

Michael Finnissy

Verdi Transcriptions
Piano Concertos 4 & 6
Snowdrift
To & Fro

Ian Pace



MICHAEL FINNISSY AND TRANSCRIPTION

In 1910, Ferruccio Busoni wrote the following in defence of Liszt's transcriptions:

"Notation is itself the transcription of an abstract idea. The moment that the pen takes possession of it, the thought loses its original form. The intention of writing down an idea necessitates already a choice of time and key. The composer is obliged to decide on the form and the key and they determine more and more clearly the course to be taken and the limitations. Even if much of the idea is original and indestructible and continues to exist this will be pressed down from the moment of decision, into the type belonging to a class. The idea becomes a sonata or a concerto; this is already an arrangement of the original. From this first transcription to the second is a comparatively short and unimportant step. Yet, in general, people make a fuss only about the second. In doing so they overlook the fact that a transcription does not destroy the original; so there can be no question of loss arising from it. The performance of a work is also a transcription, and this too - however free the performance may be - can never do away with the original. For the musical work of art exists whole and intact before it has sounded and after the sound is finished. It is, at the same time, in and outside of Time."

Such a conception of all composition as a form of 'transcription' came as a revelation to Finnissey when he first read Busoni's essay. One might well question the nature of this elusive 'abstract idea' that can be conceived independently of a particular realisation, but this form of conceptualisation of the compositional process has informed much of Finnissey's music. He attempts in these works to make clear his own particular aesthetic and technical priorities by applying them to something pre-existent.

Of course there is nothing particularly new about this approach (except in the degree to which the composer is conscious of it); think of Bach's transcriptions, Mozart and Beethoven's numerous sets of variations, Liszt's quasi-symphonic reminiscences from popular operas, Debussy's ironic cribs of Wagner, Stravinsky's utterly original reworking of Pergolesi; more recently Berio's collage of Mahler, Debussy, Stravinsky, Boulez, Pousseur and others in the *Sinfonia*, Kagel's fixation on small elements within received genres, Cage's use of a citation as just another type of sound with no special importance, and, most ominously, the claustrophobia created by the 'closing in' of many voices from different times and places in B.A. Zimmermann's *Requiem für einen Jungen Dichter*. Finnissey's transcriptions do not clearly fit into any of the above categories, although they are clearly informed by this history. His approach is not one of blind respect for his source material, of which he is uninhibited about modification or mutation to suit his own ends.

Transcription has a long history within Finnissey's output (beginning with the curious piece

Romeo and Juliet are Drowning from 1967, in which the love-scene from Berlioz's *Romeo et Juliette* 'drowns' in a pastiche of Act 3 scene 4 of Berg's *Wozzeck*). His two large sets of transcriptions for piano, the *Verdi Transcriptions* and *Gershwin Arrangements / More Gershwin*, were both begun in the 1970's, but following the disillusionment that resulted from the performances of the ultra-abstract ensemble piece *alongside* in 1979, almost all of Finnissy's music explicitly engages with pre-existent musical material. This is clear in the Verdi and Gershwin sets, and with other cycles such as the *Strauss-Walzer* and *Obrecht Motetten*, as well as other works whose titles are taken from other pieces of music, but on a deeper level the vast majority of Finnissy's musical material is at some level derived from a 'found object'.

The fundamental belief of Finnissy is that all composers are dealing with a vocabulary that has both natural and cultural/historic connotations, and thus that 'origination' (particularly of 'material') is an extremely contentious topic. He deals with the fundamentally diachronic nature of music; to achieve the 'not-yet-heard', one must find new ways of treating that which already exists, de-emphasising material in favour of its modification.

In an article on Finnissy's work, the composer Richard Barrett suggests that one might treat the output like 'an entire (relatively small!) musical culture', which continues to adapt and assimilate new elements. Finnissy's musical personality is strong enough to be able to engage with such disparate sources as Machaut's *De Toutes Flours*, Italian or French opera, radical contemporary Germanic music-theatre, Hebrew psalms, Japanese court music or the Beatles, and still produce works that are unmistakably Finnissy's own. This has little to do with the 'shopping mall' approach of post-modernism, however, where composers cynically exploit canned musical quotes and clichés. It is notable in this respect how extremely infrequently Finnissy uses direct quotation; he eschews the easy option of providing easy gratification by appealing to the familiar, and it would be very hard for a listener to approach his music in this way (providing the performance does not aim for this ideal!).

