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Pianist

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ROCK LEGEND

RICK WAKEMAN

returns to his
classical roots

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FIRST Love

Rock star and Grumpy Old Man he may be, but Rick Wakeman has always been a pianist at heart. He tells **Erica Worth** about a KGB uniform, his keyboard collection and his return to the classics

January 2017, and I'm sitting in a rooftop café overlooking Broadcasting House in central London, waiting to interview the rock keyboard legend that is Rick Wakeman. 'Just another five minutes,' I'm promised by a text from his publicity assistant. 'Rick keeps stopping to chat to people.' I can only imagine. As I set my recording device on the table and put my sheaf of questions next to it, I feel a pang of apprehension. Wakeman is not my typical interviewee, and prog rock is not my everyday listening. However, I do know a thing or two about piano. And that's what I'm here to find out about – Rick the pianist, who has revived his classical credentials with a new album and tour, *Piano Portraits*.

Wakeman strides in, larger than life, offering a firm handshake and apologies for lateness. Not to worry, I reply, and introduce myself in the expectation that he doesn't know much about my magazine. 'Oh, I do!' he roars back. 'In fact, my piano technician Andrew Giller was so excited that I'm meeting the editor of *Pianist*. He knows the mag. He's a genius, a complete nutcase.'

From that moment, I know it's going to be plain sailing.

'You can talk to Andrew about anything to do with pianos,' continues Wakeman, fired up. 'I got to know him because I inherited my father's Bechstein upright, which I used to play. When I moved to Norfolk in 2005 I thought I'd get it restored. Andrew said he'd come and have a look. He arrived, and I asked if it was still raining. To which he answered, "Where's the piano?" And now he looks after all my pianos.'

'I cannot walk past a piano without playing it. It is my greatest love, and I think it always will be'

How many pianos might that be? 'Well, I like rescuing things,' replies Wakeman. 'Apart from my father's Bechstein, there was a lovely 6' Blüthner from the old Boston Gliderdrome [a 60s music venue in Lincolnshire]. It was an early 60s model that started life in Lincoln Cathedral. It was in appalling condition, almost skip-ready.

Above: Rick Wakeman recording *Piano Portraits* at The Old Granary Studio, a converted barn in Norfolk

Things like the music stand were missing. But the basics were there – the soundboard, the frame. Andrew said he could make it into a real Blüthner-sounding piano. It took him a year. Now he's restoring a 1925, 7' 6" Bechstein, which I absolutely adore. So at the moment I have the upright Bechstein, the grand Bechstein, the Blüthner grand, and a Petrof in the studio. I got it when they started getting things right – it's about 20 years old. I've had a Yamaha B too.'

And Steinway? 'I did have one of those' – said almost under the breath. 'That went in the first divorce. It lives near Trinity College now, with a very

good pianist. I understand it's still referred to as "Rick Wakeman's piano". I would love a Thomas Goff double harpsichord – I knew Tom well – but we don't have the room.'

No wonder: Wakeman also has around 150 keyboards. 'I'm a real hoarder,' he explains. 'This collecting thing started in the late 60s. Remember, I'm old!'

Depending on what we're recording and where we're touring, we just go and sort out the ones we want.'

Wakeman happily observes a move among instrument-buyers from digital to acoustic instruments. 'Andrew Giller has told me that people come in looking for a piano saying: "We've got a digital. Now we're looking for a real one".'

Early memories

We travel back to the start of Wakeman's life at the piano. 'I was born in 1949. In the early 50s, children's TV was *Bill and Ben* and that was your lot, so we had to do something else. My parents were both musical. When I was young, they held musical evenings in our tiny house, on a Sunday evening. My Mum sang and Dad was a fine piano player. I used to climb out of bed, aged four, come down the stairs and listen. I was in raptures. There were three girls who lived next door and they were having piano lessons. The walls were paper thin, and I could hear them. I *so* wanted to play like my dad, to *be* like my dad.

'I was lucky. One of the finest piano teachers in southern England lived less than a mile away. But my dad earned exactly this: one pound eighteen and six a week. And seven and six went on piano lessons for me. So they went without. I went to Mrs Symes, and did all my grades with her.' He won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music [RCM] where piano was his first study, with Eileen Cooper.

However, Wakeman never made it to the end of the course. 'I was on the performer course,' he recalls, 'but I was doing a load of sessions. The College frowned upon this at the time – especially if you were working on an album that turned out to be a hit! The sessions were starting to conflict with studies at the college. My second study was clarinet, and I went into my lesson one day, and my clarinet teacher Basil Tschaikoff asked, "What's on your mind?" I said, "Mr Tschaikoff, I have a real dilemma." "Do you want my advice?" he replied. "Leave here, go down to your locker, empty it out, walk up the steps over the road to the Albert Hall. Don't look back, walk round to the front of the hall, then look up and say to yourself "That's where I want to be". And don't come back."'

