

# **RONALD STEVENSON**

## **PIANO MUSIC**

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# RONALD STEVENSON

CD1 (total duration 71.22)

- |   |  |      |
|---|--|------|
| 1 | <b>Komm, süßer Tod, BWV 478</b> (Bach–Stevenson)               | 4.00 |
| 2 | <b>Prelude and Chorale</b> (an Easter Offering) <i>Andante</i> | 3.47 |

## **L'Art nouveau du chant appliqué au piano – Volume I** 18.40

- |   |   |      |
|---|---|------|
| 3 | 1. Eléanore (Coleridge-Taylor–Stevenson) <i>Moderato, appassionato</i>          | 3.18 |
| 4 | 2. So we'll go no more a-roving (Maud Valérie White–Stevenson) <i>Andantino</i> | 4.36 |
| 5 | 3. Plus blanche que la plus blanche hermine (Meyerbeer–Stevenson)               | 5.37 |
|   | <i>Andantino grazioso</i>   |      |
| 6 | 4. In the silent night (Rachmaninov–Stevenson) <i>Lento</i>                     | 3.14 |
| 7 | 5. Go not, happy day (Bridge–Stevenson)   | 1.55 |

*Allegro con gioia sfatata e con freschezza primevale (with breathless joy and with spring like freshness)*

## **L'Art nouveau du chant appliqué au piano – Volume 2** 8.15

- |    |  |      |
|----|--|------|
| 8  | 1. Fly home little heart (Ivor Novello–Stevenson) <i>Andante comodo</i>  | 2.32 |
| 9  | 2. We'll gather lilacs (Ivor Novello–Stevenson) <i>Andante comodo</i>  | 3.23 |
| 10 | 3. Demande et réponse (from <i>Petite Suite de Concert Op. 77</i> , by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, transcribed by Stevenson) <i>Andante</i> | 1.13 |
| 11 | 4. Will you remember? (Sigmund Romberg–Stevenson) <i>Tempo di valse</i>  | 1.07 |
| 12 | <b>Scottish Ballad no. 1 'Lord Randal'</b> <i>Allegro moderato. Strong, stark and steady</i>   | 3.09 |
| 13 | <b>Fugue on a fragment of Chopin</b> <i>Allegro moderato</i>   | 6.57 |

## **Pensées sur des Préludes de Chopin** 9.32

- |    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| 14 | No. 1 <i>Agitato</i>                      | 1.15 |
| 15 | No. 2 <i>Lento funebre</i>                | 1.49 |
| 16 | No. 3 <i>Andantino (alla Mazurka)</i>     | 1.21 |
| 17 | No. 4 <i>Lento sostenuto</i>              | 1.25 |
| 18 | No. 5 <i>Allegro agitato, con urgenza</i> | 1.41 |
| 19 | No. 6 <i>Non agitato</i>                  | 2.01 |

## **Variations-Study on a Chopin Waltz** *Veloce* 2.06

## **Etudette d'après Korsakov et Chopin** *Allegro con fuoco (ma forse non presto!)* 1.41

## **Three contrapuntal studies on Chopin Waltzes** 13.08

- |    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| 22 | No. 1 Waltz in A flat op. 34/1 for right hand alone | 3.58 |
| 23 | No. 2 Waltz in A flat op. 42 for left hand alone    | 5.34 |
| 24 | No. 3 Double Waltz                                  | 3.36 |

**Le festin d'Alkan: Concerto for solo piano, without orchestra:****'Petit concert en forme d'études' pour piano seul à Peter Hick****27.12****1 Free composition****6.36**

*Allegro senza allegrezza—Marcia intrepida, non troppo allegro—ardente, cinetico—quasi gran caisa—pesante il basso*

**2 Free transcription****10.21**

*Andante ipnotico—Trio 1 (Scarlattianalkanesco)—Trio 2—Come prima—Trio 1a (Scarlattianalkanesco)—Trio 3—En Carillon—Development of Trio 1a—Come prima—Erinnerung und Vorerinnerung an Dallapiccola (Memory and premonition of Dallapiccola)*

**3 Free multiple variations****10.15**

*Moderato macabre—alla danza—cadenza I (LH alone)—Moderato articolato non forte (RH solo)—Fughetta (Allegro assai con amarezza)—quasi chitarra—cadenza II (RH alone)—6/8=2/2—escatto in tempo—Cadenza 3 (For both hands)—Solo, quasi l'orchestra, con ped ampia—a tempo corrente—D'après la Chanson*

*'Folle au bord de la Mer'—Ricordano lo Schubert nel bicentenario della sua nascita; anche ricordando la sua vita breve'*

