

Jane W. Stirling

Her story unfolds

It was in 1848 that Dunblane-born Jane Wilhelmina Stirling took Frédéric Chopin to Scotland. Bankrupt and terminally ill, he had nothing to lose. Instead, he thought to earn a few pounds and hundreds of new admirers. Prosperous and apparently infatuated, she had a lot to give: her support for this Great Romantic and her pure admiration for his music. And so it happened. Yet, since his premature death that shook the world of music barely a year after the Scottish voyages, little has been heard of that incredible Scotswoman – the one who truly saved the majority of Chopin's legacy. Until now.

It was in 2015 that Anna Dębowska – a Cracow-based pianist – joined an academic initiative in Chopin's motherland under the heading of theAboutProject.com to investigate the life of Chopin's pupil and friend. The idea of revealing the history of someone who had so undeservedly fallen into oblivion was inspiring and sobering in equal parts. "As a pianist, I knew a lot about Chopin, but I hadn't heard about the woman before," Anna says. "And I certainly should have," she adds after a pause.

Anna has over the last year become greatly involved in the rediscovery of Jane Stirling, a person with whom she seems to truly identify. Her latest concept album, provocatively entitled *Chopin the Ungrateful*, is a tribute to our Scottish compatriot and features a selection of Chopin's compositions, including those which Jane Stirling practiced under the supervision of her teacher as well as those which her tutor dedicated to her. Anna has also had the privilege to perform these Nocturnes (op. 55: in F minor No. 1 and in E flat major No. 2) at theAboutProject.com's *An Evening with Jane Stirling* on the Pleyel grand piano that belonged to her Scottish heroine and on which Chopin played during his stay in Scotland.

One could also say that Anna and Jane have in fact become transcendental soulmates, which might account for why she sounds so authentic and truthful when playing Chopin's music and talking about his benevolent tutee. Aged 43, Anna Dębowska is just one year younger than Jane Stirling was when she organized Chopin's tour of England and Scotland in 1848. And just like her, Anna tends towards the introverted and has over the past twenty years of her artistic activity successfully evaded the limelight, notwithstanding the fact that her playing has always been respected by professional audiences. Striking similarities, aren't they?

This natural timidity vanishes the very moment Anna's fingertips grace the keyboard, however. Normally fragile and fearful, she becomes a musical sovereign when taming the grand piano with Chopin's music. "Anna can lull the audience with the subtle rendition of the composer's nocturnes, but at the same time she can roll through the keyboard like a hurricane with demanding passages when interpreting his ballades," says Marek Kucharski, a member of theAboutProject.com. "You listen to her as if the sounds actually had a meaning, as if they wanted to say what we all

want to say: *Thank you, Scotland; Thank you, Miss Jane Stirling*," he adds. For Anna's playing offers more than just music.

Anna's performances during "An Evening with Jane Stirling" fuse the past with the present, as they provide the audience with a unique opportunity to commune with the sounds that do carry a message. Contextualized by Marek's narration and readings from Chopin's letters, they spin a story of love, devotion, disillusionment and unconditional respect for this somewhat whimsical Romantic genius. They tell the story of Jane Wilhelmina Stirling, who gave so much and received so little. They tell the story that has become forgotten or has never been known to many – the story that will now unfold.

