



Long Journey Back

James Clapperton – piano music

METIER

LONG JOURNEY BACK: selected works for piano by James Clapperton

The summer of 1988 witnessed a clear turning point in my musical development. As a pianist I was immersed in the music of Femeyhough, Finnissy and Xenakis. On a daily basis I was grappling with texts of mesmerising complexity and was conscripted into a war between brain and fingers in an effort to navigate my way through an ocean of pitches and polyrhythms.

As a composer I had been deeply influenced by this music (and continue to admire it greatly) but there came a point where my own writing broke off in a different direction. Subsequently, this parting of ways has been brought home to me by the fact that people who have previously been aware only of my activities as a pianist almost always express feelings of surprise on hearing my music for the first time. I see this as healthy and desirable, as I hope it points to a complementary rather than a redundant relationship between the constituent parts of my musical psyche.

The first fruits of this break were the pieces *Haar* and *When soft voices die* (violin and piano). 'Haar' is a Scottish word which describes the sea mist, a mist which often smothered the Aberdeen of my childhood. 'When soft voices die' is the title of Shelley's famous fragment. Shelley's poetic invocations and wanderings into the realms of spirits and faeries have long been a source of inspiration for me.

*The inviolable quietness;
The breath of peace we drew,
With its soft motion made not less,
The calm that round us grew.*

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'The Recollection')

Before the shroud of protestantism was laid upon the nation of Scotland in the 1540s, poetry and musical composition flourished under the patronage of King James IV. So much was destroyed by vandals that we can only imagine the wealth of art, music and poetry that must once have existed north of the border. Nevertheless, through the poetry of William Dunbar and Robert Henryson and the music of Robert Carver, we can catch a glimpse of what Catholic Scotland had to offer.

The most poignant passages in Henryson's poems 'Robene and Makyne' and 'The Testament of Cresseid' describe the parting of two figures who through tragic circumstance fail to requite their love: *The Testament of Cresseid* presents various fragments of melodies and dances. At the local level the music is modal, yet when one strand of material is heard alongside another the overall harmony becomes dissonant.

*O sop of sorrow
Sonkin into cair:
O captive Cresseid,
for neue an ever mair.*

(Robert Henryson, 'The Testament of Cresseid')

A sense of disunity and symbiosis is thereby attained and is carried further in *The Ressoning betuir Aige an Yowth* for two pianos. In an attempt to avoid the usual device of passing chords and motives between the two instruments I replaced antiphony with cacophony. Henryson's poem depicts two figures; one old, one young. Each character in turn espouses the virtues of 'aige an yowth' and then quietly departs the scene:

*The state of yowth I repute for na gude
For in that state sik perilis now I see.*

(Robert Henryson, 'The Ressoning betuir Aige an Yowth')

This process is mirrored in my own work.

Mikhashoffschina (the era of Mikhashoff) took four years to complete. The task of portraying the late Yvar Mikhashoff and of capturing something of the essence of his pianism proved considerably more daunting than I originally thought. Between 1989 and 1992 I studied with Yvar in Buffalo and also performed with him numerous pieces for piano duet and two pianos. During that period he was without doubt the most dominant figure in my musical life and his premature death still seems unjust.

During the same year I began to sketch a tribute to Yvar, I embarked on a series of miniature piano pieces. *The Cathedral at Freiburg* was a place to which I would often retreat during my period of study at Freiburg Hochschule für Musik. *Café Greco* is a café on the Via Condotti in Rome which was frequented in the 19th century by various luminaries such as Keats, Berlioz and Liszt. I have very rarely written pieces with a political background but *St. Patrick's Day* is an exception. The release of the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four led many people to question the impartiality of the English legal system (particularly in its attitude to the Catholic community in Northern Ireland). Through my friendship with the fearless solicitor Carolyn Taylor I have also come into contact with the legal firm Taylor/Nicholl which has succeeded in overturning a series of rank injustices over the years. The relationship between music and politics is always tenuous, but I felt an intense need to respond in my own writing to events which had an emotional effect on me.

