

**French Canadian pianist and composer Alain Lefèvre talks exclusively to C Music TV about his career, his fascination with composer Andre Mathieu and his forthcoming projects.**

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Interview transcribed by Claire Thomas at C Music TV

**C Music TV: Mark Forrest :** Alain Lefèvre, welcome to C Music TV. I am fascinated to know about how you got your start in music, your family was musical but was the decision to play the piano was that your decision or was that one taken by your parents?

Was it the decision taken by the children, the four kids -Philippe, Gilles, and David and me? I believe not, I believe the decision was an ideal for my father and mother, they left France and were very very young and for them coming to Canada was the possibility to introduce the kids to music. If you look into French culture during those times, it was mostly wealthy families where the children were brought playing music. Québec was completely different, Philippe the older brother is a pianist, Gilles is a violinist, myself I'm a pianist and David is a wonderful violinist and we did a CD together. So in our house discipline was very strict, there was no negotiation and it was you know...you will make music. Children, kids want to play and be like the other people so sometimes it wasn't so fun. I remember that I started to practice my piano for more than seven hours a day when I was ten and I started to play piano when I was four and a half. I did my first recital when I was six so this was intense and I did have the impression sometimes that someone stole my life you wake up one day all you do all day is play piano.

And this drive to succeed involved taking part in competitions quite early on in which you had great success. How important do you think those piano competitions were for you in your early career?

How important were these music and piano and competitions? I'll be very honest with you, if we do a bit of history if we go back to let's say Rubinstein's youth, at that time there were let's say 5 or 6 great international piano competitions. As we're talking today I believe that we have more than 100 and maybe I'm wrong maybe it's much more than that. And of course when I was a young kid piano competitions in Canada were an obligation, a kind of passport that you have to do. As I'm talking to you today if I can share something, I have doubts about those competitions because my very modest experience showed me that you have some musicians, some violinists, some singers, some cellists who can be very strong in competitions but is another matter after to come on stage and to have what I call a relation with the public. On stage it is something spiritual.

And as I'm talking to you today there are certain parts of the world that create tons of fantastic musicians but they're competition 'beasts', and it doesn't make them great artists. So what happens? They win first prize, they have some money, probably a recording contract and they have the impression that a career is there for them, but the career is not there because 2010 there's a complete restructuring of the classical art. There are enormous problems, we're patching them, we're trying to ignore them but the problems are everywhere – in the CD industry, in the concert industry, with artists and I could talk to you about that for many hours. There are many problems, and a very big one is that now you have to convince a younger generation that classical music can be exciting. To do so we have to make a proposal and the proposal is not made. I believe that in England, and I'm not saying that because I am in England, it's probably the country where I am the most impressed with kids and music. But in a lot of countries now we're saying that we're in democracy but the proposition is not done.

You see...and I'm not criticising, you see a singer, a person like Lady Gaga who has become such a major star in a couple of years. Of course then I think of a lot of young pianists that work alone for many years for hours and hours to be able to play Chopin Concerto or the first few bars of the fourth ballad of Chopin where with the right hand you have to do a crescendo and at the same time with the left hand you have to do a crescendo, and I'm saying to myself, and I hope I don't shock anyone...what an injustice! Because that person comes on stage, and I'm talking about Lady Gaga and she's got wonderful clothes...what clothes she has, and a pianist will try to make a career and then he will face the dramatic situation that there are too many pianists, there's not enough concerts, the concert industry is struggling, the classical CD industry is in a state of shock. We know that as we are talking, I will say no names, that a lot of recording can cost you know more than half a million dollars for recording a fantastic Mahler Symphony and around the world there will be you know 2000 to a dozen sales and how many CDs has Jessica Simpson sold? And is she a great artist? That's the question and the problem we have is that we're not allowed to ask the question anymore and this is not right. And if we cannot propose to the young people classical music, they'll say after what they want, they'll say 'Listen, I don't like this or I do like this', but at least we would have done the real work. We don't do it; the industry is so strong behind Pop, Rock and all the new things that the proposal is not done. So to answer more precisely the question, a music competition, it's a mirage to think that because you have won first prize you're going to have a career. It was really true maybe at the time of Rubinstein it was probably true for Pollini when he was at the Chopin competition or it was true for Zimerman, but it's not anymore because you have how many first big fantastic prizes

every year now? Not 5, not 6, I was telling you you have 100, those 100 are going to make a career? Come on.

Take me then through the early part of your career...I'm imaging four boys at home, performing, encouraged very much by their parents, supported by their parents, at ten years old practicing for seven hours a day. At what point did you decide that this was going to be your career?

