain. He had to move from Italy to escape from the musical rules of his father,



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Alessandro. And even in Spain he found that his art was not completely understood. He always felt himself backstage, nostalgic for Italian moods, the Italian vibes. But on the other hand he always had hope, a fantastic hope, a dreaming hope, and some vivacious happiness. And that's all in the music."

Colli plays Scarlatti, though, on a modern Steinway, not on the harpsichords of the composer's day. Has he ever tried to go "authentic"? He nods and lets out a sigh. "It's very good to play on any period instrument for study, to open your mind to what happened before.

But for me it's like when you have a Ferrari or a Lamborghini in your garage, and a car dealer suggests you test-drive a Fiat Panda. I could drive it, say, for 500m, but then I'd say, "Thank you, goodbye!"

"I try to be authentic by being as close as possible to the technique, the feeling and soul of Scarlatti, but I'm expressing these things through the full range of colours and dynamics available on pianos today. So long as the results are in the style of Scarlatti, and are true and not an exaggeration, why not use them?"

He has to thank Sergio Marengoni, his first piano teacher in his home town of Brescia, for introducing him to Scarlatti when he was about eight, along with Bach and Mozart: composers who became, he says, his personal friends. He also thanks Marengoni for teaching him the technical basics when he was at the right age. "If you don't have a teacher who tells you when you are very young how to position your back, how to relax your arms, or the different ways of using your wrists, playing the piano can be very dangerous, not just for the soul, but for the body. I remember Marengoni put a coin on my wrist and said, 'Now play the D major scale. If at the end of the scale

this coin is still on your wrist you can have an ice cream.' That's not just a game. It's serious. If you play scales your wrists must be absolutely fixed.

"Attending school when I was ten years old, when the teacher was telling us about the Roman Empire, or mathematics, or literature, I would be exercising the fingers like this [he's drumming at speed on the hotel tablecloth], changing the fingering all the while, doing this for five hours a day. Because of this, it's very easy for me to play digital music like Mozart, Bach and Scarlatti, where clarity is very important."

His later teachers were Russian émigrés, each of whom taught him different survival skills needed in the concert pianist's crazy high-pressure world. Konstantin Bogino taught him about stamina, endurance and giving 100 per cent of your body, soul and brain. Boris Petrushansky took a philosophical approach and urged Colli to find the meaning behind the music. Pavel Gililov guided him through Beethoven, and topped it off with key practical tips on how to develop relationships with managers, the PR machine and music journalists such as me.

None of them, however, seems to have left Colli with much enthusiasm for contemporary music or veteran 20th-century revolutionaries such as Schoenberg. He has even less fondness for the philosophical pranks of a figure such as John Cage. "The nihilism of a piece like 4'33, where the pianist sits in front a piano doing nothing — that's absolutely the opposite of the beauty I'm seeking and thinking about. That I think is very bad, not only for music, but for society and culture in general."

Whether he's wearing yellow trousers or not, when you're listening to Colli limply dancing over the keys in Scarlatti, Mozart or Bach, keeping heart and brain in perfect balance, it's impossible to disagree.

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Federico Colli is at the Wigmore Hall, London W1 (020 7935 2141) on November 1