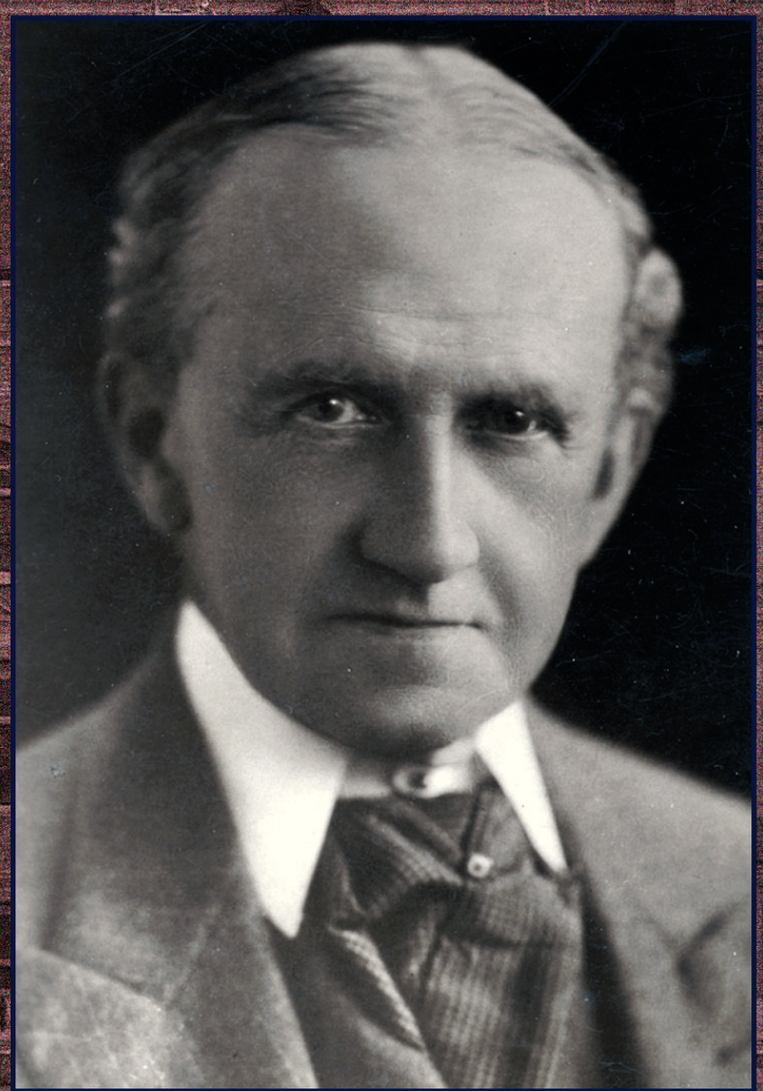
TOCCATA CLASSICS

Algernon ASHTON



Piano Music Volume One

Sonata No. 4 in D minor, Op. 164
Sonata No. 8 in F major, Op. 174
***Nocturne and Menuet*, Op. 39**
***Vier Bagatellen*, Op. 79**

Daniel Grimwood, piano

FIRST RECORDINGS

ROYAL COLLEGE OF MUSIC

ALGERNON ASHTON: Piano Music, Volume One

by Malcolm MacDonald

> The more modern music I study, the more assured do I feel that in Algernon Ashton we possess the greatest living composer – not the greatest living musical artist perhaps – but the chief of them who worship and express themselves in pure tone.

Ringing endorsement indeed – from the composer Rutland Boughton, writing in 1906, a year when the stars of the 'living composers' Elgar and Delius were at their zenith – and yet the man for whom he expressed such enthusiasm has remained, certainly over the past seventy years, virtually unknown not only to the general public but even to specialists in British music. Many music dictionaries do not even register his name. Boughton, himself often considered an obscure or neglected figure, is immeasurably better-known (if only through the lingering reputation of his once-popular opera *The Immortal Hour*) than Algernon Bennet Langton Ashton.

