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The end of the Piers show

by [Clive Paget](#) on July 14, 2017 (July 14, 2017) filed under [Classical Music](#) | [Chamber](#) | [Comment Now](#)

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As Piers Lane prepares to pass the baton at this year's AFCM, we look at the life and career of a great Australian pianist.

It is 11:15 at night by the time Piers Lane picks up the phone at his home in Putney, half-an-hour outside of central London. Apologising profusely for being a mere 15 minutes late, he explains that he's been adjudicating at the Royal College of Music since 10am with only 15 spare minutes to grab a sandwich. "That's 12 hours of listening to Schumann," he remarks wryly. "It's enough to send *me* to the looney bin just like him."

Lane is one of Australia's most successful exports, equally respected as a musician and a raconteur, and any fears he might be all Schumann-ed out are rapidly dispelled as he chatters away nine to the dozen. When pressed, he will admit to being a workaholic, even to being somewhat driven. "I like to work hard," he says. "I feel like I'm not using life properly if I'm not busy."

Busy isn't the half of it. A regular presenter for BBC Radio 3, Lane is President of the European Piano Teachers' Association, Patron of the Australasian Piano Pedagogy Conference, the Tait Memorial Trust in London, the Youth Music Foundation of Australia and the Music Teachers' Association and Accompanists' Guild in Queensland, not to mention Vice-President of Putney Music Club. For the last two years he has been Artistic Director of the Sydney International Piano Competition of Australia, a role he has managed while running the Australian Festival of Chamber Music in Townsville. That job he picked up in 2007 and he will finally relinquish it this year when he passes the baton to good colleague and fellow pianist Kathryn Stott.





Piers Lane plays Chopin by candlelight at Government House, WA.

Despite regular appearances at festivals worldwide, the Townsville connection remains one of the most personal for Lane, whose mother Enid Hitchcock was born there. “She grew up in Innisfail and, as was the case with so many Australians, it was a nun who was responsible for developing her talent,” he tells me. “She went to London at the age of 23 not knowing what would happen, but a cousin of Arthur Benjamin who she met on the boat gave her an introduction to [American pianist] Lamar Crowson who prepared her to audition for the Royal College of Music. It was on the day of the audition that she met this tall young Englishman, and he was my father.”

British pianist and educator Alan Lane went on to marry Enid Hitchcock, and after she won the Royal College’s Mozart Prize the couple moved south west to Putney where Enid landed a job teaching piano at Putney Girls’ High School. “I was gestated there,” Lane jokes, “and I’ve lived in Putney on and off since I came to England in 1979. I’ve been in my present street since 1983.”

Lane describes his subsequent move to Brisbane as “a very mature decision made at the age of five months”. His mother was returning home for the first time in six years, and William Lovelock, the first director of Queensland’s new Conservatorium was delighted to have a young Englishman present himself at his door. Alan Lane was snapped up to lecture in harmony and counterpoint – Brett Dean still credits him as his only ever composition teacher. “He was a very popular, wonderful lecturer,” says Lane. “He could make people understand things like no other person I’ve come across. I still meet people all around Australia who remember his lectures.”



Piers Lane. Photo © Keith Saunders

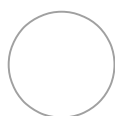
Being sensible parents, Lane’s mother considered seven plenty early to start young Piers on the piano. “Before that I used to love sitting underneath the dining room table listening to dad teach students. I think I learned a lot without even thinking about it,” Lane explains.

A quick student even then, Lane was in grade eight when he made his broadcast debut on the ABC’s Young Australia programme accompanying his Kelvingrove High School choir. “I was offered a solo gig when I was 12 and I played my first concerto with orchestra [the Mozart A Major, No 23] with Richard Mills, who was conducting for the first time I believe, up in Innisfail at the opera festival that John Curro ran every December.”

Festival that John Gatto ran every December.

After his mother, Lane's first teacher was Nancy Weir, a Schnabel pupil who encouraged her eager young pupil to be playful with colour, sound and rubato, and whose remarkable life would merit an entire feature of its own. Guided by Weir, Lovelock and his parents, young Piers' mind was allowed to expand naturally into whatever curious corners might take its fancy. Alan Lane introduced his son to the music of Ireland and Bliss, while Lovelock kindled a fondness for the salon pieces with which Piers still charms audiences today.

