

Heino ELLER



Complete Piano Music Volume One

Sonata No. 2
Preludes, Book I
Six Pieces (Estonian Suite)
Toccata in B minor
Three Dances
The Bells

Sten Lassmann, piano

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

HEINO ELLER: COMPLETE PIANO WORKS, VOLUME ONE

by Sten Lassmann

Heino Eller¹ (1887–1970) is one of the central figures in Estonian classical music, linking all parts of it into a coherent narrative, from the inception of a national culture to the modern day. Born in Tartu, the centre of Estonian national awakening at the time, he spent his childhood surrounded by music, but his professional training began late. From 1907 until 1920 he studied in St Petersburg, a metropolis with a booming musical and artistic life, which made him a witness to one of history's most radical revolutions. From 1920 to 1940 Eller taught composition in his home town, where he instigated the influential 'Tartu School of Composition', and from 1940 until his death in 1970 he was a professor of composition in the Tallinn Conservatory, now the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre – a pedagogical career of exactly half a century, during which several generations of Estonian composers were educated under his tutelage, among them Eduard Tubin, Arvo Pärt and Lepo Sumera.

Eller was a prolific composer whose works deserve wide attention. His music, distinguished by its austere expression, original use of modal harmony and a mastery of polyphonic texture, is largely lyrical with occasional epic undertones and gentle humour. In the context of Estonian classical music, where there is a strong predilection for vocal music, it is remarkable that Eller's *œuvre* consists almost entirely of instrumental works. His best-known pieces are the symphonic poem *Koit* ('Dawn') and *Kodumaine viis* ('Homeland Tune') for string orchestra, the latter bearing a symbolic status in Estonian culture similar to that of Sibelius' *Finlandia* for the Finns. Though these two works are often used as calling cards by Estonian conductors working abroad, most of Eller's substantial output is barely known even in the composer's homeland. The reception of his music underwent quite a radical change during his lifetime: in the independent Estonian Republic of the 1920s and '30s, he was seen as the country's chief modernist, but in the Soviet Estonia by the end of

¹ Christened Heinrich, he used the Estonian version Heino (officially changing to it in 1939); in Russian he was Генрих ('Genrich'). Eller means 'alder' in German.

the 1950s he had acquired the status of a national classic. In the interim he had experienced severe criticism, as the repercussions of the anti-formalism campaign triggered by Zhdanov's famous decree in 1948 reached the Soviet Republics,² and most of his works from the period of Estonian independence (1920–40) were banned. The zenith of Eller's career was at the XVII Estonian Song Festival in 1969, where he conducted his *Homeland Tune* for a public of nearly a hundred thousand.

Amongst Eller's *œuvre* there are some two dozen works for symphony orchestra (among them three symphonies), ten scores for string orchestra, five string quartets, and two sonatas and various miniatures for violin and piano. But by far the largest part of his output is piano music: almost two hundred titles, which will require seven CDs in this complete recording. The wealth of the material is astounding: in music spanning over six decades of creativity, it vividly mirrors many of the artistic tendencies of the twentieth century, springing from a late-Romantic style, absorbing the influence of Scriabin and reflecting Grieg's and Sibelius' Nordic flavour. Though Eller had sometimes probed into musical modernism with linear polyphony, saturated harmony and ambiguous tonality, by the middle of 1930s he relinquished any such aspirations.

When he entered the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1907, Eller had harboured ambitions to become a violinist, but he soon injured his hand while practising and was forced to leave the institution. His father had always been adamant that he should study law, and so the next year he enrolled in the jurisprudence classes at St Petersburg University, remaining until 1912. During that time he met his future wife, Anna Kremer, a Warsaw Jewess who was studying piano at the Conservatoire. Concurrently Eller started to compose (his first completed works are dated 1909), and eventually re-entered the Conservatoire to study composition. It was probably Anna who introduced Eller to the piano repertoire and was the first performer and critic of his compositions. But one can only conjecture about the extent of Anna Eller's influence, since very little known is known about her playing. She was killed by the Nazis in 1942.

