

Constantly craving

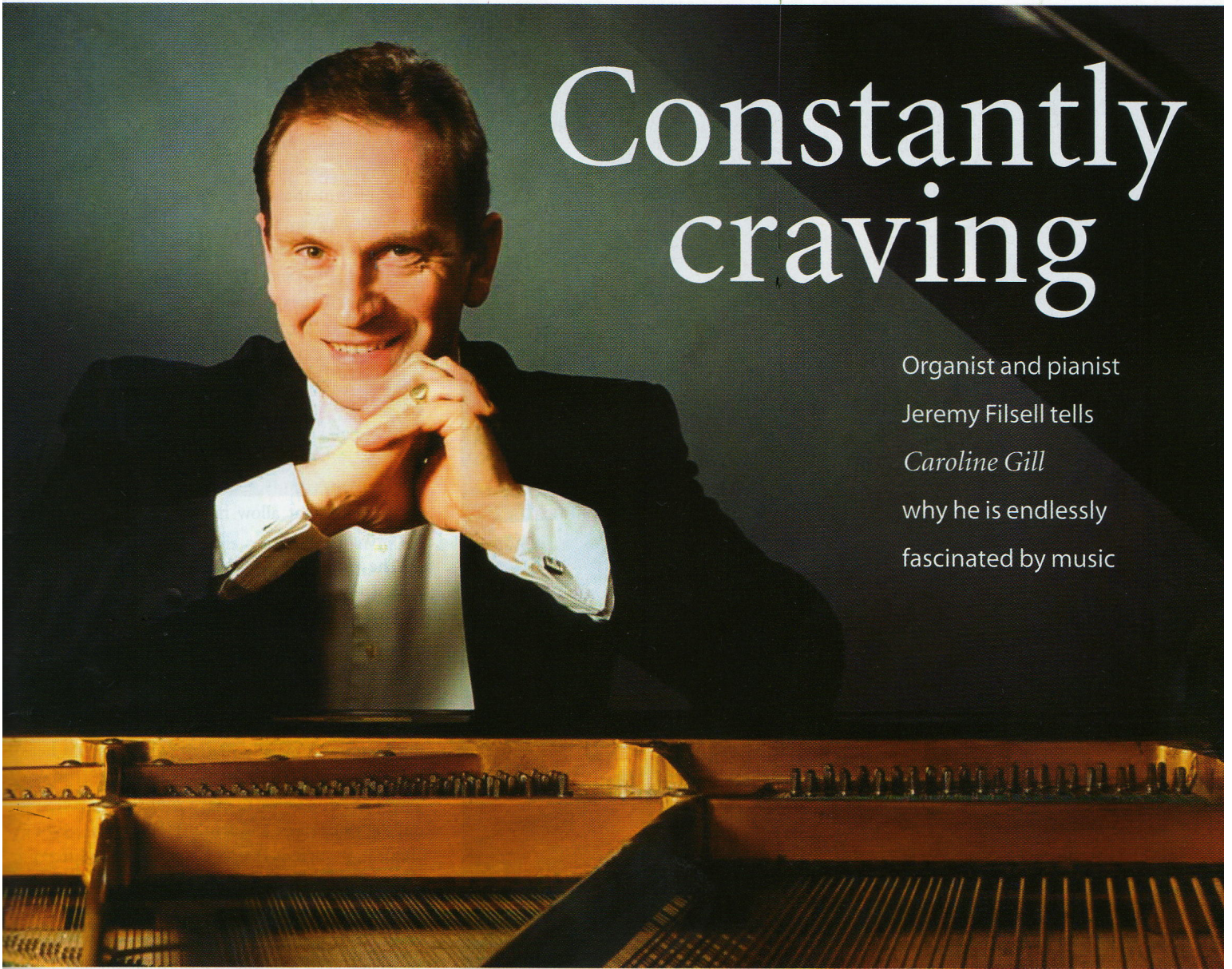
Organist and pianist

Jeremy Filsell tells

Caroline Gill

why he is endlessly

fascinated by music



Concert pianist as much as organist, and lecturer at the Royal Academy of Music and elsewhere, Jeremy Filsell is known for his unusually prolific talent, not least because it is shared between two instruments. What is less well known is that his polymath's ability extends to a residentiary position as a countertenor lay clerk at St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, and to researching a PhD thesis. More unusual, though, is the genuine admiration of his peers for – despite his own protestations to the contrary – a world-class standard in all the aspects of music to which he applies himself.

For one pulled in so many musical directions, he is remarkably calm. His enthusiasm for the music itself leads him to dart from thought to thought, often not finishing sentences; he nevertheless exudes the quiet confidence of the truly skilled. How did he come by his unique variety of portfolio career? He thinks for a moment. 'I would say I'm probably a natural

magpie. I love finding the different connections between musical resources as well as styles and genres. It's from being fascinated by the music. It's with me the whole time. The only way I can express that is through a multitude of media.'

Filsell maintains his roots, though, are in the piano. 'I've always loved the repertoire. My grandfather, who was a pianist and organist on a local level, died just before I was born and left a huge library of Rachmaninoff, all the piano music of Beethoven, Chopin scherzos, all the standard repertoire. And all this was sitting in our back room; so when I started fiddling about with the piano when I was five or six I used to hack through it all – pieces I would think twice about playing in a concert performance now. The *Hammerklavier*, for instance; and I used to sight-read my way through *L'isle joyeuse*, only realising 20 years later what an enormously difficult piece it is, as far as nuance and timbre are concerned.'

above Photo copyright © Robert Carpenter Turner
below enjoying the abbey church
of Saint-Ouen, Rouen, France





'In Dupré's most convoluted and abstruse music I find things, like finding the centre of the maze'

Growing up with the sound of the organ, and experience as a chorister in Coventry, drew Filsell in a progression from piano to organ, starting lessons aged 11 with his choirmaster Peter Johnston. '[Johnston] was doing a PhD at the time and took an organist's job in Coventry, later moving on through university teaching.'

