

Ronald CENTER



**Instrumental
and Chamber Music**

**Volume One:
Music for Solo Piano**

including

**Piano Sonata
Six Bagatelles
Three Etudes
Pantomime
Sonatine**

Christopher Guild, piano

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

RONALD CENTER AND HIS PIANO MUSIC

by James Reid Baxter

Ronald Center, pianist and composer, was born in the ancient, granite-built coastal city of Aberdeen on 2 April 1913. He studied music privately in his home town, including conducting, and in 1943, he and his wife, the soprano Evelyn Morrison, moved inland to the historic Aberdeenshire farming town of Huntly in 1943, near Evelyn's native Rothiemay on the River Deveron. In Huntly Center worked as an organist, piano-teacher and choral conductor, and wrote the bulk of his surviving music. Among his many pupils was the broadcaster James Naughtie, who has paid warm tribute to Center in print.¹

Although Center had a symphonic poem, *The Coming of Cuchullin* (now lost), performed by the Scottish Orchestra under Warwick Braithwaite in 1944, and a thrilling *Divertimento for Strings* taken up with marked success by the Scottish Orchestra under Walter Susskind in the early 1950s, it has to be admitted that 'serious music' was not a flourishing concern in Scotland in the later 1950s, and he ultimately received little recognition. Center's piano music, in particular, was played almost exclusively by himself, in private, to his wife. He died of a heart-attack in 1973, with most of his music still unperformed. Though loved by his pupils and by the local choirs he directed in a wide variety of works, including his own *Ceremony of Carols*, he was a shy and intensely private man. In one of many conversations, Evelyn Center told the present writer that Susskind described him as 'the most modest composer I've ever met'. A superb pianist who never performed as a soloist in public because of his paralysing stage-fright, Center was happy to sit out of sight at the organ keyboard, to accompany his wife, or to stand with his back to the audience as a conductor. But he simply lacked the self-confident, ebullient personality that would have allowed him to push and promote his own compositions, of which, as Evelyn Center told me, he once said: 'Well, that's my music – if they want it, they can come and get it'. But Scotland – let alone Huntly – was hardly stalked by famous pianists

¹ For example, 'Ronald Center and Deveron Arts', available online at www.deveron-arts.com/wb/media/pdfs/JamesNaughtie%20Essay%20Center.pdf.

and other professionals looking for new repertoire. The resultant lack of recognition considerably discouraged Center, and he left several larger works only as unfinished sketches, including a piano concerto (its first movement is entitled 'Morning in Sea-Town' and features the crying of gulls) and a *singspiel* (or ballet?) on Mary, Queen of Scots. Perhaps even worse, he went as far as to destroy an unknown number of scores. Yet he does seem to have continued to compose sporadically right up to his death, and to judge from the handwriting, one of his very last works was a largely *a cappella* setting of the Requiem mass.

His widow made strenuous efforts to promote performances of her husband's music, knowing its worth as she did. In 1977, through the good offices of the composer William Wordsworth, she was put in touch with me, then still an undergraduate at Aberdeen University, where in 1976 I had founded the rather grandiosely named Aberdeen University Havergal Brian and British Music Society (after co-founding the international Havergal Brian Society in 1974). Center's music found instant, sustained and enthusiastic support amongst the students in the Society, and several of its many concerts between 1977 and 1981 featured his works – with striking success, for the local press of that era was very happy to promote this Aberdeen composer. Numerous piano pieces were premiered, as were some larger works – the affecting three-movement *Lacrimae for Strings*, the *Four Songs in Praise of Spring*, the *Suite for Solo Cello* and the moving cantata *Dona nobis pacem* for chorus, soli, organ, piano, timpani and side-drum. The real highpoint came in January 1979, when a packed Mitchell Hall heard Ronald Stevenson premiere Center's Piano Sonata as the climax of a sumptuous recital (it included music by Busoni, Isidore Philippe, Maurice Emmanuel, Havergal Brian and F. G. Scott). Immediately thereafter, I departed for a study-year in Bogotá, the Colombian capital, taking a number of scores with me. Colombian musicians young and old responded warmly to Center's music. The Coral de Suba premiered his Requiem for voices and organ, and a 'Festival Escocés' in November 1979 saw a whole range of Center's works performed, including piano music, the Requiem, *Lacrimae*, *Dona nobis pacem*, *Four Songs*, the Violin Sonata and several movements from the Third String Quartet. Even Center's four-movement Symphony went into rehearsal, but problems with orchestral parts meant that no performance was forthcoming.² The work still awaits a performance.

