SACRED AND HUMANE

The Canadian pianist Angela Hewitt is a cool force of nature whose intelligence, dedication and profound musicianship have made her a leading interpreter of Bach's keyboard works. Owen Mortimer finds out what has driven this self-motivated artist to commit the Goldberg Variations to disc for a second time, more than 15 years after her brilliant first recording.

THE SETTING FOR OUR conversation couldn't be more idyllic: Hewitt's Italian villa, perched on an olive-studded Umbrian hillside, has a view that falls away into the distance until the green waters of Lake Trasimeno make landfall at the foot of more hills. It's a blazing 35 degrees without a cloud in the sky, yet this is no holiday for Hewitt. She's in the middle of running the 12th edition of her annual Trasimeno Music Festival, a nine-day event featuring eight concerts and a masterclass - with Hewitt playing a starring role in all but one event. Highlights this year included the Brahms Concerto in D minor and Shostakovich Piano Concerto No 1 with the Orchestra Sinfonica di Milano Giuseppe Verdi under Hanna Lindt, an afternoon recital of piano duo repertoire with Jeffrey Tate, two major solo recital programmes, collaborations with cellist Giovanni Scaglione, clarinettist Alessandro Carbonara and soprano Susan Bullock, plus a performance of Haydn's Seven Last Words on the Cross narrated by Simon Callow. 'It's a really personal programme, and a way of me giving back to my friends and fans,' says Hewitt.

Brahms and Shostakovich aren't names usually associated with Hewitt - playing this repertoire is one of the things she loves about running the Festival - but she doesn't baulk at being labelled a Bach specialist: 'To be recognised as a Bach player is one of the greatest things because there's no greater music - better than Tchaikovsky or Rachmaninov in my mind! Bach is me, it's my background, my mind and what I've spent most of my time working on in my life. Also because it gives you such a wonderful basis for everything else. If you can play Bach well you're on right the track to play Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms, even Chopin. Plus of course the other Baroque composers. I can't really complain because Bach has made my career in such a wonderful way.'

Hewitt is an exclusive artist with Hyperion Records in the UK, with whom she's recorded dozens of discs spanning repertoire from Bach, Rameau and Couperin to Debussy, Ravel and Messiaen. The jewel in the crown of this discography is the complete keyboard works of JS Bach, available as a 15-CD box set. Yet in 2008 she re-recorded Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, and has now committed a second version of the Goldberg Variations to disc. What has prompted her to revisit this repertoire in the studio?

The answer has a lot to do with Hewitt's discovery of Fazioli pianos around the year 2000. Her earlier recordings of the Goldberg and Well-Tempered Clavier were on 'a very beautiful Steinway owned by my German technician Gerd Finkenstein'; but in 1999 she purchased a Fazioli Model F183 for her London flat. 'Around the same time I met a Fazioli engineer and started playing them in Wigmore Hall,' she explains. 'Since then it's been my instrument of choice.' Pushed to identify the qualities she most admires about Faziolis, Hewitt says that touch is paramount: 'The action is incredibly responsive to differences in touch. This is one of the reasons I've re-recorded the Goldberg Variations: my own touch has developed because the Fazioli gives me so many possibilities.'
The sound is also very clear with amazing harmonics and reverberations. It allows you to be a lot more creative, but can be hard to control, so I think pianists who are used to something else can find it too challenging at first. If you want to play it safe you'll play another piano, but for me that's boring. I've had students in masterclasses fall in love with Fazioli because you're not fighting it.

Aside from this switch of instrument, the passage of 15 years has wrought other changes in Hewitt's interpretation of the Goldbergs that are intriguing for the listener. Unlike the two versions of this work laid down by her fellow Canadian, Glenn Gould, Hewitt has not attempted a root-and-branch reappraisal of her earlier interpretation. The changes are more subtle than Gould's, but no less transformative. 'I think it has more of everything,' says Hewitt. 'More elasticity, more joy, more colour, more feeling for the dance, more rhythmic vitality. As I've said in my notes for the CD, I was constantly on the move during the recording process. Whenever I listened to it I had to stand up, or conduct, or sing. So the whole flow of it is very important, and something I hope will be noticeable – and different from my first recording.'

One of the other most striking differences between the two discs is the acoustic of the venues in which they were recorded: the earlier version from London's Henry Wood Hall has a flatter and drier sound, whereas the new disc laid down at Berlin's Christuskirche is considerably brighter and more spacious. 'It is reverberant, yes,' says Hewitt, 'but I think it nicely captures the feeling of a concert performance, which is what I very much wanted.'

Hewitt grew up in Ottawa, where her father Godfrey served for nearly half a century as the organist and choirmaster at Christchurch Cathedral. She enjoyed a childhood steeped in church music and organ music, including hearing and performing Bach from an early age. The Goldbergs have been part of her repertoire for over 40 years – since she was 16 – so it's changed with me over the decades,' she explains. 'I think it's interesting to have [the new recording] as a marker of my life now and my experience of the piece.'