Boughton had been a student at the Royal College of Music in London, where Ashton taught piano, but it is clear his encomium was no mere act of piety. He went on to conduct the premiere of Ashton's Symphony No. 2 in G major (one of many scores now lost) on 2 September 1910 at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition in Birmingham Town Hall. To read further in his 1906 article[1] is to gather choice specimens of hyperbole. For Ashton's Piano Trio in A major, Op. 88, he 'had no words of sufficient admiration', and he delivers himself of this remarkable encomium of Ashton as an 'epic artist':

> In vain may we look, in the majority of modern orchestral and chamber works, for that sky sweeping line which declares the epic genius. But it is ever present in Ashton's work: sometimes clear as a sky of summer blue, sometimes dull and dark like miles of winter cloud, sometimes lurid and broken as

[1] The article, 'The Music of Algernon Ashton', appeared in two parts in the December 1906 and March 1907 issues of Musical Opinion. I cite from www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/Aug04/Algernon_Ashton.htm.

> a stormy sunrise, sometimes radiant and spark'ling and o'erarched with rainbow, – but in some form or other is always there. Ashton's art is of the same kind as the Iliads, the Beethoven symphonies and the art of Watts; deep as they, noble as they, full as they, inevitable as they, with the same broad line as they.

Homer, Beethoven … (let us skirt round the painter G. F. Watts, whatever genius he possessed, as an aberration of time and place) – who was this prodigious creator whose name could be spoken in the same breath, and why has he been so thoroughly forgotten?

Algernon Ashton was born in Durham on 9 December 1859, the son of a lay clerk at Durham Cathedral, but spent most of his childhood in Germany, as his parents moved to Leipzig in 1864. From 1875 he spent four years as a student at the Leipzig Conservatory under Carl Reinecke, Salomon Jadassohn and Ernst Richter; subsequently he studied with Joachim Raff and Iwan Knorr in Frankfurt during 1880–81. In the latter year he returned to England, settling in London, and in 1885, at the age of 25, he was appointed professor of pianoforte at the Royal College of Music in London, where he remained for the next 35 years, until his retirement at the age of 60. (His pupils included William Yeats Hurlstone and William Alwyn.) He continued to teach piano privately, and died in London on 10 April 1937.

Ashton was an enormously prolific composer. His published compositions (many of which were issued in Germany rather than in Britain) run to 174 opus numbers, but these are virtually all instrumental music, chamber music, songs and partsongs. (The vast majority of his vocal works are to German texts, and they show a cultivated literary taste – Heine, Kerner, Mörike, Platen, Ruperti.) But the published pieces by no means represent the totality of his output. Ashton composed at least five symphonies, a piano concerto, a violin concerto, orchestral overtures, 24 string quartets in all the major and minor keys, and a vast array of piano music: apparently he wrote a total of 24 piano sonatas (again, in all the major and minor tonalities), yet only the first eight were published. His manuscript works seem to have been irretrievably lost after his death, reportedly when the London flat in which he had been living was bombed during the Second World War.

He also exercised his literary talents in a stream of letters to newspapers, many of which he published in anthologies – *Truth, Wit and Wisdom* (1903), containing 525 letters written and

published between 1887 and 1903, and *More Truth, Wit and Wisdom* (1908), which contained no fewer than 656 additional letters written and published in the 24 months from November 1905 to December 1907. In this way Ashton became 'the best known letter-to-the-Editor writer of his time' and was forced to employ a press-cuttings agency to keep track of his correspondence, for he contributed to the letters pages of papers all over Great Britain. He wrote on a vast variety of subjects, from the trivial to the momentous, the anecdotal to the hyper-pedantic, but chiefly 'of graves, of worms and epitaphs', and in searching for material he became an expert on London and Paris burial grounds and cemeteries. In an obituary for Ashton the writer 'C. A.' noted:

> his hobby [was] the collection of biographical inaccuracies; when talking with his friends he would almost bewilder them by his fiery outbursts of indignation over an incorrect date on a tombstone, and his letters of protest on the subject always seemed written at white heat, a challenge to the world by a champion of the memory of great men.[2]