Steven's Piano Book was commissioned by the pianist Steven Osborne and was premiered in the somewhat surreal surroundings of Harrogate. These five short pieces are predominantly portraits of friends. *They're writing songs of love but not for me...* (after

Gershwin) was written for a concert given as a tribute to the life and music of Michael Finnissy. *Edain* is the name of a faery who frequented springs and whose name is mentioned in Irish texts from the 10th century onwards. *Howard Skempton* is dedicated to the emperor of the miniature while *Renard* is a tribute to my former landlady, the communist and tireless peace campaigner Eileen Daffern. *Sarah*, a Celtic elegy, brings the set to a close.

Long Journey Back was written in 1998 and is dedicated (as is this whole collection) to my father Chalmers who suffered a stroke in the autumn of that year. Hitherto, my father had been professor in Geography at Aberdeen University and his work in South America, the Antarctic and Iceland over the past forty years has been recognised throughout the world as being a unique contribution to our efforts to gain a deeper understanding of our planet.

*It was the old Scotland that perished then, and we may believe that
never again will the old speech and the old songs, the old curses
and the old benedictions rise but with alien effort to our lips.*

(Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 'Sunset Song')

James Clapperton was born in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1968. After studies in piano at Freiburg Hochschule für Musik with James Avery and at Buffalo University with Yvar Mikhashoff he gained an MMus at Exeter University with Philip Grange and DPhil in Composition at Sussex University with Michael Finnissy.

His concert debut was at the 1985 Edinburgh International Festival and following his first performance in Europe at the 1988 Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik he was awarded the Kranichsteiner MusikPreis. Since then he has concertised widely at various festivals including Ars Musica, Brighton, Donaueschingen MusikTage, Huddersfield, Nuovi Spazi Musicali (Roma), Reykjavik Dark Music Days, Tallinn NYFD, St Petersburg Soundways and Strasbourg Musica. He has performed with many distinguished musicians including Robert Aitken, Joan La Barbara, Jim Fulkerson, Yvar Mikhashoff and France-Marie Uitti and worked with composers such as John Cage, Michael Finnissy, Brian Ferneyhough, Klaus Huber and Salvatore Sciarrino.

In 1993 James Clapperton was awarded the PRS award for his violin concerto, *The Preiching of the Swallow*. Recent commissions include *The Firmament Serene* (Endymion Ensemble, London), *The Testament of James Stewart* (a theatre work commissioned by South West Arts) and *O besy gostis..* (for cello and piano, for a tour of Scotland given by Rebecca Gulliver and Paul Janes). His works have been performed at festivals including Brighton, Darmstadt Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, Nuovi Spazi Musicali and Strasbourg Musica, and broadcast on BBC Radio Three and BBC Radio Scotland, as well as in Canada, France, Germany, Holland and Norway.

He is Artistic Director of the Norwegian festival Music Factory, and was the Composer in Residence at the Griegakademiet, Institutt for Musikk from 1998-2000.



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Long Journey Back

piano music by

JAMES CLAPPERTON

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performed by

JAMES CLAPPERTON

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| 1. | Long Journey Back (1998) | 6:17 |
| 2. | The Ressoning betuir Aige an Yowth (1992) | 10:15 |
| | Stephen's Piano Book (1996) | |
| 3. | They're writing songs of love but not for me... | 3:02 |
| 4. | Edain | 1:08 |
| 5. | Howard Skempton | 1:40 |
| 6. | Renard | 1:51 |
| 7. | Sarah | 2:54 |
| 8. | Mikhashoffschina (1994-98) | 12:36 |
| 9. | Haar (1988) | 5:58 |
| | Michael's Piano Book (1994) | |
| 10. | The Cathedral at Freiburg | 1:34 |
| 11. | Café Greco | 1:29 |
| 12. | St Patrick's Day | 5:02 |
| 13. | The Testament of Cresseid (1989-90) | 10:10 |
| | Two North East Songs (1998) | |
| 14. | My Heart is broke since thy departure (arr. James Cl.) | 2:37 |
| 15. | Mrs Major Stewart of the island of Java (arr. James Cl.) | 2:30 |

Total Time 69:03

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