

Tafelmusik

A CHAT WITH JANINA FIALKOWSKA



You have a personal Tafelmusik connection that extends back more than a decade. Can you tell us about that?

I do have a rather unusual connection to Tafelmusik! A long time ago, I worked with the conductor Bruno Weil in Glasgow, Scotland. Bruno had a friend, Harry Oesterle, who was, at that time, running a festival in Germany called *Klang und Raum*. I met Harry through Bruno and Harry is now my husband. I turned up in Irsee at the festival in those early days and saw that the Orchestra-in-Residence was Tafelmusik, so I met them there for the first time – in Germany, in a little Bavarian village, not in Canada! I got to be friends with a lot of the core members and that's when the idea first came into my head: will there ever be a way that I can play with this wonderful ensemble?

How did you track down the Pleyel piano you will be playing for these performances?

When I make a recording, I often choose to record in Quebec and always insist on a certain piano technician being there with me. His name is Marcel Lapointe and he lives just outside of Quebec City. I was making my *Chopin Recital* recording up at Domaine Forget in 2008, and

Marcel was there every minute of the day checking on the piano. We were talking during one of the breaks and he said, “you know I have this Pleyel piano from 1848 and I would really like you to try it.” Well, I nearly fainted, because for all these years I have been trying to figure out some way of playing with Tafelmusik. This will be my first time performing Chopin on a period instrument.

What are the biggest differences between playing a Pleyel, a modern piano and an earlier fortepiano?

I have only performed on a fortepiano once before. I played a Beethoven piano concerto with a period ensemble in the United States, and it wasn't a very happy experience for me. I feel that to play on a fortepiano you actually have to understand the instrument – it's different! I was always pushing to make big crescendos, which I found that I couldn't do on a fortepiano, though an expert could. It's a different instrument – it's not as responsive as a modern piano and I can't do all the things I was trained to do.

But a Pleyel piano from 1848 is something completely different – that's why I was so excited. In the early 1820s in Paris, Pleyel and Erard – the two big companies that still exist today – basically created the blueprint for the modern piano. The main difference between the 1848 piano and a Pleyel piano that I might get now from the family factory are the materials used to make the instrument. Of course the metals used in 1848 were not as strong, and overall they're more fragile instruments. But it's surprising the volume I can get out of this instrument. There are other advantages to this Pleyel piano: it's easy to play – extremely easy on the fingers – so my interpretation can be based much more on subtle effects. I can add many, many colors with this piano that I can't find on a modern piano.

Would Chopin himself have played an instrument like this?

Yes, and playing on this piano inspires me for that reason. The first time I tried it, I thought, “my goodness, Chopin was playing this very instrument or something very close to it!” – this was his preferred instrument. When Chopin arrived in Paris, one of the first people he met was Camille Pleyel, who was not only a maker of pianos but also a composer and a very fine pianist. Chopin said that no one played Mozart better than Pleyel, and Pleyel thought that Chopin was absolutely the most wonderful thing that ever existed, so hand-in-hand they developed this instrument. Just imagine: Pleyel was creating this instrument for Chopin to his specifications, so this is EXACTLY the instrument that Chopin loved best to perform and compose on. Until Chopin died, Pleyel provided him with a concert piano, which he had in his apartment or wherever he played.



It's very, very exciting for me to play on this piano and I took to it like a duck to water – I didn't have any problems at all. The width of the keys is slightly narrower than on a modern instrument, but that didn't bother me in the slightest, and I just had such fun playing on it. But as I say, the Pleyel is the forerunner of the pianos we have now, so the leap that I had to make backwards was not so huge. In fact, I wouldn't even say it's backwards, it's

sort of sideways! When I first went to Quebec to try it, I had the most glorious day playing on this piano – endless Chopin. And what's wonderful about it too is that the piano belongs to Marcel Lapointe, and who better to look after it? It's in perfect shape.

Will Marcel Lapointe be travelling with the instrument?

Yes he will, he'll be mothering the instrument because it's fragile. It will go out of tune more easily than a modern instrument does. He has his own special truck to transport it and he was adamant that the concerts take place before the middle of October, because he won't move the instrument in the cold weather.