An attraction to the organ was pre-empted by a natural draw to the music of Marcel Dupré, and Filsell says that he stopped dead in his tracks at the end of a service when Johnston played the B major Prelude & Fugue.

'I have no idea why – I probably need a psychoanalyst to work this out – I have this connection with an organist-composer that died when I was

seven. I wasn't of his generation, so why I am so compelled and drawn into his music when there's so much other great music around? Ask anyone on the street about Dupré and they'll say, "One or two great pieces, but the rest is just wrong-note Romanticism." But I can find things in his most convoluted and abstruse music that's like finding the centre of the maze, where some of us would have got halfway through and thought, "Sod this, I'm going for a beer!"

Such is Filsell's continuing attachment to Dupré that his PhD explores the organ music. He is affiliated to Birmingham Conservatoire, in his home county, and his director of studies is Peter Johnston. 'You have to believe this music is worth championing,' he says. 'You can't do anything else.'

Although people regularly comment on the even balance between the piano and organ in Filsell's career, he sees fundamental differences between the instruments that allow him to compartmentalise the two effectively.

'The piano is a much more intimate and all-embracing instrument than the organ: with the piano your touch and approach to the key and what you do physically has a much stronger relationship with what you do musically. The organ is very physical – all those knobs and screws and nuts and bolts. Which is why you get the anorak aura where the tune doesn't really matter as long as you hear the tuba or the bombard. It's the only instrument where you don't have to make your sound: you pull out the right stops and that's it. What's interesting about it, though, is that you can hear two different players play the same instrument and it does sound different. In the finest hands the organ is the most exciting and compelling instrument.

'I know my strength lies in the interpretative aspect of music. It's why I joined the teaching staff at the RAM. I love teaching and feel at home with it and that feeds my interpretation and ideas. I find it hard to start from scratch with nothing in the way, as for instance, a composer does.'

Teaching is creative, though? 'Yes, you have to be creative to be effective. But your inspiration is still from another source.' So is this searching for meaning in the music with which he forges relationships born out of an abject lack of laziness? He laughs, and says, 'Talk to my wife about that!'

'But I do think that intellectual grasp of how a piece works is fundamental to a successful interpretation. You have to diversify: the making of connections between the academic and the practical is so crucial. Why do we admire the Brendels of this world? Because they can articulate things verbally about the music.'

This intellectual relationship with the music, and an engaging combination of confidence, modesty



and musical dedication, is something that Filsell shares with the composer Francis Pott. It is therefore unsurprising that the two should share an enduring friendship[™] and professional alliance. Their latest collaboration is over the recording by the Vasari Singers of Pott's oratorio *The Cloud of Unknowing*, to be released on Signum in October 2007. Filsell played at the premiere at St Pancras New Church in 2006. Although it was originally one of ten 25th-anniversary commissions by the Vasari Singers, what started out as a five-minute piece grew beyond its brief in the light of the London bombings of 7/7 into an 80-minute work for tenor, choir and organ.

'It's an extraordinary work – the most profound writing,' says Filsell. 'And Francis is fantastic at his collation of texts. He doesn't set a poem or biblical narrative: he collates all kinds of things from all kinds of sources spanning centuries. The bee in my bonnet about Francis is this: the voice-leading and technique are absolutely indefatigable. There's no compromise at all: it's beautifully crafted. It's beautiful music to look at. There's no comparison between it and the kind of music that is supposedly popular nowadays – rather pithy, empty, static writing that's here today and gone tomorrow, with no impact, and which you hear as a sonorous event that hits you straight away and is lost more or less immediately.'

This sense of musical tenacity is something that is particularly well suited to Filsell's discography, which is evenly weighted between organ and piano. He feels strongly about the role of a recording artist and their obligations to the listener.

'I really do enjoy recording,' he says. 'I enjoy the sense of the laboratory it has. That's the Glenn Gould thing, isn't it? Where he withdrew into the



studio and worked in front of a microphone. I like that idea: experimenting with different ways of doing things in that very intimate environment. I'm scornful of people who go into the studio not knowing the music properly. I think a recording should be as close to your live performance as it can be: I think it's the only way to create compelling music, even though it's second-hand.'

The search for meaning that Filsell keeps coming back to over the course of our conversation is a very solitary pursuit and I wonder how someone with the energy that Filsell displays (he even discusses his three-times-a-week squash habit) feels about that. 'That's why I sing, you see,' he smiles. 'I'd much rather be on the shop floor than in the organ loft.' ■

Buy Jeremy Filsell's complete Vierne set, recorded at Saint-Ouen, at a special discount – see page 59 –

opposite recording the Vierne **Intégrale** on the organ at Saint-Ouen, *this page*, clockwise from top left rehearsing a piano concerto with the Guildford Philharmonic, singing alto with the choir of St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle
 Photo Eva Zielinska-Millar / copyright © the Dean and Canons of Windsor, at the piano Photo copyright © Robert Carpenter Turner