

INTERVIEW BY JEREMY NICHOLAS

Happy place

British pianist **Margaret Fingerhut** revisits some touching musical memories



ANDY TYLER

I have put my choices in chronological order of discovery. Brahms' Symphony No 4 is my earliest musical memory. My mother used to put it on when I couldn't sleep. It obviously did the trick as I rarely got beyond the slow movement. It became like my comfort blanket – so I was clearly unaware of how badly it all ends! All that deep, dark despair. And the Walter was my go-to recording when I grew up. Such warmth and humanity. I know there are other more dramatic, more exciting versions, but this is the one I associate with my childhood when I was four or five. We later bought the box set of Julius Katchen. So that's how I learnt my Brahms.

I heard Rubinstein twice and he was always my absolute god. I got all his recordings – so completely natural, so unmannered and yet so emotional. Didn't he himself say he played with sentiment but not sentimentality? He brought a sense of aristocratic nobility to Chopin. I've picked the F-sharp Nocturne because it has a strong personal significance. Do you remember a radio programme called *Down Your Way*? My father was on it once and was asked to choose a piece of music. So naturally he deferred to his 15-year-old daughter in such matters. I suggested Chopin and this nocturne.

My father, like most men of his generation, was undemonstrative, but he loved Chopin and whenever he listened to this nocturne always had tears in his eyes. He unfortunately got dementia in his eighties. Towards the end, I used to go to my parents' house every day and play Chopin on their little piano. My father had lost the words for everything, but he could still sing all the melodies.

I have this love of all things British. I went to the Royal College where if you weren't in the orchestra you sang in the choir, and one of the things we did was *Dream of Gerontius*. I'm

Jewish – though I don't have a religious bone in my body, to misquote! – but I am always deeply affected by religious music. I have only to hear the mournful opening bars of Elgar's score and I'm a total emotional wreck. But there is also a lot of personal emotional history that comes with this piece. Memories come flooding back, which feed into my wider love of British music. I adore its yearning quality, like nostalgia for something you can never have.

On another occasion I arrived at the College and was literally stopped in my tracks by the sounds coming from the concert hall. How could you not? I had never heard *Daphnis et Chloé* before and still to this day the 'Lever du jour' overwhelms me whenever I hear it. The translucent sound, detailed textures and technicolour clarity... I immediately went out and bought a recording. The Martinon was the one I landed on. Hearing those orchestral sonorities opened my ears to what I'm always searching for in my piano playing. I was always obsessive about the pedal but it made me even keener to find the same clarity and detail without losing the atmosphere. You try to find a pedalling that's as natural as breathing.

Listening to a string quartet taught me about having a real dialogue between voices when playing the piano. The very first LP I ever owned was from a family friend, who gifted me the Busch Quartet playing Beethoven's Op 130 when I was about 16. 'Now you're old enough to appreciate late Beethoven.' Of course, I didn't remotely understand it. I went to the USA to study with [Leon] Fleisher at the Peabody and, to cut a long story short, ended up living in Milwaukee for several years in my early twenties.

The Fine Arts Quartet were resident at the University of Milwaukee, and I used to go and hear them on a Sunday afternoon. I ended up doing a series of concerts with the founder and original leader, Leonard Sorkin. He was at the end of his career, I was at the beginning of mine, and the way he played was just like speaking, as if he was having a conversation with me through his articulation and phrasing. I have tried to emulate that ever since. I could choose any of Beethoven's late quartets but Op 127 is my happy place. **IP**

Brahms

Symphony No 4

Columbia Symphony Orchestra/Bruno Walter

Sony 88843072592

Chopin

Nocturne in F-sharp major Op 15/2

Arthur Rubinstein *pf*
Warner Classics 5096682

Elgar

The Dream of Gerontius

Richard Lewis *ten* Dame Janet Baker
mezzo-sop Kim Korg *bass*
Hallé Choir, Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus,
Ambrosian Singers and Hallé Orchestra/Sir
John Barbirolli
Warner Classics 5735792

Ravel

Daphnis et Chloé

Orchestre de Paris/Jean Martinon
Warner Classics 9029639079

Beethoven

String Quartet Op 127

Fine Arts Quartet
Concert-Disc 43NB2001CO