

Norwegian

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**Vintage Chanel
& Currywurst**

Leif Ove Andsnes

The pianoman

**The Alps
are calling**

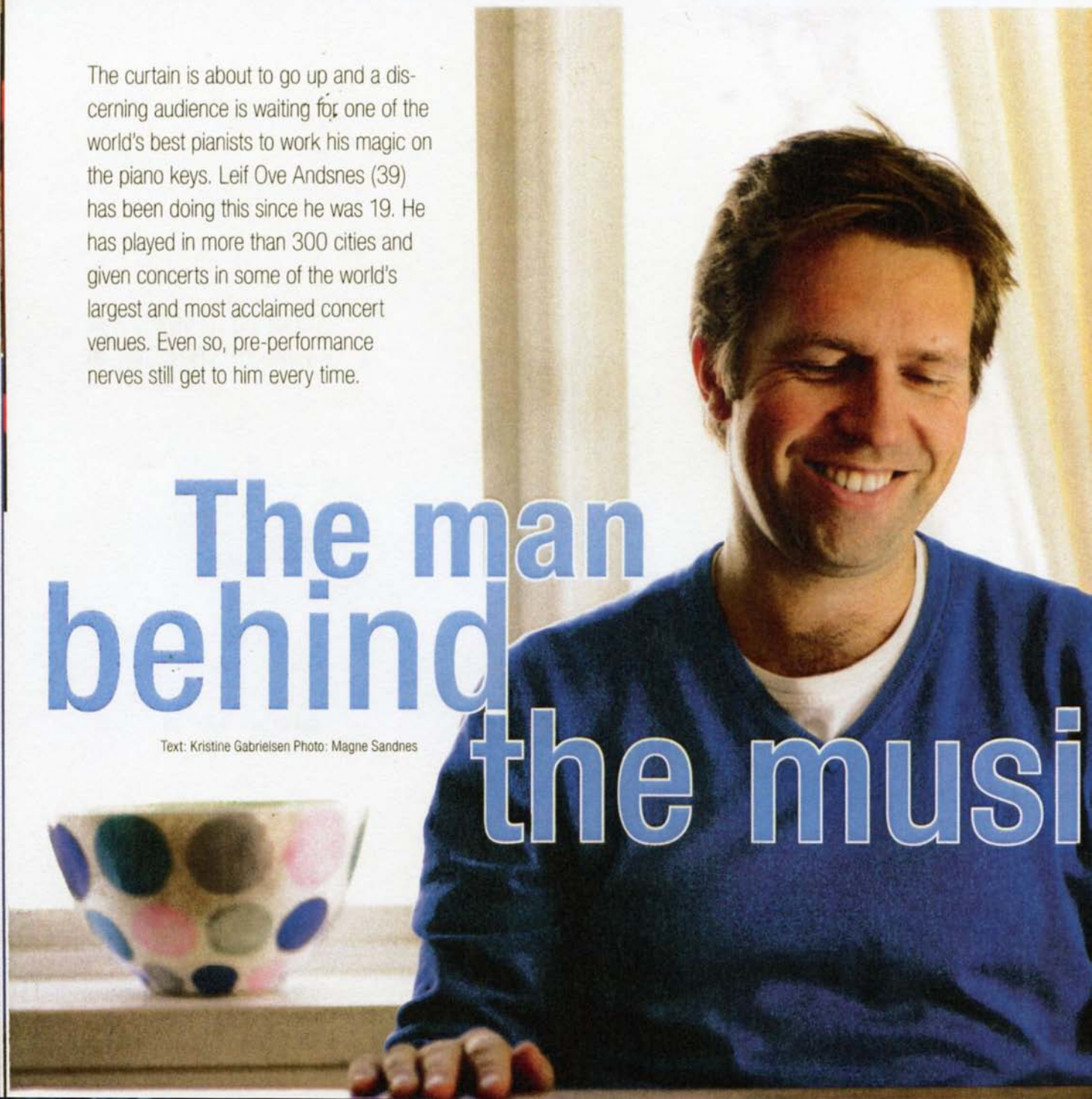
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Portrait

