

Canberra CityNews

PIANIST Penelope Thwaites plays her Chopin with mature authority, grace and style, but at this excellent concert celebrating the 209th anniversary of the birth of Chopin, it was her performance of and the music of Percy Grainger which stole the show.

Thwaites is one of the world's leading authorities on the life and music of Percy Grainger and is the editor of "The New Percy Grainger Companion".

Grainger was a formidable pianist of titanic technique and his piano music was written for him to play. Others who follow have a serious task at hand.

Thwaites delivered Grainger's music with a command and assurity that is as close to channelling as one could possibly imagine. Her uncanny ability to capture the majesty, strength, power and delicacy of his music was captivating.

During "Irish Tune from County Derry" the emotion wrenched at the heart and people everywhere misted up. From my seat in the second row, I most definitely caught a glimpse of tears from the pianist. The chords were rich and lush, the melody sang like a bird and the inner voices in the opening verse shone through superbly.

The Power of Love, part of a Danish folk music suite by Grainger and arranged for piano by Thwaites was almost a Lisztian fantasy, recalling his Swiss "Years of Pilgrimage".

The concert had a multifaceted purpose. Chopin's birthday aside, it was also a celebration of the folk music idiom and the influence this had on some of Chopin's output, as well as Bach, Grainger and Bartok. In addition, it was a concert dedicated to the Chopin music scholar Prof Miehyslaw Tomaszewski who passed earlier this year on January 14 aged 97. Many of his thoughts and reflections on Chopin's music were included in the program notes.

Thwaites herself provided excellent commentary on all the pieces and the evening actually became a sparkling lecture-recital.

Beginning with two contrasting works – Chopin's mournful "Prelude in E minor Op.28 No.1" and J.S. Bach's joyous "Chorale Prelude", Thwaite's continued with Bach's "Partita in B flat major", playing the melody with bell-like clarity.

A bracket of five Chopin mazurkas demonstrated exquisitely executed trills, authoritative and varied dynamics and a rich sonority of sound.

The final bracket for the evening, also Chopin, brought forward three of his most famous waltz's finishing with a majestic performance of the "Grande Waltz Brillante in E flat major, Op. 18".

The folk music theme was delightfully enhanced by the presence of several adults and children in spectacular Polish national dress from different regions of the country.

In a performance that spoke to and involved the audience in a musical, emotional and intellectual capacity of great magnitude, this Judy Dench of the piano finished with her own delightful musical setting of Shakespeare's "Under the Greenwood Tree", reflecting influences from Ralph Vaughan Williams and John Ireland.