**Sonata no. 1 in G minor (Ysaÿe-Stevenson)****16.43****4 Preludio: Grave Lento assai****4.50****5 Fugato: Molto moderato****4.46****6 Allegretto poco scherzoso****4.15****7 Finale con brio Allegro****2.52****Sonata no. 2 (Ysaÿe-Stevenson)****14.17****8 Obsession: Prelude poco vivace****3.09****9 Malinconia: Poco lento****2.36****10 Danse des ombres: Sarabande Lento****5.24****11 Les furies: Allegro furioso****3.08****12 Norse Elegy Lento ma con moto, con passion repressa****7.59****13 Canonic Caprice on 'The Bat' Tempo di valse****4.22**

1	<b>Fantasy for mechanical organ, K608</b> (Mozart–Stevenson)	14.13
	<i>Allegro moderato e maestoso–Fuga–Andante con variazioni–Kadenz–Tempo I</i>	
2	<b>Romanze from Piano Concerto in D minor, K466</b> (Mozart, realised by Ronald Stevenson)	9.22
	<i>Andando</i>	
3	<b>Melody on a ground of Glazunov</b> (Stevenson) <i>Poco lento</i>	2.19
4	<b>Ricordanza di San Romerio (A pilgrimage for piano)</b> (Stevenson)	4.36
	<i>Corale–Senza misura, libero, quasi recitativo, non strettamente nelle durate scritte–Andando, piu severo in tempo</i>	
	<b>Three Grounds</b> (Purcell–Stevenson) <i>free transcriptions</i>	<b>9.19</b>
5	No. 1 <i>Andante quasi fado</i>	3.42
6	No. 2 <i>Andante arioso</i>	3.21
7	No. 3 <i>Allegretto</i>	2.16
8	<b>Toccata</b> (Purcell–Stevenson) <i>free transcription</i>	<b>7.26</b>
	<i>Preludio (Allegro)–Fugato (Allegro comodo)–Alla giga–Fantasia–Allegro–Largo</i>	
9	<b>Little Jazz Variations on Purcell's 'New Scotch Tune'</b> (Stevenson)	5.10
	<i>Tune: Allegretto, Var. 1: Andante langoroso; Var. 2: Allegro, nello stile jazz; Var. 3: Blues; Var. 4: Andante cantabile; Var. 5: Poco lento</i>	
10	<b>Hornpipe</b> (Purcell–Stevenson) <i>free transcription Con spirito</i>	3.14
11	<b>The Queen's Dolour (A farewell)</b> (Purcell, realised Stevenson) <i>Adagio</i>	4.07
	<b>Two Music Portraits</b> (Stevenson)	<b>2.11</b>
12	No. 1 <i>Valse Charlot</i>	0.47
13	No. 2 <i>Valse Garbo</i>	1.24
	<b>Three Elizabethan Pieces after John Bull</b> <i>free transcriptions</i>	<b>13.04</b>
14	No. 1 <i>Pavan Con dignità</i>	5.58
15	No. 2 <i>Galliard Moderato e maestoso</i>	3.11
16	No. 3 <i>Jig (The King's Hunt) Allegro vigoroso</i>	3.55

# THE COMPOSER & HIS MUSIC

'Ronald Stevenson, with whom I share an admiration for my great teacher, George Enescu, is one of the most original minds in the world of the composition of music. His works always seem dedicated beyond the music – a humane impulse, reminding me of Mozart, that makes his music particularly attractive to a wide audience'. Yehudi Menuhin.

Born on March 6 1928 in Blackburn, Lancashire to working class parents of Scots and Welsh ancestry, Ronald Stevenson is an extraordinary figure, a composer-pianist in the grand tradition who has always worked with the highest ideals and fierce integrity. Stevenson trained at the Royal Manchester College of Music and the Conservatorio Santa Cecilia in Rome before settling in Scotland from the 1950s to follow a remarkable artistic path which has in many ways continued the work of the great composer-pianists of the past.

It is virtually impossible within the confines of liner notes to begin to do justice to Stevenson's achievements as a composer, described as "this 'Brythonic' figure" by Nicholas Slonimsky. He has written nearly 500 piano pieces, and though a significant proportion of these are virtuosic and challengingly complex by any standards,

there are many that are colourfully approachable for relatively modest players in the early years of learning. In addition to this extraordinary pianistic oeuvre, Stevenson's compositions include three hundred songs, two piano concertos, a sixty-minute long *Violin Concerto*, a *'Cello Concerto* and a monumental choral-orchestral composition entitled *Ben Dorain*.

Hovering over all of Stevenson's music there is the work for which he is best known, the *Passacaglia on DSCH* for solo piano, (completed 1962 and of which my interpretation is available on Divine Art Records), an immense composition lasting some 80 minutes which was admired by Walton and described by Wilfred Mellers as "surely one of the greatest works for solo piano, not merely of our own time".

Long before Antony Beaumont, Stevenson had been considered a remarkable Busoni scholar, and his radio documentary broadcasts on this composer led to a Harriet Cohen prize before a full scale television documentary for the BBC was both written and presented by Stevenson in the early 1970s. His Busoni research includes a historical novel of over 2,000 pages in the form of a pyramid and overlaps with many



of his other literary interests and projects, notably his Percy Grainger research. In addition, he has published *A History of Western Music* (Kahn and Avrill 1971), a treatise on Piano Technique and countless articles for publications including *The Listener* and the *EPTA Journal*. Mention should also be made of his profound knowledge and love of poetry as well as of his associations with many of the great twentieth century Scots poets including Hugh MacDiarmid, Sorley MacLean and Norman McCaig.