Yet there is living testimony to her professionalism and artistry. Heljo Sepp (b. 1922) studied privately with both Heino and Anna Eller – music theory and piano respectively – from 1933

² Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), a close ally of Stalin, was the enforcer of Socialist Realism, the official cultural policy in the Stalinist Soviet Union. He is known for his attack on Prokofiev, Shostakovich and other composers in 1948, which started 'Zhadovshchina', a witch-hunt aimed at rooting out 'formalism' in music.

to 1938. In that year the Ellers sent her to London to take part in a competition organised by the British Council, the first prize in which was a three-year scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music. Amongst the other competitors were Géza Anda and Amadeus Webersinke, but the prize went to the sixteen-year-old Sepp, who hailed from the small town of Valga on the Latvian-Estonian border – a unique example of the combined pedagogical talents of the Ellers. Sepp went on to study piano with Vivian Langrish at the Royal Academy, but her studies were cut short by the outbreak of war in 1939. Sepp collaborated closely with Heino Eller for four decades and was the chief propagator of his music in Estonia throughout the Soviet years. From 1949 to 1952 she studied with Heinrich Neuhaus in the Moscow Conservatoire, where she wrote her thesis on Eller's piano music. She was for years the Head of Keyboard and Vice-Rector at the Tallinn Conservatoire (now the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre), where my own father was among her pupils. Heljo Sepp has been keenly supportive of my current project to record all of Eller's piano works, and has been uninhibited in both her criticism and her praise. The scholarship to study at the Royal Academy that she won in 1938 was left largely unused, and in 2004 the British Council issued the remainder of the funds as a new scholarship for a young Estonian pianist, and I was the recipient. Thus, in a bizarre twist of fate, it is the actions of Anna and Heino Eller and Heljo Sepp in the 1930s which caused me to be studying at the Royal Academy in London in the 21st century. My hope is that my work on Eller's music will repay this debt, and perhaps help him acquire the international acclaim that is long overdue.

In the programming of each volume of Eller's piano works, I have deliberately avoided a chronological approach. Rather, by including pieces from various periods and in various styles and genres, I have tried with each disc of this series to create a distinctive portrait of Heino Eller.

Preludes, Book I

Between c. 1914 and 1934 Eller wrote altogether 28 preludes, although he was inconsistent in organising them into volumes and during his lifetime only the seven preludes of Book II were published. Preludes were for Eller a vehicle for novelty in musical language, and from the mid-1930s, when he stopped his search for ostensibly modern music, he discarded the genre for good. The seven **Preludes of Book I**, written between 1914 and 1917, are cast in late-Romantic mould. Having made his first attempts at composition in 1909, Eller had now acquired a solid

foundation in compositional technique, and in these preludes he assimilates various influences into his own emerging personal style. Though the second and fourth preludes hint at some of the melodic and rhythmic peculiarities of his own later style, the third and fifth are still clearly in the idiom of Rachmaninov and early Scriabin. The last two of the set, both from 1917, differ from the rest in their denser and more complicated harmony, suggesting the influence of Scriabin's later works.

The First Prelude (*Moderato*; 1914) [1] opens with a chromatically descending brooding theme. After the anguish finds emotional outlet in the culmination of the middle section, the theme returns in a resigned manner, anchored to a tonic pedal point. The gently yearning, lyrical Second Prelude (*Moderato assai*; 1914) [2] seems to derive both its texture and articulation from that of the string quartet, thus reflecting Eller's own experiences as a violinist. The passionate melody of the Third Prelude (*Molto adagio, con espressione*; 1915) [3], accompanied first by heavy chords and then sprawling passages in the left hand, leads to a passionate outcry at the close. Lyrical throughout, with masterfully woven melodic lines again closely resembling string-quartet writing, the Fourth Prelude (*Andante Sostenuto*; 1915) [4] ends with the reiteration of the initial theme in the bass. In the Fifth (*Patetico*; 1916) [5] stormy ascending passages lead to short, passionate exclamations in the treble; the middle section, with its slightly longer phrases and wide triplet passages in the bass, is more restrained, but eventually builds up to a cataclysmic passage leading to the recapitulation. The Sixth Prelude (*Sostenuto*; 1917) [6], which opens with a chord built from a tritone and a fourth above it, brings harmonic novelty into Eller's music. The subtle, inventive polyphony that comes almost to a point of saturation in the recapitulation, is counterbalanced by the fitful middle section, marked *Più allegro, scherzando*, a timid echo of which also concludes the prelude. The tumultuous beginning of No. 7 (*Con fuoco*; 1917) [7], with syncopated tritones in the bass, is followed by curt, enigmatic passages which gradually build into a *con passione* cascade of falling chromatic chords, crushing into two accentuated major-seventh chords. The *meno mosso* middle section launches with sustained melodic phrases accompanied by swirling semiquavers in the left hand, but soon gathers momentum and ushers in the recapitulation which has twice the initial intensity and length.

