



Back to the future

Meeting Paul McNulty, maker of state-of-the-art fortepianos

by Eva Doroszkowska



Paul McNulty is a maker of world-famous fortepianos, known for their best performance quality, used for concerts and recordings in most prestigious concert halls and opera houses, and owned by prominent fortepiano players and leading music institutions.

Eva Doroszkowska talks about her visit to his workshop in the Czech Republic.

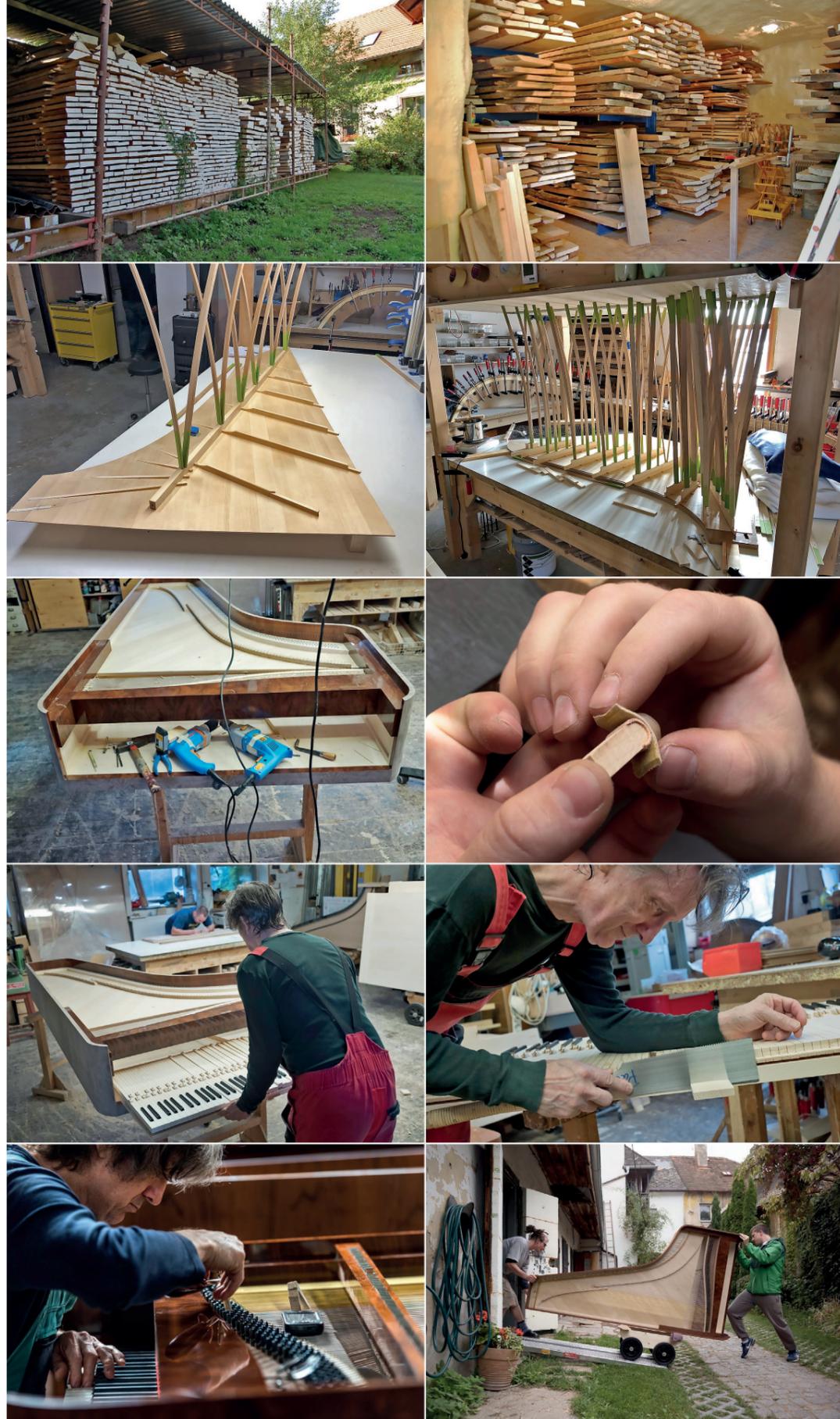
Fortepiano construction is a lifelong detective story for Paul McNulty. A genius craftsman and builder of over 280 unique instruments, he creates pianos that are world class and in demand. Together with his wife, Viviana Sofronitsky, a concert forte-pianist, they unravel mysteries of keyboard history. Meeting them in their home and workshop in the Czech Republic, I journeyed back in time where strings ring clear as crystal. McNulty's enthusiasm is infectious, communicating with humour an expansive knowledge of the industry, whilst Sofronitsky's expert touch brings the instruments to life and shines a spotlight on composers. The distant past is brought sharply into focus.

Driving through ancient forests, winding past fairytale castles, I find McNulty's workshop situated in Divišov, a historic village with obligatory cobbled streets and church clock. McNulty's van is parked outside a large arched courtyard door, indicating the disused blacksmith factory that is now his warehouse. I marvel at the rustic buildings, entering past stacks of neatly piled raw timber, their fresh warm pine scents tracing the air. An idyllic place for recreating the past, it is a far cry from McNulty's American Texas roots.

