

Niklas SIVELÖV

PIANO MUSIC

TOCCATINA FEROCCE
TWO IMPROMPTUS
JEUX DE CORDES
DUE NOTTURNI
24 PRELUDES

Niklas Sivelöv

FIRST RECORDINGS

MY PATH TO COMPOSITION

by Niklas Sivelöv

I remember my first attempts to compose. I was around seven years old, living in Skellefteå, in northern Sweden, and making drafts of symphonies in fantasy keys like K minor and Z minor. It felt like being in some kind of laboratory (not that I then knew what a laboratory was) and it was very exciting to be there – and I still wonder what K minor might sound like! I was writing graphic music – of necessity, since I couldn't read notes at the time: I was playing the organ, drums and a little piano, but only by ear. The style was mainly jazz or other folk or popular tunes – but I did have three heroes in classical music: Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. I discovered by myself how a harmony was built and how adding an extra note could make it so distinctly different. I had been drawn to rhythm long before that: I was only two when I smashed my first drum-kit into oblivion. Before I was ten, I had improvised and composed around 50 tunes that I kept in my head – and composition and improvisation are interests that have stayed with me throughout my life.

I was a grand old man of thirteen when I realised that reading music could be quite a good thing to know when I was struggling to learn a Mozart concerto by ear and it took quite some time. So my overall resistance to playing 'correctly', with all the right notes, swiftly changed into an eager learning process with the aim of mastering everything about these strange hieroglyphs.

Later, in 1986 when I was an eighteen-year-old piano student at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm, I composed my first pieces that still deserve a place in my catalogue: *The Rage of the Chameleon* for piano and a string trio I called *Divertimento per archi a tre*. I was also taking lessons in composition and orchestration and composed a number of chamber-music pieces during those years at the Academy.

My output of music for my own instrument, the piano, was still rather small. Later, in 1998, there came the *Concerto Classico* for piano and orchestra and some smaller pieces. Later still, in 2002, came the Second Concerto for piano and strings and several pieces for duos with piano, but there were also many failed attempts along the road to solo pieces that were worthwhile. I started to improvise much more again, as I had done in my youth, feeling secure enough to improvise encores at recitals, even releasing a number of albums mostly featuring improvisation.

After several years with only a few works to show for them – not least because in 2000 I took up a position as a teacher at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen, and I also had a

fairly busy schedule as a pianist – in 2009 I started to compose again, with a lot more vigour and with readier inspiration. I now had the piano more sharply in focus, and one aim was to bring composition and improvisation together in a coherent and creative way.

A stream of pieces followed, such as *The Album for the Youth*, *Préludes Naturelles* and *Suite in modo classico*, all in 2010, and in the same year I also began to sketch the 24 Preludes for piano. I wanted to come up with a cycle in the great tradition of writing preludes; I was thinking mainly of those by Chopin, Skryabin and Debussy but also of those by Bach. Other important influences were jazz, which has always been a strong interest of mine, and many twentieth-century composers for the piano, such as Prokofiev, Bartók and Stravinsky.

To begin with, I thought about combining each prelude with a ‘figura’, a fugue-inspired form of my own invention that had polyphonic qualities but wasn’t a proper fugue or a fugato with a figurative layout, but I abandoned this idea because it seemed more clear and coherent to call them all Preludes. Still, some of the Preludes are in fact transformed figuras/fugatos and so have kept some or all of the inherent polyphony – and composing a proper set of preludes and fugues is still very much on my to-do list!

These 24 Preludes are character pieces loosely following the idea of pairing the major and minor keys with the same key-signature – what are called parallel keys: C major and A minor (no accidentals), G major and E minor (one sharp), and so on. They had initially descriptive titles, inspired by different personalities – mostly women – who had had an important impact on me through my life, but I omitted those titles in the final version of the score. There are very often thematic connections between the Preludes, like little bridges: one Prelude might pick up an idea from the previous one, changing it to something new to create a kind of consensus.

