

Is there life beyond the Liszt Sonata and the Grieg Concerto? In this and the next issue of *CM* Keith Clarke meets two pianists who are making their mark outside the confines of the standard repertoire, one looking back and one looking forward

When she stepped down onto Prince Consort Road at the end of her studies at the Royal College of Music, Margaret Fingerhut faced the fiercely competitive world of the solo pianist with but one or two concertos under her belt. It was, she says, not exactly a flying start for a would-be soloist. Not that she was a slouch at college. She put in as much hard graft as the best of them. But very early on she decided there was more to life than the Liszt Sonata and the Grieg Concerto and found herself increasingly drawn to works some way wide of the mainstream.

It started with a love of chamber music. Her teachers must have been a little bemused to find her turning up at solo piano classes carrying accompaniments and quintets. In her last year she encountered a Russian pianist who took her sternly to one side and said: 'Look, you owe it to yourself to do a little bit of serious practice on solo repertoire.' For that last year Margaret Fingerhut followed the advice, abandoning most of the chamber music and knocking down to the standard repertoire. But when she started giving concerts, her natural inclination was to delve into piano music by the composers whose chamber works she had come to know.

'I'd spent so much time playing chamber music, especially with wind players, and their standard repertoire is by names that pianists



MALCOLM CROWTHERS

Margaret Fingerhut: 'People could be gently persuaded to find more excitement in their music'

## Out of bounds

in general have never heard of.' That was how she began to get a name for surprising audiences with pieces from the backwaters of the piano repertoire.

Convincing audiences is one thing. Concert promoters are traditionally more hard to please. But Fingerhut has a way of slipping unusual repertoire quietly in by the back door. 'So long as promoters

see a couple of magical names, Beethoven or Chopin, in the programme, they don't mind if there are also a couple of other names that might not be quite so familiar. You can assure them and say: Oh, they're very small pieces. You don't exactly tell them how long it's going to be. Most of the programme will be well familiar to their audiences and they use the

Beethoven or Chopin to bring people in. When I've got the audience there captive I surprise them and usually, 90% of the time, really entertain them. People do come back and of course they've enjoyed Beethoven, Chopin, but what they invariably say to me afterwards is: Oh, I've never heard of so-and-so and isn't it lovely?'

With so much unheard music in her box of tricks, does she ever give 100% 'straight' recitals? 'If by straight you mean Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert, Debussy, whatever, I don't think I ever have. I might have, but maybe their unusual works or works not often played – things like Tchaikovsky pieces. We actually hardly hear any Tchaikovsky solo music.'

But recitals are not the whole story of a pianist's life, and Margaret Fingerhut has less success in convincing promoters to take on lesser-known concertos. 'As far as recitals go I think I must have found the magic formula because my career built quite happily on that. I've had a lot of reinventions. But when it comes to concertos of course it's a very different matter because there the concerns of box office are much more manifold and I think orchestras and concert promoters are not going to risk a 50-minute Bax concerto they've never heard before.'

So this is one battle that Fingerhut is still fighting, with no signs of winning, she says. 'I just get no satisfaction at all from doing the sort of date where you turn up in the afternoon with half an hour to quickly run through the Tchaik concerto and just hack it out in the evening. It's very sad that that is most people's experience of classical music. I don't know if it's to do with the marketing but they get very frightened by the unknown. I wouldn't want things to go into mega-hype but people could be gently persuaded to find more excitement in their music.'

Recitals make up about two thirds of Fingerhut's working life, and it would be an oversimplification to say that the other third provided her

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with little musical stimulation. 'In the main the recital work provides the most satisfying experiences but that's not to say my concerto work is all negative. But obviously sometimes I do have to grit my teeth and play a certain concerto within a certain set-up which I'd honestly rather not be doing.'

If the repertoire freedom of recital work clocks up the greatest score on the job satisfaction meter, this is reflected in Fingerhut's recording work for Chandos, where she is in the happy position of working with a company which shows the same admirable interest in lesser-known repertoire. 'It's wonderful to have a company that's game to try anything,' she says. The other side of the coin is that she may find herself asked to record little-known masterpieces like the Grieg Concerto, but she takes that in her stride. The Grieg came up when she recorded Stanford's second Piano Concerto and Concert variations on 'Down among the dead men' with Vernon Handley and the Ulster Orchestra, who also wanted to record an all-Grieg programme. But with goodies like the Stanford and the complete piano works of Dukas, both recently released, Fingerhut feels she can live with the Grieg.

'At the moment I'm making about two records a year with Chandos. In the case of concerto repertoire it's naturally more what they want me to do and they were the ones who asked me to record the Moeran and Stanford and Bax, which I was extremely happy to do. With most of the recital repertoire I'm more or less allowed a free hand. I think if they had strong doubts about a repertoire suggestion they would probably veto it but they've not yet actually said no to anything I've come up with.'

What she comes up with provides a frequent keep-fit class for the long-suffering librarians at Westminster's Central Music Library where they are probably still rubbing in the Fry's Balsam from endless trips to the basement when her recording of music by the Mighty Handful was in the making. The idea for that recording came up when the music enthusiast Edward Johnson showed her a book of 25 preludes of Cui. 'Some of them were very attractive but I didn't quite think they merited an entire project and I thought: What about the piano music of Rimsky-Korsakov, Musorgsky? I knew *Pictures*

but didn't know the smaller pieces. And Balakirev - I knew nothing but *Islamey* and the Second Scherzo.

