

Leeds by example

Now in its fiftieth year, the Leeds International Piano Competition has become a tour de force as formidable as the lady who conceived it. **David Kettle** tells the story of how a local piano teacher put a small city in Yorkshire on the musical map

It all began with a sleepless night. A Leeds piano teacher and mother sat up and woke her husband late on a summer evening in 1961 to ask, “Why don’t we start an international piano competition?” He said it would never work, but he was reckoning without the determination, drive and sheer energy of Fanny Waterman.

For Waterman (now Dame Fanny, since the 2005 New Year Honours) is synonymous with the Leeds International Piano Competition, as artistic director, chief fund-raiser and the elemental force that makes the competition happen every three years. Now aged 92, she has lost none of her strength and vigour. “All the core values of the competition have been laid down by her,” says the organisation’s recently appointed CEO Trevor Green, “and they are really strong and unshakeable. Fanny is everything to the competition.”

Leeds-born herself, Waterman had the value of hard work instilled into her at an early age by her immigrant jeweller father. After showing early promise on the piano, she later became a successful concert pianist, performing in London during the Second World War. She was called up for service but given the option of teaching, which she grasped firmly. Her private pupils have included such eminent British piano names as Allan Schiller, Michael Roll, Paul Crossley and Benjamin Frith, and her piano tutor books, written with friend Marion Thorpe, have sold millions around the world.



Above: Fanny Waterman the piano teacher at work

Right: Wendy Waterman, one of Fanny’s daughters, with Allan Schiller, feeling the inspiration of Fanny’s teaching

And it was with Thorpe – at that time Marion Harewood, wife of the Earl of Harewood – that she kick-started the Leeds competition in 1963, raising funds from local businesses, generous individuals, banks and the Leeds Corporation. (The fact that Harewood’s mother-in-law was Princess Mary, the Princess Royal, can’t have hindered matters either – Princess Mary would become the event’s patron.)

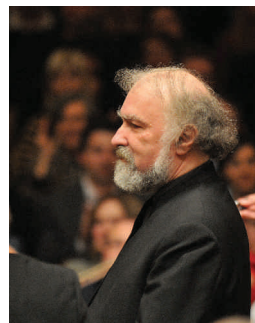
Since the inaugural competition in 1963, Leeds has helped launch the careers of some of today’s





wasn't the only controversy that the competition has provoked. Waterman was mortified at how it would look to the outside world that one of her own pupils, Michael Roll, won the very first competition, despite not even being on the jury herself. Peter Donohoe, already enjoying an international career when he entered the contest, was ranked just sixth in 1981. Lupu was originally placed fourth after the 1969 competition's second round, excluding him from the final, until Waterman badgered the jury to extend the final round from three to five competitors. Lupu went on to win.

Every music competition has its controversies, though, and the Leeds still ranks as one of the world's great keyboard events. Green agrees. "It's in the top four piano competitions in the world and it has put Leeds on the cultural map. On the



pre-eminent pianists: Radu Lupu, Murray Perahia, Dmitri Alexeev and Artur Pizarro, to name just four winners. Ironically, some runners-up have gone on to have even starrier careers than the competitors placed above them. Mitsuko Uchida came second to Alexeev in 1975 and András Schiff was placed third below them both. Noriko Ogawa took third place in 1987 and Kathryn Stott was fifth in 1978.

