

Agony & Ecstasy

Pianist Angela Hewitt reaches the culmination of her Bach Odyssey this summer with medals and prizes in the UK and Germany. Yet her remarkable journey has recently suffered a major setback, finds Claire Jackson ▶

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOHN MILLAR

Back to Bach:
Angela Hewitt at St James's
Piccadilly with the church's
Fazioli behind her

A sleek Fazioli concert grand piano is wheeled into view. It is buffed, repositioned, admired. The piano stool is carefully arranged in order to get the best of the afternoon light shafting through stained-glass windows into St James's Piccadilly. The church, host to central London's much-loved lunchtime and commuter recitals, is one of the few public venues to own the Italian brand of piano so dear to Angela Hewitt. It's one of the reasons we're here, titivating music stands and polishing decals. Hair and makeup complete – for the piano, at least – and there's no sign of our soloist. When Hewitt appears, she seems a little distracted. She fiddles with the stool as though to play, then thinks better of it. We continue to coo over the instrument; the pianist stares directly into the lens.

Hewitt is one of the piano world's leading JS Bach players. She's on the cusp of concluding *The Bach Odyssey*, a four-year project that has seen her perform the complete works of Bach in London, Florence, Ottawa, New York and Tokyo. It follows on from a previous world tour of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, as well as the complete recordings. But Hewitt is so much more than a Bach expert. Her array of Hyperion recordings includes the complete works of Ravel and collections of Couperin, Scarlatti and Mozart. She's also artistic director of the Trasimeno Festival in Umbria, near her Lake Trasimeno home. I've met Hewitt on several occasions, in London and Italy, and there's an affability to her artistry. She's generous to both colleagues and fans. Today, she's perfectly professional. And yet...

'Twenty years of playing a Fazioli has made my playing much more flexible and colourful,' she says. We're sitting in the loft of St James's retired organ, gazing at the shiny instrument below. 'The pianos have been a big influence.' Hewitt fell in love with Faziolis after playing one in Australia in 1995. She bought her first Fazioli grand in 2003. Unlike most musicians, pianists rarely get to play their own instrument in concerts or recordings – transporting a piano is complex and requires specialist tools and training which makes taking a cello on a flight seem straightforward.

When asked about her recent re-recording of Bach's Six Partitas, which



was Recording of the Month in the February 2020 issue, Hewitt told *BBC Music Magazine*, 'I recorded it on my own Fazioli... It's a piano I know intimately, and I don't have to worry about anything. It's a joy.' I have a list of questions relating to this piano – the only one of its type to have a four-pedal mechanism, installed at Hewitt's request. I have seen the concert grand once, at Hewitt's home in Umbria, and begin to heap lavish praise on its sound and tone. Later, I will replay these ill-judged sentences, mortified.

'I've just finished recording sets of Beethoven variations with it,' says Hewitt,

slowly. 'I took it to a studio in Berlin...' She trails off. 'Actually, there's been an accident,' she says quietly. At the end of the recording session, the piano movers dropped the Fazioli. Hewitt has found out just the day before our meeting that the damage is irreparable. She's understandably devastated. It will take a further week before she feels able to make the news public, announcing the loss via Facebook. 'I hope my piano will be happy in piano heaven,' she writes. The news is soon picked up by outlets across the world, from BBC News to CNN, many of which repeat Hewitt's heart-wrenching words: 'it was my best friend'.

The pianist's fans rally round. 'I'm so sorry for this loss. It's really like losing a person. Heaven is lucky to have your Fazioli,' posts one. 'Pianos are just like people; they have, dare I say it, souls. You will see this one again,' offers another. While it's a cliché to say that pianos are an extension of a pianist's body, the link



Family fortunes: Hewitt performs at Carnegie Hall in 2010; (below) the Hewitts play Haydn's Toy Symphony on Canadian TV in 1967

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between an instrumentalist and their instrument can be strong. When Min Kym's 1696 Stradivarius was stolen at London Euston station, the violinist couldn't bear to play for some time; the trauma of losing her 'soulmate' is the subject of her 2017 book *Gone*.

