



NOTES

A Newsletter About
The North Country's Music

The Revolution *Will Be Heard*



A classical piano recital. What can be so revolutionary about that?

Plenty – as Diana Fanning is ready to prove.



NOTES

A Newsletter About

The North Country's Arts



Welcome

"The Sounds Of Change"

To those who love Western classical music, certain names are ubiquitous. Among them are Ludwig van Beethoven, Frédéric Chopin, and Claude Debussy. Their works are the staples of concert hall repertoire. Their names are plastered across music history textbooks. Their statues line the venues where great artists are celebrated. To us today, they are luminaries, familiar and comfortable in their status.

Yet there was a time when polite artistic society looked at each of these men with shock. Each of them knowingly broke the rules of Western composition. Each of them found unprecedented ways to allow their emotions to shine forth in their music. Each of them cast sounds and rhythms that a classical artist in their heyday was not supposed to produce. And each of them, despite the critiques, doggedly found ways to prevail — as did Leoš Janáček, today a Slavic hero but in his lifetime a writer who had to wait until the age of sixty-two for his first big hit.

The recital that pianist Diana Fanning developed in celebration of her fifty years of teaching at Middlebury College focuses on all of these composers, featuring music that shattered old boundaries. At first glance, it all seems so familiar. Viewed in the lens of their times, though, it is clear that these artists were indeed revolutionaries.

Revolutionaries who changed the trajectory of music forever.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diana Fanning".



Pianist **Diana Fanning**, celebrating fifty years of teaching piano at Middlebury College this year, performs a solo recital at the First Congregational Church in Essex Junction, Vt., on the afternoon of November 16.

The Revolution Will Be Heard

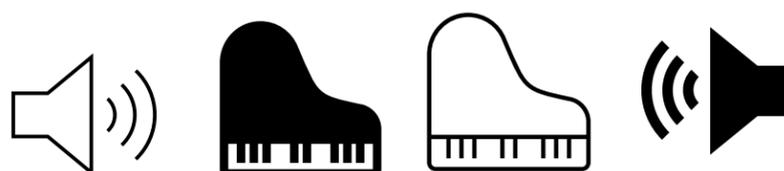
Story by Benjamin Pomerance

----- PHOTOS PROVIDED BY DIANA FANNING
AND MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

One day, the music would stop.

Others would hear it, carrying on in the sunshine that had to follow them with such a gift, not thinking twice about the sounds filling their ears. Yet Ludwig van Beethoven would receive it no more. Already, he struggled to grasp slivers of tones, the sounds that once flowed so naturally into his mind now taunting him just beyond his reach. It would be the end of his career as a concert pianist, he knew. Perhaps it would be the end of his ability to compose new music as well. Maybe it would be the end of everything.

He contemplated suicide. Isolating himself in the rural community of Heiligenstadt, Austria, he thought often about whether it would be worth waking up the next day. To his brothers Carl and Johann, he shared this thought on paper, a gut-wrenching letter known today as the Heiligenstadt Testament. "I must live like an exile," he wrote. "If I approach near to people a hot terror seizes upon me, a fear that I may be subjected to the danger of letting my condition be observed." To continue prolonging his life in such a state, he mused, felt worthless.



But by the document's conclusion, Beethoven had changed his mind. "It seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon me to produce," he declared to his brothers. "So, I endure this wretched existence."

Only a fortnight later, the composer wrote a letter of far different character. This time, the audience was his publisher. Accompanying the letter were two freshly composed works. Both, Beethoven proclaimed, were created "in a quite new style and each in an entirely different way." Most of the time, he wrote, only other people sensed when he had developed a new musical idea. "But this time," he concluded, "I myself can assure you that in both works the style is quite new for me." Despite deafness's inevitability, it seemed that the visionary was back.

And in planning a recital to mark fifty years of teaching at Middlebury College, Diana Fanning thought of that vision. "Just a couple of weeks earlier, we know from the Heiligenstadt Testament that Beethoven was despondent," she notes. "But then he goes to his publisher and announces that he is evolving in a new musical direction. It's an incredible



shift.” With that shift in mind, Beethoven’s *Six Variations on an Original Theme in F Major* received the nod to open her recital, the same program that she will play on November 16 at the First Congregational Church in Essex Junction, Vt.