Many of the Preludes could reasonably be described as modern Bachian improvisations. Divergence, differentiation, transformation and synthesis are also words that describe the inner process of handling the material. There are sometimes different, clearly defined pianistic techniques or certain interpretive challenges that serve as building blocks to create the mood of each piece – like small études. They can, for example, be trills, octaves, chords, repetitive notes, but also something like sudden changes between structural/rhythmic strictness and freedom. Basically, there are two structural models, one monothematic, with or without variation, and the other polythematic, building contrast and tension, resolved or unresolved. The Preludes all belong together, but it works fine to perform just one prelude, or a set of a few.

- No. 1: *Allegro con brio* in C major [1] is an energetic start with a march-like theme interfoiled with fast jazzy comments. It has a lot of syncopation and virtuoso display.
- No. 2: *Andante fugato* in A minor [2] is an archaic fugue with large intervals.
- No. 3: *Moderato con moto* in G major [3] is a cantilena with a flowing left hand. There are some colourful, contrasting moods in between the returning cantilenas.
- No. 4: *Vivace* in E minor (rather undefined) [4] has Bartókian qualities, but the use of low registers and sudden attacking chords imply something even wilder.
- No. 5: *Adagio con dolore* in B minor/D major [5] is a *milonga* in disguise. The ending has a particular effect with trills in both hands together with melody and bass.
- No. 6: *Scherzando* in D major/B minor [6] is a joyful fugato. Syncopated and perky.
- No. 7: *Quasi Marcia* in A major [7] deals with repeated notes and extreme distance between the hands, which gives the impression of an amputated marching band.
- No. 8: *Andante* in F sharp minor [8] is a chorale-like piece with dense harmonies. The middle part has something from Nordic folk music.
- No. 9: *Allegro di molto* in the undefined key of E major [9] is an energetic fugato with a short, joyous little theme that comes only twice. It's quite virtuosic, has a lot of octaves and cluster-like chords and the B section with its Lisztian sweep needs a powerful left hand.
- No. 10: *Adagio mesto – attacca* in C sharp minor [10] is a dark, moody, chorale-like piece, with an insect-like middle part deploying many kinds of trills and fast notes.
- No. 11: *Andante* in the key of B major/G sharp minor [11] continues the dark mood in its initial Ravelian atmosphere, but the music lightens with the help of trills reminiscent of the closing variation of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 30 in E minor, Op. 109.
- No. 12: *Allegro misterioso* [12] is in no key, and its special mood is built with tremolos and growing cluster chords. The player should also use his forearms to create some of the clusters. The music is dense and bold.
- No. 13: *Allegretto dolce* [13] is in no defined key, perhaps A flat major, but in any case it doesn't follow the overall scheme, since it should be F sharp major. It's a wandering fugato, pleasant and relaxed. Like a breath of fresh air after the intensity of the previous Prelude.
- No. 14: *Allegro* in D sharp minor [14] is a jerky fugato.
- No. 15: *Ben colorato*, in no defined key [15], is a colourful improvisatory canvas of ideas. It has some tonal centre around the note B, and some parts are close to be graphically notated.
- No. 16: *Vivace – attacca* in B flat minor [16] is a somewhat Chopinesque outburst of passion and temper. The tremolos trying to calm the heat are rather unsuccessful.

No. 17: *Moderato con anima* in A flat major [17] is lyrical and melodic and has some inspiration from a famous piano piece by Beethoven. This Prelude has a dedication: ‘for Elena’.

No. 18: *Con spirito* in F minor (undefined) [18] is a humoristic scherzo-fugato, which struggles to reach any real conclusions and happily laughs away every expected one.

No. 19: *Allegro molto: ‘Fanfare’* in E flat major [19] is a fugato built on the typical gestures of a fanfare. It’s quite a virtuoso piece with chords, octaves and shifting metre.

