

# Ronald STEVENSON

## PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE A CELTIC ALBUM

A SCOTTISH TRIPTYCH

SCOTTISH FOLK MUSIC SETTINGS

A WHEEN TUNES FAE BAIRNS TAE SPIEL

SOUTH UIST (HEBRIDEAN) FOLK-SONG SUITE

A ROSARY OF VARIATIONS ON SEAN Ó RIADA'S IRISH FOLK MASS

Christopher Guild, piano

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

# RONALD STEVENSON: PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

by David Hackbridge-Johnson

Ronald Stevenson is one of the most important composers alive today. He was born in Blackburn on 6 March 1928, into a working-class family of Scottish and Welsh ancestry, and since 1952 has lived in the village of West Linton, just below Edinburgh. The melodic impulse in Stevenson's music is strong, which may reflect his earliest musical memories – the singing of his Welsh grandmother and his father. In his Foreword to the book *Ronald Stevenson: The Man and his Music*, Lord Menuhin emphasised inspiration taken from outside music: 'His works always seem dedicated to an object beyond the music – a humane impulse'.<sup>1</sup> Although that is certainly true, Stevenson can also be said to be carrying on a dialogue with other composers; indeed, he once told me he was much more interested in other composers' music than his own. He is perhaps best known for his *Passacaglia on DSCH*, a work that in its vast scope represents Stevenson at his most ambitious. This work couples contrapuntal virtuosity with many examples of the humane impulse described by Menuhin: for example, a Pibroch section subtitled 'Lament for the Children' and a terrifying 'Glimpse of a War Vision'. Stevenson's affinities with fellow pianist-composers such as Grainger, Sorabji and Busoni locate him among a group of musicians able to combine virtuoso techniques with an intellectual rigour that derives from the counterpoint of Bach and the adventurous sonorities of Chopin – and using the piano to experiment in harmony and timbre achieved through largely contrapuntal means places Stevenson downstream from Godowsky.

This recording presents pieces that are much smaller in scope than the *Passacaglia on DSCH* and yet still reveal some of Stevenson's major concerns: a love of Scottish folksong and of Celtic culture generally; the piano as the ideal instrument for miniature forms; the irresistible urge to subject the simplest materials to polyphonic devices; and, in some of the pieces, a perfect understanding of what children and beginner pianists can achieve.

The programme opens with the suite *A Wheen Tunes fae Bairns tae Spiel* which Stevenson wrote in 1964. The title is Scots Doric dialect – i.e., that spoken in the north-east of Scotland – for 'A Few Tunes for Youngsters to Play'. These tiny pieces were the first piano pieces Stevenson wrote after the huge *Passacaglia on DSCH*, showing himself able to scale the heights of structural and intellectual intensity one moment and produce these delightful miniatures for children the next. In spite of

<sup>1</sup> *Ronald Stevenson: The Man and his Music*, Toccata Press, London, 2005, p. 9.

his formidable abilities as a performer, Stevenson never lost his understanding of young players and amateurs – his practical musicianship in this regard can be compared with Benjamin Britten's. There are four movements in the set: 'Croon', 'Drone', 'Reel' and 'Spiel'. 'Croon' [1] presents a simple melody with a modal flattened seventh which adds poignancy. The second piece, 'Drone' [2], makes no concessions in terms of dissonance; the clashing semitones evoke the vibrant sound of the bagpipes. 'Reel' [3] is full of the rasping energy of fiddle music in full swing. And 'Spiel' [4] makes happy use of the crossing-over of hands as if in imitation of a child's bouncing ball.