But Finnissy is not merely a latter-day Liszt, able to transform even the most paltry or banal musical material into a work of substance and distinction. Finnissy always takes a 'critical' view towards the music which he transforms, be it Hungarian gypsy music or Bach, and uses his works to express his feelings about the music. He has often used the music of composers towards whom he feels ambivalent or even hostile, such as Mozart, Brahms or Johann Strauss, and embeds this ambivalence into the musical surface. It is in this respect as much as anything that his 'transcriptions' relate fundamentally to late-20th century musical concerns as much as anything from the past.

FINNISSY VERDI TRANSCRIPTIONS

Finnissy's major work of transcription is the series of pieces composed over a long period of time and collected as the *Verdi Transcriptions* (1972-88, rev. 1995). Inspired by his deep love of 'the energy, passion and wide-rangingly generous humanity' of Verdi's operas, and a desire at the time of writing to advocate the music of Verdi as against that of the supposedly more 'serious' Wagner, Finnissy at first intended to write one piece derived from each of Verdi's operas, to be collected in four books. After completing one book of nine pieces, construed as a continuous work, and a collection of six other transcriptions as a second book, Finnissy decided to present these two books, with the inclusion of three fragments in the second collection, as a complete work in eighteen movements. This cycle in its entirety was first performed by Ian Pace in the opening concert of his landmark cycle of the complete piano works of Finnissy, on 26th January 1996 in Conway Hall, London.

The total work is much more than a mere ordering of disjunct movements, however; there are a number of 'running themes' throughout the cycle. During his investigation of Verdi's large output, Finnissy was able to discern a number of recurrent 'archetypal' features, such as a particular type of descending melodic fragment (first encountered at the beginning of the continuous section mid-way through the *Oberto* transcription). Indeed, descent per se is the most obvious determinant of the final piece in the cycle, the *Don Carlo* transcription, which ranges from an almost static series of long descending notes derived from the Verdi melody, an impossibly still and eerie landscape, to the coruscating series of overlapping scales which ends the piece and the cycle.

The first transcription, the *Oberto* transcription, is literally dredged up from the murkiness of the bottom of the keyboard, after an explosive opening which 'clears the air'. As has been pointed out by Richard Toop, the particular series of tri-chords used derive from all the possible combinations of intervals in the Verdi melody. From this piece until the sixth transcription, from *I Due Foscari*, the music generally progresses upwards in register, and stormily devours the whole keyboard, leading towards a series of staccato clusters of a violence unprecedented even for Finnissy, shattering all that has come before.

Upon the ruins created by this cataclysm, new life can grow, and different types of music emerge, with a new emphasis upon free melody. The first *Attila* transcription, which was the last piece in the original Book 1, contains recollections, modified with hindsight, of the previous pieces, a little in the manner of the final movement of Liszt and others' *Hexameron* variations. There are also links within the second book to previous pieces, providing further levels of cross-reference. The intensely romantic and rhetorical transcription from *La Forza del Destino* extends a slurred gesture that was heard briefly in the transcription from *Un Giorno di Regno*, while the Macbeth transcription, set exclusively

at the top of the keyboard, provides a counterpart to the low bass registers of the *Oberto* piece.

Yet, as might be expected from Finnissy, these methods of sustaining overall momentum are by no means the main *raison d'être* of the work, as he works on a variety of other compositional levels. There are a number of homages to the keyboard styles of Romantic and late-Romantic pianist-composers. The Septet from *Ernani* makes use of a left hand part reminiscent of Leopold Godowsky's studies for the left hand alone, while the Duet from *Alzira* (about the rivalry between a Peruvian Indian chieftain and a Spanish governor) uses as its basic matrix the first piece from Busoni's *Indianisches Tagebuch*. For my own part, I hear vague, distant echoes of composers such as Liszt, Schumann, Alkan, Scriabin and Szymanowski in other places. The method by which Liszt expands a seemingly unimportant ornamental figure in his *Reminiscences de Don Juan*, has a parallel in the *Un Giorno di Regno* transcription, where a dotted rhythm from the original duet keeps threatening to tear the continuity of texture apart.

On another, perhaps the most important, level, the whole work stands as Finnissy's first 'Art of Transcription' (a further one was to follow in the *Obrecht Motetten*) and a 'Homage to Busoni', from whose essay the original concept for the work stemmed. The extent of modification of the sources changes in degree between different pieces. In the Romanza from *Aida* or the Chorus from *Nabucco*, the original melodies are clearly recognizable, even though they are presented in a new context. In the *I Due Foscari* and *Macbeth* pieces, on the other hand, Finnissy is more concerned to recreate his very personal reactions to the atmosphere and impact of the respective moments in the operas, the materials having been transformed practically beyond recognition. Other movements inhabit various positions between these two extremes, sometimes submerging the originals within a quite different sort of texture, as in the *Ernani* transcription. In others, such as the *I Lombardi* or *Don Carlo* pieces, Finnissy uses the original as the starting point for his own creative imagination. Finnissy's transcription from *La Traviata* acknowledges the melodic unity of the work, and relates to the whole opera, rather than to any one particular moment, re-working the fundamental melody into an exuberant dance owing perhaps a little to Eastern European folk music.

