

MIKKEL POLL



NATIONALITY Estonian

AGE 21

TRAINING

- ▶ Helve Kuuskmann, Nõmme Music School, Estonia
- ▶ Ivari Ilja and Maigi Pakri, Tallinn Music High School
- ▶ Ivari Ilja, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Tallinn

COMPETITIONS

- ▶ 2004 Rina Sala Gallo International Piano Competition (first prize)
- ▶ 2004 'Con Brio' Competition for Classical Music Interpreters (first prize)
- ▶ 2004 Tallinn International Piano Competition (first prize)
- ▶ 2006 XX Ferrol International Piano Competition (first prize)

PERFORMANCE HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Liszt Second Piano Concerto with Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, April 2007
- ▶ Solo recitals in Estonian Concert Hall, Tallinn in 2005 and 2006; La Coruna, Spain, Brussels and Eu, France in 2007
- ▶ Represented Estonia at the classical music Eurovision for Young Musicians, Berlin, 2002

UPCOMING PERFORMANCES

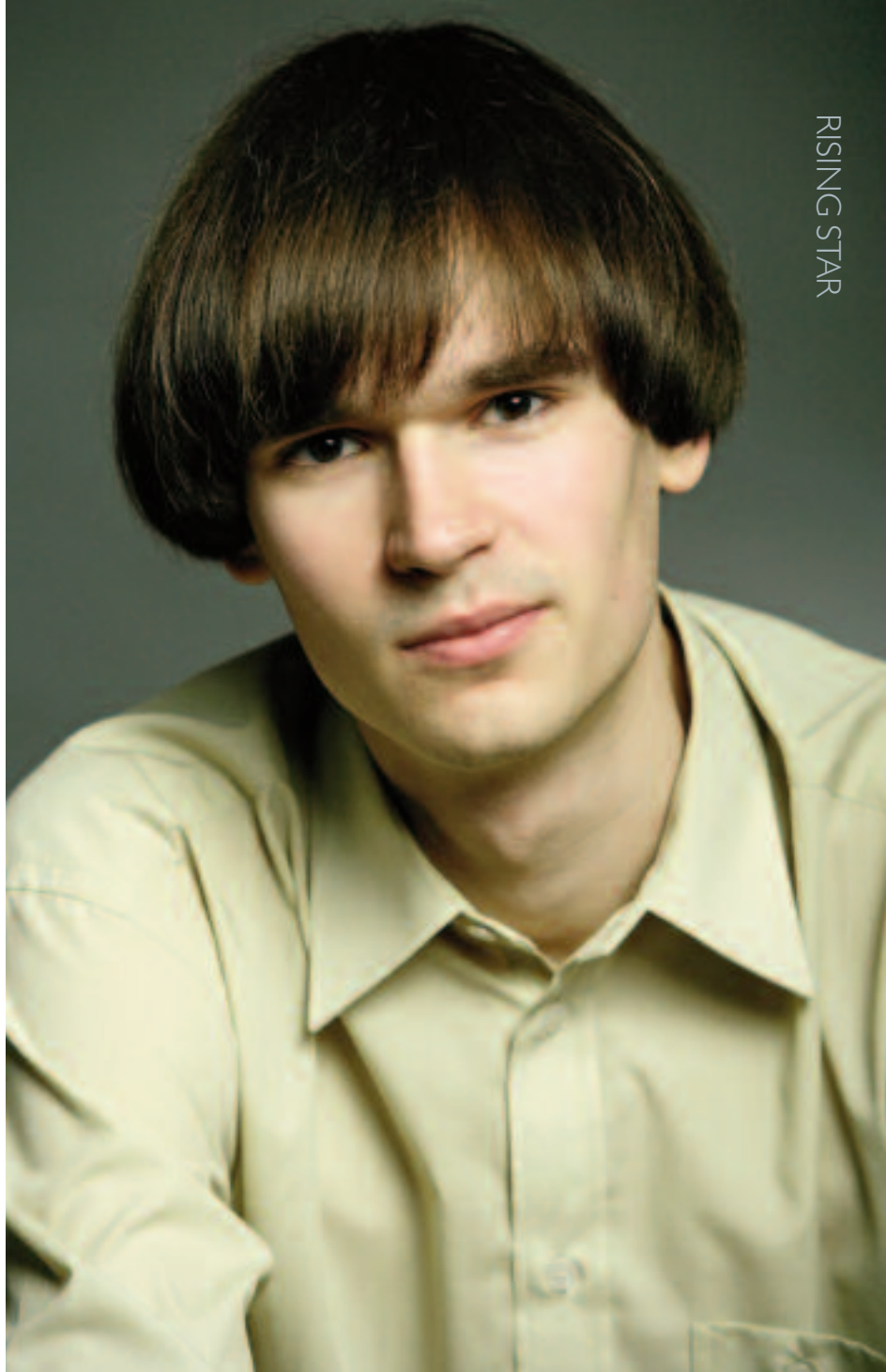
- ▶ Tchaikovsky First Piano Concerto with Vanemuise Symphony Orchestra in Tartu, 14 September 2007
- ▶ Ligeti Piano Concerto with Nyyd Ensemble in Tallinn, 16 October 2007
- ▶ Schumann Piano Concerto with Symphony Orchestra of Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in Estonian Concert Hall in Tallinn, 1 December 2007
- ▶ Chamber recital with Mari Poll in Tallinn, 6 May 2008

