

East Neuk Festival prepares to welcome back a Russian great



David Kettle

I'm interrupting pianist Elisabeth Leonskaja's rehearsal time when we speak on the phone. "I'm on stage at deSingel, the concert hall in Antwerp," she says. She's preparing for the coming evening's concert. "But don't worry," she assures me, "I'm on my own – nobody else is around."

Leonskaja is quite simply one of today's giants of the keyboard, a player from the grand Russian (indeed Soviet) tradition, who cites her decades-long duo collaborations with Sviatoslav Richter as formative influences on her own deeply compelling pianism. And that pianism is simply astonishing: commanding, often unpredictable, it's as though Leonskaja is searching for ever deeper truths in the music she explores.

Which is why I'm feeling slightly self-conscious about interrupting her afternoon practice session. It turns out, however, that she's on relaxed form. And ask her about Scotland, and you can almost sense her smiling.

"It's an incredible landscape and sky in Scotland. It's a huge country, and it keeps going north, north and more north, without end," she says. "My dream is once to have enough time to really make a big journey through Scotland. But so far I've had to be on the stage." Indeed, Leonskaja is a regular visitor to Scotland these days – she closed the BBC SSO's season with Schumann and Brahms in May, and memorably played both Brahms piano concertos in a single evening with the SCO back in 2014. "I'm delighted to be doing so much in Scotland, and with musicians like these. The SCO and SSO are absolutely extraordinary."

The reason we're speaking, however, is another imminent Scottish visit, this time a return to Fife's East Neuk Festival. She gave some memorable Schubert performances two years back, and returns this year with a richer menu of Mozart, Chopin, Brahms, Schumann and more.

What brings her back? She's clearly considered the matter in some depth.



Photograph: Marco Borggreve

Elisabeth Leonskaja is returning to the East Neuk Festival

"It is a very good organisation behind the festival. Secondly, the landscape. And the really enthusiastic audience. I have a feeling that people are really waiting for the festival and the concerts – not especially my concerts, but for the whole festival. They take it very seriously."

Leonskaja is a keen walker, so I wonder whether she's had the opportunity to explore Fife by foot. "I've explored a little, very little," she tells me. "But if you stay three days and play two concerts, you already

"I have a feeling that people are really waiting for the festival and the concerts"

have lots of work to do. I walked a little on the sea front. I never had the time, but I would like so much to walk from East Neuk to St Andrews. With the waves and the coast, the birds, the clouds. Very nice."

Her solo recital programme features music that's been with her for decades, but in it, old friends Mozart, Chopin and Schumann are joined by a new acquaintance. Jörg Widmann is an exceptional German musician who's an internationally sought-after clarinettist as well as a respected composer. "We've performed some pieces together," Leonskaja tells me of her burgeoning

partnership with him. "I admire him hugely. For me, it's unbelievable the speed at which he thinks. The speed at which his brain works. And I think he is absolutely honest with his music."

Leonskaja brings his *Eleven Humoresques* to her recital. "These are composed in a very classical style, very concentrated, with not one note that's not needed. Very influenced by Schumann in character, and also by Liszt. There's a lot of humour."

It's a particularly strong, rich programme across East Neuk's five full days this year, with Colin Currie as another featured artist – in recital and with his percussion quartet – plus late-night kora, a closing concert from the SCO, and recitals from the Belcea and Pavel Haas quartets. Leonskaja's second concert is a collaboration with both of those foursomes, in Brahms's F minor Piano Quintet. She's performed with the Belceas several times before. "We played Schubert's Trout Quintet last time I was at East Neuk. They really are excellent musicians. They're working on absolutely the top level. For me, it's a very harmonious relationship."

And with an unexpected chuckle and an unexpected flourish from the piano, Leonskaja bids me farewell, and returns to her practice. ■

The East Neuk Festival runs from 26-30 June, see www.eastneukfestival.com for more details