

ROBIN
STEVENS

music for
cello & piano

NICHOLAS
TRYGSTAD
cello

DAVID
JONES
piano



Robin Stevens: Music for Cello and Piano

1	Sonata Romantica for cello and piano (2019)	27:08
	Three Epigrams for cello and piano (1994)	2:39
2	I Foreboding	0:45
3	II Gentle Lament	0:40
4	III Clockwork Toy	1:12
5	Carried on a Whimsy for solo cello (2016, rev. 2020)	3:56
	Three Character Pieces for cello and piano (2004, rev. 2021)	6:44
6	I Thunder in the Soul	1:48
7	II Wistful Chorale	3:25
8	III A Short Ride in a Dangerous Machine	1:30
9	Sospiri for solo cello (2016)	2:45
10	On the Wild Side for cello and piano (2018, rev, 2020)	3:28
11	A Probing Exchange for solo cello (2016)	1:51
	Balmoral Suite for cello and piano (2017)	11:47
12	I The Family Gathers	3:29
13	II Grandpa Hankers for the Past	2:20
14	III A Graceful Beauty	1:50
15	IV Enter Great-Grandpa	2:57
16	V Rough and Tumble in the Nursery	1:10
17	Much Ado About ...? for solo cello (2016)	2:07
18	Say Yes to Life for cello and piano (2005)	5:28
19	Unfailing Stream for solo cello (2016)	6:56
20	A Birthday Trifle for cello and piano (2018)	1:55
	Total duration:	77:54

The music: notes by the composer

On reaching a certain age, most folk begin to reflect upon their lives, seeking to find some pattern in what has happened to them, and some meaning and purpose in what they have achieved. As a sixty-two-year-old composer during the recording and production of this album, it might therefore be appropriate for me to describe the music included here largely in chronological order of composition, setting it in the context of my entire musical output to date, and my ongoing development as a composer.

All the compositions I wrote as a young man were exclusively tonal, and much influenced by Classical composers of the first half of the twentieth century such as Walton, Vaughan Williams, Bartok and Stravinsky. This early period, not represented on the present disc, climaxed in 1985-7 with two violin sonatas (the *Fantasy Sonata* and the *Sonata Tempesta*), and a *Sonata for Unaccompanied Cello*.

A long period of post-viral fatigue ensued, during which I only had the energy to write a series of shorter works, but in composing these I was able by steps to forge a more personal and contemporary style. The *Three Epigrams* of 1994 (tracks 2-4) are typical of this time: quirky and elliptical, the cello's melodic lines just maintain a hold on tonality in the face of dissonant, staccato piano accompaniments.

A decade on from the *Three Epigrams*, the *Three Character Pieces* (tracks 6-8) demonstrate a more complex and ambitious musical language, abounding in dense harmonies, and flirting with atonality. *Thunder in the Soul* (track 6) begins with three brief flourishes on the piano, each immediately answered by a short cello phrase (0:01-0:06): the remainder of the piece plays with this idea of the two instruments quickly responding to one another's gestures, sometimes playing in turn, other times cutting across one another; contrast is provided by two fleeting lyrical episodes (0:23, 0:58). *Wistful Chorale* (track 7) is a deeply introspective composition set in motion by an ascending cantabile phrase for

solo cello. There follow two renderings of a seven-phrase chorale: the first in block piano chords, with a lyrical cello commentary, relatively restrained (0:12-1:32); the second more urgent, the piano weaving complex decorative patterns around the upper line of the chorale, with cello interjections of increasing passion and animation (1:33-3:00); strikingly, the cello takes over the final line of the chorale (2:43) before quietly recalling the lyrical phrase which began the piece. *A Short Ride in a Dangerous Machine* (track 8) is a breathless *moto perpetuo* for the cello, punctuated by tangy piano chords. The sense of risk – actual, rather than imaginary for any musicians reckless enough to attempt a performance of this extremely demanding piece – is heightened by the unpredictable and ever-changing bar-metres, which prevent the music settling into any regular pattern.

