

# PILGRIMAGE OF A PIANOPHILE:

## Four Days in Husum, the Mecca of Piano Music Lovers

### PROFILE



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY

### DR CHANG TOU LIANG

Dr Chang Tou Liang is a family physician. From 2004 to 2008, he was the artistic director of the Singapore International Piano Festival. He is presently Singapore's most prolific classical music reviewer, having contributed over 1,900 articles to the *Straits Times*. He is married to Janet, has a 14-year-old son Shan Ming and owns 12 cats.

### Legend

1. Pianist Martin Jones acknowledges the applause in the Knights' Hall of Schloss vor Husum
2. Market day in Husum square
3. Husum's inner harbour in low tide
4. Reflections of the 16th century Schloss vor Husum

Muslims go to Mecca and Roman Catholics to Lourdes. For the *pianophile*, or lover of piano music, the place to be is Husum, a little town on Germany's North Sea coast. Better known to the Germans as a summer seaside getaway, Husum hosts the world's most unique piano festival, *Rarities of Piano Music*, at the Schloss vor Husum. The festival specialises in presenting works for the piano that are rarely performed or heard of. Pieces by obscure composers and forgotten works by great composers are celebrated as if they were the true classics.

Husum is located two hours by train from Hamburg's Altona Station, a pleasant journey through vast and flat expanses of greenery, dotted by thousands of modern windmills, the energy collectors of wind farms. The train crosses over the mighty Kiel Canal, a man-made waterway that connects the North Sea to the Baltic

Sea. Husum's sleepy station beckons and the market square is a short six-minute amble away. The clock tower of Marienkirche (St Mary's Church) dominates the low skyline, and its carillons, heard from my loft at the welcoming Wohler Hotel, reminded me that it was six in the evening. The piano recital would commence in an hour and a half.

The festival takes place every year over eight evenings in late August, when the sun sets late and the air is balmy. The setting of the Knights' Hall in the 16th century castle, Schloss vor Husum, is special. A Steinway grand piano stands proudly in a small but intimate space which seats 200 comfortably. The castle's ferrous oxide red bricks and its imposing clock tower, encircled by a moat slightly overgrown with rushes, is a sight! When the concert began, the audience sat with rapt attention, but no one informed the moat's ducks and migratory birds, whose calls provided a



surreal but natural counterpoint to the piano music.

My first evening was in the company of Welsh pianist Martin Jones. Not exactly a household name, he has nevertheless amassed an impressive discography covering large swathes of French and Spanish repertoire, and the complete piano works of Brahms, Mendelssohn, Szymanowski and Percy Grainger. He is a natural for the festival, as every note of his Czerny, Mompou, Gal, Guastavino, Nin and Grainger is unknown to me, even for an inveterate *pianophile* like me.

He addressed the audience in English, offering interesting anecdotes and insights into the composers and the music he performed. It was in this informal and unstuffy atmosphere that music connected the composer, artist and audience, with nary a dull moment. There was still light during the intermission and many headed out into the castle's formal gardens for a taste of wine, while others scrutinised the festival's photographic exhibition on piano literature in the elaborately decorated rooms. I contented myself with rummaging through a "pasar malam" of piano CDs on sale at a concession booth.

The music continued, and when the recital ended, there was a clamour for the pianist to perform encores. This practice is *de rigueur*, and many find it the most intriguing part of a concert, where surprises can spring up like a welcomed Christmas gift. Jones generously obliged the audience with not one but four impromptu performances, and was duly rewarded with a standing ovation. I was informed that such accolades are not common practice in Germany, but the warmth of the response to Jones's encore performance was palpable. This fuzzy feeling continued late into the evening when the piano party moved en masse to a nearby watering hole where beer and North German home-cooked food was served.

What did I do during the intervening stretches of day between the evening recitals? Sightseeing is the obvious option. The state of Schleswig-Holstein is unlike the rest of Germany; instead, it resembles the Netherlands, with its low-lying countryside and architecture,

and neighbouring Denmark, which is only a half-hour's drive away.

Husum is a quiet town that comes alive on market days, when farmers' produce and cottage industry handicrafts are carted in, and families and pets throng the streets, giving it a carnival atmosphere. Husum's picturesque inner harbour is a kilometre away from the sea and the tide rises and ebbs, leaving boats grounded on dry land. Ice cream parlours do roaring summer business and seafood restaurants offer hearty soups and broths at reasonable prices. Within walking distance are the Maritime and North Sea Museums, which document the rich history of Husum's seafaring communities. Seven minutes away by train is the town of Friedrichstadt, which was founded by Dutch remonstrants fleeing religious persecution. Its well-planned streets, bisected by a system of canals, centuries old churches and a townhouse, resemble a miniature version of Amsterdam.

In between, I found the time to interview Peter Froudjian, a Berlin-native of Armenian extraction in his sixties, who is the founder and artistic director of the Rarities Festival. According to Froudjian, the inspiration for the festival came to him during a posting as head of music at the castle school during the 1980s. He pondered, "There is so much good piano music that is unknown, so why do we stick to a narrow perspective when it comes to concert repertoire?" The castle's rustic setting seemed appropriate and the first festival took off to critical acclaim in 1987. This year, the festival celebrates its 30th edition, which promises to be a gala event.

The second and third evenings featured excellent recitals by Briton Jonathan Plowright and the French-

Cypriot piano wizard Cyprien Katsaris. The latter was slotted in as an eleventh hour replacement for a pianist who called in sick and it was an unexpected reunion of sorts. In 2007, when I was the artistic director of the Singapore International Piano Festival, Katsaris was invited as a marquee artist in the theme "Lisztomania: The Art of Virtuosity", where he performed the music of Franz Liszt. "The doctor from Singapore!" he exclaimed when we met after his stupendous showing at the recital. It was time to catch up and reminisce.

Four days seemed an all-too-short sojourn into an arcane world of piano esoterica in a friendly atmosphere, but time flies when one is having fun. Further visits to Husum are imperative, if only I can just find more time.

For more information, visit the festival website at <http://www.raritaeten-der-klaviermusik.de>. ♦