In the later 1980s, after the demise of the Aberdeen University Havergal Brian and British Music Society, there were very occasional performances in Aberdeen (for example, of the *Nocturne*

² J. Reid Baxter, 'The Coronach, the Reel and the sea-gray Granite: The Music of Ronald Center', *Cencrastus*, summer 1981, pp. 34–35.

for strings to the memory of Dylan Thomas) and, more importantly, *Dona nobis pacem* was revived so that it could be professionally recorded along with several of Center's Christmas carols – and Ronald Stevenson's interpretation of the Piano Sonata,³ a work which Stevenson had performed several times, and even broadcast, to an appreciative review in *The Scotsman*. Around 1988, Stevenson inspired the young Aberdeen-born pianist Murray McLachlan to take up the cause of Center's music. McLachlan befriended the by then ailing Evelyn Center, and in 1990 recorded not only the Piano Sonata but also the *Six Bagatelles* and 'Children at Play', the central movement of the *Suite for Piano*.⁴ Thereafter, apart from a recording of the First String Quartet,⁵ Center's music sank back into obscurity, until some local people in Huntly decided to try to put the composer back on the map in May 2008 with a well-supported two-day Festival featuring an exhibition, a lecture by myself and recitals given by the soprano Sally Garden, pianist Donald Hawksworth, the Isla String Quartet, pianist Joseph Long, local string-players and singers, and James Naughtie sharing his memories both with the Saturday-evening concert-audience and with the sizable party that toured 'Center's Huntly', including the kirks where he had been organist and where he had directed his choral concerts. Alas, the only lasting result of this splendid weekend was a CD containing the Second String Quartet, the Violin Sonata and the Piano Sonata (played by Joseph Long).⁶ Five years later, Center's centenary – on 2 April 2013 – passed unmarked in his native land; in 1979, in a Grampian Television interview before the premiere of the Piano Sonata, Ronald Stevenson observed that 'you could ring the bells of hell and Scotland would still ignore its creative artists'.

Whatever the reason for Scotland's neglect of Ronald Center, the fault certainly does not lie with his music which, unlike its composer, puts up no barriers to deep, direct engagement with the listener. Indeed, his works tend to begin in a quite disarmingly accessible manner, though they generally move into genuinely disturbing regions: 'Bredon Hill', in *On Wenlock Edge* by Vaughan Williams (whom Center admired), would be one point of comparison, though Edwin Muir's opening couplet 'One foot in Eden still, I stand,/ And look across the other land' comes as close as

³ Stevenson's recording of the Piano Sonata, and that of *Dona Nobis Pacem* in which he participated (with the soprano Kathleen Livingstone, tenor Neil Forbes, baritone William Watson, organist Ronald Leith, timpanist Ronald Forbes and side-drummer Susan Main, with the Queen's Cross Chamber Chorus conducted by Geoffrey Atkinson) were released in 1985 by Altarus on LP AIR-2-9100, but has not been re-released on CD.

⁴ Initially released on *Piano Music from Scotland*, Olympia OCD 264 (1990) and re-released (2006) on Regis Records RRC 1246.

⁵ Played by The Saltire Quartet, on *Under the Hammer*, Mirabilis Records MRCD 961, 1995.

⁶ Deveron Arts DEVCD002 (2008).

words can to capturing the essence of Center's vision: the paradoxical co-existence of beauty and evil, innocence and cruelty. Rather than trying to ignore the excruciating reality of this paradox, Center chose to respond to it – and not with nihilism, but with pity and love. His music often seems to embody Muir's insight that 'Blossoms of grief and charity/ Bloom in these darkened fields alone'.⁷

One partial explanation of Center's failure to enter the repertory (to date) may lie in the striking brevity of his compositions, for at first glance they look like the work of a miniaturist: Center wrote nothing that lasts more than half an hour, and most of his works are over in less than fifteen minutes. But concision and dense compression are not necessarily synonymous with 'miniaturism'. Some pieces are perhaps genuine miniatures (for example, [10] and [21]–[25]) but in general Center packs real power and depth into these short durations. Alongside the outright humour or unclouded lyricism of some passages, there is darkness and anger, heart-breaking poignancy and sometimes outright tragedy. People interested in spotting 'influences' will have a field-day, but it would take unnatural prejudice to deny that out of his appreciation of Bartók, Busoni, Debussy, Prokofiev, Ravel, Shostakovich and Scottish folk-music Center created a truly individual voice. Its overtly 'Scottish' character is far less obvious than that of Erik Chisholm, say, but he did write a whole set of wonderful Scots-song arrangements for his wife, and there is an underlying 'Scottish European' feeling to his work, not least in its clearly audible French, rather than Germanic, ancestry.

