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[Emma Baker](#) 3:14pm GMT 31st August 2011

The road less travelled

The 'Rarities of Piano Music' festival in Husum, Germany, offers a fascinating approach to musical archaeology and the chance to find hidden treasure

Two facts about the otherwise obscure north German seaside town of Husum: it's an international hub for the wind energy industry and, every August, it stages an annual piano festival that's like no other.

This is because at the 'Raritäten der Klaviermusik' (Rarities of Piano Music) is all about unusual repertoire. It's a festival where you are positively guaranteed to hear first-rate artists (this year, to name a few, Marc-André Hamelin, Piers Lane, Danny Driver, Håvard Gimse, Artur Pizarro, Roland Pöntinen) but never a note of a Schubert, Mozart or Beethoven sonata. Instead, over the nine days of the festival this year we heard Berg, Bowen, Busoni, Medtner, Reger, Schnittke, von Bulow, as well as transcriptions by Saint-Saëns, Earl Wild and Percy Grainger and more... guaranteed to stimulate even the most jaded musical palate.

First, let's be clear here – just because this festival concentrates on rarities, it doesn't mean the music is second rate. In fact, it was festival founder and director Peter Froundjian's realisation, while still a piano student, that there was "an incomprehensible discrepancy between the extant treasures, the incredibly diverse span of piano music, and the small canon of works offered to the general public" that started him on the road less travelled. He wondered: "Why the constant repetition of certain works season after season, year after year? Did it really have to be that way? Was that all?" Vowing to do something about it, in 1987 he set up a concert series to explore this immense hinterland of piano repertoire. Audiences and artists came flocking and this year, his festival marked its 25th year.

Much of what makes this festival special is the setting. Husum is a backwater on the North Sea with a pretty harbour and a Scandinavia-meets-rural Suffolk vibe. Wind turbines and Friesian cows dot the landscape. The Danish border is less than an hour's drive north. Concerts take place in a sunny, first-floor room in Husum's Schloss – an imposing, moated castle surrounded by green parkland. It's the ideal place for immersing yourself in musical discoveries, so much so that the concerts in the 200-capacity hall are consistently sold out and attract an almost cultish following.

This year, being a significant anniversary, it was fitting to look both back and forward with a panel discussion – featuring international piano experts including *Gramophone* critics Jeremy

Nicholas and Harriet Smith – on the future of the piano recital. Had the golden age of pianism passed, made redundant by the effects of two world wars on society and the rise of modernism? Should modern players dress more informally and speak during their recitals? Why are promoters and performers seemingly so afraid to programme anything but a very limited handful of works? Or are we simply looking at this “golden age” through a golden haze of nostalgia?

Based on the evidence of the concerts I heard, the piano recital is still very much alive. That same evening, Artur Pizarro played a selection of French and Portuguese music – Vierne, Pierné, Carneyro and Lopes-Graça, much of which would have been completely new to the audience – with unerring musicality and conviction. His unusual but elegant choice of concert wear (yoga pyjamas – white for the first half, black for the second) was a fittingly contemporary touch, given that morning’s debate.

Fresh from his Proms debut, the up-and-coming Danny Driver made an eloquent and impressive first appearance at Husum, playing CPE Bach, York Bowen, Reger and the substantial Sonata by Benjamin Dale.

And there was Marc-André Hamelin, who due to high demand for tickets played in a larger venue – the stolid but functional hall of Husum’s convention centre. He presented a programme of thunderous virtuosity, the first half of which was entirely given over to Busoni’s steely, cerebral, disturbing sound world, the second dominated by a blazing Liszt *Fantasia and Fugue on B-A-C-H*. Forty-eight hours later he played the Liszt at the Proms, but in this smaller venue it was more intimate and direct, unclouded by the Royal Albert Hall’s tricky acoustic. And where else could you be simultaneously challenged and rewarded with such bold programming as this?

The highlights of each Husum festival are issued on CD by Danacord – meanwhile, book early for 2012 if you want to delve into this musical treasure-chest of a festival.

www.raritaeten-der-klaviermusik.de



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