Aspiring to be a rock guitarist, McNulty studied classical guitar and lute at Peabody Conservatory. It was as a penniless student, working night shifts in an American parking lot, that he read a book with interviews of 200 working people, all miserable, bar the piano tuner. It struck a chord (!)

As soon as it was sunrise, he attended the Peabody Institute to find out more. Gaining the highest possible qualification as "tuning examiner", he landed a respectable job as a technician at Steinway's but turned it down to work on a Graf fortepiano and never looked back. As he says, laughing, "Early music was the last great hope of the hippy movement."

His first instrument, which took three months to build, is still going strong in Oslo Conservatory. Helped by the Orchestra of the 18th Century, he relocated to Amsterdam, building equivalent numbers of pianos to those of Anton Walter, Mozart's famous instrument maker, although admittedly "With much more coffee in the process". He has an encyclopedic knowledge and revels in quirks of the industry: how the Viennese escapement action was sold for 100 coins and a barrel of wine by Andreas Stein, for instance.



“They are the only ones I have played that have a soul.”

Ronald Brautigam

Mozart was well aware that it was the fortepiano builder who gave definitive character to each design.



With restless curiosity he accumulates evidence and data providing essential clues into a forgotten art. Antique furniture reproduction and restoration is a continuous tradition, but an industry wide set of criteria for fortepiano building is lost, never documented. McNulty learnt from instruments in museums. “It is an understanding of pitch in relation to elasticity,” he explains, “the more pianos I visited, the more one realises Viennese pianos were made specifically with aural control. Hammer shanks were carved. If you start carving, you’ve got to know when to stop.”

Crafting their fortepianos by hand, builders courted the best composers and artists of the day, the two traditions symbiotic and interconnected. Whilst violin makers Stradivarius and Guarneri stand universally for symbols of priceless value and incomparable quality, pianos of yesteryear sound tired, bearing faint resemblance to their original sound. Time effectively eradicates tone colour.

McNulty’s expertise, refined with countless hours of diligent research into materials and combined with knowledge of physics, acoustics and history, shows a conscientious sensitivity for the subject. Observing original instruments, he learnt to locate the maker’s sweet spot. “As a piano-maker you orientate to these patterns. Experience counts. A continual creative approach is obligatory. You work with high concentration and accuracy, setting priorities that depend on a timetable you make yourself. It’s physically demanding, but having to do something 2000 times trains you.” He says, “a job is a job, which I learned quite well.” A modest answer that does little to convince me there is not more mercurial wizardry involved, especially when one hears and sees the beauty of his finished products. Ronald Brautigam, who recorded the complete Beethoven sonatas on a McNulty instrument, says, “They are the only ones I have played that have a soul.”

Problems occurred when, after seven years in Amsterdam, McNulty could no longer source quality wood for soundboards. In a fortuitous turn of events, he met a harpsichord client in the Czech Republic, and, spying there



a quantity of old growth spruce timber, hard to come by, he moved to Prague, later discovering the disused blacksmiths in Divišov. Surrounded by spruce forests, it was the perfect spot to settle. In a satisfying historical synchronicity, these forests, with their elevation on the mountainside, provide superior quality of timber for his soundboards, just as they once did for the Viennese builders of long ago.

When fortepiano specialist Viviana Sofronitsky, daughter of legendary Russian pianist Vladimir Sofronitsky, came to purchase an instrument, she was intrigued. She recalls, “It was so perfect I could hardly believe it was I who was playing.” Fascinated, she stayed and turned the warehouse into a home. More than a businesswoman and muse, she has an understanding that ensures the business grows.

Listening to Sofronitsky demonstrate, what astounds me most is the variety of timbre: astonishing changes in register from silvery pearlescent treble to crunchy, earthy bass.

McNulty’s respect, precision and care are crafted into keys reacting to the softest touch imaginable, combining delicate stroke responsiveness with a variety of tone colours. Mozart was well aware that it was the fortepiano builder who gave definitive character to each design. He wrote to his father, “It is a priceless art.”



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Testimonials amongst top recording artists confirm McNulty as a builder in the footsteps of the best legendary craftsmen. He was the first to build a replica of a Pleyel, Chopin's favourite instrument, described as the "marriage of crystal and water".

McNulty explains, "Composers of every era wrote for instruments of their day. Effects they specified are lost on modern pianos." He quotes Rubinstein, "Piano makers know nothing of these things and what's more nor do the people who play them." Together McNulty and Sofronitsky explore this lost art. When I ask Sofronitsky how she adapts to each instrument she scoffs, "I only need to listen."

As she moves effortlessly between instruments, demonstrating Schubert gracefully on a Graf, Mozart on a Walter and boisterous passages of Liszt on a Boisselot (see her in action here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK7oULqiaYw>), it is as if the ghosts of the composers themselves have been called forth. Creating a unique auditory sensation, she intuitively understands the symbiosis between composer and piano. "They prove the meaning of the score, communicating it to me on the appropriate piano." Next she plays Beethoven on the Boisselot, Liszt's piano maker. She shakes her head, "It makes no sense." I hear why. It's like seeing the Mona Lisa smile with plumped up collagen filler: out of place and vulgar.

