

MUSICIAN'S DIARY

Scaling the peaks with Leoš Janáček

Pianist *Ivana Gavrić* takes inspiration from the vast landscapes of Canada and Norway

After I'd performed and recorded *In the Mists*, exploring Janáček's remaining oeuvre was a natural direction for me to take for my second album. So when an opportunity arose to take up a residency at the Banff Arts Centre in Alberta, Canada, last autumn, before the recording, I jumped at the chance – after all, what better way to absorb the works of this nature-loving composer than in the mountains, albeit thousands of miles from his beloved Hukvaldy?

Places like Banff are of vital importance to musicians and artists. I found it incredibly nourishing to have the time to get away from the noise and stress of daily life, take stock, reflect and be inspired while also enjoying access to wonderful practice and performance facilities, and being surrounded by like-minded people. One of my favourite diversions while preparing the set of pieces *On an Overgrown Path* was to watch from my practice studio as baby deer and elk tried to dig up bits of grass buried in the snow.

'I watched from my practice studio as baby deer and elk tried to dig up bits of grass buried in the snow'

Janáček's unique voice has intrigued me ever since I first heard his Piano Sonata and his opera *The Cunning Little Vixen*. There is often a feeling of an internal conflict in the music – as if it wants to embrace and tear away at the same time – and yet, ultimately, it is incredibly melodic and loving. Especially striking is the growth in confidence and exuberance of his writing towards the end of his life. About a decade before his death, he met his muse and the love of his life, Kamila Stösslová, and at the same time began to receive the recognition for his work that he had long craved.

I wanted to share my enthusiasm for Janáček's music and present it to a wider audience – which is why I decided to curate two London festivals dedicated to his work this year. At The Forge in February we explored his solo piano works, the small chamber pieces and the song-cycle *The diary of one who disappeared*. Then, the three mini-concerts as part of the Kings Place Festival in September gave me an opportunity to perform the rarely played *Capriccio* for piano left hand, flute and brass ensemble, as well as the quirky *Concertino*, all with the brilliant Aurora Orchestra. Janáček initially resisted the commission to write for a one-handed pianist, likening it to dancing with one leg. However, realising that he could combine it with another idea he'd had for a military band, he wrote one of the most unusual works I have played, full of wonky folk-like tunes as well as Debussian textures and climaxes. During the performance of the *Capriccio* I was beaming so much at its electrifying end that I forgot to play the last octave using both my hands – a little joke I had thought up for the audience! I'd had the idea of announcing each concert with the 'Fanfare' of his



Enjoying the majesty of the Canadian Rockies in Alberta



Rehearsing the one-handed piano and brass Capriccio



Grieg's tiny lakeside composing hut at Trolldhaugen, Bergen



Trying out Grieg's Steinway in his endearing house

Sinfonietta, and it was wonderful to see many jaws drop among the milling audience as the brass blared out in the atrium of Kings Place.

I'm always drawn to composers who use folksong in their music. Perhaps it's innate: I grew up in Sarajevo where I was exposed to a lot of folk music. But I also feel that it transcends borders – a folksong from another country touches us like our own. A recent discovery of mine has been the set of short dances called *Slåtter* by Grieg. Originally Hardanger fiddle tunes, Grieg arranges and recomposes them for piano with typically transparent textures, but the pieces also contain some of his most innovative writing – at times one could be forgiven for thinking one was listening to Bartók. Grieg was one of my first 'favourite composers' as a child and I was really excited to be invited to perform at Trolldhaugen this summer, a concert hall built next to his home in Bergen. Overlooking his tiny composing hut and the view of the lake he had from it – from the concert platform – I felt much closer to the composer. A real treat after the concerts was to take a private tour of his endearing house and a chance to play on his own Steinway, which was in surprisingly good shape. **G**

► For Gramophone's review of Ivana Gavrić's 'From the Street' on Champs Hill Records, featuring music by Ravel, Janáček and Prokofiev, turn to page 81