According to a 1907 report in *The New York Times*, at that time he bore 'the semi-official title of "Corrector to the Press"' and had made his name 'almost as well known in England as that of Joseph Chamberlain or Marie Corelli'.[3] After 20 years of this pursuit he retired from it, with a farewell letter of 31 December 1907 that was printed in 56 different newspapers; but after three years' abstinence he took up his pen again. His return to the letter columns prompted the poet and parodist C. L. Graves to rejoice in a poem 'To Algernon Ashton, Esq, On Resuming his Quill', which reads in part, alluding to Ashton's graveyard enthusiasms:

> At the memorable tidings
> All the Autumn landscape smiles:
> Joy illumines Yorkshire's Ridings,
> Mirth convulses Scilly's Isles;

[2] *RCM Magazine*, 1937, pp. 76–77.

[3] 'Drift of London Literary Talk' by 'Galbraith', *The New York Times*, 1 June 1907. Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914) was a charismatic British politician, father of Neville Chamberlain, and Marie Corelli (1855–1924) an enormously popular novelist, the JK Rowling of her time.

Cheerfulness returns to Woking,
    Gilding the sepulchral scene;
And a mood of gentle joking
    Shows itself at Kensal Green.

For they know their fame funereal
    Will its pride of place regain
Buttressed by your magisterial,
    Massive, monumental brain.[4]

Thereafter Ashton prowled the letter columns of many publications until his death (which was prematurely reported in 1927, thus giving him another subject with which to belabour newspaper editors).

Whatever celebrity Ashton gained through this activity, it hardly seems to have been of much benefit to his music.[5] Such foibles have rather contributed to the image of an English eccentric whose copious production was most likely mere scribbling. At best, it seems to have been the dominant opinion – formed by generations who had no contact with his music – that Ashton was surely no more than an epigone, a pale shadow of the masters he revered. So despite Rutland Boughton's advocacy – and that of the late Harold Truscott, who in 1959 contributed a lonely article hailing Ashton as 'one of the most shamefully ignored of English composers, with a long list of what, for me, are unqualified masterpieces to his credit',[6] his works have attracted strikingly little attention until recent years, though there are signs – and this CD is one of them – that that situation is about to change. For in his piano works, at least, Ashton emerges as a composer of quality and character. His Germanic training is certainly a determining factor in his musical personality, but the music

[4] Charles Larcom Graves, *The Brain of the Nation and Other Verses* (Smith, Elder, London, 1912), pp. 39–40. The poem to Ashton is dated 'November 8, 1911'.

[5] One might speculate that Ashton's extremely prolific production of compositions sprang from the same source as his letter-writing, and points to an obsessive side to his character – something few creative artists are without, of course.

[6] *The Monthly Musical Record*, No. 89 (1959), p. 142. Truscott, who himself composed an epic series of twenty piano sonatas, is in fact be one of the few British piano composers whose music might well be said to exhibit Ashton's influence.

has little Germanic heaviness and is largely without sentimentality either; it sounds on the whole fresh and new-minted – *frescamente* is a frequent marking. It is nothing if not fluent, and it may be that Ashton's fluency led him to write too much: but works such as those selected for this disc display his gifts in a very favourable light. He was not a major innovator, but neither was he a slavish imitator; he has wit, charm, firm command of structure and an impressive range of keyboard colour. In short, he composes like a sane man and a grown man, and his works deserve to be both respected and enjoyed.