Six Pieces (*Estonian Suite*)

Eller had occasionally used folk-like material in the 1920s and '30s, and many of his compositions from the 1930s showed the influence of folk-music, but he did not make literal use of folkloric sources until 1940–41. In September 1940 he had moved to Tallinn to take up the position of professor of composition in the Conservatory. Estonia had been occupied by the Soviet Union a few months earlier, and all aspects of life in Estonia were reorganised along Soviet lines. In the arts the doctrine of Socialist Realism was enforced, which in music went under the official slogan 'National in form, socialist in content'. Although the socialist content, except perhaps in vocal music, is rather hard to determine, the 'national' was easy to achieve by using folk material, and it became a common refuge for composers in Russia and in the Soviet Republics from Central Asia to the Baltics. A failure to conform with the Soviet agenda would, in the most benign case, result in exclusion from the Union of Soviet Composers, with a ban on one's music; such composers were not even allowed to buy manuscript paper. Eller was appointed chair of the organising committee of the Soviet Estonian Composers' Union, and in March 1941 he attended the general assembly of Soviet Composers' Union in Leningrad. The sharp turn to using direct folk sources, starting with the *Thirteen Piano Pieces on Estonian Motifs* composed in 1940–41, would seem to be directly caused by the necessity of conforming with the official Soviet line. Though perhaps initially ideologically motivated, this folkloristic strand grew to be an important and organic part of Eller's *œuvre* and merits attention in its own right.

The cycle of *Six Pieces*, written in 1946–47, bears the title *Estonian Suite* in the manuscript, since four of the pieces (Nos. 2–4 and 6) are based on Estonian folk-tunes. The first piece, 'Sokutants' ('Dance of the Billy Goat') [8], which does not contain any original folk material, is a quadruple-time jumping dance with a capricious melody as the middle section. In 'Sõõritants' ('Round Dance') [9] Eller has taken an original four-bar folksong note for note, but subtly altered the character of the song by leaving out the first quaver of the three first bars. The theme, gently tentative at the start, returns with much enthusiasm and elation after a short, energetic middle section in semiquaver passages. No. 3, 'Rahvaviis' ('Folk-Tune') [10], with its sparse texture and austere manner, is closest to Estonian runic song, *regilaul*. In the beginning of 'Sarvelugu' ('Horn-Tune') [11] only a few off-beat drone fifths accompany the original instrumental tune of the folk musician. In the middle section Eller resourcefully changes the initial obstinate

and tenacious character of the theme into jaunty and light-hearted play by omitting the strong beats of the first two bars and by adding a polyrhythmic drone bass. After the flurry of the recapitulation, where the theme is now in a form of an elaborate variation, the music promptly barges into the final chords. 'Rahvatoonis' ('In Folk Tone') [12], not based on actual folk material, is a slow recitative-like melody. Four rippling passages form an introduction to 'Tantsulugu' ('Dancing Tune') [13], marked *Presto giocoso*. The gently lilting character of the theme is crafted by applying syncopations and dotted rhythms to the original folk tune. The contrasting fugal middle section is based on an upward leaping theme, which is powerfully repeated in the coda.

Toccata in B minor

The Toccata in B minor (1921) [14] displays masterful piano writing and considerable compositional inventiveness. It is in rondo form with two episodes and a coda. After the scene is set by a short introduction on a tonic pedal point, the alert, sharply articulated main theme appears. Based on a falling tetrachord of B-A-G-F sharp, it grows more powerful in the two recapitulations and finally culminates with colossal force in the difficult coda. The austere character of the main theme is counteracted by the light playfulness of the first episode and the 'Storm and Stress' of the Scriabin-esque second episode.