I decided that piano was going to be my career in an unusual way. When I was in school I was 13 and in Québec you have a kind of questionnaire that you have to answer 'What do you want to do in life?' and my dream was to become a journalist because I'm very interested in listening to other people and how many musicians are interested in talking about themselves? I have, and it's not false modesty, but I have no interest in talking about myself. So when my dad realized that I didn't want to be a concert pianist he was not very happy. But as I said there was no negotiation. And then suddenly I remember I played some music from Mendelssohn and the same year I played some Brahms and something happened. I became sure slowly that music was a part of my life, but music in the way that I love music. The problem that we have maybe now is that we say to young people that becoming a musician is to try to become someone that can be truly in love with themselves. Today as we're talking together we see a lot of those young,... yeah Mickey Mouse becoming famous and we sell them like we would sell a rock star who'll sell a new perfume or a new car. This is not classical music, far from it. Far far from it.

I wonder at what point in your career you developed this interest that you've had for many years in the work of your fellow Canadian composer and pianist, Québécois composer and pianist André Mathieu? Was it at this age of teenage years or was it later in your life that you discovered this man's music and started to champion it?

Strangely the way that I discovered Mathieu, it's like a circle, I realized very very quickly how many times that we could record the Ballad of Chopin, the Concerto of Chopin – we love that, we love to play those pieces. It's extraordinary, the E Minor of Chopin and No. 4 of Beethoven. But then you have a real problem you know, you have on the shelf in the CD store your CD with Chopin's Concerto and in Canadian dollars it's going to be \$19 or \$20. In the same Beethoven section or Chopin section you will have the 2 Chopin Concertos or the 5th Beethoven Concerto and they will maybe you know not even half the price.

So very young I said to myself there's probably some interest to propose to the public something new, we have to have new Concerti and new exciting repertoire, even for the orchestra. So one day I've heard a piece from Mathieu called 'Prélude romantique' the only music that was edited, a little piece of 5 or 6 minutes, I was impressed and I came to the studio and I said to the lady who was playing, I said 'Who is that composer?' and she said 'It's André Mathieu', and I said 'Who is André Mathieu?' She said, 'The French Canadian'. But I said 'More!..' 'Oh, he was a drunk!' and then the discussion was closed. But that was probably a very bad answer for me because it was just the thing to say for me to be excited and to try to dig and to find out more. And then I did realise that Andre Mathieu was a big part of our history and to give the public a few important facts: Mathieu composed his first piano piece when he was four during the night, and the piece is called 'Into the night', his first piano Concerto when he was five, his second piano concerto that I will play with the LMP and that I have recorded with the LMP he was five and a half and this piano concerto is not too bad because he won the first prize of the New York Philharmonic Society for young composers and

when he played this Concerto Rachmaninov went on his knees and said 'You're the only that could say you could be my successor'. Albert Einstein said that Mathieu was probably the most beautiful case of genius, so Mathieu's life was extraordinary. Concerto No. 3 he did when he was 13, No. 4 18, 17 we do not exactly know.. So slowly I've started to play Mathieu and there was some resistance in my own country because people were thinking that Mathieu was a post-romantic and were not impressed by that. We really go into new music. And I said 'Why not Mathieu?'. So I did work on Mathieu alone, it's 25 years' work and then in March 2011 we will see my CD will announce that we sold over 100,000 copies of Mathieu in 5 CDs all over the world. So that's a little of Mathieu's story. It's longer than that but this is the big picture.

I'm fascinated to know about the life of a touring pianist and the way it works and what you have to put yourself through and the way it's changed over the years. You talked about Rubinstein earlier, things must be very different from how it was in his day. How has the life of a concert pianist evolved over the years?

What is the life of a concert pianist right now and what was the life of a concert pianist before? I believe that the life of a pianist today is not very intelligent, we ask too much, we ask too much repertoire, we ask too much of a pianist and it's not true that a pianist can play everything well and that the time doesn't do the pianist. I was referring before...I'm a radio host so I love music, I'm a musician but I love more music than the fact that I'm a musician, and I know that you love music. Music is something between the notes, there is oxygen, there is something, there is a link. Today as we're talking we have a lot of pianists a lot of violinists who play a lot of notes, but do they really know what is happening? And this is the great question that we have to ask ourselves. Maybe classical music is less interesting for the public because maybe we did try to create artificial artists with CD contracts, promotional contracts, managers' contracts. And then we find ourselves with a lot of musicians we could spend 20 minutes and we can see their career, they start as a sky rocket and a couple of years after there's no one. Does a pianist or a violinist need to be sexy? Have you seen the new covers of CD? Is it so important, do you believe Emil Gilels wanted to be sexy? Or Richter wanted to be sexy? Those things are very important and I strongly believe that the career of a pianist today, we have to re-think. Rubinstein had his war horse Chopin, Beethoven...maybe 10, 12. As I'm talking to you, and I'm not someone fantastic, let's be clear I know pianists who can play probably 150 concerti. I have in my repertoire maybe 40 piano concertos and very soon it's going to be enough because you know music is not the Olympics. You had that great era of musicians that were coming on stage and would play the beginning of Beethoven No. 4 two hundred times beginning of the Grieg concerto and there's something. Now we have- they play, they come on stage and the publicity is there and marketing and bla bla bla and I've seen some new CD covers and I'm in a state of shock. Very soon it's going to be a kind of Penthouse or Playboy cover. Is it starting to make other people love music? I'm not sure. Of course we have to be closer to our public, but what is the price that we'll have to pay?