The ***Nocturne and Menuet*** which comprise Ashton's Op. 39 were published in Germany in 1888. It is sufficient to listen to the C minor *Nocturne* to realise something at once that makes Ashton unique in British musical history: as a piano composer, his work absorbs Schumann and especially Brahms and refashions their keyboard styles to his own purposes. There is no other British composer of that period who does so, as far as I'm aware. Predecessors such as Sterndale Bennett absorbed Mendelssohn; near-contemporaries like Stanford, Parry and Elgar absorbed different aspects of Brahms and Schumann, but none of them was primarily a piano composer.[7] Later figures – Ireland, Benjamin Dale, York Bowen – already transform the Brahmsian heritage into something else. But in Ashton we find a British contemporary of Brahms who uses a distinctively Brahmsian vocabulary of piano writing – the plangent right-hand sixths and thirds, the deep resonant left-hand chording and arpeggios, the cross-rhythms, the dissonant passing-notes, the finely nuanced harmonic shadings which in some cases look forward to Brahms's late Opp. 116–19 piano pieces, not yet written.

But he is no Brahms clone. His melodies have a different sort of prosody and phrasing. Brahms would not have sent the right hand so far above the left as Ashton does in his *pesante* middle section, where it soars like a flute: perhaps this gesture reflects rather the influence of Liszt, as, probably, do the few passages of gaunt octave unison. But it is a highly assured, satisfying piece, deploying several distinct and thoroughly pianistic ideas that earn the *amoroso* C major of the closing bars.

[7] Of course, it is partly the loss of his works in other genres that makes Ashton's piano output bulk so large in his *œuvre*: but the fact remains that his surviving legacy for solo piano is larger than the entire keyboard output of Bennett, Parry, Stanford and Elgar put together.

The *Menuet*, in A major, is by contrast an essay – a very fluent and graceful one – in the 'antique style'. Handel, Bach, Mozart, even Couperin might be models, though none of them would have written a piece that modulated and side-slipped harmonically quite so readily. The harpsichord-like delicacy soon metamorphoses into massive grand-piano textures *à la* Brahms 'Handel' Variations. The cascade of trills by which Ashton makes his way back to his opening ideas is an original touch, and the gentle coda is delightfully done. The dominant characteristics of these two Op. 39 pieces is their assurance, their melodic distinction, and their sheer charm.

Ashton's set of ***Vier Bagatellen*, Op. 79**, was printed in Leipzig in 1892 – only four years after the *Nocturne and Minuet*, though 40 opus numbers lie between – and bears a friendly dedication to 'Fräulein Martha Sauvan', who was then a student of voice and piano at the Stern Conservatory in Berlin (she later taught piano at the same institution). There are definite Baroque, even specifically Bachian, echoes in all four pieces, even though more contemporary influences may be more apparent on their surfaces to begin with. The first of them, an A major *Allegretto amoroso*, once more oozes charm – it seems half-way between a tender English ballad and a Bach keyboard invention (thanks to the fluent and fluid three- and four-part textures), though probably the Schumann of *Kinderszenen* was at the back of Ashton's mind. The second piece, a serene *Andante cantabile* in E flat, flows along peacefully with one intriguing piece of Brahmsian cross-rhythm (3/4 in the right hand against the 9/8 of the left). The G major *Larghetto con gran espressione* fills a single page and is warmly Romantic even though the manner of Bach's sacred arias seems to be recalled. Ashton's writing here seems to anticipate Busoni's Bach transcriptions, though his melodic idiom, however indefinably, is recognisably more 'English'. The set concludes with an E major *Allegro frescamente* in sparkling toccata style, deftly drawn and all over in 70 seconds or so. It would make a useful encore item even today.

Of Ashton's eight surviving piano sonatas, No. 1 is an early piece from 1878 (though published as Op. 101); the others appear to be substantially later – they were certainly published in the twentieth century – though their internal chronology is generally obscure. Whereas Opp. 39 and 79 could claim to be reasonably contemporary in their musical language, if on the conservative side of the spectrum, for the 1880s and '90s, by the time Ashton's later sonatas were published in the 1920s they would presumably have seemed very veritable coelacanths. They cannot even be described

as 'late-Romantic': these are full-blown Romantic sonatas whose peers issued from the pens of Schumann, Brahms, Volkmann, Liszt, Reubke…: their publication in the 1920s, when the pianistic running was being made by such contemporaries as Goossens or Casella or Prokofiev or Ravel or Stravinsky, must have seemed like the unlooked-for appearance of a supposedly extinct life-form. Yet with the passage of time such temporal distinctions matter less; one can dismiss matters of style to concentrate on content, on Ashton's generous melodic and contrapuntal gifts and the sure way he handles the sonata genre as the mid-nineteenth century understood it.