Three Dances

The three dances – Dance in B minor [15], *Tantsu karakteris* ('In the Character of a Dance') [16] and *Danse-Prapice* [17] – are stylistically similar. They represent the period in Eller's output in the 1930s where he had relinquished any claim to writing ostensibly modern music, and was looking for a more national idiom. The obstinate rustic character and angular rhythm of the Dance in B minor (written at some point in the 1930s) find relief in the tender and plaintive melody of the middle section. The opening of *Tantsu karakteris* (1941) is sombre and dispirited, as if, in fact, reluctant to dance – hence the title. The middle section is livelier and gently teasing, seemingly trying to give a lift to the murky nature of the piece. After the modified recapitulation of the first section, the motives of the middle section reappear, but now already in a resigned and wistful manner. The *Danse-Prapice* (1933), a rondo with two episodes, is a lively and energetic work. The peculiar main theme (3+3 bars), moving by leaps and bounds, recurs

three times in different settings before a sudden octave passage decisively ends the first section. The first episode starts with a limping ostinato figure in the bass, around which a sinuous epic melody starts to weave its course, steadily building towards a magnificent tolling and chiming climax, then stopping abruptly. From the ensuing vacuum a timid dance starts and leads to the recapitulation of main theme. The second episode, which follows after another gestural octave passage, is a ruminative fugato using excerpts of the previous epic melody for its theme. The following *Presto*, using *martellato* technique, is a variation of the main theme and leads to a spectacular coda.

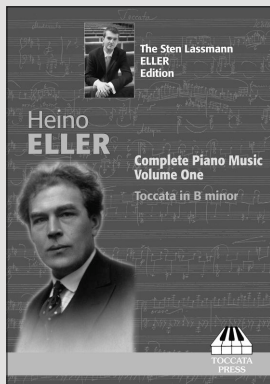
***Kellad* ('The Bells')**

Eller was inspired to compose *Kellad* ('The Bells') (1929) [18] by the bells of St Paul's Church in Tartu: he lived for many years in its vicinity. The church bells were tuned to G flat and E flat, an interval given a prominent position in this piece – from the very opening gesture in the left hand to the massive chords of the culmination. This is Eller's most popular piano work, not only for its musical merits, but also because it is one of the very few pieces that were printed in the 1930s. *Kellad* successfully entered the repertoire of pianists at the time: during the three autumn months of 1936, for example, the piece was performed in the main concert halls of Tallinn and Tartu, the two biggest cities of Estonia, altogether four times by three different performers.

Piano Sonata No. 2

The **Second Piano Sonata (1939–40)** is one of the best examples of Eller's original compositional idiom which manifested itself most distinctly in the works from the mid- and late 1930s; it possesses an appealing stylistic unity. In all three movements the prevailing mood is mainly pastoral and lyrical. The first movement, an *Allegro* [19], is in sonata form, the first subject-group consisting of short energetic phrases in a dance-like character. The second subject uses the intervallic pattern of the first – the ascending and descending minor third – to form a long, ingenious melodic section. After a short and restless development section, based on the material of the opening theme, the exposition material recapitulates with a few subtle changes. The lengthy, meditative second movement, *Andante penseroso* [20], a sonata form without development section, mixes elements of folksong and impressionist tone-colours. The short

phrases and juxtaposing harmonies of the main theme are balanced by the long, harmonically static, swelling melody of the second theme, supported by continuously weaving semiquavers. The third movement, a *Presto* in sonata-rondo form [21], is frolicsome in character. Dramatic contrast is provided with the vigorous, accentuated dance of the second episode, which draws on the elements of the opening theme of the first movement. The music of the second episode, returning after the recapitulation, also concludes the Sonata with a grand gesture.



NEW FROM TOCCATA PRESS
**The Sten Lassmann
HEINO ELLER Edition**

In conjunction with this series of recordings of the complete piano music of Heino Eller, Toccata Press, the sister company of Toccata Classics, is publishing the music in new editions, prepared by the pianist who is recording them, Sten Lassmann. The first publications, released with this CD, are the *Toccata in B minor* and the three dances, the *Dance in B minor*, *In the Character of a Dance* and *Danse-Caprice*.

