

# The multitasking pianist

Pianist Roberto Prosseda tells *Eric Schoones* how the Gounod Concerto for Pedal Piano ignited his interest in the instrument, which caused a furore in the 19th century when one female musician played it wearing a knee-length skirt

WHILE UNDERTAKING SOME research on Mendelssohn, one of his favourite composers, pianist Roberto Prosseda came across the Gounod Concerto for Pedal Piano, which had been neither performed nor published for decades. The work inspired him to study the instrument, a piano with a pedal keyboard that is usually connected to a second set of hammers and strings. As the music critic Norman Lebrecht has written: 'It's a piano that thinks, deep down, it's an organ.' The instrument dates back around 550 years and shares its history with ancestors including the pedal clavichord and the pedal harpsichord.

Many well known composers used the pedal keyboard: JS Bach owned a pedal

harpsichord and Mozart had a fortepiano with independent pedals, built for him in 1785 by Anton Walter, which he used for the premiere of the Concerto in D minor, K 466.

The pedal piano enjoyed its greatest popularity in the 19th century. In France, Erard and Pleyel both produced several models. Liszt and Chopin knew the instrument and Alkan played a 'piano à pédalier' in the salons and composed more than three hours of music for the instrument. His Erard pedal piano, made in 1853, is now in the Musée de la Musique in Paris. Schumann was also a great advocate. He had a pedalfügel made for him by Louis Schone in Dresden in 1843. His Op 56, Op 58 and Op 60, all works inspired by Bach, were written for the pedal piano.

Schumann convinced Mendelssohn to form a class devoted to the pedal piano at the Leipzig Conservatory as he was convinced that the instrument would be the natural successor to the piano. 'Schumann was interested in the inner voice,' says Prosseda. 'For him, the pedal board introduced a voice that came from another place, the voice of a big father who embraced all the other sounds.'

THE GOUNOD CONCERTO that Prosseda uncovered is fresh, colourful and spirited music, highly idiomatic for the instrument. After he had stopped writing opera, Gounod wrote four works for pedal piano and orchestra. 'Gounod is very good at drawing out the dramatic and gestural potential of the pedal piano,' says Prosseda. 'It's a very dialectic relationship between the feet and hands.'

Gounod's interest in the instrument was raised by the young pianist Lucie Palicot.

On 6 March 1882, aged 22, she created a minor scandal at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, playing music by Bach, Alkan and Guilman (her organ professor at the Paris Conservatoire) on the pedal piano. To play the pedals, she performed wearing a knee-length skirt, not entirely in accordance with the fashion or morals of the day. Musicologist Paul Landormy, writing of his memories of the day, recalled: 'I remember what a strange impression was produced by the sight of this graceful and dainty person perched on a huge case containing the lower strings of the pedal-board [...] her pretty legs darting most adroitly to reach the different pedals of the keyboard she had at her feet.' Perhaps Palicot was a 19th-century Yuja Wang.

The physical aspect of playing the pedal piano continued to raise some excitement in the ensuing decades. Even fairly recently, pianist Rudolph Ganz (1877-1972) declined to play Alkan's *Bombardo-Carillon*, an odd duet for four feet, with a female pupil of his, because he 'did not know the young lady well enough.'

PROSSEDA IS AN ACCOMPLISHED multitasking pianist. With a full touring schedule and lots of new repertoire to learn – six or seven hours at the piano every day remain essential – he still finds time for a dazzling list of other projects. Prosseda, who holds a PhD in Italian literature, has produced documentaries, published a listening guide to the piano repertoire with Edizioni Curci in Milan, contributes articles on classical and contemporary music to several music journals and is also a frequent host on Italian national radio: 'I do everything better when I combine many different things,' he says. 'As my teacher Charles Rosen once said: "I