What then would be your advice to somebody watching us at the moment who loves music, adores music would love to work in music and sees that those who are getting the careers at the moment are, as you described, young ,pretty and photographed with not many clothes on. What is your advice to a young musician of today who wants a career?

What would be my advice for a young musician who wants to make a career, how many young musicians do I see every year? I've got you know a few hats - I'm a pianist, I'm a composer, I've got my radio show so there's a lot of young people. I love to help young artists because I've struggled a lot my whole life, my life has been difficult, and nothing in my career was easy. I never was a sky rocket pianist. Every step was tough, nothing was free and I had no family, no contact, no riches, nothing. So my first advice would be to love and to be honest with music, to cherish music to understand that the chance to be able to hear the beginning of Symphony No. 9 of Mahler...this is..you cannot explain but if you like if you can just open your window to that you are going to be a rich man. The one who is going to understand that genius of the B Minor of Johann Sebastian Bach. So for a musician who wants to make a career you have to be very very strong and I would say for the industry that they have tried a lot for the last few years and now they realize that nothing really worked. Of course artificially they are pushed, but the public is less stupid than we think. And the public knows, it's not a question to be knowledgeable about music but someone goes to a concert and they know when the magic is there and when something happens they know. It is like do you really need to know everything about Chinese food to understand when you're in front of a fantastic Chinese meal? Sometimes you don't understand, but you know, instinctively you know. So right now when some young people come to me and say 'I want to make a career' sometimes I want to cry. What can I tell them? Can I tell them all the truth about this industry? I can't. I can suggest that they try to be as beautiful as the music, to be as pure as the music to be as strong as the music. And whatever people tell them they have to believe that they will go exactly where they want to go. It is not a question to be the first or to be the best, that's not the point in music. People are they are not sure anymore the young people what is the difference between Harry Potter and Shakespeare. So if we don't have the courage to say its wonderful Harry Potter but it would be wonderful if you knew a little bit about Shakespeare.

[Some people say to grow an audience for classical music the audience needs to be able to consume classical music in different ways so they can go to the concert halls, or they can listen to CDs or they can download mp3s, they can watch their favourite videos or they can learn more about classical music on TV as well which is what C Music TV is trying to do across Europe at the moment. What do you think of that as an aspiration?](#)

I have to say that when I did discover C Music TV, I heard it first because of my work, to say that I was happy is not enough, I was stunned! It gave me hope because in the same way that I do not believe in that marketing thing, with C Music TV what I cherish and what I strongly feel is the proposition. At least it is a space where actually we do a real proposal to younger, older any generation and this is more than important, this is the oxygen that we do need. If we do not have this courageous action, and I'm not trying to be nice, I know exactly what I'm talking about. I have a friend a colleague who is 39, he did his first recording it is wonderful it took him 2 months to record in his house, he sold 15 copies. So if we do not have the voice, if we do not have that kind of energy that I've seen on C Music TV - we're lost, and that's the fact. The government everywhere and we have to talk about that, politically classical music is not something that pays, they don't support the arts anymore and we know that, and we're not just talking about Canada, about the States. The first thing they're going to cut, you it - the Arts. Big mistake. A strong society, a strong democracy is passing through the arts and through education. We have to remember that the first thing that Alexander the Great was doing when he was conquering the world was to bring theatre, music to every country. Our different politicians seem to forget that - technology, sport..I don't know - the

arts. A strong democracy will be a democracy rich with people who have enough education to make a difference, to see the difference between Lady Gaga and Mozart. And that's why it's so important.

I wonder if that's now beginning to change because and I wonder if you are noticing this because you travel so much but in this country certainly in the UK we are looking at Venezuela we are looking at El Sistema which has been going for 30 years and we are starting El Sistema projects here to get every child at 5 a classical musical education. Is that not happening around the world?

