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# IVO POGORELICH

The Croatian superstar prepares for his first solo recital in London for 15 years



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# Of keyboards and cravats

Federico Colli's career received a boost when he won the Leeds International Piano Competition, and his recent Southbank Centre debut confirmed his original artistry. *By Michael Church*

**W**ITH HIS SILK CRAVAT AND PERFECTLY CUT SUIT, Federico Colli walks on stage like a dandy. But as his Southbank Centre debut last April revealed, there's a singular artistry underpinning his performance.

Mozart's Sonata No 5 in G is regarded by many pianists as downright trivial, but in Colli's hands it opened up like a spring flower, its outer movements shot through with brilliant lights and its Andante exquisitely shaded. Colli tended to brush the keys



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rather than strike them, and he was sparing with the pedal. He was faithful to the architecture of Beethoven's 'Appassionata' and white hot throughout. Colli wound up with an account of Schumann's First Sonata so original that it might have been a brand new piece, yet it still felt true to the composer's spirit. Colli's ultimate gift is absolute clarity of intention.

**C**OLLI, 26, STARTED PLAYING THE PIANO FOR FUN when he was four, but insists that even at ten he wasn't thinking about a career as a musician: maths, physics and philosophy were just as interesting to him. He played *Für Elise* in his first concert; a video shows him bursting into tears after playing it because he was unhappy with his performance:

'I felt I had a duty to the music, and I had let it down. From that moment on, I became a perfectionist.' Growing up in Brescia – the birthplace of his hero Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli – he was taught by Sergio Marengoni, and left the Milan Conservatory at 16 with flying colours. He then went to study under the Russian pianist Konstantin Bogino, by which time he was practising for eight hours a day. Colli won the Cantù Piano Competition at 20, but got knocked out of the London International Piano Competition in the first round. 'I was sad,' he recalls of that event. 'I decided to concentrate on chamber music and on studying the solo piano repertoire in depth. I decided to grow up as a man.' Three years later, in 2012, Colli won the Leeds International Piano Competition, aged 24.

'And a new chapter of my life began. I started to think philosophically about what I played. I recently talked at length to the Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino, and we discussed the *kathekon*, a benign force [defined by the ancient Greek philosophers] that can counteract all the evil in the world. The way I play Schumann's First Sonata is my attempt to give expression to that power. I am also looking for ways in which I can apply Nietzsche's philosophy to music, and Kierkegaard's; reading his work was for me a life-changing experience.' He observes that the philosophy of Hegel – an exact contemporary of Beethoven – can be seen reflected in the opening phrase of the 'Appassionata', and he makes a neat case for that view, adding sternly that 'he who does not think in this way, does not deserve to be a musician.' His other big concern is 'actuality in music – when a thing is complete in its essence. If you look at my performance of Schubert's Op 142 Impromptu on YouTube, you will find my attempt to realise this.'

Chopin doesn't interest him much, and Liszt not at all: 'There is no mystery in them.' He says he is still too young to understand Bach and Brahms: 'Finding the right sound for Brahms is very hard: you need to have physical strength, be a big Genghis Khan – and also quite arrogant.' For Brahms, Radu Lupu is his exemplar. And Stravinsky? '*Petrushka* is too virtuosic for me. I am a virtuoso, I can play anything I want, but at this moment in time we don't need more virtuosos. We need the philosophy of music.'

So where does the dandyism fit in? 'A dandy is a man who loves beauty. I am an artist, and I love beauty and truth. And yes, I collect jackets and cravats. I counted with my girlfriend a couple of days ago – 36 cravats in my wardrobe. For jackets, I love Yashimoto and Christian Dior. But they are expensive, so I wait for the sales.' 🎹