

## PASSACAGLIA ON DSCH: RONALD STEVENSON (Opus 70)

### PLAN OF WORK

PARS PRIMA:		[18] Glimpse of a war vision	0:35
[1] Sonata allegro	6:46	[19] Variations on 'Peace, Bread and	the Land'
[2] Waltz in rondo-form	2:27	(1917)	2:06
[3] Episode 1: presto	1:01	[20] Symphonic March	1:58
Suite:		[21] Episode 3: volante scherzoso	0:57
[4] Prelude	2:37	[22] Fandango	2:05
[5] Sarabande	1:08	[23] Pedal Point: 'To emergent Africa'	1:45
[6] Jig	0:15	[24] Central Episode: etudes	5:07
[7] Sarabande	0:18	[26] Variations in C minor	2:42
[8] Minuet	2:34		
[9] Jig	0:15	PARS TERTIA:	
[10] Gavotte	1:36	[27] Adagio: tribute to Bach	1:15
[11] Polonaise	1:46	Triple Fugue over ground bass:	
[12] Pibroch (Lament for Children)	2:09	[28] Subject 1: andamento	5:04
[13] Episode 2: arabesque variations	2:35	[29] Subject 2: BACH	6:08
[14] Nocturne	2:07	[30] Subject 3: Dies Irae	5:15
		[31] Final Variations on theme derived	
PARS ALTERA:		from ground (adagissimo barocco)	10:00
[15] Reverie-Fantasy	1:59		
[16] Fanfare	0:16		
[17] Forebodings: Alarm	0:15	total playing time:	75:49

## **Ronald Stevenson**

(born Blackburn 1928) is a neo-romantic, a composer who believes 'Struggle' to be the theme of his work as a whole. This present recording presents his most famous work, an immense single. movement pianistic journey approaching 80 minutes in duration which Stevenson has likened in recent years to a 'lifecycle': Think of one minute of music in the Passacaglia as one year in human development, with the physical climax in the work coming after approximately 35 minutes of music, and the spiritual climax coming at the work's tailend. A striking parallel, and the fact that it was conceived decades after the work's initial completion on 18 May 1962 (Stevenson began working on it on Christmas Eve 1960) is especially Stevensonian.

Stevenson's Art thrives on freedom, on-going creativity, the artistic necessity of never closing doors. Thus he has continually re-thought his Passacaglia, and indeed encouraged others to do so. It was Schnabel who said that a masterpiece is always greater than any one performance, and this is certainly true with regard to the Passacaglia, a work strongly admired by William Walton and described by Wilfred Mellers as 'surely one of the greatest works for solo

piano, and not merely in our time'.

Since 1951 Ronald Stevenson has lived in Scotland, the land of his parental fore-fathers, and pursued an extraordinary artistic mission with almost superhuman energy. Though one cannot summarise all of his achievements it is important to note that his compositions include over five hundred piano pieces, three hundred songs, two piano concertos, a violin concerto, a cello concerto and a monumental choral-orchestral composition entitled 'Ben Dorain'. As an author he has written a History of Western Music (Khan and Avrill 1971) and his numerous articles for 'The Listener' generated lively interest and discussion. Major works awaiting publication include a historical novel of well over 1,000 pages in the structure of a pyramid on Ferruccio Busoni, as well as a biography and smaller book on the same composer. There is also an early but brilliantly perceptive Treatise on Piano Technique and essays on Alan Bush, Hugh MacDiarmid, Percy Grainger, Paderewski, Sorabji and many others. He has produced editions of composers as diverse as Purcell and Grainger, and made both television documentaries and Radio Broadcasts over the years, winning a Harriet Cohen Award for his broadcasts on Busoni for Radio Three.