Apart from composing, presenting and writing, Stevenson has given countless piano recitals, concerto performances and broadcasts for the BBC over the years. Many of his concerts have inevitably been as an interpreter of his own music, including the world première of the *Passacaglia* (Cape Town 1963), the Song Cycle *Border Boyhood* with Peter Pears (Aldeburgh 1971), *Piano Concerto no.1* with the Scottish National Orchestra under Sir Alexander Gibson (Edinburgh 1966) and *Piano Concerto no.2* with the New Philharmonia Orchestra under Norman Del Mar (Henry Wood Proms, 1972).

An admirer of the 'Golden Age' of Piano Playing, Stevenson's pianism is always searchingly aristocratic, creative and cantabile. His sound world as a pianist is unmistakably beautiful, uniquely spacious on

the one hand yet fastidious and intimately conceived when the need arises. His feet are as creative as his fingers, his rubato, voicing, range of colours and touch control as impressive as anyone of his generation. The series of solo recordings Stevenson made in the 1980s for the Altarus Label (especially the 'Cathedrals in Sound' recital and the Busoni and *Passacaglia* discs) show him to be one of the great 'unsung heroes' not only as a composer, but equally so as an interpreter.

It would be wrong, however, to separate performance from composition when considering the genius of Stevenson, and the main reason that his piano works literally leap off the page to the prospective player is that they are written by a master-performer who knows the instrument intimately from the inside. This 'organic', holistic approach has obviously come from a deep study of the technical exercises, pianistic approaches, transcriptions and compositions of figures such as Busoni, Grainger, d'Albert, Paderewski, Godowsky, Chopin and Liszt, as well as from a firm theoretical foundation via the Viennese classics, Bach in abundance, and traditional harmony and counterpoint (at one point the teenage Stevenson was rising at 6am daily to study Palestrina!)

Hard, grinding erudition has accompanied a love of melody throughout Stevenson's

career, and his father's admiration of singer John McCormack left an early impression which was to lead to a detailed study of folksong. The resultant abundance of melody throughout the Stevenson oeuvre is there for everyone to savour.

At first glance there may appear, however, to be an apparent contradiction running through the corpus of piano pieces, as blatantly populist trifles such as the *Rigoletto Rag* (after Liszt's 'Rigoletto' paraphrase) sit side by side with such lofty offerings as the fiendishly uncompromising *Motus Perpetuus* (?) *Temporibus Fatalibus*, (complete with Herculean bravura, a note row and cryptograms of the names Busoni, Shostakovich, Bach and Schoenberg). Nevertheless, Stevenson is an all-encompassing 'epic' artist, a composer who according to his biographer Malcolm MacDonald strives for the "gigantic bear-hug, attempting to sweep *everything* up in a single idealistic embrace of shared humanity".

If we sense the influence of Busoni via erudition, counterpoint, vision and pianism in Stevenson, then we can also sense the immense debt he owes to Percy Grainger via the extrovert, open-aired,

folksy, populist outgoing honesty of many a Stevenson phrase. However, it would be wrong to view Busoni/Grainger as a kind of conflicting dichotomy running through Stevenson, for these two masters (at one time teacher and pupil in Berlin) shared an interest in ethnomusicology as well as a life-long freedom of separation between 'transcription' and so called 'original' composition in their own, quite different, music.

Perhaps this is the single most important key to unlocking the wonder of Stevenson's musical paradise: his extraordinary ability to rise above the curation of manuscripts and embrace our entire musical legacy (whether it be a folksong, symphony or whatever) as part of an enormous and ongoing creative process which can be commented on, revised, re-revised, and re-explored continuously for further illumination and beauty.

Much of Stevenson's output stems directly from re-arrangement and transcription of pieces which have profoundly moved him as an artist, and this new series of three discs most certainly shows this.

## CD 1

If we reject, as too superficial, the standard distinctions between transcription and free composition, one comes close to understanding Stevenson's outstanding corpus of music. Of course individual pieces vary enormously both in terms of approach and in terms of style. It is as though Stevenson's music as a whole becomes a kind of meeting place for kindred and diverse spirits.

One can never be sure of just how substantial or slight the Stevenson treatment will be (some compositions fit comfortably onto the back of postcards whilst others take well over an hour to play). At one end of the spectrum, some Stevenson 'commentaries' are practical, rather literal re-arrangements of pre-existing material into new contexts, whilst at the other extreme, some adopt decorative figurations and variations so sophisticated on first acquaintance that it is rather difficult to see relationships with the 'originals' at all! Therein lies a major point, namely that in Stevenson's universe there really is no difference in approach between free composition, transcription and variation. We will see this most forcefully in *Le festin d'Alkan* (CD 2) where the three

movements concentrate in turn on each of these genres.