The work in its totality stands as one of the most significant contemporary cycles for piano, I believe, with levels of variegation, emotionality, intricacy, unity and transcendentalism unprecedented previously in Finnissy's output, and perhaps only matched or surpassed in his later cycles *Folklore* (1993-94) and *The History of Photography in Sound* (1996-2000). As the first of Finnissy's piano works that I learnt (seemingly an age ago, but only in actuality 10 years before the time of writing this note), the *Verdi Transcriptions* are indeed

very special to me - rarely before playing this work had I ever encountered such an amazing combination of the far reaches of the imagination combined with studious self-discipline, to produce a work that is penetrating and lacerating in its impact.

SNOWDRIFT

Snowdrift (1972) takes its title from William Sharp's *The White Peacock*, which inspired Charles Griffes's work of the same name (although *Snowdrift* does not allude to this piece).

...Here as the breath, as the soul of this beauty
Moveth in silence, and dreamlike, and slowly,
White as a snowdrift in mountain valley
When softly upon it the fold light lingers...

The two intervals most fervently proscribed by the 50s serialists were the major 3rd and minor 6th (equivalent in inversion). Never one to be bound by others' diktats, Finnissey determined in *Snowdrift* to write a work based around these two intervals. The piece opens with a didactic statement of the minor 6th, followed by murmurings in the bottom register and a string of grace notes at the very top. Both of these elements are developed with others, and gradually a melodic line emerges, though, as in many of Finnissey's works, often interrupted or 'annotated'.

The piece is much more than a mere impression of a 'snowscape'. Finnissey has suggested that music bears more similarities to the dynamic, dialectical procedures involved in film than the static medium of still images. *Snowdrift*, like *Autumnall* (1968-71) and a number of Finnissey's other works, owes something of its structural thinking to the cinema, in particular to Eisenstein and others' use of montage. The pieces often switch between quite different materials, in such a way that meaning is generated more by the juxtaposition than the materials themselves. Sometimes a 'dissolve' occurs instead of a 'cut'; also material can be developed 'off-camera' so that it has moved on from the state in which it is left to that which is retaken up. The piano writing is generally hard-edged rather than soft-focussed, more reminiscent of Aloys Kontarsky playing Stockhausen than of Walter Gieseking playing Debussy.

TO AND FRO

The short piece *To and Fro* (1978/95) continually oscillates between two tempos, eventually exceeding such an overall flow, in a manner which resembles the phenomena for elastic/plastic deformation in a body stretched beyond its natural limits. In its original form the piece formed part of Finnissey's now withdrawn cycle of *Piano Studies*, from which material was also taken for the *Verdi Transcriptions*, Piano Concerto No. 4 and *English*

Country-Tunes (1977/82-85).

The final, and thoroughly revised, version was premiered by Ian Pace in Conway Hall, London, as part of his complete Finnissey piano music cycle, on 29th February 1996.

PIANO CONCERTOS 4 & 6

Finnissey's seven piano concertos, all written between 1974 and 1981, represent a commentary upon and rethinking of the medium of the piano concerto itself, and its representation of a particular form of individualism. Both the 4th and 6th concertos are for solo piano; Finnissey takes his cue from Alkan's Concerto for Solo Piano, and has the pianist adopt both the 'Solo' and 'Tutti' roles, in the 4th Concerto contrasting extended linear writing with a form of 'meta-piano' (to borrow Brian Ferneyhough's term when discussing this piece) where the whole range of the instrument seems to be in simultaneous use.

The Piano Concerto No. 6 (1980-81) is an exceptionally strange and eerie work, containing unexpectedly long spettrale passages in the outer registers and extended explorations of the boundaries between stasis and activity. The writing only becomes more animated and voluminous in a few places other than the beginning, as if the 'orchestra' is only occasionally able to interrupt the 'inner world' of the 'soloist'. The coda congeals what has gone before into a long series of changing trills in both hands. Its rejection of conventions of taste, form and proportions, enable types of material that have been evidenced earlier in Finnissey's output to be seen in a radically new light.