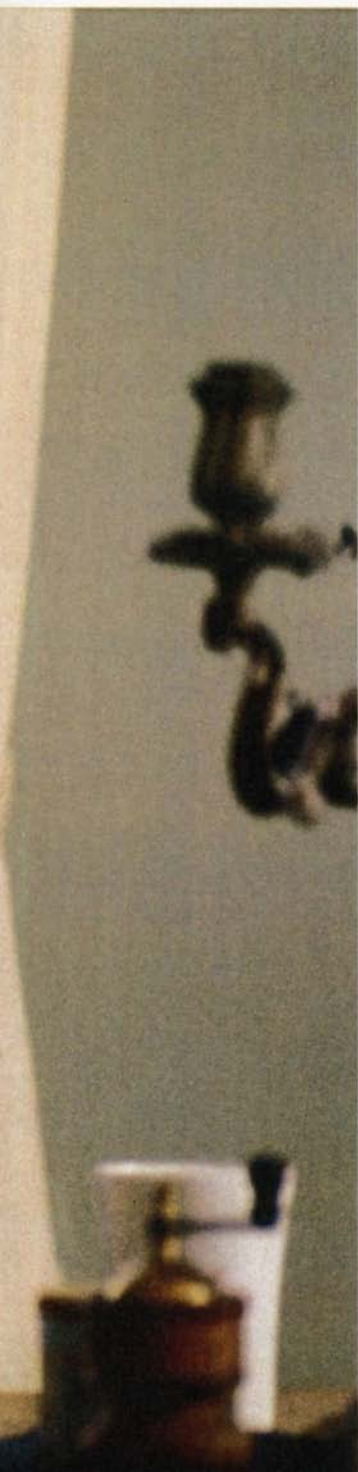
The curtain is about to go up and a discerning audience is waiting for one of the world's best pianists to work his magic on the piano keys. Leif Ove Andsnes (39) has been doing this since he was 19. He has played in more than 300 cities and given concerts in some of the world's largest and most acclaimed concert venues. Even so, pre-performance nerves still get to him every time.

The man behind the music

Text: Kristine Gabrielsen Photo: Magne Sandnes



Leif Ove Andsnes



Leif Ove Andsnes looks down at the table and places his long pianists' fingers on the edge, as if he were sitting himself down at a grand piano.

"The nerves don't get any better as you get older. Your whole body tingles because there is so much at stake. There is an enormous amount of energy involved when you play the piano," he explains calmly. "You can alternate between a feeling of mortal fear, a racing pulse and the shivers. Once the concert is over there is an anticlimax that can sometimes infuse you with energy, and sometimes result in a feeling of emptiness." In the past he could just sit down and stare at the walls. With 20 years' experience behind him, he has learned how to ground himself – both physically and mentally.

All ears

Andsnes' musical career started at an early stage. He was just four years old when he started nagging his music-teacher parents to teach him how to play the piano. He played his first piano recital at the age of six. Word soon got around that Karmøy was home to a particular musical talent.

"At school I remember someone calling me a genius. That was just about the worst thing anyone could be called!"

Although he felt 'different', he was nonetheless proud of his interest in classical music and piano playing skills. Right from the start he was happy to play for people, and often played at local events or at home for the family – on one condition; that his audience was totally quiet and listened.

"I can clearly remember one occasion when I was talked into playing for a family gathering. However, my young cousins just ran around making a noise while I was playing. So I got up from the piano and walked off. People have to listen," the pianist chuckles.

He has never had any doubts as to his vocation and was never tempted to put his piano playing to one side, as many people do in their teens.

"Obviously, at the age of 11–12, practising wasn't much fun. Practising is a lonely business and I naturally wanted to be doing sport or pursuing other hobbies with my friends. At the same time, I never considered packing it all in. I played in the school band and a brass band, and listened to all types of music. However, it was classical music that really inspired me. That's what I feel I can mould and give my own particular stamp and do exciting things with, and is the type of music with which I feel the closest affinity."

Split personality

Leif Ove Andsnes says he was not particularly career-conscious in the beginning. Musicians and soloists were vague concepts that meant little to him. However, this was also the time when he was catapulted into this way of life. As a 16-year-old he took part in competitions and gave his debut concert. Even at this stage, he had to ask himself the existential question; Am I a pianist?

"In the beginning I felt torn. Was I a student, or was I a professional pianist? And working out the answer was a tough process. As a young person I was shy, I found it difficult to arrive in new places without being able to speak the language and not knowing anyone. I pretty much travelled alone and sat in restaurants on my own. It wasn't until I was 25 that I came to terms with everything, and reconciled myself with my role in life and the person in the newspapers," he explains.

Coming home an anticlimax

And it is only in recent years that the Norwegian virtuoso has started to feel at home when he lands in Bergen or Copenhagen – the two places where he actually lives. For him, home has long been a

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diffuse concept not necessarily linked to a particular postcode.

