

not the Black & white NOTES OF A PIANO

Born blind, Ster can feel the colours of sounds, writes Tanya Farber

THE ARCHETYPAL “black and white” notes of a piano are a metaphor for how sighted people see the world. For Sigrun Paschke, better known as Ster, that is a limited world – devoid of the colourful “velvet” she experiences through her piano.

“The black and white of a keyboard don’t concern me at all. For me, each tone has a colour,” she explains, “I get a feeling that goes with each colour, and that matches the note. Green is a tranquil placid feeling so then I would express something in E Major. C Minor is red and fire. A Major is blue – it is dark and rich. As I move between the keys, the mood changes and so do the colours.”

One feels this very easily while watching her perform one of her “concerts in the dark”. The auditorium is sunk into complete darkness, so that the audience can experience the same “space” in which the pieces were composed.

The journey begins and, right up to the final moment, not a note is out of place or a mood not clearly and beautifully portrayed.

When she first walks onto the stage before the lights drop, it is difficult to imagine that such a powerful “orchestra” could emanate from the petite hands of just one person.

Born blind, she has been able to develop a specific kind of keen sight that doesn’t require eyes. During the past few years she’s increasingly been translating these perceptions into compositions with classical roots while also infusing them with jazz and world music. Her CD was launched at the Klein Karoo National Arts Festival (KKNK), the Vryfees in Bloemfontein, and the Brooklyn Theatre in Pretoria, and will be released in the Netherlands next year.

“My music is not linked to a specific genre, all I want is for people to experience it in the same environment in which it was created,” she says.



Sigrun Paschke – Ster – inhabits a vivid world of dreams.

PICTURE: TANYA FARBER

While the sighted experience the journey from day into night as one of going from light to dark, for her it is the other senses that take her on that journey.

And, always, the piano is there to offer its delights.

“The day smells and feels different to the night. The mood and energy change and it also depends where I am. I love both. Sometimes I think I’m a night person and I am not very bound to a routine, but both day and night have their advantages and magical moments. Where music is concerned, I don’t care which it is. It can be as magical and inspirational at any time of the day.

“I am sometimes very productive early in the morning, but some-

times it is late afternoon or late at night,” she says.

When one meets her, and imagines all the challenges that go with being blind, it’s hard to view her as a preferred life, but when asked what type of “light” the “darkness” has given her, she says, “All the light you can possibly have. For me I feel like I have both worlds at my disposal. There is the sighted world which is fabulous and there are so many inputs, and then there is the world in the dark where I write music. But, it is not dark at all. It is where the revelations come. Of course the moods I express are not always light but I experience the ‘light in the dark’ as inspiration.

“I have dark, weird and wonderful harmonies so when I say “light”

I am not always talking about the tone of the melodies. I am talking about the revelations I have when I compose.”

She says when she came into this world, her whole being chose her destiny.

“I have walked weird and wonderful roads because of it,” she says, “and I believe that I have had previous lives and I dream quite visually. If I have to memorise anything – a picture of a piano pops into my mind. Numbers pop up as braille but the piano is more immediate for me than something I have to read.”

As for language, that also takes a back seat to her passion for composing music and playing the piano.

“The spoken word is very limited and limiting. It is very easy to misunderstand someone who is speaking. But, if I give it my all on the piano, it will be very clear what I am saying. I love words and I love languages, but the passion and feeling that can be conveyed through piano is way beyond that.”

Born and raised in South Africa, she now lives in Berlin but is currently home for the performances. Like many things in her world, she experiences the different textures of the two cities in a way that says nothing of picture postcard icons and buildings.

“I come to Cape Town to see my family and for work. In some respects the two cities are quite similar. In summer, that feeling of sitting at an outdoor café reminds me of both cities. In winter it is different because of the snow. There are fewer sounds of nature in Berlin itself but there are also birds there, and I hear them very clearly.”

How fortunate for Capetonians that she is home. The music she has composed and performs is nothing short of an aural feast.

