

## REWRITING THE RULES

### A champion of Polish music, Janina Fialkowska still regards Chopin as her guiding influence

The works of Frédéric Chopin are filling concert programmes in the composer's 200th anniversary year. But one of the highlights of 'Chopin 200' is the return of Chopin specialist Janina Fialkowska to the international touring scene. Three concerts in London this month will be followed by Germany, the US and her native Canada. 'Every time I play Chopin, I find something new,' she says. 'And he means so much to the audience – even now, when I perform in the US, 10 or 20 Polish people come backstage to say what Chopin still means to them.'

Though she was born in Montréal, Fialkowska has always felt an affinity with Poland and has championed the works of composers such as Lutoslawski, Panufnik and Mozetich throughout her career. 'I find modern-day concert planners to be so boring!' she confesses. 'I wish they'd be more bold in their programming – there are so many good Polish composers and works to introduce.' Her father was Polish and her focus on Chopin also led to an awareness of Polish culture: 'He's a very Nationalist composer, born at a time when Poland didn't exist as a country – it was partitioned by Prussia, Austria and Russia – and he became an icon of protest and of Poland itself. His works very subtly incorporate the rhythm of Poland, and Polish folk music, and while his Polonaises continued to be broadcast by Polish radio during the war, people knew Poland still hadn't fallen.'

'Indirectly, Chopin had a huge indirect influence on Polish contemporary music – Karol Szymanowski drew a lot of influence from his work, and from Polish folk music, and I think you can certainly hear that in the work of mid-20th century composers.'

It was while listening to a performance of Chopin's First Piano Concerto, given by Arthur Rubinstein in Montréal when she was 12, that 'a light bulb went on in my head' that told her to become a concert pianist. 'I'd been playing since I was four, but when I saw audience members with tears in their eyes, it stirred something in me and I realised a musician was a conduit between a genius and the public.'

Along with Chopin, Rubinstein was Fialkowska's greatest influence. After she came second at the inaugural Rubinstein Piano



Janina Fialkowska  
Photo: © Michael Schilhansl  
Interview: Christian Lloyd

Competition in 1974 (losing out to Emanuel Ax), the pianist became her mentor and helped to launch her international career. 'Wherever he performed, he insisted that I be given a concert at the same venue the following year. That came to 48 concerts a year. So I went from almost nothing to having an international career! And I learned so much from him – communication, being aware of the public at all times, professionalism on the road, and having a sense of humour when it all went wrong.'

Fialkowska's current tour marks her full comeback after treatment for cancer in her arm. 'I couldn't move the muscles in my arm at all,' she recalls. 'My fingers were completely unaffected, but I had to practise by holding my hand up to the keyboard with my other arm.' Groundbreaking surgery in 2002 gave her 'one muscle that now does the work of three', which was followed by a process of relearning the movement she needed. 'In one way it was a blessing in disguise,' she notes. 'Originally I didn't pay much attention to the left-hand parts, but having to relearn them made me discover more about them.' It has meant less Brahms and Liszt in her repertoire, but Fialkowska has turned towards Schubert, 'who I'd always avoided as I felt he needed more maturity – which I think I've gained'.

*Janina Fialkowska will be performing a Chopin recital at Cadogan Hall on 25 May, followed by Chopin's First Piano Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra on 27 May*