

The meaning of Leif

No sports cars or blond highlights for Leif Ove Andsnes: Reaching middle age, he has decided to shake things up a little by bringing performance art to Mussorgsky's exhibition

Many people opt for life changes as they head for the iconic age of 40. But a classical musician getting together with a South African graffiti artist, playing Mussorgsky on a grand piano as it is immersed in a Norwegian dry dock and then taking a multimedia show on a rock band-style tour?

That is what pianist Leif Ove Andsnes has embarked upon, in a collaboration with visual artist Robin Rhode that is manifested this month with the release of *Pictures Reframed* – a CD and DVD released by EMI featuring Andsnes playing Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and Schumann's *Kinderszenen*. The video has a backdrop of scenes conjured by Rhode as he got to know the Mussorgsky work.

'It started in New York,' Andsnes says. 'I had had conversations with the Lincoln Centre where they have a programme of combining different disciplines. I was thinking of *Pictures* as something where one could work with a visual artist.'

'There are pieces of music where you feel everything's there, everything is said. *Pictures at an Exhibition* is the opposite, making it a perfect composition to experiment with, as Mussorgsky's music is incredibly strong but also very open and experimental. The main thing isn't the notes themselves, but the composer's grand vision. For me therefore, the original version of the work remains almost as a sketch that is open for transformations and changes.'

'You have this wild narrative of a person walking into an exhibition and he crashes into the first

picture and is faced with various strong images and textures. Later in the cycle he becomes a part of the picture and it takes on so many aspects. It's psychologically challenging, I think.'

He was introduced to Rhode, whose musical interests were focused on rap. 'I have always worked very closely with music,' Rhode says, 'playing with the notion of rhythm and sound. This project is not, therefore, so distant from my regular practice although classical music has such an intense history and that has been a difficult challenge.'

Andsnes says it was more than the onset of middle age that inspired the project. 'How can one try other kinds of concerts to bring in a younger audience? I love the ritual of a normal concert. But there are different ways. When I give concerts in Norway I speak about the music to break down barriers. This is no different, bringing two art forms together.'

He admits that as a pianist, accustomed to performing solo or in partnership with a conductor, this alien alliance was disturbing. 'I had to lose control for this project. I had no idea what Robin would make and even though I was giving my normal concert it becomes a different expression because of the movie happening. That is something I'm very happy with.'

Pictures Reframed has its official premiere in New York

on 13 November and tours the US and mainland Europe before arriving at the Royal Festival Hall on 4 December. After completing a project that has been over 12 months in the making, Andsnes admits he will have to relax.

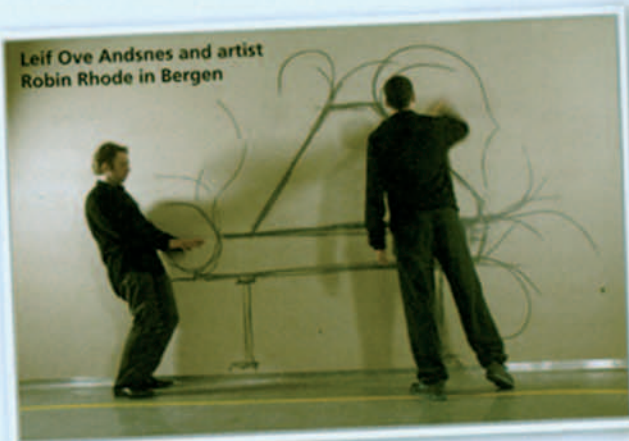
'I am going back to normal concerts but it has opened up new horizons for me about how one can organise concerts and projects and think differently about what a concert is. Very often we are unconscious about things that affect the audience. Such as the lighting. Most of the time in concerts the lighting is far too bright, it should be concentrated around the performer, which would bring people into the music in a different way. But people do want to read their programmes!'

'The visual aspect of this project does something to the audience and made me think more about the visual aspects.'

He does not think the visuals have changed his performance, but is not sure. 'The images might have affected me. For example the haunting image of Bydlo with the deserted train station in black and white, that image follows me as I play and perhaps affects what I thought the piece was.'

Andsnes' relaxation once he is out of the pictures will not last long. He is due to record the Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No 4 in the spring, to go with a performance of the third, already in the can, for release on EMI.

EMI Classics releases the Pictures Reframed CD and deluxe art book on 30 November



NRK/Pove Zakariassen