Concerts in the Dark take place at the following venues: SABC Studios, (209 Beach Road, Cape Town) on Saturday, December 10 at 8pm and Sunday, December 11 at 7pm. Tickets are R80 for adults; R50 for 12-18 years. To book, call Ayala at 021-461 7146 or 083-548-8845.

You simply do not exist unless you ‘like it’ online

I LEFT my cellphone at home. Racing out to an appointment mid-afternoon, and then I was off to a writers symposium that began at five, there was no time to retrace my steps, although I thought of doing so and knew that I’d be caught in hideous peak hour traffic and would no doubt be late. So, reluctantly, I accepted that I was going into the world naked, so to speak.

And naked I felt. As others around me clicked – taking photos, tweeting comments and images, uploading same – I sat there, feeling powerless and cut off. I did ask one of my friends if I could use her phone to alert my nearest and dearest that were there to be any emergency, to please call said friend, but that was the limit of reaching out in any digital sense.

As I said I have two cellphones, numerous email addresses, I tweet, Facebook, use Google+, I blog, enjoy Bbm messenger and Whatsapp, I use Gchat, the occasional old-fashioned SMS, and I even pick up the phone, reluc-

tantly. In short, it’s easy enough to get hold of me – so prompt and reliable am I that if I fail to respond to an urgent message within a few hours, friends become concerned and phone to see if everything is alright in my world.

There’s a reason for this. I was a teenager in the late 1980s when my grandfather died. He’d been rushed to hospital a few days previously; the night he passed on my mother and I were at a friend of hers having supper. Pre-cellphone days and neither one of us had thought to leave the friend’s phone number with my grandmother.

When we got home close to midnight it was to the frantic ringing of the phone and the news that my grandfather had died.

The hospital had been frantically calling my grandmother, and my grandfather had died alone. I still feel sad and a profound sense of loss in recalling that night. I have no doubt that our being there would not have influenced the outcome, but he died alone. I often wonder what he thought as the

ARJA SALAFRANCA

Shooting the breeze



hours passed and no-one arrived. Did he sense it was his time? Did he hope we would arrive? Did he think back on his long life? Orphaned in Poland at the age of five, he and his four other brothers ate potato peels out of dustbins.

They were the lucky ones: he and his two brothers were rescued by Isaac Ochberg and taken to South Africa where they grew up in an orphanage, and he became a successful businessman. The oldest brother, deemed too old to be rescued, had to stay behind. His fate remains unknown.

And this is partly why I have a horror of being incommunicado. I never want this to happen again.

I stayed at a game lodge in the Kruger last year and was horrified to be told that there was no cellphone signal. This was conveyed to me with a broad grin by one of the managers, implying that now I could truly get away from it all. Hell no! I don’t want to get away from it all.

On game drives we had intermittent reception and I spent the time hurriedly reading and replying to mails. In fact my publisher needed a response to a query and I was able to let her know that I’d reply properly when I could.

I don’t want to be out of touch. I like knowing what’s happening, I like receiving messages and emails, reading Tweets, responding, uploading my photos to Facebook. It gives me a sense of connection, community, togetherness.

We didn’t always have this – but now that we have the option I wouldn’t have it any other way.

There are times when it verges on the ridiculous certainly – I recall being at the *Sunday Times* literary awards and the whole table,

bar one, was tweeting and Facebooking what was going on. It was like a scene in a comedy.

But I’d still rather have it this way. People make friends and forge bonds through social networking – local writers Lauren Beukes and Nechama Brodie have written about their deep friendship that was born out of Twitter.

We need social media, we need connections, if not smartphones and Facebook, for example, wouldn’t have turned out to be such roaring successes.

Another local writer, Beth Shirley, made an off the cuff amusing comment that you should never date anyone unless they’re on Twitter or Facebook, because how else are you supposed to spy on them?

We laughed. But it encapsulated how far we’ve come. Almost as though you don’t exist unless you have an online presence. We’re living in a world where nothing happens unless it’s been shared in some form or another.

I like that.