Stevenson is also a remarkable virtuoso pianist who has performed on all five continents. His repertoire is extraordinary, including many rarities and extending from the Elizabethan Virginalists to the present day. Highlights of his career have included performances at the BBC Proms, the Aldeburgh Festival, and appearances with the Royal Philharmonic, Scottish National, BBC Scottish and BBC Symphony Orchestras. His recordings on the Altarus Label are admired by connoisseurs of pianism internationally and indicate the individuality and beauty of his pianism (In a letter to Stevenson dated 22/11/71 Benjamin Britten wrote '...what a wonderful pianist you are!...wonderfully clear and musical playing and beautiful sounds...'). Stevenson has also delivered many memorable lectures over the years, and is an inspirational teacher. Outside music his interests are wide-ranging, embracing everything from the history of British Boxing to James Joyce! He is a particular authority on 20th Century Scottish poetry and literature.

Ronald Stevenson was the first performer of the *Passacaglia on DSCH*, and his initial recording of the work in a limited edition of 100 discs (parallels here with Busoni's limited edition of the first version of his Fantasia Contrappuntisica,

also made to 100 copies) was issued with the following sleeve note:

'Composition of my *Passacaglia* was begun in West Linton, Scotland, on Christmas Eve 1960 and finished there on May 8 1962. I presented a bound copy of the work to its dedicatee, Shostakovich, in his suite in the George Hotel, Edinburgh, during the Edinburgh Festival of 1962. The Chairman was the Scottish Poet Hugh MacDiarmid. The ceremony was televised by the BBC. The work was revised in Cape Town in December 1963 and the composer was pianist in the Premiere at the Hiddingh Hall, Cape Town on December 10 1963.

This composition is a strict *Passacaglia* because it is based on a constantly repeated theme, around which variations are woven. It is not a strict *Passacaglia* in that it does not keep to one key or one mood. It consists of hundreds of variations and is probably the longest single movement in piano literature (duration approximately one hour and twenty minutes). The length has no virtue except that it allows the work to unfold in a kind of musical fresco. Though the work is sometimes motivated by extra-musical ideas, these are not essential to its appreciation.

(At the opening) the ground is immediately stated. It consists of 4 notes and 7 bars in 3/4 time. The 4 notes are the initials of D. Shostakovich in the German spelling (DSCH that is, D, E flat, C, B on the piano). Then begins a 'telescoped' sonata movement: that is, what would normally be movements are 'telescoped' into subjects, the first subject allegro moderato: the second, andantino. These subjects are developed in juxtaposition and the opening ground is recapitulated in canon. The Sonata section concludes with a brass-like coda. A Waltz in rondo form provides relief. Now the ground bass is the melody.

An improvisatory-like passage in gently lapping arpeggi introduces a Suite: Prelude, Sarabande, Jig, Sarabande, Minuet, Jig, Gavotte and Polonaise. The military Polonaise quietens and is followed by a dirge based on the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Scottish Pibroch (classical bagpipe music), 'Lament for the Children' by Patrick Mor MacCrimmon. Here his melody is quoted in memory of the child victims of Nazism.

A quiet set of arabesque variations leads to a Nocturne with bitonal elements. Out of this grows a passage of Syrinx-like glissandi, played first on the keys, then on the strings of the piano. Then follow arpeggi glissandi, a pianistic innovation achieved by glissandi between and over silently depressed superimposed thirds. The glissandi finally dissolve into arpeggi. The reverie is rudely interrupted by a 'Fanfare-Forebodings: Alarm-Glimpse of a War vision'. The harshness gradually sweetens into a peaceful mood. An allegro section follows, based on a theme derived from speech intonation of the classical slogan of Russia, 1917: 'Peace, Bread and the Land'. This theme is uttered in the Bass but soon pervades the whole keyboard and introduces a symphonic march. The inexorable march rhythms are followed by a volante variation which leads to a Fandango.

A long pedal passage, marked 'to emergent Africa' is based on Drum Rhythms, beginning in ruthless primitivism and becoming progressively complex. The pianist's left palm strikes the bass strings of the piano in an evocation of tom-tom music. The frenetic sounds spill over into rapid cascades of scales.

Excitement is maintained in a group of variations which are central to the whole work, all fortissimo and exploiting a quasi-orchestral treatment of the piano. The extremes of the

keyboard are used and the fists and palms are employed for explosive discords. An expansive set of variations in C minor follows, with a hunting horn 'refrain'.