She thought of other true tales, too. She thought of music that she had loved to play, music that she had recorded or performed in concerts that remained deeply meaningful to her. She considered how long it had been since she had played some of these works, and wondered if she could still play them again. She decided that she had to try. She succeeded, performing in front of a capacity crowd on the Middlebury campus. And only later, with cheers from that day still reverberating, did she have enough time to sit by herself quietly and think about the revolutionaries.

For it was them to whom she had turned. She had filled her program with the writings that changed how people regarded the piano — and how people regarded music in general — for generations to come. It had not been her intention to do so. Yet when she reviewed the recital that she had built, she realized that this was exactly what she had done.

She had picked, for instance, the third piano sonata that Frédéric Chopin released to the public, a tidal wave of defiance. His previous piano sonata had received mixed reviews. It was too different from what a typical audience member would expect a sonata to be, many critics complained. Others complained that Chopin should stick to writing little nocturnes and ballades and other miniature gems, for the intricacies of a long-form work like a sonata were beyond his abilities. Still others insisted that the music was too dense for anyone to understand it.

Even Chopin’s friend Robert Schumann joined the dissenting chorus. Back in 1831, when Chopin presented his *Variations on ‘Là ci darem la mano’*, Schumann effused to the public with praise: “Hats off, gentlemen, a genius!” Thirteen years later, though, Schumann offered no such remarks about Chopin’s second sonata. Instead, Schumann wrote that the music sounded as if Chopin had “gathered up four of his most unruly children, using this title perhaps to smuggle them into places where they could not otherwise have penetrated.”

Some artists might have quivered at such an assessment and changed styles. Chopin, however, came back swinging. Rather than shift to a more conventional compositional architecture, the composer packed his third sonata with practically as many contrasting musical ideas as his previous offering. Music critic Orrin Howard describes the opening salvo of notes that launches the first movement as “Chopin making a fist,” perhaps an accurate description of what was running through the composer’s mind. An emotional roller coaster unfolds from there.

It was, Fanning states, a quintessential peek into Chopin’s mind. On one hand, he adheres in this music to structure, the type of discipline one would expect from a composer who, as Fanning points out, venerated Johann Sebastian Bach’s mastery of forms. Yet on the other hand, he shatters old notions of those structures when they interfere with his musical compulsions. George Sand, the celebrated author with whom Chopin had a tempest-tossed love affair, wrote of Chopin’s gifts of melody, sitting at the piano and blithely improvising, making up gorgeous musical phrases in the spur of the moment.

She also wrote about what happened next, the anguish of a man trying to capture a sunbeam. “It was a series of efforts, of irresolutions, and of frettings to seize again the certain details of the theme he had heard,” Sand explained. “What he had conceived as a whole he analyzed too much when wishing to write it, and his regret at never finding it again, in his opinion, clearly defined, threw him into a kind of despair. He shut himself up for whole days, weeping, walking, breaking his pens, altering a bar a hundred times.”

All of which meant that when Chopin finally cast a section as he wanted it — when after all of the weeping and breaking and altering he had finally reached some halfway decent approximation of what poured out from his mind — he was not going to let anyone tell him to throw it aside. Somehow, this theme that captivated him was going to squeeze into the framework of that piece. Whether Robert Schumann approved felt irrelevant in such moments. Even if the positioning was unconventional, at least the melody would be beautiful.

In this way, he transformed his instrument. This shy, moody man who balked at widespread attention, who published far fewer compositions than his top-level



contemporaries, who gave apparently only thirty public performances during his thirty years of writing music — he was the one who turned so many prior assumptions about the piano upside-down. In so many of his works, the piano becomes a poet, not a showman or a lecturer, calling for a playing technique that is fluid, not rigid. He allows for flexibility of pacing. He lets lyrical lines ring.

If this meant raised eyebrows and shaking heads from those who felt he had gone too far, wearing his heart too visibly on his sleeve, he seemed willing to take the arrows. Not so long before him, after all, naysayers had done the same to Beethoven, chastising him for letting his emotional cup spill onto the printed page in methods that some listeners deemed shocking. Not so long after him, the skeptics would say the same things all over again to another compositional risk-taker, another man writing in ways that no one before him had dared.