No. 20: *Andante maestoso* in C minor [20] takes inspiration from a French overture with its majestic double-dotted rhythms. It has a serious and grave feeling throughout.

No. 21: *Allegretto* in B flat major (undefined, actually a bit more like A flat major) [21] is a charming waltz starting off in the minor and then has sudden caprices, and ambitions in shifting keys.

No. 22: *Lento triste* in G minor (undefined, maybe more towards A minor) [22] is an introverted chorale fantasy. A small greeting to Stravinsky, perhaps.

No. 23: *Allegro molto* in F major (undefined, but it ends clearly in G minor) [23] is a highly virtuosic piece with clusters and a lot of changing metres and accents. Some Arabic flavour is brought in towards the end.

No. 24: *Allegro con brio* is a suitable finale [24] – it has material similar to that in several earlier Preludes and a lot of pianistic challenges, and it ends with a brawl in a clear D minor.

The last four Preludes don’t really follow the earlier key-scheme; some of the earlier examples can already cut themselves loose, and the direction of the music now points very clearly towards breaking free of tonality entirely.

The Preludes are dedicated to one of my important mentors, the pianist and teacher Liisa Pohjola.

The *Due Notturmi* – early pieces: they were composed in 1989 – are simple: they are built on repetitive patterns throughout. No. 1 [25] is in A major and has a ABA form with only small rhythmic changes and a change of mood. There are some bitonal bits and some Chopin reminiscences, but very little development as such. No. 2 [26] is in E minor, but the left hand tries to convince the right hand to change the key. There is a build-up towards the end when the tension between the hands is growing and they seem to be playing at different tempos. I have a vivid memory of how they came to be written. As a student, I was tired after practising the whole day, and needed a rest from learning a Chopin *Ballade*. It was very late, and this music just came to me as a soothing mantra, one without any clear direction – just a relaxing mood. I wrote both pieces down on the spot. Only some minor changes have been made recently to enhance the clarity of the texture. After the 24 intensive Preludes, these little pieces provide a welcome rest for ear and mind.

For years I wanted to compose a toccata, something in between the toccatas of Bach and the powerful and muscular toccatas by Schumann and Prokofiev. But I almost gave the idea up, since every attempt to

write something that connected those diverse concepts ended up being too overblown and long. Finally, with the *Toccatina Feroce* [27] I managed (I hope) to boil all the ideas down to their essence and string them together in a kind of kaleidoscope with no real development, and with one idea eagerly crowding in on the previous one almost before it had had time to end. The result is music with a high degree of tension and rapid changes of material, with each idea serving as a hot catalyst for the next. There is a *Maestoso*-like Bachian intro before the madness starts.

The *Two Impromptus* were more or less improvised, based on themes and moods that I had prepared. They lean towards the traditions of French and Russian piano music, with special timbres and a rich palette of colours as the main feature. There is also something both Romantic and Impressionist about them, but the influence of jazz is also just around the corner. No. 1 [28] is in G major and starts off a little like Satie but soon steers away into other domains, and No. 2 [29] is in E flat minor and improvises around the same chord in a way that is inspired by music even further east than the Rachmaninov-sounding introduction might imply.

The last piece on the CD, *Jeux de Cordes* [30], was also more or less improvised on a theme that reminded me of a nursery rhyme, played with a mallet on the strings with one hand and on the keyboard with the other. I did it standing up and in one take – and it was exhausting to do! I was a keen mallet-player from an early age and I performed several concertos on marimba; even so, I was surprised to find that this technique was still very much alive. (We used, of course, another piano for this track and not the Steinway D.)

