

It's probably no coincidence that Margaret Fingerhut's hilly home street affords a far-flung view right across London. Fingerhut is one of the most far-sighted of British pianists. Well before the rare repertoire craze took off, she was programming unusual pieces, exploring the riches of the piano's byways and seeking out new ways to help acclimatise potentially jittery audiences to music they might not have heard before. Fingerhut has now put together a new concept in programming: 'World of Piano Themes', a brochure in which she offers 12 different programmes – eight full recitals and four shorter, lunchtime-oriented ones – each based around an underlying theme that links up pieces well-known and less so.

'Programming has always been my thing,' says Fingerhut, who has recorded some two dozen discs for Chandos, mostly of repertoire that is well off the beaten track, or was when she tackled it. 'I've never

concert, we can run an educational project for the kids at school at the same time.

'It can work in various ways: for a school with a flourishing music department we could take the Rivers and Oceans programme and set GCSE or A-level students a project to write a piece inspired by rivers or oceans; I could come in at the beginning and play them the programme to get them going, or I could have an ongoing involvement with the students as they work, or come in at the end, look at what they've written and play the programme. It can also work at a more generalised level, providing a bit of extra interest and break down the barriers a little. Rather than just a classical pianist coming in to school, it could be something that might capture the kids' imagination.'

The programmes themselves are full of fascinating rarities as well as substantial classics like Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* and Ravel's *La Valse*. 'Debussy crops up a lot because he wrote so many evocative pieces,' says Fingerhut, 'and Liszt too, as he was an inveterate traveller.' One of the lunchtime programmes is called Family Life and includes music by Bach (*Capriccio on the departure of a beloved brother*), Mozart, Suk and Mussorgsky – finishing with the latter's extraordinarily-titled *Nanny shuts me in a dark cupboard* (which probably explains a lot about Mussorgsky in later life). Another, Piano Postcards, includes a little-known piece by Bax, written in his Russophile youth, called *In a vodka shop* – 'It's in 7/4 time, so there's an extra beat,' Fingerhut laughs.

She has gone out of her way to find the unexpected, the substantial and the well contrasted: in the full-length recital *An Invitation to the Dance*, rather than landing up with an endless series of predictable waltzes, mazurkas and polkas, she begins with Bach's second partita, based mainly on baroque dance forms, and then traces an intoxicating progress from Schumann's masked-ball evocation in *Papillons* through one of Chopin's most substantial polonaises plus nationalism from Albéniz and Smetana to arrangements of music written for ballet by Prokofiev and Ravel. 'One danger of having a themed programme is that it could end up as lots of little pieces,' she says. 'I've abandoned a lot of ideas I did have because I couldn't construct a programme that didn't have some meat in it. Generally there had to be something substantial otherwise it just wouldn't work.'

So has the concept helped to fill the diary in what every musician would recognise as a pretty dire current market? The answer is a resounding yes. 'In a way, this is a calling card to present something that's entertaining and educating, something a bit different that will make me stand out from the crowd. The response has been very encouraging, especially as regards the educational element.' The Rivers and Oceans lunchtime programme has been taken up by a museum that is mounting an exhibition about biodiversity, and the full-length recital *Piano Paintings* has some interest from organisations that hold their concerts in art galleries – there was even some consideration of projecting, during the recital, the paintings that inspired the music. And *Piano Landscapes* would work well in venues that are set amid beautiful views.

'There's been a wide variety of responses and interest for different reasons. So I'm absolutely delighted and very encouraged. That wouldn't have come about if I'd been presenting conventional programmes.'

Recitals with titles

Pianist Margaret Fingerhut has devised 12 themed programmes, and the effort is paying off, as **Jessica Duchon** discovers

done a programme just because there are pieces I want to play, lumping them together and hoping they make a cohesive whole. I've always thought about programming as a special entity that adds to an evening and I've always been interested in unusual repertoire. Invariably a programme I'd play would have a mix of usual and unusual things that might interconnect. In the past I've always wanted to present something a bit different that would hopefully make somebody think about going to the concert rather than staying home and watching tv.'

Piano Themes is a logical extension of that approach. 'I didn't want to do it as a gimmick and I'd only pick out programmes that worked. I had literally hundreds of pieces to choose from and it took forever to decide. The project hopefully will continue for about four years because I intend to offer two different full evening concerts and one lunchtime per year and gradually work my way through all the programmes.'

The lunchtime-length concerts have an additional use as an educational tool. 'That is a very important integral part of the project and I'm pleased to say lots of places are already picking up on it. For instance, sometimes a music society has a close connection with a college or school, or there might be links between a school's head of music and the local music society. So if I come along to do an evening



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Marc Bröckling