Say Yes To Life (track 18) shares with the *Three Character Pieces* an Expressionist intensity and harmonic density. Though barely five minutes long, it is a bold work with a broad expressive sweep. This piece, written for a friend experiencing a difficult pregnancy (hence the title), depicts a personal battle undertaken with courage and fortitude. The soaring, aspirational cello melody of the opening leads into faster music of a restless, scurrying character (0:36). The unborn baby is represented by a mocking theme familiar to all children – 'naa-naa-na-naa-naa' – which first appears unobtrusively in the piano (0:59), regularly recurring throughout the piece. The cello's aspirational melody itself returns three times: firstly in stormy guise (1:34); then mysteriously, in a passage reminiscent of Charles Ives (3:32), rapidly followed by a heroic version (3:46). An unusual feature of the piece is the two miniature cadenzas for cello, the first based on the interval of the minor 7th (1:45), the second upon the major 7th (4:10), both punctuated by dramatic piano chords. Over the concluding pages of the composition the prevailing mood of turbulence and inner conflict is at last dispelled: the cello with growing confidence sings out lengthy augmentations of the child's formerly mocking theme (4:51 onwards) over increasingly consonant piano harmony, bringing this passionate composition to a joyful, major-key conclusion.

In 2007, after seventeen years of debilitating illness, I finally returned to full health, and within a few months embarked upon a PhD in Composition at Manchester University, where my tutors were Philip Grange and Kevin Malone. My portfolio of pieces centred exclusively on large-scale works, since I now had the energy to write them: two String Quartets; a Fantasy Trio for flute, guitar and cello; a Romantic Fantasy for harp, flute, clarinet and strings; Brass Odyssey, for brass band and six percussionists; and Mourning into Dancing, for Symphony Orchestra. Happily, I found that the rigour of postgraduate study gave me the skill set with which to build big structures in the contemporary idiom which had emerged through the miniatures of the previous two decades. But to stand still artistically is to stagnate, and after being awarded my PhD in 2013 I sought to refresh and reinvigorate my musical language: the five unaccompanied cello pieces on this disc, all written in 2016 or 2017, each uncovered a different creative pathway I could take into the future.

A Probing Exchange (track 11) transfers the dissonant sound-world of earlier works such as the *Three Character Pieces* (tracks 6-8) onto a solo cello: arpeggiated chords form an obsessive *moto perpetuo*, but in contrast to *A Short Ride in a Dangerous Machine* (see above, track 8), the regularity of the rhythms and of the broken-chord shapes gives the music a relentless, obsessive character. The multiplicity of unusual chord-patterns and hand-positions make *A Probing Exchange* the sternest of tests for any cellist, and Nicholas Trygstad rises to the challenge magnificently.

During my PhD studies I recall attending a composers' workshop for vocal writing, during which we were informed that the only way a singer can transition smoothly from one pitch to another without breaking the flow of sound is to slide: it is simply how the human vocal chords work. As a music-college-trained cellist, this was news to me, and my ears pricked up! When I was an undergraduate, in the late-1970s, there was much emphasis in string-playing on 'clean' (i.e. virtually inaudible) shifts of position between notes: conversely, deliberately using slides – *glissandi* – to link pitches together to create an unbroken melodic line, was regarded as sentimental or cheap, yet we were often

encouraged to make a 'singing' tone! In recent years, as I have composed at the cello, I have increasingly embraced the expressive potential of *glissandi*. *Sospiri* (track 7) – the Italian title means 'Sighs' – exploits the fact that a quiet *glissando* can sound like a gentle exhalation of breath: here the slides are often executed on two strings simultaneously, using the unstable intervals of major and minor sevenths. *Glissandi* are also much in evidence in *Unfailing Stream* (track 19), a probing, almost mystical composition of nearly seven minutes duration, whose continuous flow of melody depicts the Holy Spirit constantly working to inspire faith and love in the life of a Christian.

Subsequent to my PhD, another stylistic avenue of enquiry for me has been microtones – employing smaller gaps between pitches than the semitones (demonstrated, for example, on a standard piano) which were virtually ubiquitous in Western Classical Music until the beginning of the last century. Quarter-tones – half a semitone – are reasonably familiar to most contemporary composers, but for string players (double-bassists apart) they are problematic because the physical distance between adjacent quarter-tones is uncomfortably small, the players' fingers needing to be placed virtually on top of one another. My solution to this dilemma has been to employ wider microtone intervals: most often *thirds of a tone* (e.g. two equidistant pitches, rather than one, between the notes A and B) or *three-eighths of a tone* (three equidistant pitches, rather than two, between A and C), with the extra option of doubling either of these intervals to *two-thirds* or *three-quarters* of a tone. *Much Ado About...?* (track 17) sees microtones taking centre-stage in a light-hearted piece full of gruff melodrama and cheeky insouciance. Contrastingly, the mercurial *Carried on a Whimsy* (track 5) employs microtones to more serious expressive intent: dramatic gestures intermingle unpredictably with plaintive lyricism and helter-skelter virtuosity, though by the close a melancholy quietness prevails.