'I went to the Central Music Library and got everything out that they had by these composers, played through everything and decided what would make the best pieces. The moment I go into the Central Music Library the people there know that I'm going to get them going down to the basement. It's always stuff that sits in the basement because no-one ever wants to take it out.'

The fact that she is virtually alone in sifting through the dusty drawers is a constant source of wonder to Margaret Fingerhut. 'I just find it absolutely amazing that it's not a natural thing for everyone to have a curiosity about all this other music that was written and seeing why some of it fell by the wayside. Was it deservedly so?' In some cases, yes. Fingerhut is the first to admit that there's a lot of music sitting untouched in boxes with very good reason and she is well aware of the need to sort the wheat from the chaff, a process that involves an explorative spirit and pretty good sight-reading, too.

If sight-reading is a useful asset in the workshop, what does Margaret Fingerhut see as the strengths of her playing when it gets to the shop window? 'Well, I'm not going to talk about my weaknesses or we'll be here all year. Of the things I'm confident about, apart from the fact of being able to present an interesting, varied recital, the other thing I know I do very well is the actual presentation of it. I don't just sit down anonymously and play. I like to talk to the audiences where possible, where the size of hall permits it, and it really does go down a treat, as they say. I think that aspect is actually very important nowadays because of the competition that live performers have with home entertainment. People don't want to leave the comfort of their armchairs. If they have made the effort to come out and hear something live you've got to give them something different that they wouldn't have at home putting on their favourite recordings.'

'If you want me to be a bit more specific about pianistic things the

one thing I strive to bring into my playing is clarity of texture, however tough the going, however murky the textures. This is certainly true in a lot of the late Romantic repertoire I tend to play and the early 20th-century British repertoire which has got a million and one notes too many. My aim is to pare the textures down and bring out the clarity of individual lines.' Is that a job for the right foot? 'Well it gives the right foot a lot to think about. But also when I'm studying works I'm a great believer in not just ploughing through but in breaking them down into individual lines. I was first shown this tactic by Cyril Smith who insisted when you learnt Bach fugues that not only did you memorise each hand separately so that you could do a concert performance of just one hand, but you should be able to follow the course of each individual line within the fugue.'

**B**ut there is more to life than following the ins and outs of counterpoint. Ask Margaret Fingerhut how much of her life is taken up by the career and her answer is disarmingly honest: 'A bit too much. The chief drawback to one's sanity in choosing the path that I have is the necessity for extra hours for preparing unusual repertoire in addition to the standard repertoire. I hope the balance will be a little better achieved in the future - I am still learning standard repertoire because of my unorthodox student career.'

One way of keeping things in perspective is evidenced by a well-worn pair of walking boots. They have already carried the pianist up a Swiss mountain and by the time this appears she will have set out on a 190-mile coast-to-coast walk from the North Sea to the Irish Sea. 'Walking is very therapeutic because it gets me right away from civilisation, music, everything. I think if I went and lay on a beach somewhere I would start worrying and start going over music as I lay there.'

Concert giving is a great energy sapper, says Fingerhut, and the grand tour à la Kathryn Stott is not for her. 'Every musician is different. I'm not the sort of performer

that can play seven nights in a row. I find it very difficult just to do two nights in a row because after I've done one performance it really takes me at least 24 hours to get going again and it's a great effort for me to crank myself up again immediately the following evening. The adrenalin always gets you going but sometimes if I'm on a consecutive run I might be sitting there an hour before the performance really quite vacant. It's only literally that last-minute surge of adrenalin when you're in the dressing room and everything starts pumping again and you think: Ah, hell, I'm getting nervous.'

With or without the adrenalin, Fingerhut has no shortage of projects lined up for the future. 'There's a never ending ambition within music. Even at this point I think I've amassed enough unusual repertoire that interests me to keep me going for quite a few years. To be a pianist is a very lucky thing because there is so much worthwhile music to explore.' In January Fingerhut gave the world premiere of a sonata written for her by Paul Spicer and she says she would like to find time for more contemporary music. 'I hang my head a little bit there. I try and do my bit. I've got so involved with off-the-beaten-track but I do my best to try and learn at least one ultra-contemporary piece a year.'

'The real thing I'd like to indulge myself in is more chamber music. It's ironic that that's how my life in music started yet it's something that's been absolutely relegated to the occasional pleasurable play-through with friends.'

The next major record release chalked up on the Chandos board is a double album of the piano music of Joseph Suk, not available until some time next year. It was to have been a single CD released about now but having laid down some 90 minutes' music Fingerhut was so unable to decide what to cut that she persuaded Chandos to make it a double. 'Some of the later works are very difficult to sight-read, especially if you're not familiar with the style, but when I was trying these pieces out, even on a very meagre sight-reading attempt I was incredibly moved. After that I'm told that Novak is an even better composer for the piano than Suk so I can't wait to get to the Central Music Library and send them trooping down to the basement once more.' □