The Piano Concerto No. 4 (1978, rev. 1996), on the other hand, is probably the most manically virtuosic piece that Finnissey has ever written, using practically every pianistic technique evidenced throughout Finnissey's output and piling layer upon layer of hectic activity to an unprecedented degree, pushing out the boundaries of pianistic possibility. The newly revised version is dedicated to Ian Pace, and uses material from the now withdrawn *Piano Studies* (1976-78) and the piano and ensemble work, *Long Distance* which provides the five part Nancarrow-like canon in the Coda. It was first performed by Ian Pace on 4th October 1996 in Conway Hall, London, as part of his complete Finnissey piano music cycle.

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[Parts of these notes were adapted from 'The Piano Music' by Ian Pace in *Uncommon Ground: The Music of Michael Finnissey*, ed. Brougham, Fox, Pace (Ashgate, 1997)]

VERDI TRANSCRIPTIONS (1972-1988, with revisions in 1995)

Disc 1

3. I Aria: 'Sciagurata! a questo lido ricercai l'amante infido!' *Oberto* (Act 2)
4. II Trio: 'Bella speranza in vero' *Un Giorno di Regno* (Act 1)
5. III Chorus: 'Il maledetto non ha fratelli' *Nabucco* (Part 2)
6. IV Chorus: 'Fra tante sciagure...' *I Lombardi* (Act 3)
7. V Septet with Chorus: 'Vedi come il buon vegliardo...' *Ernani* (Part 1)
8. VI Choral Barcarolle: 'Tace il vento, è queta l'onda' *I Due Foscari* (Act 3)
9. VII Aria: 'So che per via di triboli' *Giovanna d'Arco* (Act 1)
10. VIII Duet: 'Il pianto...l'angoscia...di lena me priva' *Alzira* (Act 2)
11. IX Aria: 'Mentre gonfiarsi l'Anima' *Attila* (Act 1)

Disc 2

1. X Romanza: 'Me pellegrina ed orfano' *La Forza del Destino* (Act 1)
2. XI Chorus: 'S'allontanarono! N'accizzeremo' *Macbeth* (Act 1)
3. XII Duet: 'Vanitosi! Che abbietti e dormenti' *Attila* (Prologue)
4. Fragment (a) 'Cielo pietoso, rendila a questo core' *Simon Boccanegra* (Act 2)
5. Fragment (b) *La Traviata*
6. Fragment (c) 'Vi fu in Palestina' *Aroldo* (Finale Act 1)
7. XIII Romanza: 'O cieli azzuri...' *Aida* (Act 3)
8. XIV Duet: 'Qual mare, qual terra...' *I Masnadieri* (Part 3)
9. XV Aria: 'Tu che la vanità conoscesti' *Don Carlo* (Act 5)

Ian Pace has had a long and fruitful association with Finnissey's music, and his interpretations have been widely admired for their immense virtuosity and penetration to the heart of the music. In 1996, to celebrate the composer's 50th birthday, he gave a landmark six-concert series of the complete piano music, which was received with unanimous critical acclaim. This series inspired Finnissey to embark upon his mammoth five-and-a-half hour cycle, *History of Photography in Sound*, which Ian Pace premiered complete (also having premiered six different chapters of the work) in a marathon concert in the Duke's Hall, London, in January 2001, also meeting with great admiration and acclaim. He has premiered a great many of Finnissey's works, including the complete *Verdi Transcriptions*, *Song 6*, *To and Fro*, Piano Concerto No. 1, Piano Concerto No. 4, *Boogie-Woogie*, *Stanley Stokes*, *East Street 1836*, *Rossini*, *New Perspectives on Old Complexity*, *Cozy Fanny's Tootsies*, the complete *Yvoperas*, *Elephant*, *Violet*, *Slingsby*, *Guy and Lionel*, the complete *Tangos*, *Tu me diras*, *Meeting is pleasure*, *parting a grief*, *Le démon de l'analogue*, *Le reveil de l'intraitable réalité*, *Seventeen Immortal Homosexual Poets*, *Wachtend op de volgende uitbarsting van repressie en censuur*, *Unsere Afrikareise* and *Kapitalistisch Realisme*, as well as numerous chamber and ensemble works. He also co-edited, and was a major contributor to, the book *Uncommon Ground: The Music of Michael Finnissey*, which was published by Ashgate Ltd. in 1997.