We begin on disc 1 with a Bach transcription made on Busoni's birthday, 1 April in 1991. However, *Komm, süßer Tod*, BWV 478 is a touching homage to another past master in the art of 'hyphenated Bach', the great conductor Leopold Stokowski. Stokowski gave personal encouragement to Stevenson after his completion of the *Passacaglia*, and this relatively modest curtain raiser is certainly influenced by the unparalleled lushness and extravagance of Stokowski's unique and deliciously romantic orchestral Bach extravaganzas.

The influence of late Busoni is more clearly evident in *Prelude and Chorale (an Easter offering)* where the art of understatement via concentration and compression both of motivic development and in terms of pianistic layout is most impressive. Written for either piano or organ and possibly inspired on a subconscious level by the deeply moving and exquisite sonorities in Busoni's fourth sonatina *In diem Nativitatis Christi MCMXVII* this is music that lingers long in the memory. Here Stevenson is able to capture a spiritual



serenity, melancholy and beauty through restraint. The *Prelude* was completed on 1 February 1978 but the chorale originally dates from some thirty years earlier. The two miniatures were 'hand-writ' together in Magden on 27 February 1978.

Sigismond Thalberg (1812-71) was one of the most celebrated composer-pianists of the 19th century. Those who remember him only for virtuosity and mastery of the so-called 'third-hand' effect evident in many an operatic paraphrase will be pleasantly surprised by his Op. 70 set of transcriptions, written in 1853 and entitled '*L'Art nouveau du chant appliqué au piano*'. Thalberg's accompanying performance notes to his Op. 70 anthology evidently inspired Stevenson greatly, and deserves to be quoted here: "For simple tender melodies the keyboard should be kneaded as it were with a boneless hand and fingers of velvet: the keys must be felt rather than struck".

Thalberg's cycle contains some twenty-four transcriptions from an impressive range of composers including Bellini, Pergolesi, Beethoven, Meyerbeer, Mozart and Weber. Here Thalberg branches away from his earlier bravura style of composition and produces music that values *cantabile* and *parlando* above all other considerations.

As an homage to Thalberg's remarkable cycle of transcriptions, Stevenson has

produced his own *L'Art nouveau du chant appliqué au piano*. Evidently there are in existence at least twenty-five pieces written by Stevenson specifically for this 'anthology of song'. They come from more relaxed corners of the repertoire than one might expect, and their popularity, melodic memorability and beauty is always lovingly embraced by Stevenson with the utmost sincerity, care and devotion. In 1998 five of these pieces were published by the Ronald Stevenson Society as volume one in the series, with volume two including four more items appearing in 2002. The nine transcriptions make a beautiful, if diverse and contrasted selection, and are all included here.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Elënore*, subtitled as an 'étude in the art of bel-canto piano-playing', transcribed in June 1980 and dedicated to the composer's ever-faithful wife Marjorie ("my Elënore"), is passionately delineated in the radiant key of D flat major. The placement of the melodic line in the tenor register for the most part makes for a spine-tingling sense of eroticism that vividly captures sexual longing and desire.

Maude Valérie White's *So we'll go no more a-roving* was arranged a month later than *Elënore* and is in total contrast. Its reserved, wistful elegance and charm

beguiles and entices the listener through exquisite colouring and voicing. Note the quasi orchestral figurations and sonorities in the central *Più mosso, risoluto* section. The Romance *Plus blanche que la plus blanche hermine* from Meyerbeer's 'Les Huguenots' was penned by Stevenson on 7-8 May 1987 and is by far the most substantial of the nine published transcriptions in terms of length. Beginning with a remarkable eighteen bar solo for the left hand alone, the transcription unfolds with majesty and breadth – as well as some welcome frivolity, sparkle and mirth.

Volume one continues with an arrangement of Sergei Rachmaninov's *In the silent night*, arguably one of the most beautiful, natural and haunting transcriptions of a song ever penned. Dating from 18 May 1982 and dedicated once more to Marjorie, it shows Stevenson's understanding of pianism at its most impressive. Frank Bridge's *Go not, happy day*, transcribed in June 1980 and "dedicated to the evergreen memory of Ben Britten and Kate Ferrier" concludes volume one with effervescence, optimism and joy. This is a blatantly crowd-pleasing essay in bravura that shows how closely Stevenson has studied the art of song transcription as seen in particular through the works of Franz Liszt. Both Liszt and Stevenson prove that anything is possible on the piano – provided you have superhuman

imagination, energy, enthusiasm and a deep understanding of the technical resources available to command.

Volume two of *L'Art nouveau* begins with an arrangement of Ivor Novello's *Fly home little heart* made on 4 December 1983 of which Stevenson writes "The verse is transcribed as an arpeggio-study with a Delian 'bir'-motive thrown in. The chorus is transcribed as a Graingeresque study in sonority. What a beautiful melody is this chorus! It consists of the purest open intervals: octave, fifth, fourth, second and third; seldom a sixth, never a seventh. It is a pure landscape of melody: a masterpiece."

