I think the reason for such massive emphasis on teaching Bach is that it just about teaches a pianist everything about piano playing, and also develops your memorising ability.

canten. The only concert hall with a reasonable piano was on the fourth floor, and that was the dredded place of millions of exams we had each year! Prof. Kestner’s class with Andrea Gawrorz, Tatjana Shebalina, Natalia Gaivoronski and many others, all those future stars of Russian pianism. They all treated me as an equal and soon we became good friends. However, it couldn’t get over how well they played, and I realised just how far behind them I was. I determined to catch up and the regime of six to eight hours practice a day began. As my hands were small, I was given some incredibly painful stretching exercises which gave me a very big span between my fingers. I was also assigned numerous exercises, scales and studies. On top of that, Bach was a MUST, and within few months I had completed all of the Little Preludes, Two-Part Inventions and had started on the Three-Part Inventions, plus some Cimarosa Sonatinas and studies by Lichnowsky.

At the end of my six-month trial, I sailed through the auditions, with smiling faces this time, and officially joined the school. Apart from practising all those hours, I was also learning Russian, studying all the subjects in a new language. My academic tutors were friendly and encouraging, and they gave me extra lessons too. At the end of my first year at the Central School, and by the age of nine, I played my first piano concerto, J. S. Bach’s F minor Keyboard Concerto. It still remains one of my favourite piano concertos!

Life at the Central School of Music

If that wasn’t enough, we had separate exams for a Classical, Romantic & Modern work, and a concerto. Every piece had to be different to the one tried during previous exams. That year, the adjudicators were rather sorry to say that it was too well studied. However, I was allowed to play Schumann. It was frightening to play in front of them but we all got used to it.

During your exams, you either progressed to the next form or you were told politely that you were wasting your life and time, and made to leave and go to a “normal” school. It was on a Friday waiting for the marks to appear on the wall after the exams. Throughout the year, we were encouraged to play in group classes, which you got used to playing in front of other pianists. Tatjana Nikolayeva would frequently dop it in to listen to us, as a golden rule of my teacher. It was nice to hear her say, “well this was a very good performance of Bach”, I was lucky to hear that from her a few times!

Apart from our music education, academic subjects were also of the highest standard. The School was divided into juniors (7 to 12 years old) and seniors (12 to 16 years old). Juniors used to attend school from 8am until 2pm. Seniors would attend school from 2pm until 6pm. It was necessary to divide the school as there were shortages of classrooms and practical rooms. We had two “free” days a week depending on form which we were in. All our instrumental and academic lessons were 45 minutes in duration and our practice was about 90 minutes, usually in 45 minute periods, so you could rest for 15 minutes. To this day I try to work like that, although not always successfully.

I was often given a new piece on Tuesday, and expected to have it memorised and played almost up to speed by Friday.

My piano lessons were on a Tuesday and Friday (both 45 minutes). My so-called “free” days were on a Wednesday and a Saturday, so I could really practise a lot on both days following my lessons. I was often given a new piece on Tuesday, and expected to have it memorised and played almost up to speed by Friday. So you had to learn and memorise very quickly. This was fine, but once I was given the first movement of Beethoven’s Third Piano Concerto in C minor on a Tuesday and expected to play it from memory including the Cadenza on the Friday! Well, we just got on with it and never complained.

Apart from all this work, we were expected to attend a number of concerts at the nearby Conservatoire, just a five-minute walk away. Most of the teachers at the Central School were also professors at the Conservatories, so often our lessons took place there and we were frequently rubbing shoulders with great musicians like Leonid Kogan, David Oistrach, Emil Gilels, Sviatoslav Richter, Mstislav Rostropovich and so many others.

I was extremely lucky and privileged to study at this fabulous school for six years. It was very sad to say goodbye to Prof. Kestner who was such a wonderful and patient teacher. The inside who opened my eyes to so much beautiful music as well as guiding me so successfully through my first years in Moscow. I became and have remained friends with a number of very famous Russian instrumentalists; my contemporaries such as Pavel Kogan, Evgeny Levin, Vladimir Feltsman, the late Tatjana Shebalina and Andrea Gawrorz, to name just a few. The “old” school building was rebuilt a few years ago, but I believe one old wall remains!

It was a most interesting period of my life, and my experiences at the Central School from the age of just nine until fifteen had unbelievable influence on my life and my development as a musician and person. I was so upset when my father was recalled back to Warsaw and I had to leave my Russian life behind. But I will never forget this incredible experience.

Six years after leaving for Moscow, I returned to Poland playing Chopin’s Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor.

Article written by Alicja Fidlerkiewicz and edited by Melissa Spanowicz (January 2016)

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