

PIANO DUOS

Benjamin Ivry examines the illustrious history of the piano duo in this latest instalment of *IP's* piano partnerships series

SOMETHING SPECIAL HAPPENS when two pianists perform together, whether it's on a single keyboard or on two separate pianos. Some audiences see piano duos as akin to synchronised swimmers or glittering tandem skaters, whose accomplishments are also based on unified precision.

Composers from Mozart and Schubert to Bartók created chamber works for four hands, while others, including Brahms and Dvořák, wrote distilled versions of symphonies to be played by two pianists. Frederic Ming Chang and Albert Faurot's *Team Piano Repertoire* (1976) asserts that the sheer range and capacity of the modern piano may have motivated such compositions, since the piano's 'potential... is so great that the temptation

at once arises to add more hands and fingers to realise it. The very length of the keyboard invites companionship.' Perhaps some solo pianists also naturally feel lonely and in need of fellowship. In 1970, Ernest Lubin's *The Piano Duet: A Guide for Pianists* bemoaned the 'almost complete oblivion that has overtaken the entire piano duet repertory.' This is fortunately no longer the case. Perhaps amateur players do not revel in four-handed works as they did in previous eras, but public recitals by duos continue to attract piano lovers, as they have for decades.

THE GENRE RECEIVED A preliminary boost in the 1930s, when a clutch of top performing stars gave two-piano recitals. Rachmaninov and Horowitz performed together at Rachmaninov's home in Beverly Hills, sadly unrecorded; and Rachmaninov also partnered with the Russian-born American pianist Ossip Gabrilowitsch (1878-1936), who in turn played with the London-born Harold Bauer (1873-1951). Gabrilowitsch and Bauer recorded a vivaciously charming 1929 rendition of the Waltz from Anton Arensky's Suite Op 15. Arensky, a dissipated tuberculosis patient who died at age 44 after his constitution was reportedly weakened by drinking and

gambling, is emblematic of the Romantic urge to double up pianists, as if crying for 'madder music and for stronger wine,' as the 19th-century poet Ernest Dowson wrote. Like overstuffed Victorian dinner tables or overlong operas, pianism by 20 instead of 10 fingers was an exuberant form of overindulgence – but one that even the most prudish moralist could not object to. Bauer duly performed and recorded on Duo-Art piano rolls with Myra Hess (1890-1965), and many other teams followed suit.

As the craze widened, it became clear that siblings, married couples and other relatives elected to perform as duos because of their physical proximity and their presumed accord with each other's musical instincts due to long personal exposure. Some of the crassest – albeit most commercially successful – two-piano teams have been composed of sisters, brothers and married couples, though it is important to judge each case individually, rather than draw general rules about familial ties and pianism. Recordings by the Austrian pianist Artur Schnabel (1882-1951) and his son Karl Ulrich Schnabel (1909-2001), for example, indubitably offer insights of unique and lasting value. Both Schnabels expressed profound mutual sympathy and understanding of works by Schubert, Mozart and Bach. Their Schubert recordings, an offshoot of the elder Schnabel's pioneering work reviving that composer's long-neglected Sonatas, seem to bring the listener back to early 19th-century Vienna salon life, so authentic-sounding is their vividly idiomatic, celebratory gusto. Karl Ulrich Schnabel ►



Josef Lhévinne and his wife Rosina Lhévinne exemplified a collaborative ideal

Robert Casadesus and his wife Gaby Casadesus left behind liltily affectionate recordings of Fauré, Debussy and others



© TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

If Virgil and Dante were to be reincarnated as musicians, they might appear as a four hand piano team

would continue this legacy, playing and recording with his wife Helen Fogel Schnabel (1911-1974), a gifted pianist in her own right.

Many pianists pale before the achievements of the Schnabels, but one couple who did not were the Russian pianist and teacher Josef Lhévinne (1874-1944) and his wife Rosina Lhévinne (1880-1976), herself a noted pedagogue. In brilliantly punctilious recordings of Mozart and Debussy, the Lhévinnes exemplified a collaborative ideal, reminding us that not coincidentally, many of the most musically rewarding keyboard duos were also devoted teachers, including the Schnabels, Bauer and others.

The same is true of Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979), the French composer and conductor whose list of distinguished pupils includes the pianists Grant Johannesen, Soulima Stravinsky, Beveridge Webster, Clifford Curzon and Dinu Lipatti. In 1937, with the last-mentioned Romanian musician, she recorded some meltingly lyrical Brahms Waltzes, Op 39, with a joy and

abandon that belied her often sobersided and ascetic character.