An adagio tribute to Bach introduces the triple fugue over ground bass. The first subject is florid: the second is the BACH motif and the third subject is the Dies Irae, marked 'in memoriam the six million Jews'. The work concludes with an extended set of variations, marked adagissimo barocco. A grand crescendo leads to the coda, which presents the initial theme in block chords. The peroration is broken off and the work ends in quiet reflection'.

On 15 & 16 July 1999 I recorded Ronald's *Passacaglia* in the King's Hall, Newcastle University for this Divine Art CD. It was a memorable, inspiring, intense yet joyful and humour-filled two days, and my travel companions on the journey through this magnum opus were producer Stephen Sutton, (managing director of the record company/Lawyer/Lay preacher/prolific composer/collector of historic recordings/classical music fanatic), sound engineer Douglas Doherty, (patient, thoughtful yet capable of the most delightful harliquinesque pranks when stimulated

by 'African Drums' and string plucks in general!) and page turner/general assistant David Trippett, (one of my most promising and enthusiastic pupils who eventually would graduate from King's College Cambridge). Subsequently, I was indebted to Jim Pattison for development of electronic effects in Part 2 as well as for final editing decisions.

In recording a masterpiece like D.S.C.H., you can only try to do what you consider to be your best at one particular time. The work can take an infinite number of approaches, and almost immediately after the sessions I started to change voicing, as well as the pace of various subsections. For instance, the speed chosen here for the opening of Part 3 is far brisker than one might expect, but surely no apologies are necessary for a tempo that brings a certain added momentum to the work after a period of brooding contemplation and quasi improvisation. But I could very easily decide to go back to a deeply expansive Adagissimo pulse on a future occasion... Similarly, there are tempo ratio connections between Parts 1 and 3 in this recording, but I would not necessary feel that I had to adopt this standpoint every time I performed the work!

This follows very much in the spirit of the composer's own approach, and it should be mentioned that as important a section as the Pibroch Lament in Part 2 was added by Stevenson as late as the morning of the world Premiere performance! The fact that the Passacaglia is a veritable musical universe means that as time expands, so musicians in sympathy with its spirit will seek to add to it. For this reason the Grave section in part 2 with glissandi strings and the following 'quasi cithara' passage have extrapianistic electronic effects added at my request in this performance, and for similar reasons immediately before the African Drums enter there are special colourings not written into the text by the composer which were obtained here by placing objects on the strings inside the piano.

The idea is to make *Passacaglia on DSCH* as allembracing as possible. Stevenson has literally put into his magnum opus everything that he knows about the piano. In this sense it not only parallels obvious precursors by Busoni (Doktor Faust, and the Piano Concerto, the Klavierubung as well as the celebrated transcription of Bach's Chaconne and Fantasia Contrappuntistica, all in different ways) and Sorabji, but also follows on an illustrious line of works including the 'Goldberg'

and 'Diabelli' Variations. And there are connections with Percy Grainger's 'World Music', fascinating parallels with Manchester born John Foulds, under-explored connections with Arnold Bax, and finally prophesies of works Stevenson was yet to produce (Piano Concerto no.2 'The Continents' and the Violin Concerto especially). One could spend an entire essay discussing the extra-musical influences and aspects of the work from a political perspective, but ultimately it is the sheer sensitivity, passion and poetry of the artistic expression which sweeps the listener along.

This recording followed on from four performances of the work which I gave in celebration of the composer's seventieth birthday in 1998, but I have been spell-bound and captivated by the work since discovering it in the Henry Watson Music Library, Manchester back in 1980. As an aspiring young artist in the late 1980s, I spent six months going over the whole score, practising the last section in particular for many hours. By Easter 1989 I could play all of it, but felt a reluctance to perform it to anyone. It is therefore fair to say that I waited about nine years before finally playing it in public. I was privileged enough to study the *Passacaglia* with

Ronald Stevenson in February '98 at his home in West Linton, Scotland, and many precious new ideas from him are, I hope, reflected in my playing here. Ronald also wrote at length about the dynamics and the overall structure of the work after my first performance in Manchester. Of course, advice like this is precious, and an interpreter has to find a way to assimilate ideas into his own approach at any one given performance, with integrity.