Though only one piano sonata was published at the time Rutland Boughton wrote his article, it was probably because of Ashton's various other sonata-form compositions that he was moved to venture a criticism of his paragon:

> One serious defect Ashton has. He lacks the virtue of Disobedience. It proves itself in the stereotyped Ashtonian form. But it proves itself still more seriously in the texture of his musical thought.

I take this to be a reference to Ashton's apparent contentment with the classical four-movement sonata lay-out (sonata-form first movement, binary slow movement, scherzo and rondo or sonata finale[8]), and to the general busyness of his textures – not unvaried, because he varies them by shifts of register and colouring, but certainly almost always full and generally active. In fact, his calmly unfolding expanses of counterpoint, with their sometimes inexorable rhythmic surge, are surely the product of what must have been a very thorough assimilation of Bach's keyboard works.

Perhaps this was also what Boughton was thinking of when he wrote that 'as a creator of tonal beauty he is unapproached by any living composer except Max Reger' – though Ashton very seldom, if ever, sounds in the least like Reger. It's probably true to say – and no criticism of Ashton to say it – that he does not, on the whole, use the sonata as a vehicle for intense musical drama. Lyrical expansiveness is more his *forte*, and in that sense if no other his sonatas align themselves with those of Schubert rather than those of Beethoven. What they do have, often, even in minor keys, is a sense of calm inevitability, an unaffected solidity akin to the works of the great masters.

[8] In the works on this disc Ashton fights shy of discrete central sections: no scherzo or minuet with trio, no symmetrical ternary forms.

Even those who don't follow Boughton into full critical rapture will find something unexpectedly impressive about an Ashton sonata in full flood.

Ashton dedicated his **Piano Sonata No. 4 in D minor, Op. 164**, published in Berlin in 1925, to the Swiss pianist-composer Willy Rehberg (1863–1937, father of the better-known pianist-composer Walter Rehberg), who may have been a fellow-student of Ashton's at Leipzig. The pulsing repeated notes that underpin the opening subject are perhaps an echo of Schubert's *Erlkönig*, though Ashton's *Allegro* is at first gentler, suaver in its motion than Schubert's. A second, more rhythmically incisive idea (marked *audace*) leads to a first climax and then away again. A lilting *amabile* second subject in A major provides lyrical contrast, and the opening subject returns in A minor to begin a development that modulates widely and displays a wide range of keyboard writing, coming to an *ff con fuoco* climax. The recapitulation begins punctually and *pianissimo*; the climax is extended and the second subject reappears orthodoxly enough in D major. The coda develops various motifs, the pulsing repeated notes becoming a deep octave drum-beat on D before the music storms to a curt cadence.

The ensuing *Largo assai* in B flat major starts as a flowing, songful reverie, very fully scored and harmonized. A quicker second section in 12/16 time, on F, develops passionate dotted rhythms and deep throbbing left-hand octaves. Both sections are reprised in slightly varied form, the 12/16 music now on B flat. The throbbing octaves lead onto a modulating sequence built upon the first phrase of the opening idea, to form a coda.

The spirit of Brahms hovers very near in the F minor third movement, which Ashton entitles 'Intermezzo', with its deep basses, subtle cross-rhythms and twilight harmonic shading. He might even have been proud to write some of its sequences. It has something of the haunted mood of the Op. 10 *Ballades*, but with the pearly shading of the late *Klavierstücke* and an ardent, *dolce* song, starting on A flat, for contrasting subject. As with the slow movement, both elements are heard twice, with the opening idea returning in fragmentary fashion to make a short coda. Here is a piece that could be extracted and played on its own to grace any recital of romantic repertoire.