I believe I said that maybe a little bit before about what happens in the UK with music. I visit 28,000 kids all over the world every year as something that I want to do. What happens in the UK is completely special. I'm trying to put my finger on where this decision comes from and why this happens. Is there someone somewhere who still believes? This is not the case for the other countries. In Poland I was very impressed, I was doing the Ravel concerto and I saw a young generation in the concert hall and I was really happy. The UK is special, it's unique. I couldn't tell you that I see the same thing in my own country or anywhere else.

I must ask you about writing music because you do that as well, I don't know how you find the time, but you do. From where do you get inspiration to write?

That's going to be the killer part of the interview...the composer section. I'll be honest; I have no pretences to be a good composer. I have composed from the age of 16/17 because when life was difficult I was very very poor when I finished my studies in Paris. My situation was dramatic to the point that I almost died of hunger. That was the situation. So composing for me was a way to escape. It was my liberation and I have to tell you, I love the great music that has been written for the cinema, so that will surprise you. One of the movies that is in my head and still for me is one of the most beautiful movies is the English film 'Ryan's Daughter' Maurice Jarre did the music and it stars Sarah Miles, this is probably my main inspiration. There's a scene in this movie where Sarah Miles is in a kind of tavern and there's a crazy guy, and the music starts. The music is very important. My inspiration for composing is not very classical. I compose the way I feel, my themes are romantic.

I did start to put my composition on CDs, because one of my friends said I should. After my first CD I was asked to do a second and third and a fourth. Now they have sold a lot, as I'm talking to you now my compositions are playing with orchestras all over the world and I am surprised, and I'm not trying to be falsely modest. I do not understand exactly why because it's not difficult for me to compose but I'm certainly not trying to say I compose like Brahms or Beethoven, far from it. When I see something beautiful it inspires me, people that love me, I believe strongly in friendship, I believe in honesty, I believe in the old fashioned vision of life. I believe that a friend is very important, I believe in faithfulness.

Talking to you it's clear you've come on a real musical journey from that 4 or 5 year old who began to play in his parents' house, to somebody who had not enough to eat in Paris to somebody who has sold 100,000 copies of just one composer and who has a tribute coming out to his compositions. Do you find yourself very content now in your classical music life?

Content..? Well I find myself very lucky to be able to make a living from my passion but to be honest I don't have the pretence that I can make a difference but I still believe that if you can in life you

should try to make a difference. Of course making a living from music is fantastic but above that for me what I take most pride in is when I go to schools and I see the kids. Sometimes they're really tough schools for kids in trouble. I play some Schubert and those kids don't know this music and after they listen there's silence, and this is a true story because it was filmed and I said to the kids ' You have to explain something to me, have you ever heard this piece before? You've just heard, there's 100 of you and I hear no noise. Why? ' And there's a voice of a little kid who stands up and says ' Our lives are difficult and with this piece of music it's clear the composer understands us. ' And this made me proud. Success is something else, you know, success is good but there's a proverb 'If you die and you have one friend you are rich'. You know that famous BBC interview with Richter and it's one of his last, you can find it on YouTube the man interviewing him says 'Are you happy with your life?' And there is a pause and Richter says 'I'm not a good man.' I would love to have been there and to ask him what he meant. At the end of his life Richter wasn't sure that his piano playing was the best, still who wouldn't love to play like him? So of course I'm going to try to make the most of my music but above that music is not something special, and this is what I love about C Music TV, it's like music is inside the society, music is in everyone's life it's not apart from any of the people who listen to us. It's more accurate than we think. I'm sure of something, Bach B Minor mass in 200 hundred years we will still be in a complete state of shock when we hear it. In 300 or 400 hundred years that The Bruckner Symphony, the mass in E Minor will still amaze people.

[The most difficult question....why is most important to you?](#)

Music is important to me because it heals when you realize that life is difficult. Whatever happens in your life if someone gives you the key to classical music, this key will be useful forever. When you lose someone, when you fall in love, when you've been betrayed, when anything happens the key is Bruckner, Mahler, Schumann, the Quintet, Brahms, Chopin. This key is more wonderful than any pills during depression. Classical music is the key to hope.

*For further information on Alain Lefevre please visit his website:*

[www.alainlefevre.com](http://www.alainlefevre.com)

*Alain was also recently named AIB International personality of the year for the radio show he hosts on Espace Musique.*

*You can read a review of Alain's recent concert at Cadogan Hall with the London Mozart Players featuring the music of André Mathieu here:*

[http://www.classicalsource.com/db\\_control/db\\_concert\\_review.php?id=8627](http://www.classicalsource.com/db_control/db_concert_review.php?id=8627)