"One of the great advantages I had growing up in Brisbane was that nothing was out of bounds," Lane explains. "There was no particular school of piano playing as you had in Russia or France. There were no constraints on what I might find in my parent's cupboard. When I was nine, I found the Grieg Piano Concerto and loved it. When I was 17, I remember going to Nancy and saying 'I've found a piece by Liszt that I think is rather good', and she said, 'what's that?' I said 'Oh, it's a sonata in B Minor,' and she didn't bat an eyelid. 'Yes,' she said, 'it is rather a good piece.' I learned it in ten days and played it at concert practice at the Con, having no idea that it was the peak of the Romantic piano repertory. I just didn't realise how difficult it was meant to be."



Piano Concerto No.24 in C minor, K.491: 1. Allegro
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Piers Lane, Queensland Symphony Orchestra, Johannes Fritzsich

0:00

Garnering an early reputation for fearlessness, and blessed with a 'big' technique, it may come as no surprise that the first great pianist the 11-year-old Lane recalls hearing live was John Ogdon. "The second half was the *Hammerklavier*," he recalls. "It was a monumental piece, and he was a pretty monumentally sized guy too. In his thick English tails he was sweating away like anything, but making this glorious sound. He played the second Chopin study from Opus 25 with a feathery lightness straight afterwards. That stuck with me. It really revealed what was possible."

At 18, he travelled to Budapest for a competition where he met one of his heroes, Annie Fischer, who invited the 18-year-old Lane to to her house. "She gave me a ticket to my first opera, which was *Siegfried* amazingly enough, and I went along to the opera house thinking I might be down in the stalls somewhere. They sent me off in Hungarian. Turned out I was sitting in the second best box next to the royal one, which was only used by Communist Party heads in those days. That was heady stuff for an 18-year-old from Brisbane."

Lane won a special prize in Budapest, where an author on Bartók even compared his playing to that of the composer himself – "they were amazed that a young Australian would have that feeling for Bartók," he explains. The following year saw Lane awarded the prize for Best Australian Pianist at the very first Sydney International Piano Competition, a win that led to a string of important ABC concerto dates across Australia.

It was a Churchill Fellowship that enabled the young Australian to travel abroad, first to Seattle for eight months study with the Hungarian Béla Siki – "incisive, intelligent and understated with a crystalline sound" – and then to the Royal College of Music in London where his mother's old teacher, Kendall Taylor, didn't quite fit the bill. "He came from a very serious tradition and by that stage of his life was a very serious guy," explains Lane. "I found it hard to take the sort of discipline that he wanted to imbue me with, so I shifted part way through my time to Yonty Solomon, a wonderful South African pianist who had been a jazz prodigy as a child and had a phenomenally comprehensive repertoire." Liberating in so many ways. Lane still feels the loss of a teacher who died prematurely of a brain tumour aged 70.





Piers Lane in Townsville. Photo © Andrew Rankin

A handy British passport courtesy of his parents was the clincher when it came to the decision faced by so many young Australian musicians at that critical stage in their careers. “Growing up in Australia, England was called the mother country, but it certainly didn’t feel too maternal when I arrived,” he tells me somewhat ruefully. “I had problem after problem, but after two years you never want to leave somehow. London gets under your skin. You complain about it most days of your life but there’s so much to offer. There is still a feeling that London is the centre of the world for music.”

Fortunately for music lovers in Australia, those early successes had built Piers Lane an audience at home, one that he has always felt important to keep and to grow. “I adore Australia and I still call myself an Australian pianist always,” he says. “I’ve lived in London for 38 years, but I’ve always called Australia home.”

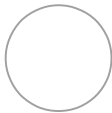
Two qualities inherent right from the start were a recognised natural technique and an insatiable curiosity for the repertoire. It was the combination of these, for example, that made Piers Lane a natural fit for the pioneering Hyperion label, kicking off their Romantic Piano Concertos series in 1991 with challenging works by Paderewski and Mozskowski. “I’m a quick learner, so people have always asked me to learn things that they wanted played,” he explains. “It’s a dangerous reputation to get too early on, because people, as we all know, love to put each other in boxes. I did so much rare repertoire that sometimes managers thought it was all I was about. But having a technical ease certainly stood me in good stead for a lot of things.”

In the early days – with Siki in Seattle and then in London – Lane actively sought a big, sonorous sound through exercises and Chopin studies, practising scales pianissimo with a metronome, sometimes with consecutive fingers, in an effort to get absolute

control. "I think there has to be a time in one's playing life where one does really discipline one's technique," he admits. Nowadays, Lane's secret to keeping in shape is simply by playing a lot. "I've always done a lot of work away from the piano, just mentally," he says. "Going on walks, I often finger passages in my head – it's very useful if you can do that."