A *Scottish Triptych*, the most substantial work in this programme, consists of three pieces written some time apart. Each celebrates the work of men close to the composer and of importance in any reckoning of leading figures in twentieth-century Scottish cultural history. *Keening Sang for a Makar: In Memoriam Francis George Scott* [5] was written in 1959. Scott was a major song-composer in his own right, setting mainly Scottish texts ranging from the late Middle Ages to contemporary poetry by his former school-pupil Hugh MacDiarmid. Stevenson uses the cipher FGS (F, G and E flat) as the main material for his work. This combination of rising second and sixth is a melodic shape that occurs frequently in Stevenson's work and suggests that Scott was an influence at work not only in this most obvious commemoration. *Heroic Song for Hugh MacDiarmid* [6] dates from 1967 and was a BBC commission to mark the 75th birthday of the poet and polemicist who bodily dragged the Scots language into the modern age. Three main types of music are presented in short order: 'The Poet Speaks', a passage that makes use of sympathetic resonance, is followed by a violent outburst in displaced octaves – 'The Poet Laughs'. Then the main theme of the work emerges, a falling and rising phrase of distinctly Celtic feel: 'The Poet Dreams'. A discordant development section based on the laughing material follows before a pibroch section full of subtle ornamentation emerges as the still centre of the work. At the end of the piece the opening material is presented in reverse order, creating a palindromic structure. The final piece in the triptych is *Chorale-Pibroch for Sorley MacLean*, also written in 1967 [7]. MacLean, from the island of Raasay, was a friend of MacDiarmid, and is generally reckoned one of the most important poets ever to have written in Gaelic. The piece is full of drones in bare fifths and spicy dissonances, and it also makes use of the inside of the piano: strings are strummed and plucked in several sections as if in imitation of a clarsach, the Celtic harp.

The *South Uist (Hebridean) Folk-song Suite* was written in 1969 and published in 1995. The source for the folk-songs used is the book *Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist* by Margaret Fay Shaw. A folklorist from America, Shaw (1903–2004) came to South Uist in 1929, becoming particularly attracted to Gaelic song and ways of life, and in her song-transcriptions, photographs and writings, she recorded the world

ofcrofting communities for posterity. Shaw corresponded with and then met the Hungarian composer and folk-music specialist Zoltán Kodály – a meeting, in the London offices of Boosey and Hawkes, which lasted all day and during which Kodály urged Shaw to publish her collection. Routledge and Kegan Paul brought out the book in 1955.<sup>2</sup> Stevenson's wife, Marjorie, who bought a copy of the book for Stevenson's birthday in 1956, well remembers Shaw's recounting of her meeting with Kodály. Stevenson dedicated the set to Shaw, who was particularly taken with his programme note: 'In this suite sounds the music of a day in the life of an island woman, with its work and rest against the background of sky, sea and land'.

Stevenson's suite comprises seven movements, the textural simplicity of which allows the tunes to be heard clearly. 'Sailing Song' [8] is marked 'Lively, jolly, robust' – words which might well have been used to describe the indomitable Shaw. 'A Witching Song for the Milking' [9] presents an *Allegro* lilting tune over an oscillating left hand, as if a small accordion is the imagined accompanist. 'A Little Mouth Music' [10] is in the style of a reel and is marked *Allegro alla danza*. The title refers to the *Puirt à beul* form of Gaelic music where singers often imitate the virtuosic patterns of absent fiddles or pipes. This style of singing is still performed at mods, the festivals of Gaelic culture that occur all over Scotland. The fourth piece of the suite is 'A Waulking Song' – a tiny miniature which presents a microcosm of Hebridean life [11]. The title refers to songs sung by women when beating newly woven tweed to soften it. This 'waulking' of the cloth starts in slow tempo (*Moderato*) and increases in speed as the cloth softens. Stevenson includes several such tempo-changes in his short piece. He also captures the call-and-response structure of such songs by varying repeated segments of melody at different pitches and with different textures. 'Spinning Song' [12] presents an *Allegro corrente* melody in triplets against a spinning accompaniment in semiquavers. 'A Tired Mother's Lullaby' [13] has an aching theme (appropriately marked *Andante stanco*, 'Weary andante') that spans a ninth. It contains interval sets that have been important in many of Stevenson's compositions where he has subsumed folksong material into his own style. The lullaby has three verses ending with an ambiguous chord of E major – a chord at odds with the G Dorian modality of the piece. Perhaps it symbolises the desired outcome of the song: a sleeping baby. Shaw told the Stevensons that often the mother would fall asleep as well, lulled by her own singing. The final piece is 'The Christ Child's Lullaby' [14], an *Andante semplice* where Stevenson bathes the tune in beautiful modal harmonies, the simplicity of which on the written page belies their moving effect in performance.