The emotional core of volume two appears in Stevenson's arrangement from 1980 of Novello's celebrated *We'll gather lilacs*. The melodic line and counter-melody are lovingly adorned with filigree accompanimental textures reminiscent of florid writing perhaps most readily associated with the music of Leopold Godowsky. Certainly the exotic key of F sharp major and the hushed dynamic range chosen and sustained for the most part throughout produces a special intimacy and tonal palette that draws one in toward the very essence of Novello's extraordinary song. The cycle finishes with the easiest arrangements in terms of technical difficulty – music not beyond the abilities of relatively

modest players – though the charm and craftsmanship on display remains as acute as ever. *Demande et réponse* from Coleridge-Taylor dates from 18 August 1981 and is presented as a 'miniature waltz in canon-form', whilst Sigmund Romberg's *Will you remember* from 'May-time' is also a canonic waltz, dating from 1980.

By way of contrast, the first of Stevenson's *Three Scottish Ballads*, 'Lord Randal' makes a powerful impact. Written in 1973 and dedicated to Allie Munro, it takes a sixteen bar verse and presents it five times in contrasted textures and keys, concluding with an ominous, stark coda of eight bars.

CD1 concludes with the complete set of Stevenson's Chopin transcriptions and paraphrases. Clearly the 53 *Studies based on Chopin Etudes* of Leopold Godowsky have had an enormous influence on Stevenson as both a composer and pianist. This can be seen in all of the Chopin works on this recording, though Stevenson also manages to exude more of a blatant extrovert, humorous spirit, a quasi-Graingeresque streak, that makes these commentaries in sound so much more than mere Godowskian imitations. From 1949 comes an 8-minute long *Fugue on a fragment of Chopin*, written to commemorate the centenary of Chopin's death and based on the main motif from the F minor *Ballade*.

This is given full textbook fugal treatment, complete with Busonian craftsmanship and erudition via eloquent pianistic layouts and exhaustive permutations of double note figurations. Yet there is something distinctly joyful, mischievous even, about the relentless contrapuntal display, and with the final *Tarantella* metamorphosis, the Graingeresque abandon and vivacity which is sensed beneath the surface earlier on really comes to the forefront. A remarkable achievement from the 21-year-old composer.

The six *Penseés sur des Préludes de Chopin* are darker and more ominous in tone. Written in 1959, the work was first performed at the Edinburgh Society of Musicians in 1992 by the dedicatee, Harold Taylor. Each movement is prefaced with a quotation from Pascal's 'Penseés': Movement one, 'notre nature est dans le mouvement...' combines Chopin's C minor and C major *Préludes*. Movement two, '...le repos entire est la mort' mixes the A minor *Prélude* with the dotted rhythm motif from the 'winter wind' A minor *Étude* before continuing with the E major *Prélude* as well. Movement three, 'Nature diversifie et imité, artifice imité et diversifie' elegantly connects the two 'Mazurka' *Prélude*, in A major and C sharp minor, before we have a more ominous mixture of the *Préludes* in D flat and

B major in movement four, 'Le cœur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connaît point; on le sait en mille choses'.

Movement five is adorned by the text 'Guerre intestine de l'homme entre la raison et les passions. S'il n'avait que la raison sans passions... S'il n'avait que les passions sans raison... Mais ayant l'un et l'autre, il ne peut -être sans guerre'. As well as being the most extensive piece in the cycle it is also the most taxing to play technically. Beginning with an innovative combination of the E flat minor and (transposed) G minor Prelude, it expands and introduces the finale of the B flat minor 'funeral march' sonata into the mix, revealing a plethora of contrapuntal connections and possibilities in the process.

The cycle could have easily chosen to finish with movement five's excitement and athleticism, but Stevenson elevates the work in cyclical form by returning to the combination of *Préludes* featured in the first movement, presenting the C minor and major preludes this time round with more weighted, magisterial and sonorous textures. 'La dernière chose qu'on trouve en faisant un ouvrage, est de savoir qu'il faut metre la première' is the final quotation from Pascal. The work finishes quietly, almost tragically, but with a real sense of repose and pensive consideration.

*Variations-Study on a Chopin Waltz*

is a delightful trifle penned when the composer was only 22 and based on the famous secondary theme from Chopin's posthumous C sharp minor waltz. The sixteen bar period is presented in five variations – as an octave étude, an extended arpeggio study for both hands, a cascading right hand arpeggio étude, a scampering semiquaver mixture divided between the hands, and finally as a left hand octave essay.

