

PERSONAL TOUCH

British pianist *Alexander Soares* combines a busy and varied performance schedule with research into the memorisation of music, with a particular focus on contemporary repertoire. He introduces his debut album, featuring solo works by Boulez, Dutilleux and Messiaen

THE SENSATION OF PLAYING A challenging work from memory is an exhilarating and cathartic experience. I have always enjoyed the feeling of liberation onstage that playing from memory brings, expressing exactly what you want while focusing completely on the sound being created at the instrument. There is a similar fascination from the audience's perspective: one of the most frequent questions I am asked is how I remember all the notes!

It is curious that the process of memorisation is seldom discussed. Like many pianists, I relied during my formative years on a combination of repetitive practice to develop muscle memory, along with an awareness of the music's underlying harmonic patterns and progressions. These techniques did not free me from the inevitable nerves before a concert, but on the whole this proved to be a successful technique.

It was my first experience with 20th-century repertoire that really challenged my way of working. I recall learning Boulez's *Notations* in my late teens and wondering if there was any way to remember the vast number of runs that go up and down the keyboard, seemingly without any order (in fact this music has an extremely tight structure). This desire to understand memory would later become a long-standing preoccupation of my performance and research career.

Alexander Soares: 'I have always been attracted to the freedom that is possible when performing from memory'



To explore this process, I was particularly attracted to the repertoire featured on my debut album, *Notations & Sketches*. The blazing intensity of Boulez's works, the sensuous timbres of Dutilleux's piano writing, and the subliminal ecstasy of Messiaen's music provide huge challenges in terms of both performance and memorisation.

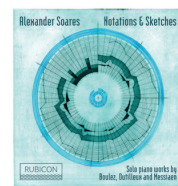
In reality there is no singular method to memorise this type of repertoire, but a variety of techniques that are often combined. Looking at the basic building blocks – the intervals between notes – is my primary technique for discovering patterns. Then follows an awareness and a recognition of the physical hand shapes required. Fingering too plays a vital component in my memorisation process, particularly if some connection can be found between the hands. The visual pattern of the keyboard itself also becomes a tool, as do verbal associations to remember the starting notes of a particular section. Perhaps the best way to summarise

the process is to say that memorisation becomes a form of analysis, but in this case not looking at the musical structure, but examining the habits of the composer and using these to deduce any form of memory cue to grasp in performance.

Of course the decision to memorise is an extremely personal choice, and many of the conventions and attitudes surrounding the requirement to memorise are relaxing. There is sometimes the erroneous notion that memorisation is merely learning how to remember the notes. Instead, I think it is inextricably linked to learning the music itself, and it becomes particularly important in music where the language and gesture are far removed from what we are used to.

I have always been attracted to the freedom that is possible when performing from memory, and nowhere was this more evident than during the recording sessions for the album. The soundworlds created by the three composers, evoking galactic, infinite spaces through their astonishing

resonances, blinding in the intensity of their timbres, were enhanced in the wonderful acoustic of the recording venue: Milton Court Concert Hall at London's Guildhall School of Music & Drama. I only felt able to fully explore and capture the myriad possibilities of this music with the complete liberation and comfort enabled by memorisation. 🎵



Notations & Sketches by Alexander Soares is now available from Rubicon Classics label (RCD1016). The album was supported by City Music

Foundation and includes the second recording ever made of La fauvette passerinette (*The Subalpine Warbler*), a missing Messiaen score discovered by Peter Hill in 2012 and published by Faber Music.

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