Meanwhile, the Gallic team of Robert Casadesus (1899-1972) and his wife Gaby Casadesus (1901-1999) left behind liltily affectionate recordings of Fauré, Debussy and others. I well recall visiting Gaby Casadesus in her Paris apartment on the rue Vaneau in the 1990s, when as a nonagenarian she looked like an only slightly fatigued 70-year-old, still bursting with energy and enthusiasm about learning new repertoire. A student of the Paris Conservatoire pedagogue Louis Diémer, who died in 1919, Gaby Casadesus was an embodiment of the life-giving force that may be derived from, and exuded in, piano partnerships.

Another such example from France was Geneviève Joy (1919-2009), who formed a duo with Jacqueline Robin (1917-2007). Joy created goodwill for herself and her husband, the composer Henri Dutilleux, by performing works by other contemporary composers, even those who publicly derided Dutilleux's works.

From 1945 to 1990, the Joy-Robin duo played and recorded fluidly seductive yet sober renditions of French music. Also a devoted teacher, Robin was a leading instructor in sight reading at the Paris Conservatoire for two decades, where her preferred method of instruction was to arrange her pupils into impromptu duos, having them share a piano bench or sit opposite one another at two keyboards to patiently work through compositions. This method underlines the implicit didactic aspect of the exploratory workshop in duo playing; guidance is an essential part of the shared experience. If Virgil and Dante were to be reincarnated as musicians, they might appear as a four-hand piano team. In 1970, to celebrate the Joy-Robin duo's 25th anniversary, 10 composers wrote works dedicated to them, a venture that would well bear repeating today.

Other educator-duettists of note include two Cleveland-based pianists, Arthur Loesser (1894-1969) and Beryl Rubinstein (1898-1952), who flourished as a team in the 1930s and 1940s. Among the works magisterially recorded by the Loesser-Rubinstein duo were Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion and Rubinstein's own Suite for Two Pianos, written in 1939. Around the same time, the noted Russian instructor Alexander Goldenweiser (1875-1961) and his star pupil Grigory Ginzburg (1904-1961) also made many forthright, energetic recordings, most notably unsentimentalised versions of Rachmaninov. And the French pedagogue Pierre Barbizet (1922-1990) managed to tame an elsewhere unruly colleague, Samson François (1924-1970), in a persuasive version of Ravel's Mother Goose Suite.

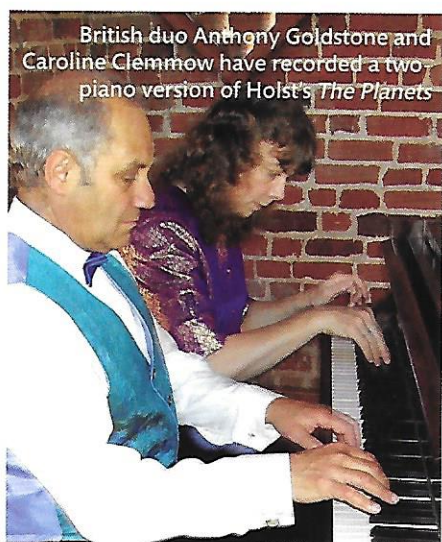
IN SOME CASES, A COMPOSER was part of a duo. With his wife, Ditta Pásztory-Bartók (1903-1982), Béla Bartók premiered his Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion in 1938 in Switzerland and played duo piano concerts throughout Europe. These often included his two-piano arrangements of seven pieces from *Mikrokosmos*, six volumes of progressive pieces with a didactic intent. The Bartóks' recordings of these excerpts have a stunning immediacy and earthy dynamism. After the pianist-composer's tragically premature death in

1945, Pasztory-Bartók returned to Hungary, where she continued to promote her late husband's music in duo recitals with the Hungarian pianist Erzsébet Tusa (born 1928).

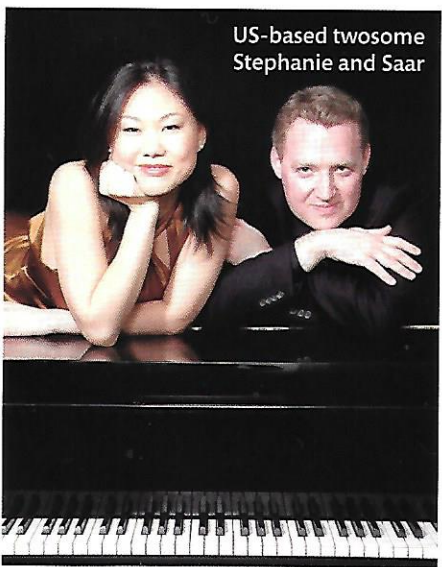
The Polish composer Witold Lutosławski (1913-1994) performed in a piano duo with his fellow composer Andrzej Panufnik, playing in cafes in war-stricken Warsaw as a form of inner liberation, while the Frenchman Francis Poulenc celebrated the dry-as-a-biscuit artistry of his friend Jacques Février (1900-1979) by writing works, including a splashy concerto, for the pair to perform together.