And Claude Debussy, like Beethoven and Chopin before him, turned his back to the noise. Twelve years had passed since the death of Chopin when Debussy was born in a humble household in Paris's suburbs. His parents ran a store that failed to reach any real levels of commercial success. Things only worsened after his father commanded a battalion on the losing side of the Franco-Prussian War, leading to his arrest and imprisonment and causing the family even deeper degrees of financial hardship.

Yet while he was in prison, Debussy's father met a café pianist named Charles de Sivry, whose mother taught piano lessons. Allegedly, she had studied once upon a time with Chopin, although no one could prove this. Still, this was good enough for Debussy's imprisoned dad, who decided that his son needed to learn to play the piano. Questions about the logic of spending the struggling household's cash on piano lessons rather than more vital daily necessities have been lost to the sands of time, for the eventual outcome of those lessons changed music eternally.

At first, though, the expense felt like the dumbest extravagance imaginable. Debussy was a talented pupil, but he was also uncooperative. "He knew all of the rules from his classical training," Fanning says. "But he also liked to break the rules, and for that he became known as a difficult student." In 1872, he entered the Paris Conservatory. According to some accounts, he distinguished himself quickly for

all of the wrong reasons, asking professors in basic harmony courses why any of the traditional rules of Western composition were needed.

As if to thumb his nose at the establishment, he aced virtually every technical assignment, as if to show the faculty that he could play their game — if he felt like it. His favorite place, though, seemed to be not at the writing desk but at the piano, improvising for hours, seemingly oblivious to all life around him. Yet while Chopin improvised flowing melodies, much like the arias that he adored from Vincenzo Bellini's operas, Debussy improvised clusters of tones, much like the free-verse poetry and Symbolist paintings that enthralled him.

Eventually, like Chopin, he translated some of his personal highlights from those long improvisatory sessions into full-length pieces. For a while, he refused to engage in any Chopin-like hand-wringing over perfection. He wrote music with dissonant-sounding chords that did not resolve into any bedrock place of comfort, because he felt that the dissonant chord said enough by itself. He crafted chord progressions that sounded more at home in a jazz club than in a conventional concert hall. He employed techniques harkening back to medieval cathedrals.

In 1899, he heard a gamelan ensemble perform at the Paris Exposition. Afterward, he announced that this musical heritage of the Javanese, Sundanese, and Balinese peoples of Indonesia made Western classical music sound like "empty phantoms of use to clever little children." A fascination with Eastern tonalities followed. In his operatic setting of the play *Pelléas et Mélisande*, he utilized all of these influences and more to cast an atmospheric, ethereal creation quite unlike any opera that had been crafted before it.

"He created a new sound world," Fanning states. "It was a world of imagination." In this realm, he found a home, at least for a bit of time. "Those around me persist in not understanding that I have never been able to live in a real world of people and things," he declared. Amid his Eastern tonalities and Symbolist tendencies, his use of blues notes and ragtime rhythms and surreal sonic clusters, he appeared to find some semblance of whatever reality lacked for him.

Then the music aficionados switched on the klieg lights of fame. Commentators started writing of the "school" of Debussy. Followers of his work became known in



the press as “Debussyites.” A self-styled loner, Debussy purportedly found all of this attention to be far too much to bear. Around this time, the loner also had a torrid affair with a singer, ending badly his marriage to a fashion model, and when the gossips of Paris got ahold of this story, there was no turning back for Debussy from his newfound place in the public eye.

“An artist is, all in all, a detestable, inward-facing man,” Debussy wrote in one letter to his first wife after the affair came to light. Other composers began using these adjectives to describe him, too, when the composer decided to take up the secondary job of music critic. His opinions set Europe into an uproar. Richard Wagner, he wrote, was a sunset disguised as a sunrise, a bright light that represented the end of an era rather than the start of one. Felix Mendelssohn’s music was too glossy. He even took aim at Beethoven’s piano sonatas.

