



keys

Story Jane Cornwell

The neighbours complain when Piers Lane doesn't practise. "You've been away!" they say when they spot him getting out of his red Saab convertible, putting the key in the door of his neat terrace house. Here in south-west

London's Putney, a Thames-side 'burb with an older, rather refined demographic, living close to a world-famous concert pianist is considered both a privilege and a unique selling point – a bit like being on the guest list for an exclusive if irregular series of soirées.

Windows are flung open the moment Lane starts playing. Privy to a repertoire that includes the rare, the greats and the Romantics, it's no wonder the denizens of his manor feel a little more cultured, a little more la-di-da, than most. Not that Lane is home that much. A musician of his calibre is honour-bound to share his gifts.

"Sensitive, styled, intellectual, dramatic," swooned *The New York Sun*. "No praise could be high enough," sighed Britain's *Gramophone* magazine. "Everything you could wish for in a recitalist," insisted *The Courier-Mail*. Audiences in more than 40 countries have witnessed Lane's talent and, more recently, his trademark garish socks. He has played with the London Philharmonic and the American Symphony, been conducted by Andrew Litton, Sir Charles Mackerras, Maxim Shostakovich. His solo recitals have taken him from Bremen to Brisbane, Sheffield to Stockholm, Wellington to Wigmore Hall.

Then there are the festivals. The broadcasts. The masterclasses. The recordings. He is a professor of piano at London's Royal Academy of Music, although he hardly finds time to teach. Lane's recent appointment as artistic director of the Australian Festival of Chamber Music, held in Townsville each July, makes him even more prismatic. The southern hemisphere's largest festival dedicated to chamber music, it is also the only national music festival to be held in Queensland. Outgoing director Theodore Kuchar has been at its helm since founding the festival 16 years ago; it seems only fitting that the new incumbent should have ties to the state as well.

Lane was born in London and bred in Brisbane; his late mother, pianist Enid Lane, hailed from Townsville, which must have got champagne corks popping at AFCM committee meetings. "I love the north of Queensland," says Lane, 48, sitting back on a couch, lanky and dapper in a linen suit, black brogues and standard-issue black socks. "It has a great pull for me. I did my first Mozart concerto with an orchestra in Innisfail, with [Queensland composer and conductor] Richard Mills in one of his first-ever conducting gigs. He was a student of my father's."

to the city

It's been six years since pianist Piers Lane performed with the Queensland Orchestra in his home town. But their reunion is just a prelude to bigger things ...

The late Alan Lane was a director of studies at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music – which will present Piers with an honorary doctorate at a special ceremony in June. “My grandmother grew up in Torrens Creek but up until her late old age still played what she’d learned in the six months she spent in a convent in Townsville. I’ll always remember the time she invited half-a-dozen nuns to hear me play my first Liszt piano concerto,” Lane says. “I was about 12, I think. It was pretty surreal.”

He still prefers performing on his own. If he could do just one thing, it would be solo recitals. “There is no compromise at all. You go onstage and you are you. But it is great to make music with other people,” he adds smoothly, with a flash of the easy diplomacy that made him such a likeable presenter on the 54-part BBC Radio 3 series *The Piano*. “When I first came to London, in 1979, I used to accompany lessons by a singing teacher named Eric Vetheir – who was from Brisbane, funnily enough – and play for singers auditioning at the Royal Opera House. Chamber music was also an important part of my life when I was a young pianist wondering how to make headway. I was happy to do everything.”

Lane arrived in London, relatively late, at the age of 21. He could have studied at a famous school such as the Juilliard in New York but preferred to stay in Australia, close to his four younger brothers and his parents in Ashgrove, in a big wooden home that backed onto a bird sanctuary. His parents had met at London’s Royal College of Music; for a while Enid Lane even taught piano at Putney Girls High School, not too far from where her son lives now. When Alan Lane was offered a position at the Conservatorium the family returned to Australia, where they created a classical music haven. Lane thinks he fell in love with the piano the moment he was plonked onto a piano stool. At any rate, it was way before his feet could reach the pedals.

His mother was his first piano teacher. “It was a pretty chaotic household, what with five boisterous boys running about and at one stage 17 students of Mum’s coming and going,” he recalls with a grin. “I remember practising my scales while my brothers were watching television a few feet away. I’d play louder, they’d turn the TV up, so I’d play louder again. It taught me how to concentrate.”