*Etudette d'après Korsakov et Chopin* ('Spectre d'Alkan') was completed in 1987 and first performed by myself on BBC Radio Three the following year. Beginning as an arrangement of Korsakov's 'Bumblebee' for the left hand alone, eventually the other hand joins in with Chopin's A minor *Étude* Op. 10 no. 2, producing an extraordinary cocktail made all the more convincing by virtue of the fact that the chromatic ascents and descents of each famous piece have a tendency to 'mirror' each other. This results in a great deal of contrary motion and an extraordinary visual display in live performance. Little wonder the composer Stevenson mentions Alkan in his subtitle to the piece! Finally we have a Godowskian triptych in which Chopin's A flat Waltzes Op. 34 no. 1 and Op. 42 are firstly presented independently in new guise then combined. The first movement presents Op. 34 no. 1 in an arrangement for right hand alone



whilst movement two shows Chopin's Op. 42, the famous so-called '2/4' Waltz as a left hand only study. Movement three combines both waltzes in a festive and sparkling display. 'Champagne from Heaven' was how Bruno Walter once described Johann

## CD 2

*Le festin d'Alkan* is Stevenson's most recent major composition for piano; it was completed after nine years of work in 1997 and first performed by Marc-André Hamelin in London the following year. Commissioned by Peter Hick for the centenary of Alkan's death in 1988, Stevenson's title is a reminder of Alkan's set of variations *Le festin d'Esopé* (this is quoted in the third movement) and the work's subtitle 'petit concert for piano solo without orchestra' brings Alkan to mind too (both Alkan and Schumann wrote works subtitled 'concerto without orchestra', and Alkan's performances from 1873 at the Salle Erard were billed as 'petits concerts de musique classique').

The composer's own programme notes mention that the work's "three movements encapsulate my idea that composition, transcription and variation are all essentially the same thing. The first movement is free composition, with no quotes (as far as I know!). The second movement is free

Strauss waltzes. In his innovative approach to pianism and contrapuntal wizardry, Stevenson is able to emulate something of this effervescence, bringing new found excitement and colours into the virtuoso repertoire.

variation on Alkan's *Barcarolle* in G minor. There are two trios which vary quotations from Alkan and other composers. The finale is in free variation form. The famous *Le festin d'Esopé* is quoted (very freely) only in the finale. This movement contains three cadenzas: one for each hand alone, then for both hands."

'Free composition', the first movement, has twenty-one pages which fly forward at a mercurial pace. It contains technically ferocious passages that require huge stretches and rapid leaps. The movement is divided into 'tutti' and 'solo' passages and is uncompromising in its use of dissonance. Its rhythmic drive is unyielding and fearful for the most part, leading to much excitement and transcendental virtuosity. It makes a deeply disturbing, powerful impact on the listener. Alkan's *Barcarolle*, Op. 65 no. 6 is transformed in the second movement, 'free transcription', into an extraordinary musical commentary. As in the first movement,



enormous hands and confidence with outsized leaps are necessities here for the performer as Stevenson's 'transcription' makes extensive use of tenths throughout. In the trios quotations from Scarlatti and Paganini refer to music that Alkan himself used to play. The return of the *Barcarolle* for the final section utilizes symmetrical counterpoint pioneered by Bernhard Ziehn so that the music appears in transformed light before a brief coda makes reference to Dallapiccola and his *Sonatine canonica*.

The third movement, 'free multiple variations', is the most substantial and complex in the work. It is literally pasted with quotations and references to the dead and past works, making it something of a musical museum perhaps – were it not for the fact that the music is so innovative and novel in its approach. With three cadenzas and much episodic writing there is certainly an improvisatory feel to this music. In addition to *Le festin d'Esopé* (presented in transformed guise for the most part but eventually 'exposed' in direct presentation) the 8th *Prélude* from Op. 31 *La chanson de la folle au bord de la plage* is also quoted. The work concludes with a poignant reference to Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden' string quartet, a musical masterstroke that seems to bring the work to a quietly ominous conclusion. However the final three bars

thunder out dissonances from the first movement and the work explodes into the abyss.

The great Belgian violin virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe's six sonatas for unaccompanied violin were composed in 1923-4 and stand as an extraordinary testament for string players. Stevenson transcribed all six sonatas in an extraordinary period of energetic endeavour from November 1981 to January 1982, regarding his achievement as one of the greatest importance to his development. The first two Ysaÿe sonatas are presented here. In both, one marvels at the easy fluidity with which the music sits at the keyboard. In order to achieve this natural, idiomatic layout Stevenson has, of course, had to enrich and expand on textures in the original.

It is fascinating to study on a bar-by-bar basis the way in which Stevenson has worked, and he has compared his endeavours in particular to the work that Godowsky did in his, still under-performed, transcriptions of Bach. Ysaÿe's first sonata in G minor in many ways pays homage to Bach's violin sonata in the same key. Stevenson's arrangement certainly emphasises and confirms the organ inspired sonorities of the original, amplifying and extending Ysaÿe's implications in the outer movements into a glorious display of pianism. But it is in the second, fugal

movement where Stevenson's transcription comes into its own. Here we have textures and figurations so natural that the original Ysaÿe is temporarily forgotten. Indeed at the conclusion of this movement the transcriber wrote on his manuscript "This is proof of what I have learnt from Bach, Busoni and Godowsky".