Later, he confessed that some of this was for show — or, at least, for self-preservation. By attacking the titans of the past, he apparently hoped to jar audiences into thinking about the music that they heard rather than applauding it simply because they recognized the name on the title page. Beethoven and Wagner, in particular, were composers whom he actually admired, but he told an interviewer later in his life that he rejected the notion that he should “admire them uncritically, just because people have told me that they are masters.”

In his own quest for mastery, he tried during this period to write another opera equal in innovation to *Pelléas et Mélisande* — and failed. With instrumental music, he found greater success at this time in his life, from the sprawling tone poem *La Mer* to two books of preludes for solo piano. “The preludes really represent some of Debussy’s most innovative writing,” Fanning states. “He had such an imagination for the possibilities of sound on the piano. And in

these works, he really seemed to let that imagination run in so many incredible directions.”

From the first of Debussy’s books of preludes, Fanning picked two selections for her program: *Minstrels*, filled with wordless depictions of medieval European street entertainers, and *Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir* [“The Sounds and Fragrances Swirl Through The Evening Air”]. The latter of these brings her back to time spent studying French literature in college, where she learned the poem that inspired the prelude. “I loved that poem,” she says. “I memorized it. I recited it.”

She pauses for a moment. “Debussy was the perfect person to cast those ineffable ideas into music,” she adds. “He creates these shimmers of sound, ethereal and floating. It creates this suggestion of mysteriousness that embody the feelings of the poetry.”

There are mysteries, too, in the sound worlds that Leoš Janáček conjured in *On an Overgrown Path*, a cycle that has long fascinated Fanning. Yet while Debussy’s secrecies generally are abstract, the writings in *On an Overgrown Path* focus on elements of the composer’s own life. “These reminiscences are so dear to me that I do not think they will ever vanish,” Janáček wrote of this creation. “Whenever I have a moment to indulge myself undisturbed in these recollections, then I find that another such little piece comes to mind.”

It was a long-term labor, a familiar feeling for a writer whose career was itself a long-term labor. Initially, he crafted music in the conventional Western fashion. When the calendar turned to the twentieth century, however, something within him turned with it, and all of his pieces from the year 1900 onward bore distinctly personal stamps. Cadences of the Czech language found a home within his rhythms. Snippets of Moravian folk tunes entered his melodies. Bird songs — the purest music of all, he insisted — wove their way into pivotal moments of his works as well.



There was only one problem. Plenty of critics did not share his interests in birds, folk songs, and speech-like rhythms. He yearned for acceptance from audiences in the Czech cultural center of Prague, but opportunities there remained elusive. Europe's literati grumbled that he was merely a provincial man, lacking in sophistication. Still, he remained insistent on writing his music in his own way. Perhaps unsurprisingly, with himself as his only truly reliable audience, many of his works from this era of struggles took on a rather personal atmosphere.

And none were more autobiographical than *On an Overgrown Path*. The gestation of these pieces spanned ten years and covered even more time than that. He opened the cycle in childhood, both the halcyon memories of home and the shock of being rushed, at the age of four, from that home during a fire. Then more golden moments come: the cheering of kids assembling to play; the early musical adventures of a burgeoning music student, improvising with care on his church's organ as a procession approaches outside; the joking and gossiping of schoolgirls.

Yet rawer segments await. A movement titled *A blown-away leaf* represents a lost love. Another section, *Words fail!*, tells of a heartbreak that defies speech, with fractured segments representing attempts to talk that end with sobs. And then, most poignantly of all, three sections tracing the final illness of his daughter Olga, a fatal battle with tuberculosis that began while she was studying abroad. The last movement introduces the call of the owl, the bird that in Slavic folklore foretells death and guides the deceased to the afterlife. For these passages, no symbolic translation is needed.

Ironically, the era of the grieving father's deepest tragedy would meld with his inaugural professional triumph. Janáček would pour his torment during Olga's illness into completing a new opera, *Jenůfa*, premiering it in 1904. At first, the establishment in

Prague turned their collective backs yet again. But twelve years later, the composer formed a friendship with the theatre critic Max Brod, who managed to convince the artistic gatekeepers to give the opera a chance. The listeners roared their approval. At the age of 62, Janáček had found acclamation at last.