By the time we had completed recording *D.S.C.H.* on 16 July '99, we were, quite naturally, feeling more than a little lively. Champagne flowed liberally, and non of us were in any doubt whatsoever over the greatness of the work. Faces were not furrowed in Faustian seriousness, but creased with smiles. Exhausted yet energised!

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#### MURRAY McLACHLAN

As a concert artist Murray McLachlan has received outstanding critical acclaim for intelligent and sensitive interpretations and superb technical ability. His prolific discography has received long-standing international recognition and includes over thirty commercial recordings on the Olympia, Linn, Divine Art, Somm and Dunelm Labels.

Murray McLachlan's repertoire includes over 40 concertos and he has appeared as concerto soloist with many leading UK orchestras including the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Hallé Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, London Concert Orchestra Manchester Concert Orchestra, the Lakeland Sinfonia and the Moscow Symphony Orchestra. He gave the last concerto performance of the twentieth century in the Albert Hall when he played Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue at the 'Millennium Proms' with the BBC Concert Orchestra under Christopher Warren-Green. During the 2000-2001 season he directed the Mozart Festival orchestra in period costume on a national tour of 18 concerts including appearances at the Barbican, Bridgewater Hall, Waterfront Hall in Belfast, Dublin, Birmingham and the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall.

His recognition has been far-reaching, bringing many invitations to perform abroad, and his engagements include recitals in the USA, Scandinavia and South Africa as well as tours of the Soviet Union, Germany, Belgium, Holland and the Far East. In 1997 he was awarded a knighthood by the Order of St John of Jerusalem in recognition of his services to music in Malta.

Murray McLachlan has been especially associated with Russian Music, and his recorded cycles of Prokofiev, Kabalevsky, Khachaturian and the lesser known Tcherepnin, Vainberg, Shchedrin and Myaskovsky have received outstanding reviews. His discography also embraces rarities such as music by MacCunn and a concerto based on sketches, left by Grieg for a second piano concerto. Most recently his cross-over album with the internationally reknowned jazz saxophonist Tommy Smith received wide-spread critical acclaim. Recent releases include a recording of Erik Chisholm's First Piano Concerto, music by Arthur Sullivan and solo works by the Welsh composer John Williamson.

Murray McLachlan's skill and versatility extends throughout the classical repertoire and he has delighted the public and press with performances of all 24 Chopin etudes, the complete Beethoven sonatas and the complete works of Brahms. During the 1997-98 season he undertook a series of fifty Chopin recitals featuring the four Ballades in aid of the Marie Curie Cancer Fund's Golden Jubilee. Broadcasts include recitals, concertos and chamber

music for the BBC as well as Classic FM, and recordings of Russian repertoire for Dutch and Byelorussian television.

Murray McLachlan is a tireless advocate of contemporary music. He has given first performances of works by many composers, including Martin Butler, Ronald Stevenson, Charles Camilleri, Michael Parkin and even Beethoven! His recording of John McLeod's Piano Music was selected as 'Record of the Week' in the Herald and his recording of 'Piano Music from Scotland' was awarded a rosette in the Penguin Guide to Compact Discs.

As head of keyboard at Chetham's School of Music and Tutor at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, Murray McLachlan is also a committed teacher and regularly gives masterclasses around the UK. He is founder and artistic director of the Chetham's International Festival and Summer school for pianists, which in 2003 attracted 120 gifted students to Manchester from all over the world. Future plans include tours to the Czech Republic, South Africa and Poland. During 2003 he will perform and record the complete cycle of 32 Beethoven Sonatas in Manchester in aid of the Chetham's 'Millgate' Project.

## Murray McLachlan



Recorded at King's Hall, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 15/16 July, 1999

Producer: Stephen Sutton Engineer: Douglas Doherty

Editing & Post-production: Jim Pattison

Art & design: Inglewood Graphics Passacaglia on D.S.C.H. is copyright of

Ronald Stevenson

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#### Ronald Stevenson



(taken in 1963 at the time of the first recording of *Passacaglia*)

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# **Ronald Stevenson:**

Passacaglia on D.S.C.H.

Murray McLachlan (piano)