'Obsession', Ysaÿe's second sonata, quotes extensively from the opening motif of Bach's E major *Partita* and the *Dies Irae* plainchant. As in the first sonata, Stevenson's tonal palette is arresting, original and sounds effortless and natural in keyboard layout. Though the sounds of the organ permeate this work too, there is also a sense of the orchestral, as well as of an outsized fiddle at play. This seems highly appropriate as contemporary accounts of Ysaÿe's own performance frequently stress the enormity, power and dynamism of his approach. A 'larger than life' transcription for a historical figure who was most certainly bigger than other violinists in every sense!

Norse *Elegy* was written in memory of Ella Nygaard, wife of Percy Grainger's Norwegian-American Surgeon Kaare K. Nygaard, and is based on the musical spelling of her first name ('Ella' giving the work its germinal motif through the notes E-A-A-A). Also prominent is the descending motif 'A-A-G sharp-E' which of course has

connotations with the Grieg *Piano Concerto* (a work Grainger championed) as well as being directly related through the interval of a fourth to the 'Ella' motif. Written from 1976-9 and marked *con passion repressa*, its structure develops in the main through the use of the 'Ella' motif as a basso ostinato. Note the impressive canonic imitation and beautiful simplicity in the central G sharp minor episode which acts as a foil to the complexities evident in the outer sections.

The *Canonic Caprice* on 'The Bat' concludes the second disc. This contrapuntal homage to Moritz Rosenthal and his celebrated *Carnaval de Vienne* of 1925 may be a miniature, but it is unquestionably one of the most technically demanding works in the Stevenson oeuvre. Completed in 1967, I gave its first performance in 2002 in Manchester. Following 28 bars of canon between the hands it ventures into double note territory for further imitative counterpoint, first with double thirds, then (most unusually) with perfect fifths then in sixths and fourths. A central fantasia brings five bars of reflection before the canonic texture returns in minor sevenths and finally major seconds – the latter after a charming non-contrapuntal appearance of Strauss's celebrated theme with a lilting left hand waltz accompaniment.

The third disc begins with two Mozart transcriptions that lie at the more practical, literal end of the Stevensonian universe. Mozart's *Fantasy for mechanical organ, K608* was famously arranged by Busoni for two pianos and performed by the composer with Egon Petri at the Bechstein (now Wigmores) Hall in London in the 1920s. In 1952 Stevenson produced this ingenious, sonorous version for piano solo. It stays extremely loyal to the Busoni transcription yet miraculously never sounds over-loaded in terms of texture. As homage it is tempting to take the 'bedfellow' piece which Busoni also arranged for two pianos (the finale of Mozart's *Concerto in F, K459*) and produce one's own solo transcription to follow on with minimum break from Stevenson's solo arrangement!

The Mozart-Stevenson *Romanze* that follows was completed in 2002 and is also a fairly literal arrangement of the K466 D minor *Piano Concerto's* slow movement, though the central double octaves take the music into a different sphere, and the sensitive appoggiatura decorations when the opening section returns thereafter are novel and beautifully 'original'.

*Melody on a ground of Glazunov* was completed in 1970 and also exists in a version for violin and piano. The music is based on a theme from Glazunov's *Prelude-Improvisation*, also known as *Poème-Improvisation* (1918) which is extended in wistful, wave-like phrases that meander poetically over the middle range of the keyboard in 45 bars. This is a quietly eloquent bagatelle that exploits effectively some of the possibilities afforded by superimposing and juxtaposing perfect fourths harmonically and melodically.

*Ricordanza di San Romerio* dates from 1987. Though only lasting a few minutes in terms of duration, its sonic beauty, haunting evocation of an ancient plainchant and remarkable *tremolandi* make for a striking impression. *Ricordanza* (literally translated as 'souvenir') brings to mind the famous transcendental étude of Liszt. The monastery of San Romerio (founded originally as 'San Remigio' before 1055) is situated above the Poschiavo valley in Switzerland, so Stevenson's subtitle 'A pilgrimage for piano' also reminds one of Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage* and 'Suisse', in particular, the first volume of the series.

Tracks 5-11 present all of the known and completed Stevenson Purcell transcriptions, and they make for a substantial and strikingly varied group. *Three Grounds* dates in revised form from 1995 and takes a quasi-orchestral basis as the springboard for intense expressivity, elegant pianism and contrapuntal textures. A glimpse at the skill involved in arranging string music so carefully for solo piano is afforded at the end of the first ground, where the quartet texture of the final two bars is reproduced in Stevenson's own distinctive handwriting as a footnote.

For the second ground the composer writes: "The source of the second ground is the St. Cecilia Ode *Here the deities approve* (1683) which Purcell arranged in E minor for harpsichord in *Musick's Handmaid* Part 2 (1689), both in E minor, which for pianistic reasons, is transposed to E flat minor in the present edition." Though the third ground was originally transposed in D minor back in 1958, its recasting here in C minor makes for heightened intensity, with more lugubrious colours.