In Britain, piano lovers long enjoyed the penchant for duo pianism of Benjamin Britten, who performed and recorded with the Canadian composer and musicologist Colin McPhee (1900-1964) as well as the

pianists Clifford Curzon and Sviatoslav Richter (Richter would later make more duo recordings with current cover artist Elisabeth Leonskaja, among others). Britten's recordings are exemplary for their emotion and psychological density, reflecting musical thought on the most creative level as well as reflecting his unsurpassed understanding of the chamber music idiom. As a composer exploring new sound worlds – McPhee wrote works inspired by the gamelan music of Bali – Britten also influenced Murray Perahia, who worked with him in the 1970s. Around the same time, Perahia made some sublime recordings of duos by Mozart and Schubert with Radu Lupu, a pianist with whom Perahia has reportedly lost touch in recent years, for reasons unreported.



British duo Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Clemmow have recorded a two-piano version of Holst's *The Planets*



US-based twosome Stephanie and Saar

USING THE TRADITIONAL piano duo as a launching pad for sonic innovations was the strategy of another composer-duo pianist, the Hungarian György Kurtág (born 1926), and his wife, Márta Kurtág (born 1927). Márta Kurtág is an admirable pianist, as the 2010 release of her recording of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* on BMC, taped a decade before, demonstrates. In concerts stressing domesticity, sometimes using an upright piano rather than a traditional concert grand and not sparing the practice pedal, the Kurtágs have toured the world, playing Bach transcriptions and Kurtág's *Játékok*, a compilation of works for piano (two and four hands) that Kurtág has been working on for three decades. As recorded by Kurtág and Márta on ECM, *Játékok* ('Games') conjures up a world of Central European domestic music-making. The excerpt *Schläge Zank* expresses a conversational spat, evoking the distracted nagging that is to be expected in any long-term partnership. In other pieces, Kurtág stands over his wife in uxorious yet highly attentive watchfulness as she plays a solo work. As their positions change, the watchfulness turns into that of an attentive wife surveying her husband's pianistic doings. This uncanny, emblematic work, representative of centuries of duo pianism, has been described by Kurtág as 'suggested by the child who forgets himself while he plays; the child for whom the instrument is

still a toy.' He deliberately eschews any formal didactic intent, thus dissociating the work from Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*. In a preface to the 1979 edition of *Játékok*, Kurtág alludes to evoking the primary motives for performance: 'Pleasure in playing, the free movement – daring and if need be, the movement over the entire keyboard, right from the first lessons instead of the clumsy groping for keys and the counting of rhythms – all these rather vague ideas lay at the outset of the creation of this collection. Playing – is just playing. It requires a great deal of freedom and initiative from the performer [...] Let us tackle bravely even the most difficult task without being afraid of making mistakes: we should try to create valid proportions, unity and continuity out of the long and short values – just for our own pleasure!'

A sign of the potential pain, as well as pleasure, in husband-and-wife duo piano teams came in 1994 with the double suicide of Patrick Crommelynck and his Japanese-born wife Taeko Kuwata, who had performed together since 1974 as the Duo Crommelynck. After the pair had made dozens of significant recordings, especially focusing on two-piano arrangements of Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' Symphony, Dvořák's 'New World' Symphony and Smetana's *Má vlast*, Crommelynck hanged himself following a domestic crisis and was followed in suicidal symmetry by his wife, who did the same after discovering his lifeless body.

Fortunately, this tragedy was not indicative of the overall destiny of duo pianists, as today's many thriving piano duos show. The prolific British duo of Anthony Goldstone and Caroline Clemmow have recorded a multitude of rare works, such as a two-piano version of Gustav Holst's orchestral hit *The Planets*. Looking at the current landscape of duo piano teams, one can easily err by omission, just as space limits prevent mention of many worthy teams of yore. Now that concerts and recordings abound from such stellar ensembles as the US-based Stephanie and Saar, Marc-André Hamelin and Emanuel Ax and the promising Dutch brothers Lucas Jussen and Arthur Jussen, a vibrant future for piano duo partnerships is a certainty. 🎹