

ONE TO WATCH

BEATA KORYCKA

# Intrepid adventurer

Winner of the 1st Chopin Competition on Period Instruments, Tomasz Ritter sweeps the cobwebs away from fortepianos of the Romantic era with a unique perspective that leaves audiences spellbound. **Eva Doroszkowska** meets him after a recital in Berlin

**T**omasz Ritter is not one to rest on his laurels. He recently wowed audiences in Warsaw with Chopin's Concerto in F minor and has plenty more concert invitations beckoning. Meanwhile, he is busy completing final exams in harpsichord, historical piano, modern piano and chamber music at the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatoire. This diverse range of studies could lead in many directions and places him among the long list of graduates such as Nikolai Lugansky, who have already secured their place in the piano's hall of fame.

A piano student of Mikhail Voskresensky, harpsichordist Maria Uspenskaya and fortepianist Alexei Lubimov, Ritter has a solid grounding in all aspects of music. It is clear he has the greatest respect and admiration for Lubimov – the 'wizard of sound' – a pupil of celebrated pedagogue, Heinrich Neuhaus. Ritter first met Lubimov as a child at the Early Days Music Festival in Hungary, where he was invited by renowned Czech keyboard restorer Petr Šeřl.

Ritter was enrolled into music school aged seven, and it was by chance a few years later that he had an opportunity



to delve into the soundworld of the fortepiano. He was encouraged by his parents, both keen music-lovers. Aged 11, attending a competition in Prague, he was enthralled by a lecture on early instruments but could not get near the fortepiano due to overcrowding. It was thanks to his father's tenacity, persuading him to wait patiently until everyone had left, that he got his opportunity.

Petr Šefl heard him and was astonished at how quickly the young boy from Lublin adapted to the needs of the instrument. 'For me it seemed natural and easy,' says Ritter. 'It was fun to experiment.' Through Šefl's encouragement, he attended the Early Days Festival as an observer. His talent was quickly noted, and he was invited to perform with the adults in the final concert.

Further masterclasses and conferences followed, resulting in more meetings with Lubimov and other specialists in the field. 'When eventually I had to choose my studies, I knew which direction I wanted to go. I fell in love not just with the sound of these instruments but with a different approach to thinking – less about following directions but more about getting to the heart of the matter, studying texts and different approaches to performance. This is especially relevant in Baroque repertoire, where 50 per cent or more of the music is not written down.'

On early instruments the colour and timbre of sound varies more throughout the registers, presenting important clues to deciphering scores. The dynamic range may not be so wide in terms of volume, but subtle shades of nuance and counterpoint weave elaborately to enrich the tapestry of Romantic piano textures.

In contrast to the modern piano approach, unravelling the mysteries of why notes are written, where and in what context, struck a chord with Ritter's curious intellect. It is clear his joy lies as much in asking questions as in finding solutions. His teacher in Warsaw, Irina Rumiancewa-Dąbrowska, came from the Russian school of modern piano-playing. Yet despite her starkly different approach, she was a friend of Lubimov and encouraged him to pursue his passion.

Paradoxically, Ritter says that the challenges presented by historical pianos are less to do with keyboard technique than exploring a return to the roots of music: playing is not in the fingers but in the head, inside the mind and soul. 'Most importantly, exploring early instruments encourages imagination, developing ideas away from the instrument unravelling clues to reveal the message behind each composer.'

Returning to Chopin, Ritter speaks with affection for the 1842 Pleyel he played throughout the competition in Warsaw. Instruments like these, he says, create 'that most beautiful moment in performance, the element of surprise, [which] forces you to change the way you listen, disclosing the true sense of music.' Venturing into what lies beneath the surface, reacting and adapting to different instruments is a source of continual fascination for him: 'It develops the necessity of a flexible spontaneous approach.'

A prizewinner from an early age, Ritter has taken part in many competitions, notably being crowned Arthur



*Tomasz Ritter's new album, featuring live performances of works by Chopin and Kurpiński from the 1st Chopin Competition on Period Instruments, is now available from the Fryderyk Chopin Institute (NIFCCD 634). [chopin.nifc.pl](http://chopin.nifc.pl)*

Rubinstein Young Pianist in Memoriam and personality of the festival, an award previously given to stars such as Rafał Blechacz. Ritter was also a winner at the San Sebastián International Piano Competition and the third Szymanowski Memorial Piano Competition in Warsaw.

He continues to be eager to discover more, enthusing about harpsichord and his love for chamber music. With so much to discover the only limit is time. Whichever path he follows, he does so with focused intent and thorough dedication, leaving little room for anything else. For now, he looks forward to the next stages of study at the Hamburg Hochschule. There awaits a fine collection of period instruments and studies in modern piano with more stories to unfold. 'It is important to introduce some disturbance to the usual order, to explore new avenues and find what I want to say,' he says.

What advice does he have for young pianists? 'Don't be afraid of the challenges. Always be ready to change your mind.' An intrepid adventurer with a long trajectory ahead, Ritter remains steadfast, undaunted by his quest. **IP**

## ***'Exploring early instruments encourages imagination'***



WOJCIECH GRZĘDZIŃSKI