

# Bax, blizzards and babies

Margaret Fingerhut talks to  
Keith Clarke about her adventures  
in musical motherhood



Difficult decisions:  
Margaret Fingerhut

MALCOLM CROWTHERS

Is there no limit to the indignities a piano soloist may have to endure? Just imagine this. There was Margaret Fingerhut at the Barbican, happily playing a Mozart concerto, when at the beginning of the third movement someone punched her in the stomach. And the audience didn't notice a thing.

The person packing the punch was her baby, Samuel, then still waiting in the wings. It was Margaret Fingerhut's last concert before her confinement. Samuel made his debut on 5 November. (The world was suitably impressed and everyone let off fireworks.)

The arrival of a new baby is a

time of big decisions for any woman with a career. For a musician with a public following to uphold, the decisions are that much more complicated. No-one trying the mother/performer juggling act can hope to get it 100% right. There are compromises in all directions. Margaret Fingerhut knew from the beginning that she wanted to be back on the road and in the recording studio as soon as possible. What she has discovered is that in some ways her new situation has helped to focus her mind more clearly on her music.

'I have a nanny who comes in for three hours every morning so

I practise then. In the past I had the day stretching out endlessly to practise but if it wasn't going well or I didn't feel right, breakfast tended to go on a bit or I'd read the paper, have coffee breaks and everything. Now, whether I'm in the mood or not I just knuckle down to it. So, I'm a much more efficient worker now.'

A difficult labour left her unable to practise until the beginning of January, with a tour in the diary for the following month. And of course she had chosen a difficult programme with many new pieces.

But Margaret Fingerhut has never shrunk from a challenge, and when we spoke in early March she had returned from the tour with flying colours (and a baby with 1,200 miles on his clock).

The challenge was greater than audiences would have known. The tour coincided with snow blizzards on the roads, the car got stuck in a snow drift and had to be towed out, then it was badly vandalised in Durham, the ignition ripped out with a crowbar. Beside all that, the concerts might have seemed the least of Margaret Fingerhut's worries. And as she says, 'I thought it was going to be interesting, having not had more than three hours' sleep for a long time, but quite frankly after going through the birth and bringing up baby, a recital was something of a doddle.'

It is early days to say how family and career will get along together, but the baby has brought at least one unexpected bonus. 'Having Samuel has put everything else into perspective and while my career is still very important to me I'm not getting so uptight about dates that may or may not come in. I think it's helped me to focus on what I actually want to do, rather than what might be expected of me.'

That is the sort of language to raise an agent's eyebrows, which is perhaps why Fingerhut has decided to turn her back on agencies for the present and work with an assistant. 'It's quite a difficult decision to go down that route but in the past I have been pressurised too much by an agent and things have not gone well as a consequence. I know how I work best. I felt I wanted to take more control.'

Fingerhut is not alone in going her own way. It is a decision which has worked well for Kathryn Stott, suggesting that

perhaps more pianists will react against the pressures of towing the agency line. 'They work for you and they get you dates,' says Fingerhut, 'and if you turn round and say you don't fancy doing that one they are understandably not too pleased about it.'

With her new independence, Margaret Fingerhut is consolidating her reputation as a pianist who is always coming up with largely unheard repertoire. She also continues to do her bit for new music and her Purcell Room recital on 24 April offers the world premiere of a work dedicated to her, a piano sonata by the 25-year-old James Francis Brown.

'I think he's got a great future,' says Margaret Fingerhut. And is it a tricky piece? 'Yes, it is,' she says. 'In fact I'm thinking of asking him to go and play it for me! When I was practising it while I was pregnant it occurred to me that there were only three people in the world who knew this piece inside out – the composer, myself, and the baby. I imagined the baby arriving and I'd be playing the sonata and he'd say no, that's F sharp there!'

The rest of the Purcell Room programme, all 20th-century English, has the third sonata of Bax ('I'm a great Bax freak'), Herbert Howells' *Sarum Sketches* ('A really sweet set of pieces, a sort of English *Children's Corner*') and Kenneth Leighton's *Four Romantic Pieces* ('The last pieces he wrote – very challenging, especially for someone with small hands, full of ninths and things').

Margaret Fingerhut will also be recording the programme for Chandos, together with a sonata that Paul Spicer wrote for her. And Herbert Howells fans will be pleased to learn that they are getting a CD wholly dedicated to their hero – another laudable Chandos project, since the piano music is very little known. 'It's all incredibly different,' says Fingerhut. 'If you dip in you wouldn't guess the composer.' Meanwhile, in the shops now is a CD of 'Tchaikovsky and his friends', 78 minutes of largely unknown gems.

So followers of this most engaging of pianists can rest assured that she is not lost to the nappy pail. 'I actually feel more laid back about things career-wise,' she says. 'But at the same time having Samuel has really confirmed that I really want to carry on playing the piano.' ■