

Paddymania

One hundred years ago, Christchurch was gripped by the presence of a Polish pianist who had captured the world's imagination. CHRISTOPHER MOORE looks back as the city prepares to commemorate the event with a centennial concert.

September 1904. Christchurch is affected by a strange phenomenon, a cultural epidemic described by the popular press as Paddymania.

The symptoms include applauding wildly, writing purple prose and wide-eyed adulation.

The object of this mass adoration by staid Cantabrians is a wild-haired, 34-year-old Polish pianist whose passionate, virtuoso playing has captured the world's imagination. Ignacy Jan Paderewski is the international megastar of 1904 — a fin-de-siecle Robbie Williams, feted, adored and worshipped.

Paderewski is in Christchurch, accompanied by his wife, large entourage and pet parrot, during a New Zealand tour. Every move and comment is recorded by the press. His concerts in the Canterbury Hall are attended by hundreds. His legendary Polish charm, mop of red hair and aristocratic character reduce strong Canterbury women to weak-kneed surrender. His patriotism and courage inspires stanzas of heroic verse from its poets. Crowds stand outside Warners Hotel for a glimpse of their idol.

One hundred years ago, Ignacy Paderewski was at the height of his popularity when he toured Australia and New Zealand. In Sydney, 3000 people attended his final performance. Acclaimed as his generation's greatest interpreter of Bach, Paderewski's performances of Chopin and Liszt were described as cultural landmarks. He was the best paid artist of his time — he still holds the world record for the highest income per played note.

On September 26, 2004, Christchurch will mark the centenary of Paderewski's visit with a special performance by the young Polish pianist, Joanna Lawrynowicz. Organised by the Christchurch Polish Association, with a programme inspired by Paderewski's repertoire, the concert will celebrate a unique personality — virtuoso pianist, statesman, Polish nationalist, linguist.



1904 megastar: Ignacy Jan Paderewski.

produced tone colours and textures from the lightest to the thunderous. He was a pianist who transformed the solo piano into a full orchestra.

His 1904 New Zealand tour took him from Auckland to Invercargill. He was invited to Government House in Wellington. The Prime Minister, Richard John Seddon, visited him several times at his hotel. He received a ceremonial welcome on a Rotorua marae, where he was photographed in Maori cloaks with his wife, Helena, and other members of his party.

He arrived in Christchurch to the sound of loud verbal fanfares.

"The coming in our midst of one so great in the art of music cannot fail to leave a deep and everlasting impression on his hearers... a landmark in the musical annals of New Zealand... the

illustrious genius of the pianoforte," a front-page advertisement in *The Press* trumpeted.

Mr R. W. Gilder was moved to verse.

"How Paderewski plays! And it was he/ O, some disbodied spirit, that had rushed/ From silence into singing; that had crushed into one startled hour a life's felicity..."

Critics trampled over each other in the rush for suitably glowing adjectives to describe Paderewski's performances in the Canterbury Hall.

"There have been brilliant pianists here before but all previous conceptions of pianists and the piano had to be enlarged last night when Paderewski played," *The Press* reviewer wrote on September 20.

"This man is not simply first in the membership of his fellows; he is of a temper different from the rest and in him there are qualities to which no others may lay claim."

Paderewski was born in 1860 in a Poland divided between Russia, Austria and Prussia. His mother died shortly after he was born. His father had been arrested for his involvement in an uprising against the Russian authorities. Paderewski studied at the Warsaw Musical Institute, launching his professional career in 1885 against the advice of many of his teachers. In 1890, he played his first London concert — and received an overwhelmingly negative response from the critics, who attacked the young Pole's emotional mannerisms and romantic sentimentality.

In the face of this criticism, he continued to attract increasingly large audiences in Europe and the United States where he performed more than 1500 concerts and conquered the hearts and minds of an entire country. Paderewski's unorthodox style is still remembered as unique, especially the famous and scandalous "Leszytycki's piano key strike" and his individualistic approach to tempo. Each recital became a "spiritual happening", where Paderewski



Rotorua marae welcome: Ignacy Jan Paderewski and his touring party in Maori costume.

Chch centenary of Paddymania

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What did Christchurch audiences hear for the price of their ticket (dress circle and reserved stalls, one guinea; back stall rows, half-guinea)? The programme included the Bach/Liszt Prelude and Fugue in A Minor, Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata and a selection of Chopin, Schubert and, naturally, one work by the maestro, a minuet.

"When he finally bowed and retired for the last time, and the two hours with Paderewski are at an end, the great audience, or such part of it as has felt most, is at a loss for words. Ordinary superlatives are banal for a time like this. Only one tries to remember the echoes," The Press reported.

Before he left Christchurch, Paderewski was interviewed by The Press ("at the conclusion of last night's recital, a member of the staff of The Press had the pleasure of a personal introduction to M. Paderewski").

Despite feeling "rather tired", he was enthusiastic about Christchurch.

"It is beautiful — c'est si coquet, as they say in French. Let me tell you one thing, of all the towns in Australasia which I have so far visited, I consider Christchurch to be the most beautiful of all. Yes, I really do."

The New Zealand audiences?

"Again I marvel. I have been amazed and delighted to find how cultured, how educated, how appreciative, how critical are the people of New Zealand. I can well see that New Zealanders know music."

Paderewski and his wife left Warners Hotel in a carriage for the Christchurch Railway Station where they boarded the Dunedin express.

"A large and enthusiastic crowd of ladies and gentlemen has assembled to catch a last glimpse of the master. A special drawing room car was reserved for the distinguished pianist — and his beloved parrot who appeared to be quite at home in his cage. Dozens of his admirers were vying and struggling to get close to the carriage and peer in at the windows. One elderly dame, having succeeded in so doing, was able to exclaim, 'The cockatoo's safe anyhow'."

Paderewski never returned to New Zealand. In 1919, the Polish patriot became Prime Minister of the first independent Polish government. Two years later he resigned to become the Republic of Poland's first delegate to the League of Nations.

In 1921, he retired from public office, returning to music and his home in Switzerland. Throughout the 1930s, he toured, performed, and campaigned against the looming spectre of Nazi Germany.

In 1940, Ignacy Paderewski was appointed leader of the Polish National Council at the request of the Polish government in exile. He travelled to the United States to organise relief work for his fellow Poles but never returned. On June 29, 1941, he died in New York after a short illness. His body lay in Washington's Arlington Cemetery for half a century before his remains were taken back to his beloved Poland — once again free — in 1992.

Joanna Lawrynowicz in concert, the Great Hall, the Arts Centre, 7.30pm, Sunday, September 26. Book at The Arts Centre Information office. Door sales from 7pm.