Spending every Sunday at church throughout her childhood has also informed Hewitt's view of Bach's faith, which she believes is present in all his work, sacred or secular. 'I don't quite know how to put it into words, but there's an inner strength that you always have to feel in his music, whether it's the Mass in B minor or a gavotte in an English Suite. I think everything he wrote was for the glory of God. Even in his most despairing moments there's a sense of joy in the eternal, for example a lot of his music about death is in a major key – so for him it wasn't a tragedy to die, it was something to look forward to.'

Another influence she cites is Wilfrid
Mellers’ J S Bach and the Dance of God, a seminal text which emphasises the composer’s humanity as well as his religiosity. Hewitt herself learnt ballet for 20 years and is acutely aware of the dance rhythms underpinning Bach’s music: ‘If Bach doesn’t dance, it dies – and not just at the keyboard. That goes for any musician performing Bach, whether a string player, a singer or an orchestra. It’s one of the great things about the so-called Early Music specialists that they always imbue Bach’s music with its proper dance rhythms.’

The Goldberg Variations culminate in a virtuoso display of counterpoint – a ‘quodlibet’ that introduces two folk melodies alongside the work’s main theme. For Hewitt this is an important moment that captures the essence of Bach’s dual nature: ‘Up until Variation 13, the piece is setting out its patterns and remains fairly rooted to the earth. Variation 13 is the first one where I feel we go “up towards something”. Then we get No 15, the first minor variation. At the work’s halfway point it’s festive again – there’s a French overture followed by more hijinks – until we reach No 25, which is the emotional core of the work with its great sorrow, tragedy and intimacy. As we approach the end – I get the shivers just talking about it – there’s more virtuosity, with joyous outbursts of trills and octaves like pealing bells. The quodlibet is a combination of the sacred and secular: it’s an emotional high point yet uses rather bawdy folk tunes. Finally, the return of the Aria is like music from another world. I find it incredibly moving how Bach combines such feeling for everyday life with his capacity to be on a higher plane. Let’s not forget that he had 23 kids so was above all a human being.’

The result may not be to all listeners’ tastes – Hewitt has been criticised in the past for her use of rubato in Bach – but there’s no doubting its integrity as a performance. Even the rubato is something she has considered very carefully, and makes a strong case for its historic precedent: ‘A lot of adjudicators are silly enough to think that there shouldn’t be any rubato in Bach, but C P E Bach talks a lot about this in his Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments. Besides, the freedom in my playing doesn’t come from an arbitrary sense of “I feel like doing this here”, but from an understanding and awareness of the shifting harmonies, of what they’re saying about the architecture and the music’s focal points. It’s all tied in to what’s going on in the score, not just because I feel like doing a ritardando!’ She hopes, too, that her own sense of movement which animated these recording sessions will be felt by listeners: ‘It’s got to flow and become a part of you. This comes from the dance rhythms as well as the music’s metaphysical dimension. I want people to feel it’s all of a piece – the emotional and technical aspects of each variation, from beginning to end.’

Aside from championing Bach, Hewitt has many other passions and several ongoing projects. During our convivial lunch in Umbria she recalled off a huge list of forthcoming international engagements that would drain the stamina of an artist half her age. Major recording plans include three more volumes of her complete Beethoven Sonatas cycle plus another Scarlatti album. She’s also the main fundraiser for her annual festival, which relies on generous donations from fans. These are all achievements for which she’s worked hard – and of which she’s justly proud.

‘I never had anything handed to me on a silver platter,’ she explains. ‘I did so
much work for myself: I got my Hyperion contract myself, I came up with the idea for my 14-month Bach World Tour in 2007/08, and I suggested the Bach book that I did with Boosey & Hawkes [Angela Hewitt’s Bach Book]. I’m very creative that way. I don’t leave everything up to agents. I think a lot of young artists today get signed by agencies and then sit there complaining that nothing is happening, but you’ve still got to try yourself. I used to write envelopes for my own Wigmore Hall recitals! I’ve always been one to take an active role in my career.’

She’s also candid about having experienced discrimination as a woman pianist. In 1985, aged 27, she won the Bach Toronto Competition and a year later her first disc of Bach keyboard works was released by Deutsche Grammophon. It sold well and was nominated for a Gramophone Award, yet she was dropped by DG and didn’t make another disc for 10 years. Was this a deliberate decision? ‘No, it was DG who said I wasn’t marketable! The artistic people at DG wanted to do more with me but the marketing department weren’t interested. Those were the days when they were doing things like trying to turn Peter Donohoe into a punk rock star and they didn’t know what to do with me.’

Hewitt has proved her naysayers spectacularly wrong, but she still feels more change is needed. ‘If you’re a woman pianist you have to be really good to make it,’ she says, ‘though of course if publicity departments can portray you as a young sexy thing it makes it easier for them.’ Hewitt also has serious doubts about the possibility of combining a career with family life: ‘I do think it’s hard if you are going to be a female concert pianist, in particular, who travels so much, to have kids. I don’t think this will ever change. I couldn’t have done the complete Bach and had four kids – I wouldn’t have had the space in my head for it!’

Angela Hewitt’s new recording of Bach’s Goldberg Variations will be released on 30 September by Hyperion Records (CDA68146). www.hyperion-records.co.uk
www.trasimemonomusicfestival.com
www.angelahewitt.com