He didn't. Those sessions led to a stint with folk-rock group The Strawbs, then a frantic period of moonlighting for David Bowie, Elton John, Lou Reed and many others. In 1971 he joined Yes, and contributed to the seminal prog-rock album *Fragile* – notably the keyboard break between the first and second songs, *Cans and Brahms*, where he plays his own virtuosic condensation of the Scherzo from Brahms's Fourth Symphony on several of those 150 keyboards.

Wakeman laughs as he remembers the RCM days. 'I saw Basil Tschaikoff years later, when I found myself on *This Is Your Life* with Michael Aspel. At the reception afterwards, I reminded him: "Mr Tschaikoff, you, a professor at the college, encouraged me to leave. Why?" To which he replied: "The whole object of doing this course is to reach the stage where one becomes the professional one wants to become. And if the door opens for you to do that, you go through it, you don't miss the opportunity". My only regret, I told him, was not getting my degree because I hadn't finished.'

Redemption arrived in 2012 – 43 years after he had walked out of the RCM – when he became a Fellow of the college. Today he works closely with the students there and is also Professor at London College of Music in West London. 'It's wonderful,' he remarks, 'the diversity and opportunities that students now have, which they couldn't in the 60s'.

Exotic, erotic years

During the 70s Wakeman gradually drew away from dependence on existing formations such as Yes and pieced together the ideas, the music and the personnel for his own projects. In 1973 *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* was released, with its coruscating, Baroque-patched opening keyboards cadenza (Wakeman the performer at his most technically brilliant) and clinching variations on *The day Thou gavest* (Wakeman the composer at his most ingenious).

The following year he embarked on the most ambitious project of his career, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. This was a 45-minute fantasy based on Jules Verne's novel and featuring the London Symphony Orchestra and choirs. The live recording at the Royal Festival Hall was famously fraught with technical issues, but the album was a worldwide hit, and he toured it across the globe.

By 1975 Wakeman was obvious choice to compose the soundtrack to *Lisztomania* (billed as 'The exotic, erotic, electrifying rock fantasy'), in which Ken Russell explores the parallels between mid-19th and late-20th-century notions of musical fame with characteristic imagination. Wakeman himself appears on film as the god Thor. The same year he released a concept-album sequel to *Journey* – *The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and The Knights of the Round Table*, with opulent orchestral strings against wild harpsichord and keyboard solos.

Brahms, Liszt, the LSO: it should be clear that an irreverent love of the classical tradition remained central to Wakeman's work. I ask how his classical training helped his career. 'My father played classical and stride piano,' he continues. 'He said that if you want to make music your profession, you won't always be able to play what you want to play.'



RICK WAKEMAN

Up close

If you could play only one piece, what would it be?

A piano arrangement of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. I love it. Prokofiev is my hero. When I was about eight, my father took me to a concert of *Peter and the Wolf*. I thought 'Here's a man telling a story'.

One composer?

Mozart. On a desert island, if I had all the Mozart sonatas with me, I'd be very happy.

One pianist you'd choose to hear?

Vladimir Ashkenazy. He's one of the few who has successfully made that great transition from performer to conductor.

Any technical hurdles?

No, but I'd love my left hand to be stronger. I have to work hard at it, especially when I bring out the classical pieces.

If you weren't a musician, what would you be?

A politician. I think that if you're a musician, you like to make a difference to people's lives. I was asked to stand as an Member of the European Parliament. I was involved with a wonderful MEP and we stopped the cat and dog fur trade that's based in China. A lot of the fur would end up in the UK, in big shops, with names such as 'wild cat' or 'mountain cat', but actually it was little Tiddles from around the corner.

I also gathered support for a lot of Iraqi musicians after the coup, when they all got drummed out of the country, but tragically most of them ended up in Syria. I've spoken in the European parliament about that. I learnt you could make a difference.

What would you say to someone starting to play the piano?

No matter what age, have fun. Enjoy it, and aim to be the best you can be. Even if you try two or three teachers, find one who almost becomes your friend. The first questions they should ask are, 'What do you want to do? What would you like to be able to play? Do you want to do Christmas carols? Sonatas?' Obviously, if the student says 'I want to be a concert pianist' and they're already 36, then the teacher might suggest that they return to the world of reality!