There has long been talk of him as 'a Scottish Bartók': in *The Scotsman* in 1944 a critic wrote of *The Coming of Cuchullin* that Center 'for some reason chooses to bring the Irish hero with music from the east of Europe'. But though Center admired Bartók, the fact is that, questions of sheer scale and extent aside, Center may well strike the listener as far more of a Scottish Prokofiev. This anthology by no means contains all of his piano music, but it does constitute a wide-ranging and representative survey. Center's scores are mostly undated and many are undatable: about all that can be said is that the sequence of pieces presented here is not chronological.

The disc opens with what is, remarkably, the fourth professional recording of the Piano Sonata, which was, according to Evelyn, Center's own favourite among his compositions. It is thought to date from 1958. It is worth describing Center's largest composition for piano in some detail, so as to provide a framework within which to approach the other works on this disc. As the *Sonatine* [11]–[13], for example, reveals, the Sonata is closely related to various other Center piano works.

⁷ *One Foot in Eden*, Faber & Faber, London, 1956.

Indeed, as Murray McLachlan has observed, quite a number of Center's smaller pieces can be seen as 'preparatory sketches' for this, his major piece for his own instrument. There can be no question that the Sonata is a kind of 'summa' of Center's pianism, and a truly 'symphonic' one.

Ronald Stevenson suggested to me that the Sonata as a whole was analogous to a life-cycle, with the four movements embodying in succession the exuberant inventiveness of childhood, the half-lights and anguish of young love, the sometimes dark spiritual exploration and eventual triumphant equanimity of growing maturity and, finally, the renewed childlike spirit of a personal renaissance. As a general interpretation, this schema works well: the opening *Allegro* is a reworking of the slow movement, 'Children at Play', from the *Suite for Piano*.⁸ One of the features Center dropped from his recasting was the Scotticised version of the children's song 'Pop goes the weasel' just before the recapitulation, but the echoes of 'Bobby Shafto's gone to sea' remain. Yet Christopher Guild's interpretation shows that there is more violence and darkness in the first movement than one might have expected (just as there was in 'Children at Play'): Center's vision of and yearning for childhood involves more than a little of the drowning of the ceremony of innocence, so pervasive in the life's work of his admired Benjamin Britten.

The Sonata opens *Allegro molto* [1] with a cascade of laughing seconds, followed almost at once by an ascending series of unrelated triads, quasi-dodecaphonic in nature; a veritable flood of striking, variegated ideas follows, which the taut development sometimes superimposes to create something entirely new. A short bitonal cadenza culminating in a trilling alarum of bells precedes the recapitulation, which whirls *senza rallentando* to its exuberant close. The succeeding *Adagio* [2] is very dark, an unquiet song of agonised beauty, based almost entirely on fourths, and it comes to rest only in the funeral coda. The remarkable third-movement *Andante* – a bimodal canon rhythmically varied at the octave [3] – is an extension of Busoni's principles. From this questioning, exploratory start, Center accelerates, with subtle adumbrations of the theme of the fugue that will close the movement, into an extraordinary passage marked *pianissimo, presto ed appassionato, la nuance bien indiquée* – out of which steps a splendid two-part fugue in C minor, *allegro*, with a Lydian-fourth inflection. It concludes triumphantly with a chord of G sharp major, and many a composer would have been happy to end there in the objective calm of musical abstraction. Center, by contrast, in a gesture distinctly reminiscent of Busoni's ideal of 'junge Klassizität', supplies a short but powerful *Molto allegro finale* [4], its opening a metamorphosis of the first-movement laughing-

⁸ Recorded by Murray McLachlan on Regis Records RRC 1246.

seconds-into-descending-major-thirds. There is again a bitonal cadenza, its ambiguity questioning the dancing gaiety. It dissolves like mist into a coda filled with Scotch snaps and the sound of wildly ringing bells, building rapidly to a *fortissimo* final chord that ends the Sonata in the key of B – where it began.

The sheer range of emotions and textures contained in the Sonata are found, in all sorts of varied and individual shapes, in the other works on this disc. Ternary form is used again and again to give the pieces a strong, satisfying shape, though the ‘recapitulations’ sometimes have conclusions which are distinctly disconcerting in their offhandedness – the final notes of the sixth *Bagatelle* [10], the *Sonatine* [20] or ‘Harlequin’ [16], for example, are almost like question marks, or indeed yelps of surprise at their own unexpectedness. ‘Wry, always very wry’ was how Evelyn Center’s described her husband to me.