Born in Ottawa, Canada, Hewitt grew up with music: her father was the cathedral organist and her mother a music teacher. As well as having a prodigious gift at the piano, Hewitt was also a talented dancer. She chose to focus on music and studied at the University of Ottawa with Jean-Paul Sevilla. When Sevilla moved to Paris for a year-long sabbatical in 1978, Hewitt followed, staying in France for seven years because 'well, it was Paris!' She then came

to London in 1985, where she has had a base ever since. During her first year in the UK, with the help of the Canadian High Commission, Hewitt was able to arrange her debut at the Wigmore Hall. This year, the 35th anniversary of that first appearance, just before the final instalment of *The Bach Odyssey*, the pianist will receive the Wigmore Medal. It's a prize that recognises musicians who have a strong association with the venue. Pianists András Schiff and Menahem Pressler and soprano Felicity Lott have all received this prestigious accolade in past years.

'It really means so much to me,' says Hewitt, cheering a little at the change of topic. 'I've played virtually my whole repertoire at Wigmore – the complete



Shipshape: David Juritz in Hong Kong in 2007

Pilgrims' progresses

More major musical journeys



Odyssey, journey, pilgrimage... whatever you to call it, there seems to be a special appeal to a tour or project that looks beyond a single concert.

There's no one way to go about it. Sometimes an artist explores an aspect of a composer's work, as in the case of John Eliot Gardiner (above) and his *Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists*. On Christmas Day 1999 they began their Bach Cantata Pilgrimage, performing all of the composer's surviving church cantatas in one year. Also in 2000, *The Sixteen* and its conductor Harry Christophers embarked on their first Choral Pilgrimage. The focus wasn't a single composer, but sacred music brought to the UK's cathedrals and abbeys.

Even when the music isn't religious, there can be a spiritual aspect to these quests, or social and historical inspiration. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma formed his *Silk Road Ensemble* by following the trade route from Europe to Asia, recruiting musicians along the way. They've since made recordings and performed across the globe.

And there's the tale of another globetrotter, violinist *David Juritz*. In 2007, the leader of the London Mozart Players embarked on a round-the-world busking trip, supporting himself by playing Bach. He covered 60,000 miles and played in 50 cities in 24 countries. The five-month project helped him launch his charity Musequality.



Baroque's best: composer JS Bach

Keyboard warrior

Five Bach masterpieces to head for



Goldberg Variations

The story goes that Bach penned this work to brighten the insomniac nights of Count Kaiserling (left). Whatever the truth, the beautiful aria and

30 dazzling variations add up to a remarkable work, published in 1741.

The Well-Tempered Clavier

This mighty collection is made up of two books of preludes and fugues in all 24 major and minor keys, written 20 years apart. The title refers to the emerging 'well-tempered' tuning system, which meant that all the keys sounded equally in tune on a keyboard instrument.

Six Partitas

These six keyboard suites of dance movements were first published in 1726. Although they were his Op. 1, Bach had been composing for 20 years. He offered them 'to music lovers in order to refresh their spirits'.

Italian Concerto

This solo keyboard work was published alongside the French Overture as the second part of Bach's *Clavier-Übung* (keyboard practice). The German composer was alive to popular French and Italian styles, and absorbed them into his own music to great effect.

The Art of Fugue

This unfinished marvel isn't strictly a keyboard work, as Bach didn't specify any instrumentation for his 14 fugues and four canons. Yet pianists have often taken it into their repertoire, embracing the challenge of its contrapuntal complexity and austere undertone.



A broad church: 'Bach's music is more interpretative than people realise'

works of Chabrier, music by Ravel, Messiaen and Beethoven.' And, of course, Bach, who has featured in dozens of the 80 Wigmore recitals Hewitt has given over the years. Attendees at those recitals during the 1990s might be surprised to know that the leaflets they received through the post were administered by the pianist herself. 'For 15 years I put stamps on envelopes!' she says. Then, around 2000, Hewitt finally got the recognition she deserved. 'I started selling out halls. It's great because I have a really solid base. I have worked incredibly hard for my career. I want people to know that.'

