THEfirstNEWS

"I must have been inspired" *Joseph Conrad*

Piano restorer says working to bring back original sound of Chopin's last piano is 'the most exciting thing I have ever done'

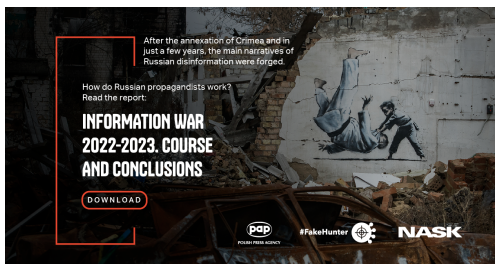
CULTURE

STUART DOWELL **DECEMBER 10, 2021**

The aim of the work is to recreate as closely as possible the sound of the piano that Chopin would have heard when he played and composed on it 172 years ago.
Kalbar/TFN

The last piano ever played by Fryderyk Chopin is currently undergoing an overhaul that hopes to restore the sound of the instrument to how the composer himself heard it 172 years ago.

As a treat for Chopin's legions of fans, the work is being carried out in front of the public at the Chopin Museum in Warsaw until Sunday.



CULTURE | LIFE

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Kalbar/TFN

In 1848, Fryderyk Chopin, then seriously ill, received the instrument from the piano maker Camille Pleyel. At the time, it was the most technologically advanced instrument created in his famous Parisian workshop.

The piano was in Chopin's last two apartments and was the last one the composer played and composed on.

After his death, it was bought by his pupil Jane Stirling, and then given by her to Fryderyk's sister, Ludwika Jędrzejewiczowa.

Evaluating his chances of success, expert piano restorer Paul McNulty who has been entrusted with the historic task said: "We are within the parameters of the piano at that time."
Kalbar/TFN

Transported by sea, it arrived in Warsaw in August 1850. Still inside the piano's case is the Tsarist wax customs seal and a handwritten dedication 'pour Luise', written by Jane Stirling.

The piano was carefully preserved by successive generations of the family, Ludwika's children and grandchildren.

In 1924, it was sold to the National Museum in Warsaw, where it was exhibited until the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising. After the fall of the uprising, the piano was taken by the Germans to Austria.

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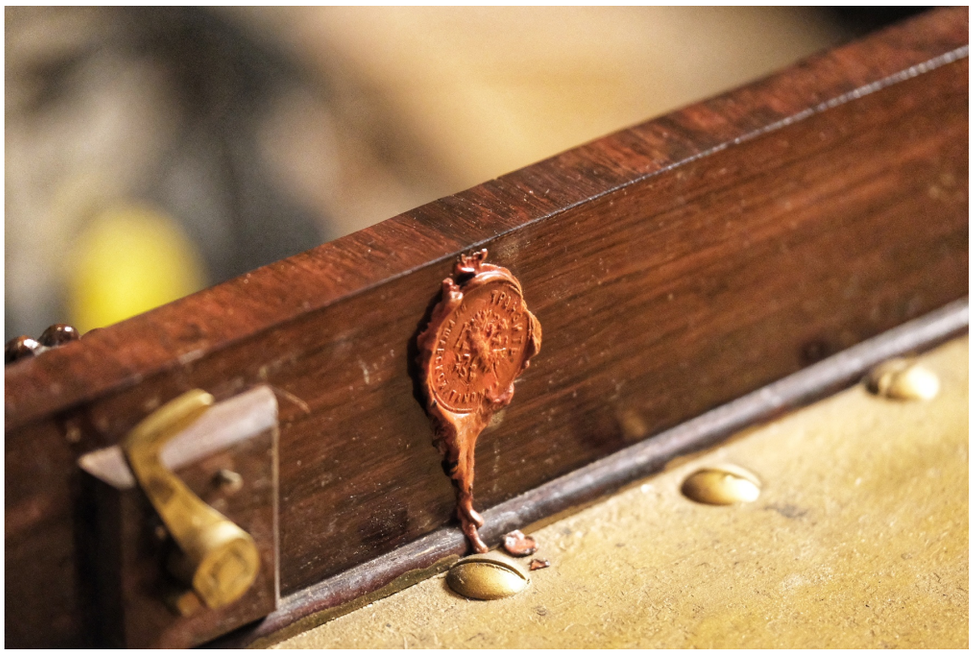

Kalbar/TFN

Kalbar/TFN

Still inside the piano's case is the Tsarist wax customs seal and a handwritten dedication 'pour Luise', written by Jane Stirling.