The Purcell *Toccata* is a substantial work in five sections that certainly offers ample opportunity for pianistic display. Dating from 1955, though 'slightly retouched', in Stevenson's view it is 'a very fine transcription (self-critique!) which is both

respectful and newly individual; traditional and exploratory (!! ) musicological (heu!!!) and inventive – Yes!' The first section seems to recall the opening flourishes of the C major Bach-Busoni organ *Toccata*, whilst the figurations in the fugato that follows seem close to the contrapuntal textures in the Bach-Busoni D minor *Toccata*. The overall structure is similar to that adopted by Bach in his harpsichord toccatas, though of course it was Frescobaldi who was the real pioneer in developing keyboard toccatas as a genre that indicated a large scale form.

*Little Jazz Variations on Purcell's 'New Scotch Tune'* originally dates from 1964, (when it was entitled 'Simple' rather than 'Little Jazz' Variations...) but in 1975 three more variations and the current title were added at Louis Kentner's instigation. Further revisions were made for the printed publication of the piece in 1995. Charm and carefree abandon are characteristics of this delightfully slight occasional piece. The swinging melodic thread on which the five variations are based encourages foot-tapping and humming, and in the variations that follow the ghost of Gershwin never seems far away. Variation 3, 'Blues', also recalls music from the 'America' section of Stevenson's second concerto 'The Continents', and the quiet serenity of the



final variation shows contrapuntal skill and precision at its most natural and unforced.

*Hornpipe* (begun and indeed completed in January 1995) is the most recent of Stevenson's Purcell transcriptions and is based on the final movement of Purcell's 6th *Suite* in D major for harpsichord. The composer has written "This hornpipe suggests to the present transcriber the melodic type of a London street song ... Purcell's song *Bess of Bedlam* provides evidence that he was aware of, and influenced by, popular balladry, for its music was in part inspired by the ballad *Tom of Bedlam* ... The by now démodé bias against the art of transcription should disappear vis-à-vis the case of Purcell himself, for his D minor *Hornpipe* was a harpsichord arrangement of a dance from his theatre music to *The Married Beau* (1693).

Last but by no means least from Stevenson's Purcell collection comes *The Queen's Dolour* (A farewell) from 1959, which was also later arranged for solo guitar. Though barely a dozen bars in length the expansive expressive mood created by Stevenson makes a beautiful impact in performance, and a remarkable one at that since the original Purcell consists of only two parts with Spartan ornamentation. As the composer has written, the transcription is "arranged in my language in an (almost)

apologetic derangement! 'Transcription' is a creative re-working!"

Amongst the smallest shavings from Stevenson's workbench are the children's pieces entitled *Two Music Portraits* from 1965 (*Valse Charlot* and *Valse Garbo*) which were originally intended as a musical equivalent of 'cigarette cards of famous film stars'. *Valse Charlot* is restrained, graceful and elegantly poised, with fastidious articulation and dignified rests. *Valse Garbo* is much more soulful. Beginning in the evocatively resonant tenor register of the instrument, it coaxes and expands the melodic material towards the climax (with individual melody notes marked 'I want to be alone') in the final six bars.

Disc 3 concludes with one of the most striking of all Stevenson's transcriptions, *Three Elizabethan Pieces after John Bull*, completed in 1950 at the age of 22. The writing here is extremely persuasive and generously laid out in the grand, orchestral manner. The influences of Stokowski's orchestral Bach arrangements and the Bach-Busoni *Chaconne* are easily sensed with regard to the massive chordal writing, but there is also much that is memorable individual on a smaller scale too, with deliciously effervescent double thirds in the *Pavan* and *Galliard*, as well as 'music box' trills and thrilling repeated notes in the



*Jig.* It seems particularly sad that music as immediate, entertaining, lovingly crafted and individual as this set has remained so obscure and under-performed for so long.

Sadly it is certainly not the only work of Ronald Stevenson to have (so far) suffered a similar fate.

*Notes* © 2012, Murray McLachlan



*Murray McLachlan with the Steinway*

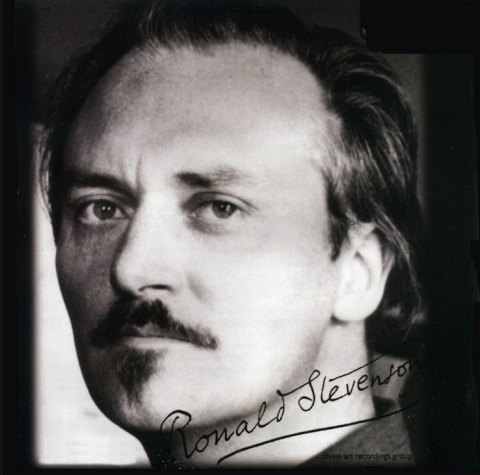


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