The other thing about this piano is that the veneer on the case is made from a type of Cuban mahogany that no longer exists. In Europe in the 1830s and 1840s they discovered this wood and used it for a lot of furniture, the pianos, everything, so eventually the species was basically wiped out. It's such a beautiful instrument. When I saw it for the first time my jaw dropped.

Can you tell us more about the Pleyel piano's sound and what differences the audiences might perceive?

I don't know how to put it, but it has a liquid kind of sound. It's not thin at all, but there is a kind of fragility to the sound, a kind of sweetness or delicacy like a very fine French perfume, or a wonderful Fragonard painting. It's an elegant sound, a subtle sound. With the arrangement we're using for ten instruments and in the setting of the church, the sound will not be lost – it will be very clear. The Pleyel has a surprisingly big sound and actually produces quite a lot of volume. But everything I've ever read about Chopin confirms that he himself preferred a gentler sound – that's how he played. It's going to be a gentle Chopin E Minor. I'll put plenty of passion into it, but if anyone's looking for fireworks, they're not

going to get them. They're going to get passion, but they're also going to get subtlety. I'm going to try and find the voice of the piano and make it sound as beautiful as I can.

It's funny, initially I approached the whole project with some reservations! On my way to Quebec to try the Pleyel, I thought, "it's going to be a honky-tonk, it's going to have a thin sound, but I want to do this because it's my chance to play with Tafelmusik." I should have trusted myself more, and I did trust Marcel enough to go ahead. And then, I had this revelation playing on that beautiful instrument, which is also perfect for Trinity-St. Paul's - it would be lost in a bigger hall. The church is perfect, and with the ten instruments, it will be just the way Chopin would have liked it.

Chopin would have played it in the salons and in concert also. This was the piano he preferred. For students and for practising he had an Erard, but the Pleyel was for performing and for himself. Interestingly enough, Liszt preferred the Erard because it had a bigger sound.

How did this arrangement of the Chopin E-Minor Concerto by Sylvia Maessen come about?

Sylvia is Dutch and extremely well known in Europe as an arranger, transcriber and composer, and we were just lucky that we had conductor friends who had asked her to arrange things for them. It was actually my husband Harry's idea. Both of us had read in different books that Chopin had expressed a wish to have an arrangement of both his piano concertos with ten instruments accompanying the piano. I chose this concerto because Chopin had played it in Rouen on the same programme as the Spohr Nonet, which is also on the Tafelmusik programme. Chopin played the E-Minor concerto with the same instruments used in the Nonet - that was nine musicians and I'm playing with ten, an extra violin. After that concert, there was correspondence between Chopin and his publisher mentioning how great it was, and his publisher pushed him to write that arrangement, but he never did. Chopin wasn't a well man, and I don't think he particularly liked writing for other instruments - I think he wished someone else would do it. I'm just speculating here, and maybe he was mustering all his energies just to write his new pieces. The intent was there though, and I'm always looking for new ways and excuses to play the Chopin concertos because I love them so much. I just performed the new arrangements over the summer with modern instruments at festivals in Ottawa and Parry Sound.

Was there a point at which you went back to Sylvia Maessen to tweak some passages?

Definitely! Composers (or most of them that I know) are very lenient with us performers, and

if we feel there's something to be changed they say, "go right ahead." Since Sylvia couldn't be there in Ottawa where we first played it at the *Music and Beyond Festival*, there were maybe four or five places where we switched around a few things. It was just a question of orchestration and which instrument took what line. And since we had the original orchestral version with us, we were able to compare and decide what worked better. Her arrangement is absolutely wonderful because it's very high-spirited and quite jolly. I had never associated the Chopin concertos with "jolly" before, but somehow she brought out the youthful spirit of the concerto.

We have to remember that the Chopin we all think of – the exile, the dying tubercular man who had an affair with George Sand – was a sad person who missed his family. This was not the person who wrote the concertos. The Chopin who wrote the concertos was an 18, 19, or 20 year-old, full of health, with his family around him supporting him, with all his friends, having already been on concert tours outside of Poland. There is a kind of joyful quality to this piece that Sylvia brings out in the arrangement and I'm thrilled about it. She hasn't changed anything – the notes are exactly the same. She has just orchestrated it for ten instruments. The winds and the strings are brought to the forefront, so it's like having ten soloists along with the piano.