Kalbar/TFN

The piano returned to Warsaw on 24 April 1946. For some time, during the 1950s, it was exhibited at Żelazowa Wola.

In 1958, it was given to the National Museum, and later became the property of the Fryderyk Chopin Society and was transported to the Ostrogski Palace in Warsaw, which is now the home of the Chopin Museum.

The instrument underwent its first major restoration at the end of the 1950s.

On the inside of the piano a wine stain is still visible. McNulty suggested that Ludwika Jędrzejewiczowa may have tipped over a glass when she was reading one of the very small letters that previous owner Jane Stirling sent to her.
Kalbar/TFN

In 2018, the Fryderyk Chopin Institute commissioned a detailed study of the piano, which recommended renovation.

Paul McNulty, the expert piano restorer from the United States who has been entrusted with the historic task said: “It is the most important piano in the world. It’s the best preserved Pleyel I’ve ever seen. It is miraculous in its resistance to destruction.”

Kalbar/TFN

Modern day strings are designed for pianos that are played in huge concert halls, but Chopin played in small ballrooms.
Public domain

He added: “It often takes a heroic effort to repair a piano like this, but not in this case. The mechanism is perfect, the hammers are good. It was obviously very well cared for when in the Chopin family.”

However, the 1950s’ restoration replaced the strings with contemporary, high-carbon steel ones with strong tension.

This changed the original timbre of the piano, and it was also feared that it would have a negative effect on the condition of the whole instrument.

Aleksandra Świgrut, runner-up in the International Chopin Competition on Historical Instruments, will test it out in a behind-closed-doors performance.
Darek Golik/NIFC

These strings are being replaced this week with ones similar to those used by the Pleyel factory in the first half of the 19th century.

“Modern strings are monsters,” McNulty said, adding that today’s strings are designed for pianos that are played in huge concert halls.

“Chopin played in small ballrooms. He valued subtlety, transparency and articulation, not power,” he said.

The piano was in Chopin's last two apartments and was the last one the composer played and composed on.
Kalbar/TFN

On the inside of the piano a wine stain is still visible. McNulty suggested that Ludwika Jędrzejewiczowa may have tipped over a glass when she was reading one of the very small letters that previous owner Jane Stirling sent to her.

“A puddle of wine is actually a pool of bacteria that stained the wood. In the end, we decided not to bleach it out,” he said.

Kalbar/TFN

The piano was carefully preserved by successive generations of the family, Ludwika's children and grandchildren.
Kalbar/TFN

Though McNulty has restored a countless number of historical keyboard instruments over his long career, this job is special for him.

He said: “It is the most exciting thing I have ever done,” adding, “Chopin was not always graceful in his appraisal of piano builders. I have to watch my step.”

In 2018, McNulty completed work on a copy of a Buchholtz piano that Chopin played on when he lived in Warsaw.

Though McNulty has restored a countless number of historical keyboard instruments over his long career, this job is special for him.
Kalbar/TFN

The aim of this week’s work is to recreate as far as possible the sound of the piano that Chopin would have heard when he played and composed on it.

Evaluating the chances of achieving this, he said, “We are within the parameters of the piano at that time.

“My feeling is that the piano is so well preserved that the sound will be active and lively.”

McNulty said: "It is the most exciting thing I have ever done."
Kalbar/TFN

He will find out on Sunday when Aleksandra Świgrut, runner-up in the International Chopin Competition on Historical Instruments, will test it out in a behind-closed-doors performance.

The restoration work is being carried out on the first floor of the Chopin Museum in space that is open to visitors, who can observe the progress up to Sunday 12 December.

The Chopin Museum then plans to use the piano for performances and recordings.

TAGS: NATIONAL MUSEUM, ŻELAZOWA WOLA, FREDERIC CHOPIN, PIANO, RESTORATION, CHOPIN MUSEUM, CAMILLE PLEYEL, JANE STIRLING, LUDWIKA JĘDRZEJEWICZOWA, FRYDERYK CHOPIN SOCIETY, OSTROGSKI PALACE, FRYDERYK CHOPIN INSTITUTE, PAUL MCNULTY, ALEKSANDRA ŚWIGRUT

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