Lane went on to study with Dr Nancy Weir, whose photo is one of many on his mantelpiece (she is now in a Brisbane nursing home, aged 91). He was also taught by Dr William Lovelock, the founding director of the Conservatorium, where he would eventually enrol as a student. After winning a prize at the inaugural Sydney International Piano Competition in 1977, he entered the Liszt-Bartok competition in Budapest, where he was awarded a stint in Seattle

with great Hungarian pianist Bela Siki. When Lane finally arrived in London it was to attend the Royal College of Music. “I had established an audience in Australia by then,” he says. “I’ve gone back endlessly since and grown that audience and kept my friendships up. And I had opportunities and experiences in Australia that might not have been available to me if I’d grown up in England.”

At the age of ten he took part in the now defunct Primary Schools Festival at Brisbane Town Hall, playing before several thousand parents and kids. Two years later, he accompanied the girls’ choir from his own Kelvin Grove State High School on a broadcast for the ABC. “The producer then asked me to do a solo performance, which kickstarted my broadcasting career.” He has met a lot of successful people, he says. “And what many have in common is: a) they come from smaller places that gave them opportunities as youngsters, and b) when they’re older they’ve had to fight to get where they are. It’s a winning combination.”

LANE DIDN'T HAVE TO FIGHT, EXACTLY, BUT HE DID have to rein himself in. In his eagerness to establish himself in London he accepted everything that came his way. “My agent warned me that I was becoming too widespread, that I needed a focus. I remember asking [vocal accompanist] Graham Johnson whether he thought I could be both an accompanist and a soloist. He said, ‘Well, it’s like bisexuality, isn’t it?’ And I said, ‘It is?’” He chuckles at the memory. “He explained that it was perfectly possible, but that people would probably find it hard to cope with.”

He turned the spotlight on his solo career. It blazed suddenly when, aged 25 and booked to accompany

Head to toe ... Lane (pictured in concert in the 1980s) has traded his Percy Grainger curls for signature lurid socks.



Australian soprano Rosamund Illing at the South Bank Centre’s Purcell Room, he was called on to fill in when Illing bailed out the day before. Reviews waxed ecstatic about the youthful antipodean pianist with the Percy Grainger curls. In the 1990s, emboldened by his new teaching post at the Royal Academy, he began enhancing his recitals with spoken word introductions to every piece. Three years ago he reconfigured his image when he started wearing test pattern-worthy socks.

“The sock thing started when I was judging the [2004] Sydney International Piano Competition and had to give the opening recital. I was shopping for a shirt with [Australian violinist] Miki Tsunoda when she suddenly said, ‘Piers, you gotta buy these socks!’ And I thought, ‘Will I wear them under tails?’ I decided I would and I have ever since.” Leaping off the couch, he bounds up some nearby stairs, talking all the while. “Here you go,” he says moments later, proffering a luridly coloured, wildly patterned selection of socks. “There was also a pair that the friends of the Christchurch Symphony auctioned for charity. The chairlady reckons they fetched \$3000.”

With 76 different concertos to his name – way more than your average world-famous concert pianist – Lane can now collaborate with whoever he likes. He recently accompanied Australian soprano Yvonne Kenny in a UK concert entitled *British Composers and their Influences*; the two have just released a recording of songs by Frederic Delius. This month sees the pianist on a 12-date national tour with the Australian String Quartet (playing Dvorák), after which he’ll play in Brisbane with the Queensland Orchestra – Mozart at the Conservatorium next Friday, and Beethoven at the QPAC Concert Hall on May 4. He is especially looking forward to playing Chopin at the Conservatorium on June 17 in a concert staged in memory of his mother – and then there’s the Australian Festival of Chamber Music from July 6-15.

Lane’s festival program includes performances by many of his previous collaborators: soprano Cheryl Barker and baritone Peter Coleman-Wright feature on Brahms’ *Liebesslieder Op 52*. Norwegian pianist Bengt Forsberg revisits Vaughan Williams with the New Zealand String Quartet, and plays alongside Lane on a Grainger/Gershwin paean. Lane will accompany the NZSQ on Elgar’s *Piano Quintet Op 84* and cellist Raphael Wallfisch on the Australian premiere of Brett Dean’s *Huntingdon Eulogy*.

In the midst of all this, Lane tries to find time to relax. “It can be a drag to have to live out of a suitcase again. But when I play and the music is flowing it is worth it, every time. It’s an extraordinary feeling.” Stretching his limbs, he stands to see me out. “Now if you’ll excuse me,” he adds, only half joking, “I think I’d better practise.” ■