It is this line, too, that runs through Fanning's program. The potholed road takes its share of detours before leading finally to an unspoiled plateau. Chopin weathered the doubters who claimed he lacked the talent to write substantial compositions. Debussy showed the teachers who shook their heads at his questions that his curiosity came with good reason. Janáček's decades of sticking to his own way of writing finally reached vindication at an age when many people are thinking of retirement.

And Beethoven found that he still had motivations for living after all. There would be no miracle cure for his deafness. Yet music still whispered to him. He would keep writing in new ways, pushing boundaries before demolishing them entirely. "It seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon me to produce," he had resolved at Heiligenstadt. Against the storm, he met this aim.

"When I perform," Fanning says, "I think about taking the audience by the hand and leading them through this piece of music that I love. And, hopefully, giving them a reason to love it, too." A love, maybe, that begins with the recognition of the glory that certain music gets performed at all. A love for those who risked and pushed and struggled to advance their art form to novel heights. A love for the fact that in this art there are revolutionaries, and that even for those whose hearing frays, the revolution will be heard.

Diana Fanning performs on November 16 at 3 p.m. in the First Congregational Church of Essex Junction (39 Main Street, Essex Junction, Vt.). For tickets and more information, visit www.fccej.org/v5/calendar-news/concert-series/.

Upcoming Events

Arts of the North Country
and Beyond



Love At Sea: Board the *S.S. American* for high-seas hijinks and romance against a backdrop of Cole Porter's classic hits when Artistry Community Theatre presents *Anything Goes* in Plattsburgh.

Coming Attractions: Our Region's Arts Programming In November

Lyric Theatre Company *A Chorus Line*

A musical glimpse into the lives of seventeen dancers auditioning for a Broadway chorus line
Flynn Center for the Performing Arts
153 Main Street
Burlington, Vt.
November 13-15, 7:30 p.m.
November 15, 2 p.m.
November 16, 2 p.m.
(802) 863-5966
www.flynnvt.org

Artistry Community Theatre *Anything Goes*

Cole Porter's classic musical romp at sea, filled with tunes that are de-lightful and de-lovely
Strand Center Theatre
25 Brinkerhoff Street
Plattsburgh, N.Y.
November 14, 7 p.m.
November 15, 7 p.m.
November 16, 2 p.m.
info@artistrytheatre.org
www.artistrytheatre.org

Middlebury Performing Arts Takács Quartet

Moses Pendleton's troupe of dancers and illusionists
72 Porter Field Road
Middlebury, Vt.
November 14, 7:30 p.m.
(802) 443-6433
www.middlebury.edu/college/box-office

Whallonsburg Grange Hall

Casey, McCaffrey & O'Hara
Elite acoustic artists unite for a high-flying program
1610 Route 22
Essex, N.Y.
November 22, 7:30 p.m.
(518) 963-7777
www.thegrangehall.info

Hill & Hollow Music

The Still Point of the Turning World
LaFolia Baroque Ensemble
Saranac Methodist Church
Route 3, Saranac, N.Y.
November 23, 3 p.m.
www.hillandhollowmusic.org

And More To Come: *A Look Ahead*

Lake Placid Ctr. for the Arts

The Nutcracker

Pyotr Illyich Tchaikovsky's beloved holiday ballet returns to the North Country
Nov. 29, 1 p.m. & 6 p.m.
Nov. 30, 1 p.m.
Dec. 6, 1 p.m.
Dec. 7, 1 p.m.
Venues to be announced
(518) 523-2512
www.lakeplacidarts.org

The Lane Series

Ute Lemper sings Kurt Weill
University of Vermont
Recital Hall
392 South Prospect Street
Burlington, Vt.
December 5, 7:30 p.m.
(802) 656-4455
www.uvm.edu/laneseries

Piano By Nature

Patricia McCarty, viola
Rose Chancler, piano
Janice Kyle, oboe
8273 River Street
Elizabethtown, N.Y.
December 6, 7 p.m.
December 7, 3 p.m.
www.pianobynature.org



To all who sustain
the arts in our
region, thank you.