



Exploring lost horizons at the Palazzetto Bru Zane in Venice

# THE AGE OF DISCOVERY

*Robert Turnbull* assesses the growing contribution to the piano repertoire that has resulted from painstaking research by the Bru Zane Foundation, champion of forgotten but rewarding avenues of French music from the 19th and early 20th century

**T**HE PALAZZETTO BRU Zane fronts a small canal in Venice, a stone's throw away from the great Basilica dei Frari. Built by the aristocratic Zane family between 1695 and 1697 as a pleasure palace on land belonging to Habsburg royalty, it was deliberately situated in a quiet area of the city so as not to attract too much attention.

The palazzo was, after all, a place of entertainment, and presumably of hedonism. One imagines revellers dancing under swaying candelabras. Perhaps even Casanova himself cavorted in the upper galleries under the magnificent frescoes by Sebastiano Ricci.

That's a very distant fantasy. In 2007 the place was bought by the Bru family, based in Paris and heirs to a large pharmaceutical

fortune, who set about converting the galleried ballroom into a concert venue. Today, centuries of tobacco smoke have been removed from its walls to reveal a covered ceiling bearing a fresco of Hercules with Fame and Virtue. There's a perfectly restored 1905 Erard piano in an antechamber.

The music-making, too, is more refined. In 2009 the Palazzetto became ►





Alexandre Dratwicky: 'The Romantic generation of Liszt and Paganini could not really have happened were it not for those composers who anticipated the new keyboard skills'

the headquarters of the Bru Zane Foundation, an organisation dedicated to the rediscovery of French music, much of it penned by obscure French composers living between 1780 and 1920. An endowment given by Nicole Bru, a medical researcher (who created the Group UPSA laboratories) offsets an annual budget of over €3m.

IT'S YET ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF France being foremost among European nations in promoting its own culture. One struggles to imagine the British doing anything similar for Charles Villiers Stanford or Hubert Parry! Yet in the French case the neglect is very real. You may have heard Charles-Valentin Alkan or Cécile Chaminade, but what about Mel Bonis or Marie Jaëll, both talented women composers and exceptional pianists? That might change. Given the foundation's global reach and resources there's a good chance that all four will be coming to a concert hall near you.

Every year the Bru Zane Foundation drags at least one composer out of obscurity with a celebration they could barely have imagined during the lifetime. It usually begins with a solo or chamber

music concert in the Palazzetto but then gathers pace internationally with much larger events, often in the form of opera productions, in places such as the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris or Opéra de Lyon.

Opera is a major focus for the foundation, reflecting decades of an obsession which the French call 'La Grande Boutique'. During the Ancien Régime, the Académie Française's dominance was such that few opera composers dared to tamper with its rules or advance significantly on the Baroque opera style epitomised by Charpentier and Rameau. In the period immediately following the Revolution, they had a lot of catching up to do – and did so spectacularly. Gluck was clearly a major influence on classical stalwarts such as Méhul and Gossec, who were then followed by early romantics such as Hérold and Boieldieu, not to mention Cherubini and his *Sturm und Drang* masterpiece *Médée*.

Success at the Opéra was more than de rigueur: without it you remained essentially a nonentity. The French public's demands on opera composers were notorious and the bane of the many whose misfortune it was to try to please them. Verdi and Wagner were driven mad in the

process. Auber and Meyerbeer perfected the formula, but in doing so proved to be hard acts to follow.

SO MUCH FOR OPERA – WHAT OF the piano? One could easily be forgiven for thinking French piano music didn't really exist in the early part of the 19th century, presumably as a result of the craze for opera. Were there ever any French composer remotely comparable to Haydn or Mozart? Even the famous Ignaz Pleyel managed only five pleasant-enough piano sonatas among a handful of occasional pieces.

This perception is completely wrong, according to Alexandre Dratwicky, the musicologist who is currently *directeur scientifique* of the Bru Zane Foundation. A musicologist who worked for Radio France as well as the Opéra Comique, Dratwicky insists that the period between 1790 and 1830 in France produced a steady stream of great music. If nobody knows about it, he says, it's largely because little of it was published.

Dratwicky trots out names such as Hélène de Montgeroult, Hyacinthe Jadin and Jean-Louis Adam as important composers of 'large-scale sonatas, preludes, studies and



variations; and for piano concertos, his examples are Jadin, Hérold, Dussek and Viotti. Jadin died at the early age of 24 and wrote almost exclusively for piano. Dratwicki considers her F-sharp minor sonata to be a masterpiece of melodic power, demonstrating a prodigious sense of invention – and he is right.

There is also the fascinating case of Héléne de Montgeroult. A brilliant pianist and pupil of Dussek and Clementi, she was regarded as possibly the greatest French virtuoso of her time, a position which could have guaranteed her a prestigious career, had her aristocratic background not forced her to remain within the narrow confines of the Paris salons.

When *la Terreur* did finally catch up with her, Montgeroult saved her own head from the guillotine by improvising at the piano on the theme of La Marseillaise before the Revolutionary Tribunal. We should all be thankful that Héléne played so well under pressure. Her later music, especially works like the *Étude* Op101, are superbly realised, without a trace of superficiality.