Ever since I was young, I have felt more like a composer playing the piano than a pianist who composes, even though I have recorded some 25 CDs of piano music. Nevertheless, I love the piano, its sound, its orchestral timbral possibilities, its percussive qualities as well as its singing ones, its rich polyphonic and powerful dynamical prospects. I like the way a pianist must be ahead in his mind all the time, to be prepared before the stroke: once you have played the note, there is nothing you can really do to change it. And so I belong to the long tradition of pianist-composers, or composer-pianists, such as Beethoven, Liszt, Skryabin, Rachmaninov, Prokofiev and many others.

The result is a strong feeling of unity and wholeness, which rubs off when, for example, I play a Beethoven sonata or a piece by Skryabin. I analyse it with both my mind and my heart, aiming on getting totally under the skin of the composer and forming a clear grip of his or her many intentions and signals – trying almost to become the composer and to understand him/her from within. Curiously enough, this approach very often leads to rather personal interpretations.

Another consideration, and in many respects perhaps the most important one, is that it gives you

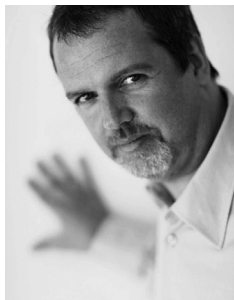
the ability to see the intentions between the lines – the unwritten ones, but which, as often with the great masters, glow at full strength for the sensitive interpreter to see and incorporate.

The process is absolutely the same when I play my own pieces: I must switch roles convincingly, reading and deciphering my own ideas and intentions. Of course, one part of me knows very well what they are, but now they must be clearly expressed and that's something more than simply a silent knowledge of the music. That's why a degree of time and distance is necessary if I am to play my own compositions well. It's a challenge in these modern times to be both composer and pianist, but it's also very rewarding to try to be part of that long tradition, especially in this compartmentalised world where most musicians do only one thing, and I hope my audiences enjoy the fruits of my eager and exploring pursuit of unicorns.

Niklas Sivelöv is one of the leading pianists in the Nordic countries, with a number of international awards and distinctions to his name. He was born in Skellefteå in northern Sweden and began playing the organ at the age of six, winning prizes across Scandinavia and attracting attention both as improviser and composer. When he was fourteen, he switched to the piano and studied at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm from the age of seventeen. He made his debut, playing Bartók's Second Piano Concerto, in 1991, and since then the conductors he has worked with include John Axelrod, Kees Bakels, Paavo Berglund, Thomas Dausgaard, Alan Gilbert, Kristjan Järvi, Okko Kamu, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Leif Segerstam and Mario Venzago; the many orchestras include most of the major ones in Scandinavia as well as the Bucharest Philharmonic, that of the MDR in Leipzig, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande and that of the Tonhalle, Zurich. The other musicians with whom he has shared a stage include the tuba-player Øystein Baadsvik, mezzo-soprano Malena Ernman, clarinetist Martin Fröst, flautist Patrick Gallois, cellists Leonid Gorokhov and Mats Rondin, accordionist Lelo Nika and violinists Nils-Erik Sparf and Ulf Wallin.

His repertoire, which encompasses around 50 concertos, begins with Bach and extends to contemporary music: he has given many world premieres. His own compositions are around 40 in number, with three piano concertos among them. He has recorded over 25 CDs; this is the first for Toccata Classics.

He has been a member of the teaching staff of the Royal Danish Academy of Music in Copenhagen since 2000 and a professor there since 2007.





Recorded in the Concert Hall of the Royal Danish Academy of Music, 23–24 May 2014 and 7 February 2015

Piano technician: Thomas Hübsch

Producer and digital editing: India Hooi

Mastering: Jesper Andersen

Thanks also to Friedrich Gürtler

I dedicate this album to my wife, Anne-Marie.

Booklet notes by Niklas Sivelöv

Cover design: David Baker (dmbaker@me.com)

Design and layout: Paul Brooks (paulmbrooks@virginmedia.com)

Executive producer: Martin Anderson

TOCC 0271

© 2015, Toccata Classics, London

© 2015, Toccata Classics, London

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.

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 E-mail: info@toccataclassics.com