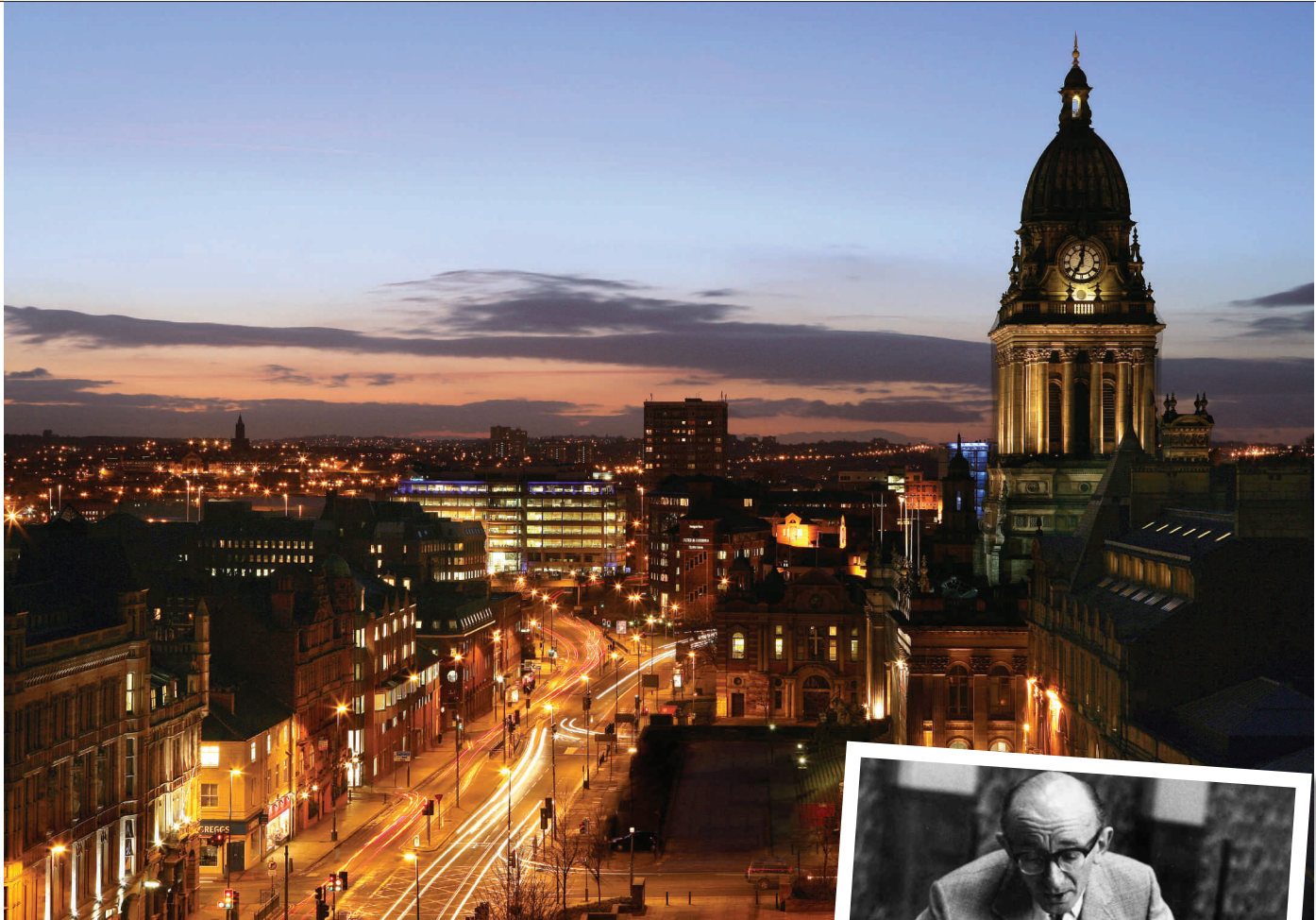
Stott decided to re-enter the competition in 1987 – and didn't make it past the first round. That

Top left: Princess Mary, the competition's first patron

Top right: Dame Fanny Waterman still living for the music

Above, left to right: Sir Mark Elder MBE, leader of the Hallé Orchestra, and Leeds success stories Murray Perahia, Radu Lupu, Mitsuko Uchida and Sofya Gulyak

Photography: Corbis; Simon Doidt; Felix Broeders; Nan Maly; Richard Avedon; Ben Duffy



back of the founding of the competition came Opera North, dance companies, galleries – it’s a very visible and high-profile thing for the city and Yorkshire.”

Leeds’ administrator, Elizabeth Blanckenberg, also highlights the competition’s connections with the local community. “People here are very glad to be involved in such a prestigious event. We have about 200 volunteers helping us, offering their homes, stewarding at events, helping with administration, driving competitors to where they need to be.”

For, despite the slick operation, once the event is happening there’s a frenetic buzz of activity behind the scenes. Accommodation and food are taken care of: competitors stay in the university halls of residence and get their meals there too. But what about their all-important practice?

“It’s a huge operation,” says Blanckenberg. “There’s a running schedule for practice: when competitors arrive, they draw a ballot number and that determines the order of play. But there’s a new schedule every day.”

