

Classical **MUSIC**

CRYSTAL BALL

Top CEOs look to
the future

ANNIVERSARIES

Britten, Verdi,
Wagner and more

ROYAL PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY

200 Years of service

Fighting fit

Janina Fialkowska



R.



I feel I'm playing better,
working more intensively
on fewer pieces -
Janina Fialkowska

Key inspirations

Janina Fialkowska's story is extraordinary. In spite of a serious health setback ten years ago, at 61 she remains one of the most sought-after international concert pianists. **Jessica Duchen** meets this force to be reckoned with as she prepares for a her UK tour with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

From competition winner and protégée of Arthur Rubinstein to cancer survivor and self-reinventor par excellence, the story of Janina Fialkowska has been a rollercoaster, to say the least – and she is adamant that her music-making is all the richer for it. Now 61, she is, along with an extraordinary crop of her Canadian compatriots including Marc-Andre Hamelin, Louis Lortie and Angela Hewitt, one of the most sought-after pianists on the international concert circuit, and her artistry continues to progress apace.

She is about to tour the UK with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, performing the Piano Concerto No 2 by Chopin, perhaps the composer with whom she has been most strongly associated. Her Wigmore Hall lunchtime concert in April is also dedicated to his works, and in the recording studio she has been setting down the first 29 of the complete mazurkas, with the remaining 28 to follow in June. Her Polish roots, she believes, may have given her a natural affinity for Chopin's idiom; this plus the mentorship of Rubinstein is an enviable combination.

The truth, though, is that Fialkowska is fortunate to be here at all. It is now ten years since she first noticed a troublesome swelling in her upper arm. It turned out to be a rare form of cancer in the muscle. She faced potentially devastating surgery and the possibility that she would no longer be able to play the piano. After initial treatment, the cancer recurred in her lungs three times; she went through six major operations between 2002 and 2007. It is with an unimaginable sense of relief that she declares, 'I've now been clear of it for five years, so you're looking at a very happy person.'

The experience has certainly not left her unchanged. On the physical level, she is now unable to practise for more than three hours a day – but feels this is 'a blessing' that has forced her to take a new approach to her work: 'It's a more concentrated way of practising, but also it restricts my repertoire, and I like that very much. I feel I'm playing better, working more intensively on fewer pieces. When you're younger you accept everything: you want to make a career and you don't *think*. But now I always think carefully about what I'm taking on. There are no regrets, other than a couple of Liszt works that I can no longer play. On the other hand, I've discovered a whole different side of Liszt; he wrote thousands of pieces.'

Her entire attitude towards music has transformed, too: 'It is that much more precious. It was always important to me; now it's doubly so. I think music is therapeutic,' she adds. 'During my radiation I'd ask them to play me CDs of Murray Perahia playing Mozart concertos, or Rubinstein's French album. I'd play these over and over again. The technicians in the hospital would never have dreamed of it, but now, years afterwards, they're still playing these old CDs because they're so therapeutic! I didn't realise that before. I don't think I ever took things for granted, but today when I go on stage and I can actually play a concert, I'm very grateful. What I feel is mostly gratitude.'

Previously celebrated for her interpretations of war-horse virtuoso piano repertoire, today she has turned instead to Schubert and Mozart. Her latest recording is her first devoted to the former: two sonatas – the so-called 'little' A major and the G major – and a selection of impromptus. She has also re-

“When I go on stage and I can actually play a concert, I’m very grateful. What I feel is mostly gratitude”

corded two Mozart piano concertos, K415 and K449, with accompaniment on string quartet and double bass from the Chamber Players of Canada, a sequel to their disc of the concertos K413 and 414.

For Fialkowska, the hard work began in childhood. She was born in Montreal to a Polish father and Canadian mother and started to play the piano when she was five. Was she pushed? ‘I was pushed, but I’m grateful to have been pushed,’ she insists. ‘And I was pushed to practise, not to play concerts.’

‘I wasn’t a typical child prodigy. My mother wanted me to play the piano really well, but she couldn’t care less about my career until later on. So that was wonderful. But I did practise for five hours a day when I was 11. Today that might be called child abuse – but the fact remains that if you want to be a concert pianist you have to do that. That’s probably why there are fewer North American concert pianists these days – because they’re allowed to play soccer instead.’

Not that her rise to fame was free of stress. After studying at the Paris conservatoire and the Juilliard in New York, in 1974 she won the inaugural Arthur Rubinstein Master Piano Competition in Israel – an event that brought her to the attention of Rubinstein himself. With the prize and his championship to back her up, her career turned stratospheric. After a couple of years of intense pressure, in which Fialkowska ‘went from having no concerts straight into this career he created for me,’ she had ‘a sort of nervous collapse. He was so concerned. He was the happiest man in the world and he couldn’t quite understand why I was so frightened of playing!’

Everything good we have heard about Rubinstein is true, she says. ‘He was generous, funny, a great raconteur and extremely caring. Everything was exciting for him.’ The great pianist turned blind at the age of 90: ‘It didn’t bother him: he went on with life, he just didn’t play concerts any more. He strode about! We’d be on the sidewalk and he’d say “Is there anything ahead?” I’d say “No”, and he’d go rushing

off and I’d think “Oh God”. But then, one day in Paris, I found him sitting in a darkened room with tears in his eyes. It was so unlike him. I started telling him about what I’d been doing, trying to be funny, but feeling very awkward. He patted my hand and said: “Nina, it’s all right – I’m *enjoying* being miserable!” That was him in a nutshell.

‘I learned so much from his piano playing – being aware of the audience, projecting the sound and the structure of the pieces, the rhythm and so on. But also to meet a human being who enjoyed every aspect of life, even the hideous aspects because it was all part of life – that helped me a lot. And thinking of this helped me during all my troubles with the illness. I’m not like that – I’m a Slavic melancholic! I wish everybody could have met him and I wish the music world could have him now, because he was such a force for good. He believed in putting the composer first. He was extremely humble. He would never put himself anywhere near the rank of the composer. He never asked for big fees, unlike the crazies these days who bankrupt orchestras with theirs, he was always generous in giving to the public and he believed in beauty of sound.’

It was even indirectly thanks to Rubinstein that her first shoulder operation took place the way that it did. ‘The surgeons asked me what kind of motion I need. They thought I needed a Lang Lang type of movement because that’s what they see on tv. I said that no, Rubinstein sat straight and had a very direct, honest style – it was all designed to create a beautiful sound, it wasn’t to draw attention to himself. The surgeon was amazed – he said “Is that all you need?” So that’s what I got! My arm is completely handicapped. But I can play the piano. And that’s fine with me.’

Last year, Fialkowska was awarded the Governor General’s Performing Arts Award, the highest honour in Canada for lifetime achievement in this field. ‘I’m the first woman instrumentalist to receive it and only the second instrumentalist ever, so I’m tickled pink!’ she laughs.

Wigmore Hall audiences lost her planned recital at the time because she was obliged to travel to Canada for a three-day celebration. The London concert has been reinstated for this April; and we can expect to see a lot more of her in the UK in the year ahead, not least a benefit concert for the British Red Cross at The Sage, Gateshead.

Her tale is inspiring and humbling to say the least. Perhaps she has inherited Rubinstein’s mantle as a ‘force for good’ in the music world. **CM**

Janina Fialkowska plays Chopin’s piano concerto No 2 on tour with the RPO, 23 - 27 January. Her Wigmore Hall lunchtime recital is on 8 April

www.janinafialkowska.com



PETER SCHAAF