It was of course the emergence of the next generation, of virtuosi like Alkan, and the rise of the salon and its new superstars that dictated the next phase of French pianism, catalysed by the extraordinary mechanical innovations of Érard, Pleyel and other piano manufacturers. It was then, according to Dratwicki, that composers began to respond to extraordinary new possibilities in colour and articulation. It was the beginning of virtuosity, in the modern sense. 'The Romantic generation of Liszt and Paganini could not really have happened were it not for those composers who anticipated the new keyboard skills', he says confidently. In Paris he cites Rode, Kreutzer and Baillot for the violin, with Adam and Montgeroult rapidly finding 'new ways of writing for the piano'.

By the time of Liszt, Chopin and especially Alkan, there was an *embarras de richesse* in style and content, deriving in part – and perhaps ironically – from opera. In the mid 19th-century opera's popular arias formed the hit parade of the day and fuelled the narcissism of the salon. The pot-

pourris demanded of pianist-composers such as Thalberg and Liszt became among the most difficult pieces in the repertoire.

IT'S UNLIKELY THAT BRU ZANE will do much to celebrate Debussy this year but has begun to show an interest in a few of his contemporaries. Charles Koechlin became the chosen composer in 2016. A much-loved and venerated figure who as a socialist and humanitarian worked hard to champion other composers' music as opposed to his own, Koechlin's fascinatingly eclectic piano music has been seriously neglected.

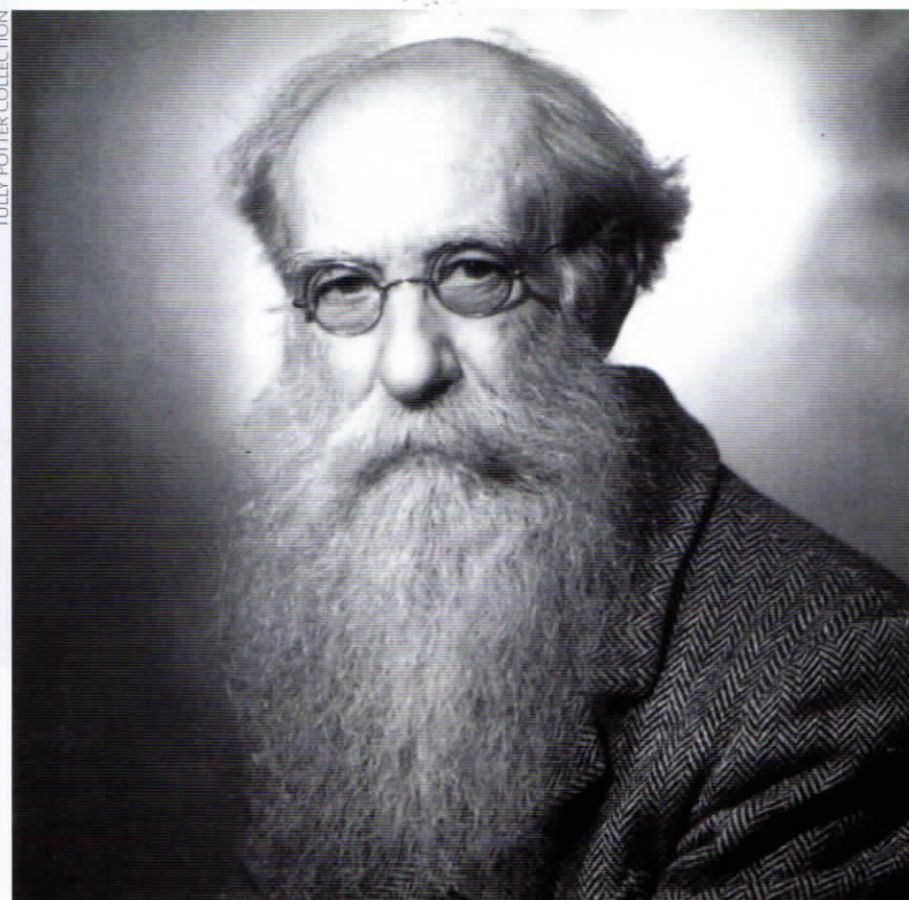
Last year the foundation chose a composer who wasn't actually Francophone at all: Antoine Reicha became a naturalised Frenchman in his middle years and acquired some fame as a professor at the rich but Byzantine Paris Conservatoire. There he imported Viennese classicism to Restoration Paris, while teaching, among other luminaries, Liszt and Berlioz.

A friend of Beethoven in his youth, Reicha didn't see himself as a genius and published little of his vast output; which is why it was left to the Bru Zane's team of researchers to scour the archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale to find the manuscripts. It is this sort of research that has made the Bru Zane Foundation invaluable to the musical world today. When it comes to French composers, there is no reason to think there isn't an inexhaustible supply: bring them on!

After all, the musical public needs new input, and not only in France. How many more recordings of the *Hammerklavier* do we need when clearly there are large numbers of composers whose unpublished scores are still gathering dust in Europe's libraries? Even if they may never be recorded, these pieces represent new blood for the concert halls and potentially greater audiences. After all, there is nothing more exciting than the discovery of a new composer. ♪

[www.bru-zane.com/en](http://www.bru-zane.com/en)

Seriously neglected: Charles Koechlin wrote dozens of fascinatingly eclectic works for piano



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