The challenge of finding enough pianos of quality in a city the size of Leeds has been helped immensely by the All-Steinway Schools program. “We have a partnership with the Leeds College

Above: Leeds Town Hall, where this year’s final round will be held

Right: Clifford Curzon and Sir Arthur Bliss adjudicating at the first Leeds competition in 1963

Below: Murray Perahia on his way to first prize at Leeds in 1972



of Music, which has recently become a Steinway college,” says Blanckenberg. “They have wonderful new Steinway pianos and they’ve kindly agreed that we can use a number of them for rehearsal. Steinway also sponsors a number of grand pianos that they bring up to Leeds from London to place in private homes for the competition, so a lot of competitors go round to people’s houses to rehearse.”

And that can lead to some close relationships between competitors and Leeds residents. There

Photography: Courtesy of Leeds International Piano Competition; Marketing Leeds; Getty Images



are tales of pianists returning numerous times to visit Leeds families who have looked after them. 1984 winner Jon Kimura Parker, for example, would stay with his Leeds hosts if he was performing anywhere in northern England. “Alessandro Taverna, our third prize winner from 2009, has been back so many times,” says Blanckenberg. “He’s got a real following in the Yorkshire area. It just shows that they do touch people on a personal level.”

The 2012 competition received 260 applications, from which eighty competitors from forty-three countries have been invited to take part. “They’re sensational – it’s going to be a great year,” enthuses Green. “The Chinese are very strong, the Koreans and Americans are good and Europe is well represented too.”

This is also the first year for two new additions to the prize list, alongside the main awards of concert engagements and substantial sums of cash. A new orchestra prize will be voted on by the players of the Hallé Orchestra, under Sir Mark Elder MBE, which accompanies the six pianists in the concerto final. Winners get £5,000 and three engagements with the Hallé Orchestra, plus the possibility of recording a CD with the orchestra.

And a new audience prize will be awarded at the end of each stage, an incentive both to



Above: Sir Mark Elder MBE with the Hallé Orchestra, which accompanies the finalists

Leeds International Piano Competition 2012 programme

29 August - 15 September 2012

First stages: 29 August–2 September, Great Hall, University of Leeds

Second stages: 4–7 September, Great Hall, University of Leeds

Semi-finals: 9–11 September, Great Hall, University of Leeds

Finals: 14–15 September, Leeds Town Hall

Prize-winners’ gala: 16 September, Great Hall, University of Leeds

encourage audience members to attend the earlier rounds and to involve them more in the event as a whole.

Indeed, looking outward to audiences and the Yorkshire community has become increasingly important. “We’re really keen to involve a younger audience in the competition,” says Blanckenberg. “We ran a project in March this year where we took classical and jazz ensembles involving the piano to schools all around Leeds. We wanted to show them how the piano can be used in various settings. At one of the schools the kids were so enthusiastic that we’ve invited them for a day at the competition, to meet the competitors as well.”

For Green, one of the key challenges is preparing for the future and maintaining the passion that the pioneering Dame Fanny has invested in the competition. “I’d love to see it become a piano festival eventually,” he says, “still with the competition, of course, but with lots of other keyboard activity going on. There’s the possibility of a junior competition, or a showcase for young talent from schools and conservatoires, and I’d love to do more master-classes, with Dame Fanny and other pianists.”

With what looks like a bumper year ahead and grand plans for the future, it looks like the Leeds competition will continue to put the north of England firmly on the international piano map for years to come. ■

Past winners

- 1963 Michael Roll (UK)
- 1966 Rafael Orozco (Spain)
- 1969 Radu Lupu (Romania)
- 1972 Murray Perahia (USA)
- 1975 Dmitri Alexeev (USSR)
- 1978 Michel Dalberto (France)
- 1981 Ian Hobson (UK)
- 1984 Jon Kimura Parker (Canada)
- 1987 Vladimir Ovchinnikov (USSR)
- 1990 Artur Pizarro (Portugal)
- 1993 Ricardo Castro (Brazil)
- 1996 Ilya Itin (Russia)
- 2000 Allesio Bax (Italy)
- 2003 Antti Siirala (Finland)
- 2006 Sunwook Kim (South Korea)
- 2009 Sofya Gulyak (Russia)



Above: the splendid setting inside Leeds Town Hall for the 2006 final