How did your own approach change, if at all, as you prepared for the Tafelmusik performances?

Interesting. I've been playing these pieces since I was a teenager, and this year in particular I've been playing them a lot. A lot of people ask, "well, how do you keep it fresh?" But you know, they're in my fingers wonderfully, and the week before a performance, it's the same approach for Tafelmusik as it would be anywhere: I take the piece home and start from the beginning again. I don't practise it *too* much, but I practise it extremely carefully. For the Tafelmusik performances though, we have a lot of rehearsal, which is great because I have to reacquaint myself with this piano. I have to "learn" this piano, I have to learn the soul of this piano, and I also need to forget about the modern instrument. And this is not like any music that Tafelmusik has ever played!

I have played the Chopin concertos with a modern string quintet in several countries, and I've noticed that each concerto needed at least eight or nine hours of rehearsal, because suddenly the string players realize that there's actually a lot for them to do. Whereas when I play it with an orchestra, there's less for the musicians to do and they get bored. The Chopin concertos are renowned for being very difficult for the pianist and the conductor, but the orchestra has not much to do. So in a chamber version, suddenly the musicians are soloists, and it's very difficult and requires a lot of work. A lot of rubato and freedom of tempo is

involved, so we really have to play as an ensemble.

You have another Tafelmusik connection coming up with Ivars Taurins, the Director of the Chamber Choir.

That's right, I'll be performing a new Chopin-inspired piece with the Calgary Philharmonic in November and Ivars is conducting. The piece is called *Prelude Variations* and was written for me by the composer John Burge, who is based in Kingston. I have played a lot of Canadian music, mainly when I was doing the Piano Six project. I commissioned Canadian pieces to take along on the tour, and one that I particularly liked was by John Burge. Recently, I've had to cut back on learning new repertoire because I can't practise as many hours anymore, so I limit myself to pieces that I really want to learn. When John came along with this suggestion that he write a special piece for me for the Chopin bicentenary, I said yes immediately. I've been working on it quite a bit, and it's turned out to be a fabulous piece, a real piano concerto. *Prelude Variations* is very well written for the piano, and I can actually use my talents here, not just my musical talents but my technical talents, and that makes it that much more interesting for me. The piece has a wonderful climax at the end, beautiful slow passages and it's accessible while being innovative. It's a very, very good piece and I'm just thrilled by it, so Ivars and I are going to have a lot of fun with it.

When you're not recording or performing or touring, how do you like to unwind?

My favourite thing is hiking in the valley not far from my home in Germany. We actually try every single day, even on tour, to get out and walk. Last month we had four days of hiking in Austria in a place called the Kleinwalsertal. Another place I'd love to return to is Cape Breton Island. It has to be my favourite place in Canada - we used to go there all the time as kids, and it's the first sort of "beauty spot" in Canada that I brought Harry to. I just love it, and I'm planning next year somehow to get back there and go hiking around the Cabot Trail.



I also read all the time - lots of mysteries of all kinds, mostly English ones, but I'll read any book that somebody sends me. Harry and I love to cook. He's a terrific cook and I'm a good sous-chef -- and we love to eat well. Everyone thinks I have high-minded musical goals, but actually, my goal in life is to have my own vegetable garden! That means, of course, that I'd have to be home in Germany between April and October. I can't achieve that yet, but it's on the horizon.

Janina with her husband - and dear Tafelmusik friend - Harry Oesterle

Tafelmusik would like to extend a warm welcome to Harry Oesterle, Janina's General Manager as well as her "travelling househusband," as he likes to be called. Tafelmusik's friendship with this musical couple began in the early 1990s, when Harry was the Personal Representative of conductor Bruno Weil. During his tenure as General Manager of the Klang und Raum Festival, Tafelmusik musicians and staff worked closely with Harry on both the festival concerts as well as innumerable tours and recordings. Harry became a very dear friend, and we were so pleased when the Canadian connection was sealed in 2001 when Harry and Janina were married. All of this to say – we at Tafelmusik have a deep affection for this wonderful couple, and are thrilled to welcome both Janina and Harry to our Toronto home.