

Rural rhapsodies

Six pianists make beautiful music in the boonies

Internationally acclaimed concert pianist Janina Fialkowska sways her arms to a haunting *Lyric Piece* by Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg. "You're playing the same stuff I play," she enthuses as 15-year-old Peter Jones, his eyes fierce with concentration, moves his fingers across the keys of an ebony grand. Jones and three other piano students from British Columbia's Sunshine Coast, the rugged region northwest of Vancouver, have come for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. At Sechelt's Raven's Cry Theatre,

her roots. In 1994, driven by national pride and troubled by the dearth of opportunities rural Canadians have to hear live classical performances, Fialkowska founded Piano Six, a unique nonprofit touring partnership with five other leading Canadian pianists: Jon Kimura Parker, Angela Hewitt, Marc-André Hamelin, Angela Cheng and André Laplante.

They each pledged 10 days a year out of their busy touring and recording schedules for an entire decade to visit isolated Cana-

children. Among their far-flung stops: Corner Brook, Nfld., Chicoutimi, Que., and Prince Rupert, B.C. And last fall, concerned about a possible shortage of pianos, Parker, who lives on Manhattan's Upper West Side, even lugged a Roland synthesizer across the Far North, where he entertained Inuit children in Iqaluit. "It was one of the most fascinating experiences of my life," says the 37-year-old pianist. "When you see kids' faces light up and you see that they are excited, that makes it."

But like other arts organizations, Piano Six is beginning to feel the financial pinch. Although they have received some money from the Touring Office of the Canada Council, Fialkowska and several of her Piano Six colleagues—as well as project co-ordinator Jane Colwell—have personally had to bear a portion of the costs of touring. And without additional funding, Fialkowska says, her dream may have to be downsized. "I don't think that any of us will ever let this die out," she vows. "But we will probably have to cut back—we are already stretched to the limits."

That could well be a loss for tiny communities like Sechelt (population 7,500), which Fialkowska recently visited as part of Piano Six's last tour of the season before resuming engagements next fall. Tracey Thompson, a 19-year-old piano student hoping to major in music at the University of British Columbia, drove nearly an hour from her home in Pender Harbour to attend the Raven's Cry master class. "I got a lot out of it," said Thompson, whose performance of the difficult third movement of Mozart's *Sonata K. 332* was meticulously critiqued by Fialkowska. "I'm happy she got so detailed." Added her piano instructor, Valerie Rutter, who also teaches Jones: "This is just a wonderful opportunity for the students, a chance for them to perform and get a lesson from somebody in a place like this that they'd never dream of normally having."

Later that same evening, about 150 locals flocked to the Raven's Cry Theatre for an intimate two-hour Fialkowska recital. "People like her would normally be extremely expensive—and way beyond the budget of a small presenter like us," event organizer Allan Crane, president of The Coast Recital Society, noted before the show. Concertgoers, who paid only \$15 for their tickets, showed their appreciation of the program, which included works by Haydn and Chopin—as well as five *Lyric Pieces* by Grieg—by giving Fialkowska a rousing standing ovation. Later, at an informal reception in the theatre lobby, decorated with native art, the visiting pianist was the talk of the town. "I'm in a daze," said local piano tuner and jazz musician Ken Dalglish of Fialkowska's performance. "It is such a joy to hear this calibre of musician here."

SCOTT STEELE in Sechelt

Fialkowska (right) with student Vivian Lee: intensive master classes



owned by the local Indian band, they are attending a master class with one of Canada's foremost classical artists. "Here, play the bass," Fialkowska interjects, methodically dissecting Jones's performance. "Don't get bogged down." Then, balancing her criticism with an equal measure of praise, she adds: "You'll be fine because you have a very nice sound. That's half the battle."

Encouraging young pianists has become something of a personal crusade for Montreal native Fialkowska, herself discovered in 1974 by the late piano legend Arthur Schnitger during the prestigious international competition in Israel bearing his name. Since then, her masterful interpretations of Chopin and Liszt have made her a popular guest of top orchestras throughout North America and Europe. But the 46-year-old pianist, who now lives outside New York City near Weston, Conn., has remained true to

dian communities and perform solo recitals for only a fraction of their usual fees, which can run up to \$10,000 for a performance. Although Piano Six charges \$1,500 per visit to cover costs, the musicians earn an honorarium of \$500 for what can be a long working day of master classes, workshops and educational school concerts, as well as a formal recital. "We six just can't get Canada out of our systems," says Fialkowska, pointing out that with the exception of Laplante, who recently moved to Toronto from New York, all the Piano Six artists currently live abroad. "Now, we all want to return—and to give something back."

Since the group's inaugural tour less than three years ago, Piano Six members have thrilled audiences in more than 135 communities in every province but Saskatchewan, which they hope to visit soon. They have also entertained more than 12,000 school-