A *Rosary of Variations on Seán Ó Riada's Folk Mass* [15] is one of Stevenson's finest works. Many of his abiding preoccupations are present in the music; it almost feels like a summa of his art. The themes are borrowed from the music of the Irish composer Seán Ó Riada (1931–71), in whose memory the work was

<sup>2</sup> It was republished by Birlinn, Edinburgh, in 2014.

composed in 1980. The noble simplicity of the themes is enhanced by the finely wrought treatments given to them by Stevenson. The work begins *Moderato semplice e parlando*; the repeated notes give the feel of a vocal intonation. It is typical of Stevenson that some of the themes are given canonic treatment. Others are embedded in imposing chordal structures. A hint of a *bel canto* aria is followed by a theme in the left hand decorated by Lisztian cascades in the right. Some particularly fierce passages in block chords recall another of Stevenson's influences, the music of Alkan. The core of the work lies in the section marked *Andante con moto (quasi cornamusa [bagpipe])*. Here a drone bass supports a version of one of Ó Riada's themes in pibroch style. This moment of calm is interrupted by a burst of mirror-image chords with a degree of dissonance that is alarming in the context of such a modal work. Certainly there is a touch of Bernhard Ziehn's book *Canonic Studies*<sup>3</sup> in this passage: Ziehn's mirror chords contain just this kind of dissonance. The acerbic nature of the harmonies may also be a homage to those pieces of Ó Riada's that in their use of serial techniques are a long way from the Irish traditional works that he is best known for. The work ends with two impressive sections: an ardent setting of The Lord's Prayer is followed by a coda, the *moto perpetuo* chords of which end the work with a joyous abandon.

Ten of Stevenson's several dozen *Scottish Folk Music Settings* were collected into a book published by The Ronald Stevenson Society in 1999. These ten settings date from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. A superscription runs as follows: 'Lovingly and reverently dedicated to the memory of Percy Grainger'. On a visit to Stevenson's music-filled house in West Linton in 2010, I was struck by the fact that Grainger was mentioned every day in our long talks.<sup>4</sup> One day when we were listening to *Tribute to Stephen Foster*, Stevenson exclaimed: 'My favourite music by my favourite composer!' What is it about Grainger that so moves him? I think the answer lies in the shared ideals of the two men. They were both drawn to the expressive potential of vernacular forms – a certain reluctance exists in them with regard to established forms such as sonata or symphony. Rather they are both captivated by melodies of 'the people', for want of a better phrase, and how such melodies create their own harmonic implications. They are both alive to the added excitement caused when such implications are circumvented by chromatic intrusions. Harmonies formed both from within the melody and outside it interest Stevenson a good deal. His folk-music settings show this harmonic variety in many subtle ways. For the most part the folk-tunes are heard in tonal or

<sup>3</sup> Ziehn (1845–1912), born in Erfurt, settled in Chicago in 1868, establishing himself there as a piano-teacher and music-theorist. Ziehn's theoretical writings were soon lost from view, although Busoni was one of those who hailed his importance. A new edition of Ziehn's *Canonic Studies*, edited by Stevenson, was published by Kahn & Averill, London, in 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Stevenson's correspondence with and writings on Grainger have since been published in Teresa R. Balough (ed.) *Comrades in Art: The Correspondence of Ronald Stevenson and Percy Grainger, 1957–61, with Interviews, Essays and other Writings on Grainger* by Ronald Stevenson, Toccata Press, London, 2010.

modal contexts, but there are always harmonic surprises. Stevenson also revels in canonic treatments of melodies, a technique that occurs in 'John Anderson, my Jo' (from 1961) [16], 'Lang hae we Pairted Been' (1961) [19] and 'Hard is my Fate' (1980) [24]. Stevenson harmonises 'Waly, Waly' (1959) [17] with its own inversion. Particularly beautiful are those settings which employ contrapuntal textures that veer towards studies in sonority; the running semiquavers of 'A Rosebud by my Early Walk' (1961) [18] provide the best example. The entirely modal setting of 'Ca' the Yowes' (1965) [21] suggests both the music of the clarsach and the late piano music of Liszt. 'From an Old Pibroch' [20] features lilting pipe-music as if heard from afar. The gentlest canons suggest reflection in water rather than a contrapuntist's textbook. 'Jock o' Hazeldean' [22] has the following indication at the start: 'Broadly singing with sumptuous Graingeresque tone'; its textures are the richest in the set. 'The Hielan Widow's Lament' [23] shows Stevenson's harmonic ingenuity. Apart from a few telling accidentals the work is modal throughout, and yet the composer uses the notes of the mode to create chordal combinations that sound ever fresh. In the last setting of the group, 'Ne'erday Sang' [25] (for the first day of the year), the melody consists of a series of rising phrases that ache with longing. In the last verse, the melody rises nobly through the tenor range and seems to be, in a profound way, an additional homage to Grainger, whose unique way of voicing such textures on the piano Stevenson well understands.