The *Six Bagatelles* are much more than ‘mere bagatelles’ and, like the very different Sonata, provide a veritable showcase of Center’s art: gentling musing and melancholy in No. 1 [5], explosive and uproarious in No. 2, with its parodistic reference to Khatchaturian, and packed with wonderful rhythmic complexities [6]. The trance-like quiet tintinnabulation of the outer sections of No. 3 [7] turns to nightmare when the same music is inverted, amplified and accelerated – and the terror is all the fiercer because the stillness returns quite unchanged. Center sequenced the ‘bagatelles’ to form a mirror shape, with the stark juxtaposition of serenity and violence of No. 3 forming the centre. The wonderfully abrupt exuberance of No. 4 [8] is ‘energetic and rhythmic’ with a vengeance, and the *Andantino* No. 5 [9], although taking off in an unexpected direction in its brief central section, begins and ends with wistful music reminiscent of No. 1. The unclouded No. 6 [10] comes as an enchanting, chuckling tailpiece, like a portrait of a lively small child running in a sunlit landscape.

Four beautifully lyrical pieces recorded here can, on the basis of ink and handwriting, be placed amongst Center’s latest works. The *Andante* [11] was used, with some adjustment, as an effective organ prelude for the 1979 Colombian performances of Center’s Requiem, another late work. The *Sarabande* [12] and *Air* [13], although not specifically linked in the manuscript sources, may be associated with the Mary, Queen of Scots project. As in the gorgeous *Larghetto* [17], with its Iberian ‘voce velata’ central section, the French shades of Ravel and Debussy glide through this music. But it is Busoni, the creator of *Arlecchino*, who hovers over much of *Pantomime* [14]–[16], an earlier composition, presumably from the early 1950s. Over this attractive work, no shadow seems to fall, even in the lyrical ‘Columbine’; formally, it is a sonatina in which the movements have titles, and it

makes an instructive contrast with the far from sunlit *Sonatine*. Its title notwithstanding, this work makes all the impact of a compressed sonata: the apparently cheerful and very purposeful *Allegro* [18] runs into a moment of doubt at its heart; the *Adagio* [19] that begins with a quietly questioning melody that is swiftly overwhelmed by darkness, rising to an outburst of baffled pain. But the infinitely sad return of the opening provides no answer. The closing *Vivace* [20] is audibly related to the first movement of the Sonata, but is much darker – its relentless energy is positively manic, a frustrated anger barely held in check. At the end, a brief dancing attempt to change the mood and momentum is swept away by a throw-away close that creates the impression that Center is simply giving up the pretence and shutting the piano lid.

Center did not offer any explanation of the title of *Hommage* [21], though one suspects that that this beautifully pianistic tribute is to Claude Debussy and various of his *Préludes* (Center liked Debussy so much that his cat was called Chou-Chou, the family name of Debussy's daughter, Claude-Emma).

The *Three Etudes* [22]–[24] constitute a typical Center fast-slow-fast sequence, and each étude is itself in ternary form; but there is no descent into darkness in the delicate, singing central movement.

The *Impromptu* [25] also lacks Center's characteristic central 'catastrophe'. Instead, the engaging innocence of the start is swiftly and very briefly interrupted by uncertainty and violence, rendering the extended lyrical progress of the remainder of the piece poignant in the extreme.

This conspectus of Center's piano works ends with the *Three Movements for Piano*, arguably the most powerful of all of Center's many triptychs. Here again one can hear passing similarities to the music of the Piano Sonata, but this work is a very different proposition. The outer movements bear titles and are written in the same ink; the central *Poco adagio* is untitled, and written in a quite different ink. But Center has not simply assembled three separate pieces because he had noticed that they worked as a sequence. They certainly do belong together, but they are more deeply connected than may be at first apparent: the slow movement, one of his blackest, incorporates material from the Prelude and the Toccata. The quiet opening of the *Poco adagio* [27] transmutes the striking start of the Prelude [26] and is used to help build the shattering central climax, and the 'tail' of the triumphant fanfare figure that dominates the outer sections of the Toccata [28] is a version of the yearning motif heard, *pianissimo ma animando*, after the first *forte* bar of the slow movement. The *Poco adagio* ends in the darkness that seems to underpin so much of Center's music, but

whereas the Piano Sonata ‘thinks its way out’ of the night of its slow movement by means of fugue, here the darkness is simply dismissed with triumphant energy. The exultant (and virtuosic) music of the Toccata ends in a clangour of bells and a very final chord of C major.

Dr James Reid Baxter, a native of Banffshire, has written widely on Scottish history, literature and music, not least on the Renaissance master Robert Carver in whose rediscovery he was an active participant. He retired from the European Parliament translation service in September 2011. Since 1995 he has been an honorary research fellow in Scottish History at Glasgow University. His Scots-language poetry has been set to music by Dafydd Bullock, Fabian Fiorini and Ronald Stevenson.