On the Wild Side (track 10) marks a return to the Expressionistic drama of the *Three Character Pieces*, with cello microtones now being set against the standard tuning of the piano. After initial scurrying scales, the cello intones a lyrical phrase against a bare fifths piano chord (0:13, reappearing in harmonics at 1:04, and

again, dramatically extended, at 2:28) – the stark simplicity of the piano harmony emphasising the alien, otherworldly character of the microtone cello line. A *moto perpetuo* ensues, started by the cello in fast quintuplets as an accompaniment to short, spiky piano phrases (0:27) before the instruments reverse roles (0:42). These ideas form the substance of the remainder of this cataclysmic whirlwind of a piece, which concludes with the listeners having a door firmly slammed in their faces...

In retrospect it is clear – though to the composer it was not so at the time – that the five solo cello pieces described above, together with *On the Wild Side*, strongly anticipate aspects of the *Sonata Romantica* of 2019 (track 1), though the later composition occupies a far larger canvas, being a single-movement work twenty-seven minutes long. Major works comprising one unbroken span of music have constituted an important part of my output, beginning with the twenty-minute Fantasy Sonata for violin and piano of 1985, and continuing with the String Quartet No.1 (2008) and the Romantic Fantasy for flute, clarinet, harp and strings (2010). A broad, unified sweep to a composition is arguably easier to achieve in a big, single-movement composition: however, such pieces make considerable demands on the concentration of performers and audiences alike, and one loses the immediate contrast of mood and material which the start of a new movement readily provides. As a composer, 'you pays your money, you makes your choice!'

I consciously endeavoured to strengthen the structural coherence of the *Sonata Romantica* by using that traditional Classical device, the exposition repeat: after the briefest of introductions, we are presented with almost all the musical material of the Sonata within a five-minute span, which is then immediately restated, unaltered except for a degree of ornamentation (0:19, 2nd time 5:19). Throughout the remainder of the composition, this material is subjected to a continuous process of development and variation: themes recognisably reappear, but never in quite the same guise, so there is no recapitulation as such, but rather the experience of seeing the same landmarks from different viewing-points.

Significant themes to lay hold of are: at the very start, the 'pinprick' motif unison A's on both instruments, and the ascending microtone scale on the cello; the spacious cello theme (the 'first subject') which begins the exposition proper (0:19), with lyrical, modally-flavoured phrases connected by discreet piano flourishes; and the equally melodious 'second subject' (4:11), again initially given to the cello, dominated by semitone intervals, with the piano imitatively shadowing the cello line. There are several subsidiary ideas, and, beyond the exposition, the piano introduces one further melody (13:25), featuring a quintuplet, broken-chord accompaniment based upon the first five notes of the 'first subject'.

After the exposition repeat the music enters a pensive, mysterious phase, entitled 'Dreamscape' in the score, with atmospheric use of both a conventional mute and a practice mute on the cello (10:39-12:16). Highlights in the continuous, more rapid development that follows include a soaring rendition of the 'second subject' where the music takes flight in an overtly romantic manner (17:25), and the ensuing tumultuous passage based upon the introductory 'pinprick' unisons and cello scale (starting 18:21) – the pinpricks more like violent stabs, now – which culminates in a catastrophic climax (19:28-19:36). Also gripping are the three-against-seven cross-rhythms which underpin two augmentations of the 'second subject': three melodic notes are heard in the time of seven accompanying staccato bass-notes, whilst the 'spare' piano hand plays a complex, rhythmically free pattern of its own (20:04, 22:27) – for the performers, there are easier passages in the entire cello and piano repertoire than these!

A notable stylistic fingerprint of the Sonata is the numerous passages in which one instrument plays solo whilst the other remains silent, with the roles then quickly reversed. This conversational aspect of the piece might almost, at times, describe an unsuccessful romantic date: in bars 98-120 (3:11-3:48), for example, the piano intones a deliberately expressionless chorale, each phrase being answered by deeply emotional music on the cello, as if the cellist is trying desperately to impress the less-than-enthusiastic pianist! (See also, 12:17-12:53 where the roles are swapped, or again 21:49-22:26). Towards the end of the

Sonata this procedure reaches its apotheosis in two lengthy solo cadenzas, the first for the piano (20:34-21:48), the second for the cello (23:00-25:26).

Another hallmark of the Sonata is increasing tension through a phrase by an increase in density, and vice versa. For example, the brief chordal figure on the piano, at the beginning of the first fast passage in the work (1:34-1:36), consists of three chords comprised of three, then four, then five notes – a pattern repeated in the next phrase.