*David Hackbridge-Johnson is the composer of over 600 works, including twelve symphonies, nineteen piano sonatas and over 100 songs. He is also active as a jazz pianist, violinist and drummer. He has recorded in these capacities and has also made several CDs of vocal music that include songs by Stevenson, Brian and Bainton.*

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. Performances have included those given at St James's, Piccadilly, the Wigmore Hall and St John's, Smith Square, in London, as well as numerous recitals for music societies under the auspices of the Countess of Munster Musical Trust. Christopher's concerto appearances have seen him work with conductors such as Sian Edwards and the Milton Keynes City Orchestra in Bach's Keyboard Concerto in D minor, along with numerous amateur orchestras in concertos by Beethoven, Haydn, Schumann and Shostakovich. A strong advocate of contemporary and lesser-known repertoire, he has recently begun a survey of the piano works of Scottish composer Ronald Center and his first recording of these was released by Toccata Classics in September 2013. The late Calum MacDonald, writing in *International Record Review*, commented: 'The rhythmic vivacity and crispness of his delivery, the subtlety of his pedalling, the incisiveness of attack with never a hint of heaviness, and his range of keyboard colour are such that I'm sure the composer himself would have applauded [...]. All in all this is a splendid achievement.'

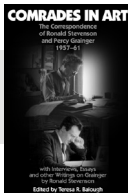
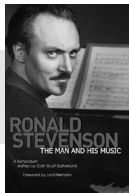
As a chamber musician and ensemble musician, in 2012 Christopher appeared as a Park Lane Group Young Artist at the Purcell Room and the Wigmore Hall in London, with the violinist Diana Galvydyte. Their disc of twentieth-century Soviet, British and Italian violin-and-piano works was released on the Champs Hill label later that year. More recently, they were finalists in the Parkhouse Award 2013 at the Wigmore Hall, and as part of a larger ensemble gave the London premiere of *Blue-Green Hill* by the recently appointed Master of the Queen's Music, Judith Weir, in October 2014. 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 Marin Alsop, Andreas Delfs and Vladimir Jurowski.



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 – a victory which sees him as 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, gaining a First Class BMus (Hons), and the MMus and Artist Diplomas with Distinction. Having recently completed his one-year tenure of the Richard Carne Junior Fellowship in Performance at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in 2013, he now combines an active concert and recording career with his work at the Godolphin School in Salisbury where he teaches piano, accompanies the music students, coaches chamber music and assists with the choral groups and concert programming.

Christopher Guild acknowledges the following organisations for their invaluable support to his studies at the RCM: Dewar Arts Awards, the Robertson Scholarship Trust, the Alistair MacLachlan Memorial Trust, the Cross Trust, The Royal Caledonian Schools Trust, the Hope Scott Trust, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Sir James Caird Travelling Scholarships Trust, the RCM Foundation, a Michael Whittaker Scholarship, and an Ian Fleming Award administered by the Musician's Benevolent Fund.

His website can be found at [www.christopherguild.co.uk](http://www.christopherguild.co.uk).



Toccata Press has published two major books on Ronald Stevenson. Details at [www.toccatapress.com](http://www.toccatapress.com)



Recorded in the Recital Room, Edinburgh Society of Musicians, Edinburgh, 21 and 22 August 2014

Piano: Steinway

Sound Engineer: Christopher Tann

Producer: Christopher Guild

Booklet essay: David Hackbridge-Johnson

Cover design: David M. Baker

Design and layout: Paul Brooks, paulmbrooks@virginmedia.com

Executive producer: Martin Anderson

TOCC 0272

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can be found at  
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