Sofronitsky points out, "It's not enough just to restore a piano. Any restoration involves destruction. As ceramicists know you can practise the Japanese art of Kintsugi threading golden lines across places of fracture but "To restore is to efface" (Edmund de Waal). It is vital people hear the beauty of how these instruments should sound, that they feel fresh to play with new actions." Paul says, "It is my wife's insistence that on a new keyboard the new damper mechanism plays with ease and no nonsense. There must be a number of useful instruments worldwide for the critical mass to catch on."

Luckily the stored timber in the yard is seasoned for at least 100 more pianos.

Climate change has unfortunately wreaked havoc here and the damage to trees in the surrounding forests has made it necessary to fell them in advance.

Sofronitsky takes care of business, dealing with transportation logistics to festivals, recording studios,

concerts, museums and more. A busy performing and recording artist in her own right, she is more interested in promoting the pianos than herself. "Artists must have experience of historical instruments. A musician who knows how to play a fortepiano will change their habits of touch, dictating what soloist and composer want from the music."

They are delighted more young musicians are exploring these instruments. "Beauty lies in creating something unique of interest for the listener they may never have heard before. Authenticity arises from insight into the composer's sound world dependent on their instruments." For Paul, authenticity is getting something new from wood which never had a use before, but for both of them one authenticity traces to another, both rooted firmly in a voyage of aural discovery. With András Schiff performing Haydn on a period piano at the Wigmore Hall last spring, and the second International Chopin Competition on period instruments to take place next autumn, whispers are spreading fast beyond the Bohemian forests, awakening the interest of many to this sound world.

Back to the future or forward to the past? Viviana Sofronitsky may have found some of her musical answers, but for a man like McNulty who has spent his life asking questions, he certainly investigates questions that matter.



Concert pianist **Eva Maria Doroszkowska** performs internationally as soloist and chamber musician working from as far afield as Kazakhstan to Canada. She has performed on BBC and Polish Television. As a piano teacher she has taught at the Royal Academy of Music,

Junior dept for over 20 years.

She is particularly highly regarded for her interpretations of Polish music "an emotionally committed pianist who sensitively conveys both the lyricism and dramatic drive of the music" (Polski Informator). She is an adjudicator for the British and International Federation of Festivals and has written several articles for International Piano magazine. Eva Maria won a scholarship to the Royal Northern College of Music before taking up a scholarship at the Szymanowski Academy, Katowice, Poland and Amsterdam Sweelinck. She also won a travel scholarship to complete Soloist Class at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, Copenhagen making her debut in Rundetårn.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

Continuing our fascinating retrospective history of EPTA through a review and summary of *Piano Journal*. Pianist, teacher, adjudicator, performer, writer and educator Nancy Litten summarises and selects excerpts from issues 41 & 42 of our EPTA magazine.

No. 41 (June 1993)

WHO'S WHO OF PIANISTS: MELVYN TAN talks to Carola Grindea

When I was about 11, a visitor to the house, an air hostess, heard me play. She offered to help me by taking a tape with some of my pieces to the recently established Yehudi Menuhin School for talented youngsters near London. Indeed, two months later, my parents received a cable letting them know that I was offered a scholarship and that I should arrive as soon as possible.

I was still a student at RCM when in 1977 I won the 1st prize for harpsichord in the Over-Seas League Competition for musicians from the UK and the Commonwealth (Singapore was not yet independent). This event really decided the direction of my career. Jury member, Ellena Warren, recommended me to one of her colleagues at BBC Radio 3,

the producer Paul Hamburger, who engaged me for a Lunch Hour Recital on the harpsichord. Another producer, Clive Bennet, offered me a series of broadcasts highlighting lesser-known pieces by Dussek, Clementi, Haydn etc., encouraging me to play them on the fortepiano.

C.G. How do you adapt to conducting from the keyboard?

M.T. I always approach the Mozart concertos as 'chamber music'. I place my instrument to face the audience while the players are seated around me, with the wind players directly behind so that they can see my hands; crucial for the ensemble as wind players are apt to enter early or late without a conductor.

C.G. How do your instruments stand up to the later works such as the *Hammerklavier* sonata or op. 111?

M.T. I use the later instruments. By 1825 fortepianos became bigger, stronger and heavier, developing from

a small instrument in 1770 to those of 6½ and 7 octaves by 1845. Beethoven was trying to stretch the instrument to its limits and piano makers started to respond.

C.G. How do you cope with your jet-set life?

M.T. All of us at the Yehudi Menuhin School had regular Alexander Technique lessons with an excellent ex-runner. He understood the body's need for exercise as well as relaxation. It is important for artists to be rational and careful and know when to stop, in order to maintain our strength.

WHO'S WHO OF ACCOMPANISTS: GEOFFREY PARSONS talks to Malcolm Miller

M.M. You have recently recorded Fauré songs with Janet Baker. Was this her last record?

G.P. Yes, she was still singing in concert and nearing her retirement, an