More information at www.toccatapress.com

Since winning first prize in the Sixth Estonian National Piano Competition in 2002, **Sten Lassmann** has been regularly appearing as soloist and chamber musician. Concerts and competitions have brought him all over the world, to play in some of the most prestigious venues, such as the Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto, Purcell Room in London, the Large and Small Halls of the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in Moscow, the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatoire Concert Hall in Milan and the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing. In 2010 he toured Beethoven's Fifth Concerto, and in 2003 Prokofiev's Second Concerto, with the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, and in 2008 played the Estonian premiere of James Macmillan's Second Concerto.

His solo repertoire includes works from the Baroque to the modern. Since 2008 he has been engaged on a project to make the first-ever recording of the complete piano works of Heino Eller, which is also his PhD project at the Royal Academy of Music in London. He is also a keen chamber musician, with a large repertoire of duo works for violin, cello and clarinet, as well as piano trios and piano quintets.

Sten Lassmann was born 1982 in Tallinn in a family of musicians. He started his musical education at the Tallinn Central School of Music in 1989, studying piano with Ell Saviauk and Ira Floss, and continued at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (BMus, MMus with Distinction) with Ivari Ilja. He later studied also at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris with Brigitte Engerer and at the Royal Academy of Music in London (MMus, Dip RAM) with Ian Fountain. Sten Lassmann has played in master classes with such musicians as Boris Berman, Konstantin Lifschitz, Victor Merzhanov, Michael Roll, Alexander Satz, Howard Shelley and Maxim Vengerov. An important influence also comes from his father Peep Lassmann, an eminent pianist and professor, who studied with Emil Gilels at the Moscow Conservatoire.



Recorded at the Old Granary Studio on 11–12 December 2008
Steinway model D piano tuned and prepared by Andrew Giller
Recorded and mastered by Eric James for Philosophers Barn Mastering
Produced and edited by Sten Lassmann

An important incentive for this recording project was the support of the Alexander Kelly Memorial Award in 2007, and the whole project has been undertaken on a Wingate Scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music, London. The recording and production of this CD were supported by the Cultural Endowment of Estonia and the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum.

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HEINO ELLER Complete Piano Music, Volume One

Preludes, Book I (1914–17)	18:19
1 No. 1 <i>Moderato</i>	2:08
2 No. 2 <i>Moderato assai</i>	2:44
3 No. 3 <i>Molto adagio, con espressione</i>	1:42
4 No. 4 <i>Andante sostenuto</i>	1:38
5 No. 5 <i>Patetico</i>	3:35
6 No. 6 <i>Sostenuto</i>	2:49
7 No. 7 <i>Con fuoco</i>	3:43
 Six Pieces ('Estonian Suite', 1946)	12:18
8 No. 1 Dance of the Billy-Goat	1:51
9 No. 2 Round Dance	2:02
10 No. 3 Folk-Tune	2:14
11 No. 4 Horn-Tune	1:19
12 No. 5 In the Folk Tone	2:19
13 No. 6 Dancing Tune	2:33
 14 Toccata in B minor (1921)	4:00
15 Dance in B minor (1930s)	2:43
16 <i>In the Character of a Dance</i> (1941)	2:25
17 <i>Danse-Caprice</i> (1933)	5:48
18 <i>The Bells</i> (1929)	5:59
 Piano Sonata No. 2 (1939–40)	16:50
19 I. <i>Allegro</i>	5:54
20 II. <i>Andante pensioroso</i>	6:13
21 III. <i>Presto</i>	4:43

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The Estonian Heino Eller (1887–1970) is probably best known as the teacher of Arvo Pärt – but he was a prolific and original composer in his own right. His substantial output for piano – this series will contain seven CDs – was written over a period of six decades and thus reflects a range of styles. Taking the lyricism of Chopin and Grieg as its starting point, it combines the influence of Estonian folksong, Scriabin's troubled harmonies, the epic northern colouring of Sibelius and, at times, Prokofiev's motoric energy into an attractively individual manner.

HEINO ELLER Complete Piano Music, Volume One

1	Preludes, Book I (1914–17)	18:19	16	<i>In the Character of a Dance</i> (1941)	2:25
8	Six Pieces ('Estonian Suite') (1946)	12:18	17	<i>Danse-Caprice</i> (1933)	5:48
14	Toccata in B minor (1921)	4:00	18	<i>The Bells</i> (1929)	5:59
15	Dance in B minor (1930s)	2:43	19	Piano Sonata No. 2 (1939–40)	16:50

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