The young Estonian pianist tells **Maggie Hamilton** why performing contemporary music is so important, and how his nationality has shaped his musical outlook

Music has surrounded me since I was very young. All my family are musicians, from my grandfather downwards: my mother is a singer, choir conductor and composer; my father is a pianist; and my sister is a violinist. When I was young I somehow knew that I wanted to be a pianist – I don't remember ever having doubts about it. My childhood teacher was very encouraging, then at Tallinn Music High School I received specialist music training as well as general academic studies. I'm now studying at the Estonian Academy of Music with Ivari Ilja, probably my greatest influence. He's an exceptional pianist, artist and teacher – someone who brings all his experience into his teaching. He has had a huge impact on me.

'I play a wide spectrum of piano music but lean towards Romantic and contemporary repertoire. I think it's important to play the music written in our time. A couple of hundred years ago this was the norm, and it's important not to lose this tradition. So in addition to Liszt and Beethoven my repertoire includes Eduard Tubin's Second Sonata [see article next issue], the Études of Ligeti, Shostakovich's First Sonata and Prokofiev's Sixth. I also play Ligeti's Piano Concerto, which is quite a challenge. It's not a traditional concerto, in that the piano is not always the soloist but in many places is like part of the orchestra, and the texture is very difficult. Ligeti had his own style of writing, based to a large degree on rhythms and polyrhythms. You have to keep together with the orchestra even if at times piano and orchestra seem to be playing different pieces, and to achieve this you have to know the orchestral part as well as your own. Modern music is often more about ideas and concepts than the composer's country of origin, and with Ligeti it's rhythm – his piano writing is at times extremely percussive.

'I'd like to play the Fifth Sonata of Alexander Mosolov, who was a Russian contemporary of Shostakovich. It's rarely played, and yet it's very evocative music, intense and sombre, even more so than early Shostakovich. Mosolov wrote the piece in 1925 and it reflects the awful situation in Russia



at that time. There are very dark moods in the music, and some folksong melodies are presented in such a way that they sound like a lament. The first movement is very Expressionistic, reminiscent of Skryabin; the second is slow and static; the third very fast with complex piano writing and shades of the constructivist movement, reminiscent of factory machines – similar to his earlier pieces *Zavod* and *The Foundry*. The final movement is slow and depressive, reprising the folksong of the first movement. Like Shostokovich, Mosolov had trouble with the Soviet authorities. He was imprisoned not long after he wrote this Sonata. I'm too young to remember much of the Soviet Occupation, but the location of Estonia and the history of Russian involvement here gives me an insight into the psyche of Russian 20th-century composers. I think people who lived through the Occupation have a deeper understanding of Russian music, in particular of Prokofiev and Shostakovich. In those days it was mainly Soviet artists who came here, performing a lot of Russian music, and there are still some issues with Russians here – it's not completely resolved.

'After Estonia became independent we could go abroad freely, and I've played in Italy and Spain, Portugal, Russia, Latvia and the Czech Republic. Travel is important. If you stay in one country your outlook is too small, but travelling allows you to see other places, hear other people play and communicate with musicians from other countries.

Experiencing different cultural environments is important to understanding the context of the music you play. Estonian piano music, for example, is much harder to interpret if you're not Estonian. Take the Ballade by Tubin: it's based on a deeply national song by another Estonian, Mart Saar, with the text taken from the national epic, *Kalevipoeg* (Kalev's Son). If you feel the history of the nation and have been a part of it, you feel the music differently: you're more open to it and understand it, not just in your mind but in your heart.

'My sister [violinist Mari Poll] and I are giving a recital in April 2008 at the Estonian Concert Hall. It's important to play chamber music as well as solo, and for your chamber playing to be as expressive and creative as a solo recital. You also need to understand each other's playing and know what you want to do with the music, yet still have a spontaneous response on the stage. It's a fine balance, and the better you know your ensemble players and the more you play together, the easier it is to anticipate what they will do. Over time you develop an instinct, and of course other people's thoughts on the interpretation of a piece can help your own understanding. As a performer it's also good to listen to different recorded interpretations. Tastes change, and it's important to hear as much as you can and pick out what you do and don't like. However, recordings can never replace live concerts, which bring dimensions that a recording can't. There is an energy between the stage and the public which you can't get in the studio. If you feel the audience is supportive and that they're listening, this gives you strength and you can create things spontaneously. Only in live concerts, if the audience is quiet and attentive, do you get the sense that a needle dropped would be like an explosion!' 🎹

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