More strikingly, the three 'waves' of detached piano chords heard a couple of pages later (2:14-2:25), display not just an additional note with each succeeding chord, but a progression in articulation through each 'wave' from *staccatissimo* to *tenuto*: each subsequent 'wave' also contains a longer sequence of chords than its predecessors (six chords, then seven, then nine). When the 'waves' idea reappears much later in the piece, (17:11-17:25), the dimensions of articulation and density are reversed, progressing from *tenuto* to *staccatissimo* and losing a note with each successive chord, bringing about a consequent lessening of tension.

How to end so big a piece? After the cello cadenza, the cello ecstatically sings out the expansive 'first subject', to a rippling piano accompaniment (25:27). The 'pinprick' or 'stabbing' motif makes a last, brief, appearance (26:17) before the music rushes headlong to a joyfully emphatic conclusion, with fleeting reminiscences of the soaring 'second subject'.

Having described all the Modernist music on this disc, two pieces of lighter music remain. Some listeners might be puzzled that a composer unafraid to challenge his listeners could so easily revert to the tuneful approachability of *Balmoral Suite* and *A Birthday Trifle*, but human beings are complex, multi-faceted creatures, and composers can be equally honest and authentic writing in two or more styles - just as a person might behave very differently but still be truly themselves in the presence of their partner or their mother, their boss at work or a mate at the tennis club.

Balmoral Suite (tracks 12-16) was a commission from John Turner, who premiered the original recorder and piano version in Manchester in 2017, and has recorded the version for recorder and string orchestra (Prima Facie, PFCD101). The work is an affectionate tribute to a well-known family who habitually spend their summer holidays at the eponymous Highland abode... *Balmoral Suite* is a pastiche of Scottish folk music, with the occasional contemporary twist thrown in.

The first movement, *Overture - The Family Gathers* (track 12) begins with regal precision, after which a medley of tunes expresses the wide range of ages and personalities which have come together. *Grandpa Hankers for the Past* (track 13) gives a nod to the somewhat conservative taste of Prince Charles, perhaps the family's most musical member, aping the mannered, Rococo style of the mid-eighteenth century. *A Graceful Beauty* (track 14) celebrates, through simple melody, Kate in her unaffected loveliness. *Enter Great-Grandpa* (track 15) is a warmly respectful tribute to the late Prince Philip, who very sadly died soon after this recording was made: it gently depicts, in its 'Scotch snap' rhythms, the uncertain gait of a gentleman in extreme old age, still endeavouring to live life to the full. Finally, *Rough and Tumble in the Nursery* (track 16) brings the younger family members to the fore in a high-spirited romp.

The playful closing track of this collection, *A Birthday Trifle* (track 20) has a particular personal resonance: I wrote it for my sixtieth birthday party, and first performed it, accompanied by Claire Campbell-Smith, on the day itself, August 30th, 2018. Even in a piece as slight as this, Modernism makes a stealthy appearance in the form of rapid chromatic scales on the cello which incorporate microtones: although, given the easy-going character of the piece, the presence of unorthodox tunings could easily be missed (0:5, 0:10, 0:23, etc.).



NICHOLAS TRYGSTAD

ROBIN STEVENS

DAVID JONES

The Composer

Born in Wales in 1958, to a musical mother and a rock-climbing father, Robin studied at Dartington College (where he played the Elgar Cello Concerto with the College Orchestra), the Royal Northern College of Music (with cello as principal study), and Manchester and Birmingham Universities, before working for five years as Music Director and Pastoral Worker of St. Paul's Church, York, and then for three years as Head of Music at a West Yorkshire Comprehensive School.

During his PhD studies at Manchester University under Philip Grange and Kevin Malone, Robin earned his living as a home tutor. On turning sixty, he was the recipient of a generous family bequest, which has enabled him to compose full-time, and to supervise quality recordings of some of his best music.

Robin particularly relishes the challenge of writing for 'Cinderella' instruments and ensembles – those with a low profile that tend to have a limited repertoire, such as tuba quartet, bassoon trio, guitar duo, euphonium duo, and cello sextet.

His major works unmentioned in the programme notes above include a Bassoon Concerto, a Cello Concerto, a Te Deum for Choir and Symphony Orchestra, a Quintet for Clarinet and Strings, and Six Duos for Double Bass and Piano. He has also written a substantial body of vocal music, and released two albums of solo songs, *Fire and Inspire*, and *Whispers in the Wasteland*, as well as a disc of his earlier compositions for solo cello, entitled *Reconciliation*. Future projects include a Quartet for Flute and Strings, and a Viola Concerto.