Five times a soloist at the BBC Proms, his concerto repertoire, he believes, currently stands at a remarkable 102 works while his discography runs to almost as many recordings. His greatest challenge, he tells me, has been twice tackling the titanic, five-movement Busoni Piano Concerto, an 80-minute marathon that comes complete with male chorus! "It just misses out on being a masterpiece," he admits. "But it's dazzlingly difficult. I played it in Brisbane and I did it at Carnegie Hall where it was sold out and I got a standing ovation. That was probably the most thrilling concert I've done in the last decade."

Memorable conductors would have to include, early on, Sir Charles Groves and Norman Del Mar. "To be honest, I love Sir Andrew Davis as an accompanist," he enthuses. "He goes with you and gives you all the space you need onstage. There's an Australian I love, and that's Nick Milton. I think he's a marvellous conductor."



Violin Sonata in E-Flat Major, Op. 18, TrV 151: I. Allegro ma non troppo
Richard Strauss, Tasmin Little, Piers Lane

0:00

And then there are the longstanding chamber partnerships with clarinettist Michael Collins, the Goldner String Quartet, and most notably, over 30 years, with British violinist Tasmin Little – "nowadays, in rehearsals, we just notice what the other's doing or wants. Often we don't even have to say where we're going to pick up from. We just start together," he explains.

For all that reputation for embracing 19th-century byways, there have been plenty of first performances across the years with new works by Brett Dean, Colin Matthews, Richard Mills and Carl Vine to name a few. Lane has long been a champion of Malcolm Williamson – whose Fourth Piano Concerto he premiered – having met the maverick Aussie Master of the Queen's music on his first trip to London age 18. "He heard a broadcast of me playing all the Chopin Etudes on the BBC and rang and said lovely, lovely things," Lane recalls. "He wanted me to play his music. He had been told about me by Nancy Weir, but said that he never believed teachers and parents and so he hadn't done anything for me in the first place."

For Williamson's 70th birthday, Lane played the Third Piano Concerto live on BBC Radio 3 with the composer sitting 15 feet behind him. "That was a nerve-racking situation, I can tell you," he says. "He could write a tune though, couldn't he, which is so rare."

Other career defining moments would have to include the first performance in modern times of Parry's late-Romantic Piano Concerto, and what was probably the second performance after Solomon of the Bliss Piano Concerto at the Lincoln Center in New York. He went on to give that particular underrated British masterwork its centenary outing at the BBC Proms.

Although he's coming up to 60, there's certainly no sign of Piers Lane slowing down, especially in the studio. His latest disc of Franck and Szymanowski with Tasmin Little is recently out on Chandos, as is a disc of Borodin with the Goldners. There's a CD of Ferdinand Ries that he's just recorded for Hyperion, as well as Brahms Sonatas with Little in the pipeline and another eclectic collection of bonbons and encores – *Piers Lane Goes to Town, Volume II* – waiting in the wings.

A roll call of Piers Lane's achievements to date can easily sound enough for two careers, but he's always been lucky with stamina, though he admits relaxing can be a problem – "I don't take enough time out," he opines.

He does read every night, mainly fiction, though not exclusively. Lane cheerfully admits to having read everything that Patrick White ever wrote, as well as devouring the quirky novels of the late Canadian master Robertson Davies. "When I was 12, I used to love Georgette Heyer, so as you can see, I have broad tastes," he laughs. "At the moment I'm reading Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*. I also love socialising – I have friends all over the world – and I like food and the odd glass of wine."

By the time we finish up, it's well past midnight in London, but that's not a problem for Lane who readily owns to being a night owl. "I am certainly not a mornings sort at all, never have been," he chuckles. "I did see a thing in *The Times* about 20 years ago saying they had discovered some little pendulum thing in the brain that physiologically determines whether you are a night or a morning person – and I am definitely a night person! That can be a good thing as a musician, but I never like it very much when I have to rehearse at ten in the morning with an orchestra."

Before I wish him sweet dreams, I remind Lane that for all those nocturnal habits he always seems to cope with his famous morning platform talks at the Australian Festival of Chamber Music. "Ah," he replies, "I don't sleep at all in Townsville... but that's a different matter."

Piers Lane's final Australian Festival of Chamber Music takes place in Townsville from July 28 – August 5. He plays Moszkowski with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra on October 14 and Rachmaninov's Third Concerto with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra from October 18 – 20.

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