

Four decades of discovery

Celebrating Germany's 'Rarities of Piano Music' festival, which for 40 years has made a virtue of exploring the repertoire's lesser-known byways, **Jeremy Nicholas** meets its founder **Peter Froundjian**

You'll find Husum right at the north-western tip of Germany, 50km south of the Danish border, two hours north of Hamburg by train. On leaving Husum station, a 10-minute walk past perfunctory, anodyne houses and offices leads you to the delightful surprise of a cosy, cobbled fishing harbour and waterside restaurants. Continue up Neustadt with its art galleries and gift shops selling lovely things that nobody needs and you come to a leafy park, a moat and the Schloss vor Husum. It's not a castle on the scale of those built by Ludwig II of Bavaria – more like a large English country house. It's very pretty, and upstairs is the Rittersaal, where, for the past 40 years, the annual Raritäten der Klaviermusik (Rarities of Piano Music) festival has been held. Its capacity is just 170 (including the extra seating offered by an adjoining room), and every one of those seats is sold each year at least two months before the festival begins towards the end of August.

The Husum festival, modest though it might be in some respects, has been both a local and an international success. Devotees of the piano from all over the world make an annual pilgrimage to the Schloss, no matter the schlep to get there and its relative isolation. Pianists of all nationalities queue to appear, their invitations coming courtesy of the festival's founder and artistic director, Peter Froundjian. They will offer – or he will suggest – a full recital of works that are rarely, if ever, heard in the concert halls of the world. Every concert will be recorded live (with no patching), and a selection of performances, chosen by Froundjian and approved by the artist, will be issued on a Danacord CD in time for the following year's festival.

Since 1989, every Husum recital has been recorded complete by Danacord. Jesper Buhl, the label's founder and CEO, explains: 'Each concert lasts about two hours (artists are always generous with encores!), so one week with eight concerts (plus the occasional Sunday matinee) gives you

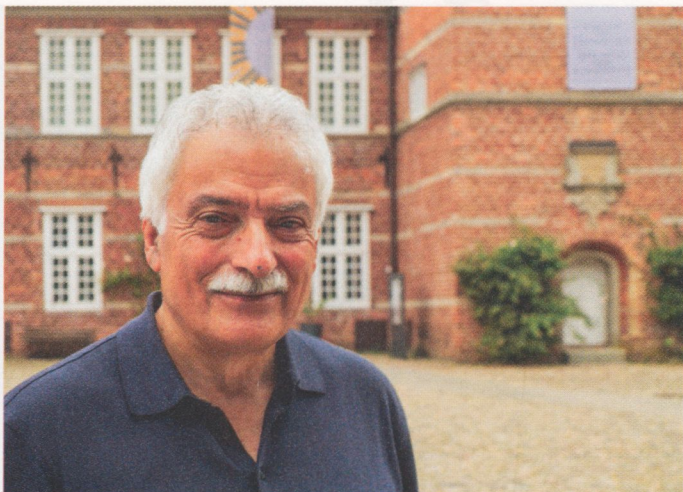
16 hours of music. Multiply that by 40 years and you have 640 hours. That's a lot of piano music to listen to. If you spent four hours listening every day, it would take 160 days to hear it all!'

Froundjian is very careful to ensure that only performances approved by the pianist are ever released on CD. 'They will give consent for one, two, three or four pieces and I choose from this pool what to put on the annual disc. I choose the programme and its order.' It is not an easy task. 'All the pianists are living human beings,' says Buhl, 'and in a concert you can live with something that might not be totally perfect or at the level the pianist wants. However, to keep something for posterity on a CD is another matter, so it is a long process to find the right pieces of music for the album, pieces that satisfy the pianist's standards, are sufficiently rare to be included and will have the permission from an agent or another record company. In the end you want the CD to be something people want to listen to, so the piano pieces in one way or another have to be like a nice varied recital – much more difficult to achieve than many can imagine.' Every pianist appearing at the festival is represented on the album, some by one piece, others by two or three. Generally there's a total of 12 to 16 tracks lasting anything up to 80 minutes.

Since 1989, the festival has each year brought in a magnificent Steinway D from Berlin, replacing the Schloss's own Model B, which was used for the first two years – the two that were not recorded by Danacord. It later transpired that in fact all of those first concerts had been recorded on cassette by the pianist Daniel Berman.