Away from music, Robin reads biographies avidly, cycles, participates regularly in the Park Run, enjoys historical drama on the television, and relishes engaging with people of all ages and backgrounds. A committed Christian, he belongs to the worshipping community of St. Mary Magdalene Church in Greater Manchester.



ROBIN STEVENS

The Performers

Nicholas Trygstad (cello)

Like many outstanding performers, Nicholas initially excelled at the cello through parents who cared enough to insist that he kept on practising! He began cello lessons at the age of four in Minnesota, USA. In his teenage years he studied with Peter Howard, Principal Cellist of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, who inspired him to pursue the cello professionally. Other key influences in his youth were a series of masterclasses with the American cellist, Yo Yo Ma, and playing in the Schleswig-Holstein Symphony Orchestra under the direction of the great Georgian cellist, Rostropovich, who happily signed Nicholas' copy of the CD compilation, 'Rostropovich – The Radio Years', then sloppily embraced him and complimented him on his excellent musical taste!

In 1998 he came to England to study with Hannah Roberts and Ralph Kirshbaum at the Royal Northern College of Music. While at the RNCM he received many awards both within the UK and America, most notably the Bronze Medal in the London Symphony Orchestra scholarship competition, (through which he performing the Schumann concerto with the LSO), and the Gold Medal from the RNCM, the institution's highest honour.

Having previously been Principal Cello with Scottish Opera, Nicholas Trygstad became Principal Cellist of the Hallé in 2005. With the Hallé Orchestra Nicholas has performed many of the cornerstones of the cello repertoire, including concertos by Elgar and Schumann, the C major Concerto by Haydn, Beethoven's 'Triple' Concerto, and Strauss' *Don Quixote*.

In addition to his work with the Hallé he has a number of students at the RNCM and performs regularly in recitals and chamber music collaborations. He is a member of the Manchester Piano Trio, which plays extensively around the UK, and he has performed concertos with the Northern Chamber Orchestra, the Orchestra of Opera North. A passionate educator, Nick has taught and led

workshops for many years at the Royal Northern College of Music and is delighted to now be working with the NYO and NYO inspire.

When not lovingly attending to his cello, Nicholas delights in walking the Pennines with his partner, children, and pet Labrador. He still enjoys computer games, though lacks the stamina for them that he displayed as a teenager, and greatly appreciates good food and wine, despite being, in his words, a less than impressive cook himself.

David Jones (piano)

David Jones was born on the Wirral. He graduated from the University of Wales, Bangor, studying piano with Jana Frenklova, and the Royal Northern College of Music, studying Accompaniment with John Wilson.

After a year as Junior Fellow in Repetiteur Studies in the RNCM Opera Department, David lectured for three years at University College, Salford. He joined the staff of the School of Keyboard Studies at the RNCM as a staff pianist in 1996, and was appointed Head of Accompaniment in September 2001. He is also Deputy Head of Junior RNCM, pianist for the Hallé choir, and founder and Music Director of Alteri, the Manchester-based chamber choir.

For many years he has been, with April Cantelo, Stuart Smith, Patricia MacMahon and Rosemary Walton, a tutor on the summer course, *Art of Song*. As a member of the examiners' panel for the ABRSM, he has worked both in the UK and in the Far East.

David has given first performances of works by David Ellis, Robert Hanson, John Hawkins, Alan Lees, Peter Hope, Emily Howard, David Matthews, Mark Simpson, Robin Stevens and Philip Wilby. He completed his PhD at the University of Manchester in 2011, researching Jeffrey Lewis's music, and of his second CD of Lewis's music, the Gramophone said '*...a disc not to be missed by anyone who cares about communicative 20th-century music*'. A third disc in the series was released by Metier/Divine Art in 2009, on which he collaborates with soprano Caroline MacPhie and violinist Zheng Yu Wu.



NICHOLAS TRYGSTAD



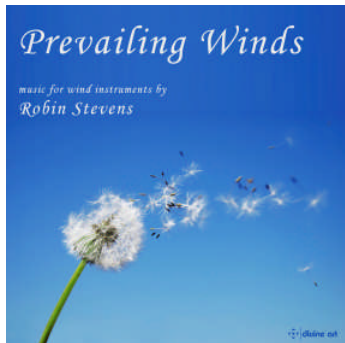
DAVID JONES



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We are thankful that we were able to make this recording despite the Covid pandemic!

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Executive Producer: Robin Stevens

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Dedication

This album is dedicated to Dorothy Milner, my first cello teacher, whose patience, care, fire and enthusiasm helped set me on the path to becoming a full-time composer.

Robin Stevens

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