The finale, *Allegro, ma non troppo*, returns to the D minor tonality and is a fine example of that 'calm inevitability' that is an Ashton characteristic. Its initial dotted-rhythm hesitation followed by running semiquavers gives birth to a broad and powerful exposition with a slighter second

theme – and then a third which turns out to be a variation of the opening idea. A thunderous build-up on a pedal E leads to an elaborated reprise of all the material, in different tonal relations. Another pedal build-up – on A – leads to a surprisingly terse final cadence, but the confident onward sweep of the main theme lingers long in the memory.

The **Piano Sonata No. 8 in F major, Op. 174**, apparently Ashton's latest surviving work, was printed the following year, 1926, by Goodwin & Tabb, and is dedicated to the pianist Rita Neve, who was active in Britain, Europe and the USA from the earliest years of the twentieth century to the 1930s. The comparatively simple texture of the *Allegro soave* first movement, which opens as a carefree dance with the melody in the right hand against left-hand chords, makes a strong contrast with the keyboard writing of Sonata No. 4. The flowing 9/8 motion extends to the second subject, which appears more as a variant of the first than an independent idea. More striking a contrast is the chorale-like third idea that unfolds against pulsing repeated notes, and from here on Ashton whips up the passion in a short but eventful development. The recapitulation is regular, and a short coda rounds off this charming, Spring-like movement.

The slow movement is a *Lento* in A minor/major, marked *con gran espressione* and beginning with a gloomy recitative-like motif that arises in octaves from the depths. A pathetic idea in thirds and sixths follows, enunciated against a harshly enunciated left-hand note, like a tolling bell. This develops into an expressively melancholy song-like passage. The opening recitative is heard again, this time on D, and the ideas are reprised with variants. The general impression created by this sensitively imagined movement is of a desolate nocturne.

There follows an *Allegro animato* scherzo in C minor, characterised by a sinuous, loping motion, and showing close study of Brahms' scherzo-movements. But it is entirely successful on its own terms, and develops a fine momentum all the way to its clipped ending. The jovial finale then begins *Allegro frescamente* with running semiquaver motion above a pounding chordal accompaniment, but these elements are equally willing to change hands and positions without notice. A full-hearted contrasting theme appears on B flat, then makes way for a rather ecclesiastical-sounding idea in sober triplets with answering Aeolian-harp figuration. A martial dotted-rhythm figure completes the roster of subjects, which Ashton develops with enthusiasm.

He keeps the rhythmic pot boiling through a full recapitulation and an excited coda; as often, the final cadence comes as a surprise, forcibly ending a discussion that seemed set fair to rage merrily on.

Malcolm MacDonald is the author of The Symphonies of Havergal Brian *(three vols., Kahn & Averill, London, 1974, 1978 and 1983) and the editor of the first two volumes of* Havergal Brian on Music *(Toccata Press, London, 1985 and 2009); further volumes are in preparation. His other writings include books on Brahms, Foulds, Schoenberg, Ronald Stevenson and Edgard Varèse.*

With a repertoire which ranges from Elizabethan Virginal music to composers of the modern day, **Daniel Grimwood** is carving a reputation as one of the most varied and insightful musicians of his generation. Although primarily a pianist, he is frequently to be found performing on harpsichord, organ, viola or composing at his desk. Felix Aprahamian once wrote of him: 'Probably the finest all-round musician I have ever known'.

He is a passionate champion of the early piano, and recently performed Liszt's *Années de Pèlerinage* at the Wigmore Hall on an 1851 Erard, to rapturous critical acclaim. His recording of the work was CD of the week in *The Daily Telegraph* and has been unanimously praised in the press.

On being offered a scholarship to the Purcell School in 1987, Daniel Grimwood studied piano with Graham Fitch, violin/viola with Elspeth Illif and Sybil Copland and composition/counterpoint with Tim Stevenson. He later finished his pianistic training under the tutelage of Vladimir Ovchinnikov and Peter Feuchtwanger. He has subsequently enjoyed a solo career, which has taken him across the globe, performing in many of the world's most prestigious venues and festivals. Although he has been the recipient of several awards, there is no glamorous list of competition wins, as Grimwood has always considered them harmful to the musical community.