"I have been able to feel at home in places that I have never been before, or on a concert stage – and not always in the place where all my things are. Arriving home tended to be something of an anticlimax. Without a hectic concert schedule I would have to shape my day myself, doing things like cooking and paying bills. However, over the years I have found a certain peace of mind and have been able to separate being at home and at work more clearly. Now it feels great to be at home in Bergen with my partner," he smiles sitting at the kitchen table, while apologising for not being able to offer me any coffee. He only arrived home yesterday and has not had any time to do his shopping.

Celebrity and nobody

Leif Ove Andsnes has long since become comfortable with both hectic travelling and his pianist title. He has garnered professional recognition, prizes and awards all over the globe, and is currently the biggest celebrity pianist in Norway. He could have done without the celebrity status though. In that sense he is happy to have the opportunity to give concerts worldwide.

"Norway is a small country, and it can easily feel like a bubble. I don't envy performers and artists who only have their home country as their arena. I can be anonymous when I want to, and at the same time build up an audience abroad without being recognised by the man in the street. I find that refreshing," he explains.

Being blessed with international fame means he also has to meet his audience on their turf.

Classical music is a niche industry, and selling out concerts in London does not automatically make you a household name in Florence. In order to build his career in different countries he has to be constantly present, and give concerts regularly. One of Andsnes' booking agents estimates that he has given 1,400 concerts, in 350 venues, in 300 cities between 1992 and the present date.

Sources of inspiration

Picking one particular highlight from his long career proves difficult.

"I've found that there can be a magical atmosphere at the most intimate concerts, for example in a small venue with 70 spectators, but I also have some favourite places of course. New York has given me an amazing welcome, and Carnegie Hall is definitely one of my favourite concert venues. It's an honour to play there, so in a way that could be seen as a career highlight," muses Andsnes.

Andsnes answers the question about who inspires him in is work promptly:

"I don't think I have any particular sources of inspiration. Inspiration comes through day-to-day work. Personally I find motivation in all the classical works I get the urge to play. There is a never-ending source of music and not enough time, so the problem is being selective", says Andsnes.

Pictures Reframed

Andsnes tells us that he has almost exclusively played classical piano works, but at the moment he is working on slightly alternative projects that are quite different to what he has been doing in the past. He will, for example, take part in a short directed by

Norwegian choreographer Jo Strømgren, and in November he is due to hit the road with a project entitled *Pictures Reframed* where he will play a piece to accompany a video directed by South African performance artist Robin Rhode. This is the first time that a classical pianist and a video artist have come together in an artistic performance.

"I really enjoy participating in projects that incorporate more modern art forms. *Pictures Reframed* is a very exciting production because it's innovative. The ambition is to create something new where two different art forms merge."

Inner balance

The autumn air is crisp and Andsnes' bags are packed. He is fully booked right up until next summer. Luckily travelling hasn't been a problem or something that's caused a strain for him. "I regard it as a necessary evil in my line of work. I use the time spent travelling reading, on the computer or studying sheet music.

Travel, play a concert, travel home. That looks set to be Andsnes' routine for many years to come, although he would like to cut down on touring a little in the future. However, he still wants to be known as a pianist for all his days. He cannot go more than two weeks at most without playing. That's when he starts getting restless, keen to connect with the piano keys once more.

"Playing keeps me balanced. It does a world of good for me as a person," he concludes, leaning back on the kitchen chair.



CV/LEIF OVE ANDSNES

- Norway's most famous contemporary pianist.
- Born in 1970 on Karmøy outside Haugesund.
- Gave his first piano concert at 14 years old.
- Began his studies at Bergen Music Conservatory (now the Grieg Academy) at 16 years old.
- Became known for his technical skill, sensitive touch and undisputed virtuoso qualities in the 1990s.
- Signed a five-record contract with EMI Classics and was nominated for the Nordic Council's Music Award in 1996.
- Won the prestigious Gilmore Artist Award in 1998.
- Was awarded the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav in 2002.
- Currently Artistic Director of Risør Chamber Music Festival, Professor at the Oslo Music Conservatory, Visiting Professor at the Royal Music Conservatory of Copenhagen and a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Music.
- This autumn you have the opportunity to see Andsnes performing Rachmaninov *Piano Concerto No. 4* in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Rome. *Pictures Reframed* will take to the stage in Stockholm, Hamburg, Munich, London, Berlin, Paris, Copenhagen, Stavanger and Oslo, among other cities.

Praise for Andsnes:

"Andsnes is an aristocrat among pianists, who has the gift of uncovering new depths without any loss of spontaneity or the slightest trace of artifice"

(Gramophone Magazine, December 2007)

"Andsnes would be a dazzling pianist even if forced to play Chopsticks"

(The Times, September 2006)