ROCKING OUT

The legend and his keyboards: Wakeman on stage at his various shows, including Myths at the O2 Arena in London



The more experience you get playing different types of music, the better. From the age of 12 I played trad jazz, modern jazz, dance, rock and blues. I did clubs, churches, even strip clubs – I played a lot of wrong notes there! – weddings, funerals, absolutely everything.’

Was that with or without the score? And what about transposing? ‘I’d play with and without music. As for transposing, you’d get a piece of music slung in front of you at a working men’s club and they’d say, “We’ll do this in B flat now”, and it was written in F sharp. It was a great apprenticeship! My father always said to me: “Your classical training will give you the tools to do your job.” He likened it to being a writer. A writer can have the world’s greatest imagination, he said, but he’ll only be able to put onto paper the words that he knows. He encouraged me to go through all my grades: they would stand me in good stead.’

Wakeman has returned to those roots for his 100th studio album, *Piano Portraits*. Debussy, Fauré and Tchaikovsky sit beside *Amazing Grace* and *Eleanor Rigby*, *Stairway to Heaven* and *Life on Mars*, in which the pianist pays tribute to the memory of his late colleague Bowie. The album is, self-evidently, a labour of love.

Respecting the melody

‘Acoustic piano is still my favourite instrument,’ confesses Wakeman. ‘I cannot walk past a piano without playing it. It is my greatest love, and I think it always will be. I’ve done a few piano albums before’ – such as the *Classical Connection* albums made in reunions with members of Yes – ‘but not one with so much thought behind it.

‘The idea for *Piano Portraits* came about when David Bowie died. I released *Life On Mars* for Macmillan Cancer Support in March 2016, and several labels got in touch: “We want an album just like this”. How weird is that? Or so I thought. Anyway, Universal encouraged me to do it. I’m glad I waited until now to make a classical album like this, because I wouldn’t have known about The Old Granary [Giller’s concert venue where *Piano Portraits* was recorded], or Andrew’s concert grand Steinway. It’s a gorgeous Hamburg model.

‘After all these years, I thought a lot more about the pieces. At college you’d take a work by one composer and write it in the style of another, and I loved that. I’ve always loved playing around with variations on other people’s music’ – as the exuberant fantasies of *Henry VIII* show. ‘It’s nothing new: composers have been nicking music for donkeys’ years. Everyone nicked from Bach. And he did some nicking too.

The key is a good melody. If you’ve got a good melody, and you’re honest with it and treat it with respect, you can do almost anything. Some pieces on the recording were instantly easy to work on. I played *Clair de lune* when I was a kid.

The *Berceuse* was more tricky because I knew the original. I had to get that out my head, except for the melodies, and pick the areas I wanted to come out.’

It strikes me how many *Pianist* readers would enjoy learning his arrangements. ‘Funnily enough, my publisher asked if I would release them. I’d prefer to do three different versions of a certain piece – for beginner, intermediate and advanced. Then it’s up to the student to choose. I’ve been told music teachers are desperate for this kind of thing. They could even be graded. We’re looking at this for next year. I’m too busy right now.’

Yes, every second counts in the life of Rick Wakeman. His tour diary is more squeezed than ever thanks to his increasing appearances on radio (*Just a Minute*, *The News Quiz*) and TV (*Have I Got News For You*, *Grumpy Old Men*) as an affable, eloquent, likably self-parodying Grumpy Old Man. ‘I love TV and the media,’ Wakeman tells me. ‘It started in the late 80s. I did a lot of chat shows. But I’d play on them, and then nobody wanted to chat afterwards. Everything changed with the *Danny Baker After All* show one Saturday night in the mid 80s. I’d just got back from Russia. I’d been arrested out there for stealing a KGB uniform, which sounds hilarious now but wasn’t funny at the time – I was in real trouble. So I packed the KGB uniform and went to White City for the show.’ In a flash of inspiration, Wakeman put on the uniform and walked onto the set doing a Russian goose-step. ‘I told the whole story, on prime time. And when I walked off, instead of playing a bit of Yes, they did the Russian national anthem. The following Monday, the phones didn’t stop ringing. And from all the programmes I’d been trying to get on for years. That’s all thanks to Danny.’

Time is up. The PR assistant appears, and Wakeman vanishes, as if in a puff of prog-rock smoke. I’m left with a snapshot (see page 4) and memories of an exhilarating half-hour in the company of a rock legend. ■



Piano Portraits is available on CD and 2LP sets from Universal Records. Wakeman appears at the Cheltenham Jazz Festival on 29 April at the Town Hall, Cheltenham. He tours the UK from the end of May to early July with *Piano Portraits in Concert*. See www.rucc.com. Turn to page 4 for a chance to win a copy of *Piano Portraits*.