A passionate chamber musician, Grimwood's work has always been closely associated with the cellist Jamie Walton with whom he most recently recorded the Grieg and Rachmaninov Sonatas for Signum Records. High points of their combined work have been a recital of Chopin at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, where they shared the evening with Krystian Zimerman, and an appearance at the Chateauville Foundation in Virginia at the personal invitation of Lorin Maazel.

Future record releases include Mozart chamber music on period instruments, the complete violin/fortepiano works of Schubert with Madeleine Easton and a series of Chopin discs on an Erard piano for SFZ.

TOCCATA CLASSICS

Recorded on 2–3 February 2008 in the Old Granary Studio, Beccles, Suffolk
Piano: Steinway D
Producer-engineer: Andrew Giller

Booklet notes: Malcolm MacDonald
Front-cover photograph of Algernon Ashton courtesy of the Royal College of Music
Design and layout: Paul Brooks, Design and Print, Oxford

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

TOCC 0063

Come and explore unknown music with us by joining the Toccata Discovery Club. Membership brings you two free CDs, big discounts on all Toccata Classics recordings and Toccata Press books, early ordering on all Toccata releases and a host of other benefits for a modest annual fee of £20. You start saving as soon as you join. You can sign up online at the Toccata Classics website at www.toccataclassics.com or send a cheque for £20 made out to Toccata Classics to the address below, with a note of which two free CDs you would like us to send you.

Toccata Classics CDs are also available in the shops and can be ordered from our distributors around the world, a list of whom can be found at www.toccataclassics.com. If we have no representation in your country, please contact: Toccata Classics, 16 Dalkeith Court, Vincent Street, London SW1P 4HH, UK Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020 Fax: +44/0 207 834 5020 E-mail: info@toccataclassics.com

Algernon Ashton, born in Durham in 1859, is one of the best-kept secrets in British music. His generous output of piano music includes no fewer than eight sonatas, none of them ever recorded before now. Rutland Boughton wrote that Ashton 'seems to pour out great musical thought as easily as the lark trills its delight in cloudland', and though Ashton's piano writing, which lies downstream from Chopin and Brahms, is phenomenally difficult, what strikes the ear is its spontaneity and melodic richness.

TOCCATA CLASSICS

ALGERNON ASHTON Piano Music, Volume One

	***Nocturne and Menuet*, Op. 39**	**10:44**
1	Nocturne (*Andantino*)	5:53
2	Menuet (*Allegretto*)	4:51
	Sonata No. 8 in F major, Op. 174	**26:10**
3	I. *Allegro soave*	7:36
4	II. *Lento*: *Con gran espressione*	6:50
5	III. Scherzo: *Allegro animato*	4:12
6	IV. Finale: *Allegro frescamente*	7:32
	***Vier Bagatellen*, Op. 79**	**7:26**
7	1. *Allegretto amoroso*	1:44
8	2. *Andante cantabile*	2:15
9	3. *Larghetto con gran espressione*	2:12
10	4. *Allegro frescamente*	1:15
	Sonata No. 4 in D minor, Op. 164	**30:05**
11	I. *Allegro*	9:15
12	II. *Largo assai*	6:44
13	III. Intermezzo: *Moderato*	4:51
14	IV. Finale: *Allegro, ma non troppo*	9:15
		TT 74:25

Daniel Grimwood, piano

FIRST RECORDINGS

TOCC 0063

DDD

TOCCATA CLASSICS
16 Dalkeith Court,
Vincent Street,
London SW1P 4HH, UK

Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020
Fax: +44/0 207 834 5020
E-mail: info@toccataclassics.com

LC14674

COMPACT disc DIGITAL AUDIO

5 060113 440631

Made in Germany

TOCC 0063
ASHTON Piano Music, Volume One ~ Daniel Grimwood
TOCCATA CLASSICS