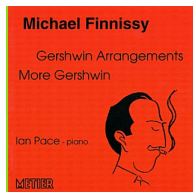
His CD of Finnissey's complete *Gershwin Arrangements* on METIER MSV CD92030 was a *BBC Music Magazine* Critic's Choice, as well as being "Pick of the Year" in the *Sunday Times* and *The Wire* magazines; it was described as "unique and remarkable" (*International Record Review*), "an incandescent performance" (*Classical London*); "technically exemplary" (*The Guardian*); also in *International Record Review* it was said that "Pace is clearly so conversant with this music as to be a constituent part of it". Other of Ian Pace's forthcoming METIER Finnissey releases include the complete *Folklore* cycle, a disc of dance-inspired works from across Finnissey's career, a disc of Finnissey's tribute pieces, and a 5-disc set of the complete *History of Photography in Sound*.

Ian was born in Hartlepool, Cleveland, England in 1968. He studied at Chetham's School of Music, Manchester, The Queen's College, Oxford, then as a Fulbright Scholar at the Juilliard School, New York with the Hungarian pianist György Sándor, whom he regards as an important influence upon his work and thinking about the piano and music. He has a busy international career, having played at major festivals and venues in 15 countries, with a particular focus upon 20th-Century music. He has given over 100 world premieres, by composers including Julian Anderson, Richard Barrett, Luc Brewaeys, James Clarke, Chris Dench, James Dillon, Pascal Dusapin, Brian Ferneyhough, Christopher Fox, Volker Heyn, Howard Skempton, Gerhard Stäbler, Jay Allan Yim and Walter Zimmermann. His absolutely vast repertoire ranges broadly around the entire contemporary repertoire, featuring especially the sonatas of Pierre Boulez and Jean Barraqué, the *Klavierstücke* of Karlheinz Stockhausen, and the piano music of Iannis Xenakis, Luigi Nono, John Cage, Morton Feldman, György Ligeti, Mauricio Kagel, Helmut Lachenmann, Salvatore Sciarrino, Brian Ferneyhough and many many others. He also plays the bulk of the piano repertoire from the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, combining influences of historically-informed performance practice with a modernist perspective to produce radically searching interpretations.

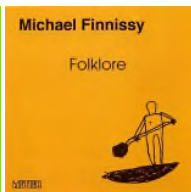
Ian is also a regular chamber and ensemble performer: he is artistic director of the group Topologies (who have recorded discs of Michael Finnissey, Richard Emsley and Alwynne Pritchard for METIER), and has often performed with other groups, most notably with the Arditti Quartet. He is co-director, with pianist Philip Mead, of a course for the study of contemporary piano music at the London College of Music and Media.

(above is original biography from 2001)

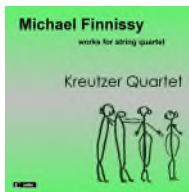
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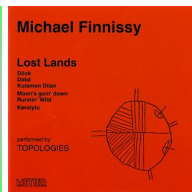
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Michael Finnissy (piano)

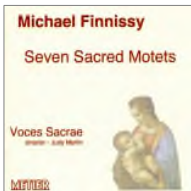


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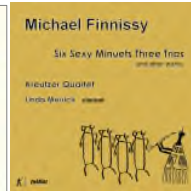


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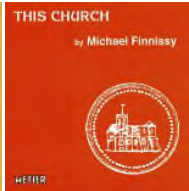
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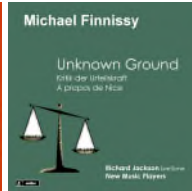
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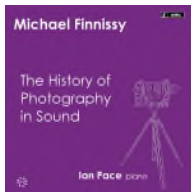


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Darragh Morgan (violin)
Mary Dullea (piano)



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David Lesser (piano)

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Michael Finnissy

music for piano played by

Ian Pace

Disc 1

1. Piano Concerto No.6 24:32
2. Snowdrift 10:05

Verdi Transcriptions Book 1

3. I 6:28
4. II 3:17
5. III 1:48
6. IV 2:34
7. V 5:32
8. VI 6:02
9. VII 3:05
10. VIII 3:20
11. IX 8:39

Total Time 76:02

Disc 2

Verdi Transcriptions Book 2

1. X 3:51
2. XI 4:45
3. XII 3:12
4. *Fragment (a)* 2:28
5. *Fragment (b)* 1:16
6. *Fragment (c)* 2:43
7. XIII 1:10
8. XIV 4:49
9. XV 26:19
10. To & Fro 2:58
11. Piano Concerto No.4 16:47

Total Time 70:49

This recording was made in Christ's Hospital, Horsham on 18, 21 & 22 February 1998 (CD1: tracks 3-11, CD2: tracks 1-9) and 25 April 2000 (CD1: track 2), and in Djanogly Hall, University of Nottingham on 28 July 1998 (CD1: track 1) and 14 August 1998 (CD2: tracks 10 & 11)

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