The Scottish pianist **Christopher Guild** is in demand as a recital artist, concerto soloist and collaborative pianist, with concert engagements taking him to a wide range of venues across the UK. Recent performances have included those given at St James’s Piccadilly, the Wigmore Hall and St John’s, Smith Square, in London, and he continues to give numerous recitals for music societies under the auspices of the Countess of Munster Musical Trust. Christopher has made concerto appearances in the music of Bach, Beethoven, Haydn, Schumann and Shostakovich. A strong advocate of contemporary and lesser-known repertoire, Christopher’s investigation into the piano music of his homeland will continue with works by Ronald Stevenson.

As a chamber musician and ensemble musician, Christopher appeared as a Park Lane Group Young Artist in the Purcell Room of the South Bank Centre in London, and the Wigmore Hall, with the violinist



Diana Galvydytė. Their disc of twentieth-century Soviet, British and Italian violin and piano works was released on the Champs Hill label in 2012. More recently, they were finalists in the Parkhouse Award 2013 at the Wigmore Hall. Christopher has also worked as an orchestral keyboardist with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and City of London Sinfonia, appearing under the direction of conductors such as Vladimir Jurowski, Marin Alsop and Andreas Delfs.

Born in Elgin in 1986 and brought up on Speyside, Christopher Guild studied piano and violin locally before entering St Mary's Music School, Edinburgh, aged thirteen. He returned to Morayshire one year later to take top honours in the Moray Piano Competition – the youngest-ever winner to this day. He entered the Royal College of Music in 2005 as a Foundation Scholar, and remained there under the tutelage of Andrew Ball until 2011, successfully gaining a First Class BMus (Hons), and the MMus and Artist Diploma's with Distinction. He now combines a busy schedule as a performer with extensive work as a teacher, and has recently completed a one-year tenure as Richard Carne Junior Fellow in Performance at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London.

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RONALD CENTER Music for Solo Piano

Piano Sonata* 12:29

- 1 I *Allegro molto* 4:04
- 2 II *Adagio* 3:22
- 3 III *Andante – Presto ed appassionato*
– *Allegro* 3:01
- 4 IV *Molto allegro* 2:02

Six Bagatelles, Op. 3* 15:18

- 5 No. 1 *Poco adagio e teneramente* 2:13
- 6 No. 2 *Allegro* 2:24
- 7 No. 3 *Mesto* 5:16
- 8 No. 4 *Energico e ritmico* 1:37
- 9 No. 5 *Andantino (tempo rubato)* 2:26
- 10 No. 6 *Vivo* 1:13

11 Andante 2:06

12 Sarabande 1:56

13 Air 1:59

Pantomime 4:27

- 14 No. 1 *Pantaloon* 1:18
- 15 No. 2 *Columbine* 1:48
- 16 No. 3 *Harlequin* 1:21

17 Larghetto 2:42

Sonatine 9:04

- 18 I *Allegro* 2:25
- 19 II *Poco adagio (tempo rubato)* 3:30
- 20 III *Vivace* 2:09

21 Hommage 3:11

Three Etudes 5:43

- 22 No. 1 *Presto* 1:28
- 23 No. 2 *Andante* 2:35
- 24 No. 3 *Allegro molto* 1:40

25 Impromptu 3:55

Three Movements for Piano 6:58

- 26 No. 1 *Prelude (Allegro)* 1:14
- 27 No. 2 *Poco adagio* 3:41
- 28 No. 3 *Toccata (Allegro molto)* 2:03

Christopher Guild, piano

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Ronald Center (1913–73) is sometimes described as ‘the Scottish Bartók’, and his music does indeed capture some of the wild energy of the Scottish landscape in a style of Bartókian asperity. It also shows affinities with the music of Busoni, Debussy, Prokofiev, Shostakovich and Vaughan Williams, absorbed into an individual style that is audibly Scots. Center wrote with striking concision and meticulous craftsmanship, his works encompassing a wide range of emotions – heart-felt sorrow, grim humour, relaxed lyricism, dark despair – in a crisp and succinct manner, animated by sharp wit and irony.

RONALD CENTER Music for Solo Piano

1	Piano Sonata*	12:29	17	Larghetto	2:42
5	Six Bagatelles, Op. 3*	15:18	18	Sonatine	9:04
11	Andante	2:06	21	Hommage	3:11
12	Sarabande	1:56	22	Three Etudes	5:43
13	Air	1:59	25	Impromptu	3:55
14	Pantomime	4:27	26	Three Movements for Piano	6:58

Christopher Guild, piano

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