

“The Story of a Pianist” — Ukrainian-born Inna Faliks on her monologue-recital & her home country

by Jarrett Hoffman



Inna Faliks has always found it natural to mix and match the arts.

“I think that’s directly related to growing up in Odessa, Ukraine, in a musical household, but also a household of people who love books,” the UCLA piano professor said during a recent telephone conversation. “I feel like the arts speak to each other in a way that’s

extremely natural, so exploring that has never been anything that I decided to do. It’s always been second-nature to me.”

That’s been evident throughout Faliks’ career in projects combining music with poetry and theater. In the category of musical autobiography is her monologue-recital “Polonaise-Fantaisie: Story of a Pianist,” which she will bring to Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Akron on Sunday, March 27 at 4:00 pm as part of the Arts @ Holy Trinity series.

Faliks has described this one-woman show as her most personal. The narrative, spanning from immigration to music and love, is interspersed with works by Rodion Shchedrin, J.S. Bach, Jan Freidlin, Niccolò Paganini, Franz Liszt, Mozart, Chopin, and Beethoven.

Admission is free. Click [here](#) to see the full program and to register for the livestream option.



The album version of the program, released in 2017.

In selecting pieces for the show, Faliks borrowed from the philosophy of the Music/Words series, which she founded and curates. Both projects alternate music and text — poetry in the case of that series — with the idea of creating “a seamless emotional arc,” Faliks said. She also chose music that has simply been meaningful throughout her life, or that helps illustrate the story, whether in a concrete or emotional way.

“When I talk about my great-grandmother practicing with me and discussing the sound of Bach, then I play Bach. That’s an obvious one,” she said. “When we’re immigrating to America — leaving Ukraine — I play the Mozart *Fantasy in d minor*, which is very sad in the beginning but uplifting in the end.” It’s also a piece she learned when she was young, tying into the idea of leaving childhood behind.

The second half has a different tone. “It’s like a romantic comedy that happened to me in real life,” she said. Closing the program are Beethoven’s *Six Bagatelles* — “whimsical pieces that are full of character. And each one of them shows a whole world in just a few minutes. I think that’s perfect for punctuating this slightly comical love story.”

When Faliks steps onstage at Holy Trinity, it will be her first time performing this program since the onset of the war in Ukraine. “I haven’t changed anything, but I’m sure that when I’m up in front of the audience, I will say something about what’s happening. It will have to be very natural and seamless, and I will just speak my feelings in the moment. But it’s going to be hard for me to do this. It’s going to be very painful and poignant for a variety of reasons.”

One reason: Faliks lost her mother to cancer four months ago. “She figures so prominently in this story,” the pianist said. “She was such a big part of my life — we were so close, and she was one of my first teachers and musical influences.”

Another reason is place. “Odessa is where she’s from, where my father is from, where they met, where they went to school, and where I met *my* husband — he and I were best friends, and now I’m giving away the end of the story,” Faliks said, laughing.

Now bombs are being dropped on Ukraine. “So much of what connects us and makes us who we are — our background, our childhood, our life stories — is burning in front of our very eyes,” Faliks said. “It’s going up in smoke. It’s surreal. It’s enormously painful. And I just can’t say enough about how profoundly I am against this war, and how disgusting I find it, and how atrocious it is. And we all can do what we can to help.”



Faliks in a [video](#) posted the morning of the Russian invasion.

Identity is a complex issue for the pianist. “I’m a Ukrainian Jew, and when I was growing up in Odessa, being Jewish was something that went on your passport,” she said. After leaving what was then Soviet Ukraine to escape antisemitism, the family’s arrival in the U.S. brought with it cultural misunderstandings. “When we first moved here, people said, ‘Well, you speak Russian, so you must be Russian.’ I had to explain that actually I’m from Ukraine, but I speak Russian — and I’m also Jewish.

“It’s all very complicated, but all of us now are deeply and strongly for Ukraine, and for establishing and continuing that democracy, as difficult and unlikely as it seems at this moment.”

She worries about the situation in Odessa. “It’s frightening. We have family and friends there — some have been able to get out, some have not. So while I have not been back since immigrating, I still feel a strong connection to it.”

On the topic of identity, Faliks pointed out that several musicians who are commonly thought to be Russian were actually born in Ukraine, including pianists Vladimir Horowitz and Sviatoslav Richter, and composer Sergei Prokofiev. “Does that mean they were Ukrainian national artists? No, they made their lives elsewhere, but they came from Ukraine, and I think those connections are powerful.”

I asked Inna Faliks for her thoughts on how the classical music world has supported Ukraine.

“It’s an interesting question,” she said. “I think it’s very powerful and moving. The sympathy for other people — that’s just a human thing. It’s impossible to ignore this, impossible not to care.” But she also wishes that the world would care more about other horrors committed by Russian president Vladimir Putin. “I think it’s important to care, to think, to know about everything that’s going on, and to learn from history.”

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