'At the end of the 1990s,' reveals Buhl, 'when we were aware of the tapes, we listened to them but felt the sound was not good enough to grant a release. However, by 2010, the digital sound remastering system had improved drastically, and the sound could be improved sufficiently to justify their release. Daniel Berman, who played at those





Founder and artistic director Peter Froundjian didn't originally envisage a festival



The Rittersaal in the Schloss vor Husum: the intimate setting of the annual concerts

first two festivals, oversaw the digital transfer himself.' The two-disc set was reviewed in these pages (Danacord, 10/10).

Forty years later, and those performances represent a valuable historical document, for among those featured are Michael Ponti playing Henselt études, Froundjian himself in Chaminade and Chabrier, Berman offering a Tausig arrangement of Schubert plus Godowsky and John Ireland rarities, and the young Marc-André Hamelin in his own Étude No 12.

What impelled Froundjian to instigate the Husum festival? 'I would say it was something I had in my head without wanting to make a festival. I had been frustrated for many years by the normal musical life of Berlin, say, and other places, because the same pieces were always being played. Chopin's B flat minor Sonata in recital twice in a week – just as an example. On the other side, I was discovering nearly every day exciting pieces and scores in libraries. So I knew a lot of repertoire, but over the years it wasn't reflected in normal musical life. I thought, "Something is missing."

German or, rather, Teutonic musical hegemony has dictated the taste buds of the piano's repertoire for so long. It began with Robert Schumann and has yet to be subverted. What delicious irony, then, that it should have been a German – a German pianist – who threw down the gauntlet, and in his own country, too. 'It started in the 1920s with Artur Schnabel and his peers,' says Froundjian. 'That's the reason why so much interesting music has been consigned to oblivion.'

He was offered an appointment as a teacher at the music school in Husum, and when he saw the castle and the Rittersaal, it clicked. 'I could say yes to this appointment, and then I could establish a festival, perhaps. In the beginning, I didn't want to run a festival but then I realised that it had to be a festival, because if you arrange one concert with a programme of unknown works, you will not succeed – you will get maybe 30 people coming. It has to be a package, not too big, not too small. I thought a week would be appropriate, and so I presented my idea to the cultural board in Nordfriesland. They were very pleasant and very sympathetic, and the head of the board said he trusted me, and he said, "Just begin, do it, and we will see." That was in 1985.' It took a further two years to launch the festival. 'It was also helped by an old critic in Berlin, Walther Kaempfer [1899-1991], who was a very knowledgeable man – a Renaissance man. He had heard Ferruccio Busoni, Konrad Ansorge, Eugen d'Albert and all

these old pianists perform in concert. He was present at the first festival and wrote a big article in the newspaper about it.' The success of the first one led to the second in 1988. 'Then,' Froundjian enthuses, 'in 1989 there was a breakthrough, because I had Hamish Milne, Marc-André Hamelin, Idil Biret; and I had Ronald Smith with an all-Alkan recital, and so on.'

Froundjian had no previous experience of running a festival. Was he nervous? Did he make mistakes? 'No, no. I had a good format. I knew it should be eight recitals over eight days from Saturday to Saturday, and we have stuck to that format ever since.' He runs the festival as a benevolent dictator. Softly spoken and innately courteous, his apparently diffident nature hides a steely resolve, ensuring that the content of the festival programme conforms to his exacting standards. He invites pianists to play – and often suggests

repertoire that they might include in their programme if they so wish. 'A few years ago, I discovered a Nocturne in F sharp minor by an obscure French composer named Albert Bertelin [1872-1951]. I sent the score to Alfonso Soldano and he fell in love with it too!' (His performance is included on the album from the 2024 festival.) Any artist who offers a programme that includes well-known music – by Beethoven, Chopin or Brahms, for example – will be politely declined. As soon as one festival finishes, Froundjian begins to plan the next. 'I force myself to take new names each year, otherwise it would be the same group year after year. I have to refuse wishes from pianists who want to play two years in succession. The only exception is Marc-André Hamelin. Right from the beginning, he knew what this was all about and always offers interesting programmes.'

Funding comes almost entirely from the Nordfriesland department of culture (based in the Schloss vor Husum), with a small amount coming from the Schleswig-Holstein budget. Forty years is quite a record for one man to control a festival; and one might think that that would be enough, but the powers that be are eager for Froundjian to continue. One question remains. Why has no other organisation thought to adopt the Husum template and emulate its success? 'I don't know,' says Froundjian, 'Perhaps they don't have the fantasy or they don't dare to do it.' But why hasn't he copyrighted the idea or offered the same programmes to other venues? 'You know, I'm not a cultural manager. I have not learnt to be a cultural manager. I have knowledge of pianists, pianism and the piano literature. That's all.' **G**

'I was frustrated by normal musical life, because the same pieces were always being played' – Peter Froundjian