It's not only Wigmore Hall that will be celebrating Hewitt's achievements. The pianist is also the 2020 recipient of the City of Leipzig Bach Medal, an award that recognises those who have promoted Bach around the world. Previous awardees include John Eliot Gardiner, Robert Levin, Gustav Leonhardt, Helmut Rilling... Notice a theme? Hewitt will be first the woman to

receive the Leipzig Medal. 'I first went to Leipzig in 1976 when I was 17 to take part in the [International] Bach Competition,' she says. 'Of course, I've been back since, but to collect this award bookends things in a way.' It's apt, too, that she'll be back in the city to perform the *Goldberg Variations* at this year's Bachfest.

On her website, Hewitt dedicates the Leipzig Medal to her parents 'who both adored Bach and Leipzig – especially my organist father who made Bach so alive to me as a child.' Being absorbed by this music for the entirety of her life has contributed to Hewitt's highly informed approach to Bach's keyboard works. 'Your mind starts to work in a different way when you play a lot of Bach,' she reflects. 'You think contrapuntally. There's a need for greater attention to detail, and a feeling for tempo, dance rhythms and the relationship between harmony and expression. You can't be sloppy with Bach. You also become very aware of technical

skill, particularly finger independence.' Absent-mindedly, she moves her fourth fingers, the weak point for many pianists. Her ring fingers, perfectly curved, press invisible keys.

A word of advice for dinner parties: never discuss religion, politics... or recordings of Bach's keyboard works. The latter can evoke visceral responses. Unlike, say, Rachmaninov's piano concertos, where listeners often enjoy aspects of different soloists' performances, the likes of the *Art of Fugue* can be divisive. Why is music that is often thought of as being 'pure' also so varied? 'Bach's music is much more interpretative than people realise,' explains Hewitt. 'That's why when you put on Glenn Gould, András Schiff or me, you know after a few bars which one of us it is. The hardest thing with Bach is that the notes are written there on the score, but you don't know how slow or fast, how detached or smooth, how loud or soft he wanted – you have to look for the clues. Of

GETTY; ELEONORA DOTTORINI/STUDIO DIFOTO



Leading pianist: Hewitt directs violinist Jan Söderblom and cellist Nicholas Altstaedt at the Trasimeno Festival in 2015

course, you can get editions that are edited but they are subjective. In the end, you have to make decisions.'

Those decisions are further complicated when performing Baroque music on contemporary concert grands that are capable of broad tonal colour. Hewitt will need some time to work with a new instrument to feel comfortable with a different set of paints and brushes. Luckily,

'My fans have become my family – it can be a lonely life being a pianist'

she has the support of devoted fans. Followers of popstar Lady Gaga refer to themselves as her 'little monsters', while Madonna calls her fans her 'tribe'. While at the 2013 instalment of the Trasimeno Festival, I attended a party at Hewitt's lake-side residence held for patrons and friends of the event, many of whom follow the pianist all over the world. 'We call ourselves "Angelas",' one American fan told me, perfectly straight-faced. I share this anecdote with Hewitt, and she laughs, finally. 'They have become my family,' she says fondly. 'It can be a lonely life being a concert pianist. The festival is a gift from me to my fans – it's very personal, I don't make any money from it. I always think we

should have biographies of the audience in the programme as it's such a wonderful mix of people; they are so distinguished!'

She's right: previous attendees have included the novelists Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes, as well as Paolo Fazioli, who provides the pianos – and that's before we even get started on the musicians. This year features tenor Ian Bostridge, a night of Baroque dance with performers from Atelier Ballet and a Q&A with novelist Salman Rushdie, whose pianist niece Mishka Rushdie Momen will be playing in a special version of Saint-Saëns's *The Carnival of the Animals*. Hewitt herself will play *The Art of Fugue* in the beautiful Basilica di San Pietro, Perugia, before giving an eight-day masterclass. It's a relief to hear that she then has a three-month break booked – her first holiday in ten years.

And what does such an esteemed pianist yearn to do after a decade on the road? 'I have Op. 106 left to learn for my Beethoven sonata series. I never liked the *Hammerklavier* growing up as it was always played badly in competitions. Now I'm excited to have some space with it before I record it,' she says. But don't worry, this won't be too much of a busman's holiday. 'First of all, I want to clean out all my cupboards,' she smiles. Then, there's the small matter of an 'insurance saga' to mop up – and the chance to settle in to the next chapter with a new piano. ☺
Angela Hewitt will receive the Wigmore Medal before the final instalment of her Bach Odyssey at Wigmore Hall on 2 June