



Paul JUON

PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

INTIME HARMONIEN: 12 IMPROMPTUS, OP. 30

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Rodolfo Ritter

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Paul Juon – originally Pavel Fyodorovich Yuon – was born in Moscow on 6 March 1872, to a family that had emigrated to Russia two generations earlier, his paternal grandfather being from the Swiss canton of Grisons; his maternal grandmother was of Scottish origin. His first contact with music took place within a family environment imbued with art and music. His younger brother, Konstantin, also benefited from that milieu, later becoming one of the most important and celebrated painters of the Soviet era.

Paul's development as a composer was precocious, but his formal musical studies began at the age of sixteen under the eminent Czech violinist Jan Hřimalý – one of the best-known exponents of the Moscow violin school – and the composers Sergei Taneyev and Anton Arensky, the most prominent teachers at the Imperial Conservatoire in Moscow. His time there coincided with that of Sergei Rachmaninov – with whom he developed a close relationship – and with Glière, Medtner, Skryabin and Tcherepnin. Juon, however, decided to continue his studies at the Hochschule für Musik in Berlin under Woldemar Bargiel, and in this new environment he completed his musical education in 1896, obtaining the state scholarship and the Mendelssohn Prize on 3 October of that year. The jury included the violinist Joseph Joachim, who became Juon's mentor. Very little information has survived about Juon in those years and his subsequent period as teacher of violin and theory at the Baku Conservatoire in Azerbaijan. From this time onwards, traditional Caucasian music is clearly discernible as a fully integrated element in his music. It was also the time of his first marriage, to the Russian Katharina Schachalova, which produced three children.

He returned to Berlin in 1898 and established himself in a teaching post at the Musikhochschule, with an emphasis on musical theory; later on, in 1906, at the express recommendation of Joachim himself, he was nominated to the chair

in composition (which he held until his retirement in 1934). In 1898, too, he saw his first work published, by the prestigious firm of Schlesinger-Robert Lienau, giving an indication of the recognition he now enjoyed, and during the early years of the twentieth century his prestige as composer and teacher grew steadily. In 1901 he obtained a scholarship from the Franz Liszt Foundation. In 1904 he published the important cycle *Tanzrhythmen*, Op. 24, for piano duet, which makes use of variable metres and cross-rhythms, and explores, by way of *ricercari*, the expansion and compression of rhythm. The first performance of his Symphony, Op. 23, in Meiningen in 1903 was a milestone during this phase of his career: it was an enormous success, receiving subsequent performances in Berlin, Vienna, Warsaw, Amsterdam, St Petersburg and Moscow. The publication of three brief theoretical and practical treatises further enhanced his standing: his *Handbuch für Harmonie* (Zimmermann, Leipzig, 1901), *Aufgabenbuch für den einfachen Kontrapunkt* (Schlesinger-Lienau, Berlin, 1910) and *Anleitung zum Modulieren* (Schlesinger, Berlin, 1919). In 1911 the death of his wife coincided with his definitive nomination as professor of composition; at this time his students included such figures as Stefan Wolpe and the Bulgarian pianist and composer Pancho Vladigerov. A second marriage, in 1912, to Marie (also called Armande) Hegner-Güntherth (1874–1957), with whom he was to have a further three children, turned out to be highly significant, not least since it involved a return to his paternal roots: the wedding took place in Vevey on the north-eastern shore of Lake Geneva. During the First World War he was called up as an interpreter in a prisoner-of-war camp in Heiligenbeil, East Prussia, until 1918 (his mastery of several languages had already served him well in translating texts from Russian to German). In 1919 he was appointed a member of the prestigious Prussian Academy of Arts, and later, on 26 March 1929, he obtained the equally prestigious Beethoven Prize for lifetime achievement. In the works of his last period – the 1930s – a change occurred in his style. His retirement as a teacher in 1934, and emigration to Switzerland (where he was to die on 21 August 1940, in Vevey), may have been prompted by the advent of the Nazi regime in Germany, but this translocation does not explain the oblivion into which his work was later to fall and from which it still has not entirely awoken.

Vier Klavierstücke, Op. 65

Composed in 1915 and published the next year by Zimmermann in Leipzig, this short cycle bears witness to Juon's lyricism; here his refined feeling for contrast through simplicity enables him to create exquisite kaleidoscopes of sound. With the contradictory elements of the energetic, jubilant spirit of dance and the contained emotion of song, these four pieces become at times a murmur and at others a recitative, with archaic echoes heard with the nostalgia of distance.

From the very beginning of 'Heitere Weise' ('Cheerful Tune') [1] Juon achieves a rustic feeling and a genuine *Gemütlichkeit* thanks to a syncopated rhythm that suggests a gopák: it uses a motif of eight notes, partially repeated in canon, and abrupt and fragmented dynamic contrasts of the motif in addition to the use of fifths as a kind of recurrent idea. 'Schlummerlied' ('Lullaby') [2] offers a brief microcosm of intense beauty within the cradle-song tradition, tracing a delicate, almost ecstatic, slow dance. In the 'Exotisches Intermezzo' [3] Juon uses a composite rhythm ($\frac{3}{4}, \frac{4}{4}, \frac{2}{4}$) to structure this almost static piece, built on a melismatic melody and its repetitions in a psalmodic style, replete with echoes. The harmony of open fifths in the middle part reiterates the vocal, even choral, character. The closing 'Tanz' [4], marked 'Im Walzertakt', with its echoes of Tchaikovsky and Glazunov, sits within the grand Russian waltz-tradition; here Juon uses ascending and descending open intervals in a melodic pattern supported by harmonies of impeccable refinement and contrast.

Intime Harmonieen, Op. 30

These '12 Impromptus', published as *Intime Harmonieen* by Schlesinger in Berlin in 1905, display Juon's detailed and refined writing, especially in the internal voicing, and his accomplished sense of contrast. Many of them point to Russian musical folklore, treating familiar topoi with unusual tempos, metrical instability and what are, for Juon's musical language, harmonic extremes.

The first of the *Intime Harmonieen*, 'Wogen' ('Waves') [5], is a brief *tour de force* which requires the performer to generate an epic breadth and intensity close to the symphonic, in particular through abrupt leaps in the left hand, with the *legato* determined by an

undulating movement imitating the waves of the title, calmly at some moments and at others with the ferocity of a storm. Juon's narrative ability, making extensive use of fifths and enharmonics, is remarkable. The refined austerity of No. 2, 'Episode' [6], a succession of fifths with an appoggiatura in the lower register of the left hand, suggests a caravan approaching and then fading into the distance. The echoes of a hocket reinforce the archaic atmosphere. The delicate and mercurial 'Elfchen' [7], cast in a single time-signature, $\frac{3}{8}$, portrays one of the hobgoblins of Russian legend, its melodic discourse built on rhythmic and dynamic instability and restless movement. The first section of the 'Romantisches Wiegenlied' ('Romantic Lullaby') [8] is distinguished by a long melody made up of small phrases suggesting the sweet sound of a *gusli*, the ancient Russian zither; the piano-writing in the second part, in an unconventional $\frac{12}{8}$, recalls Brahms in its unexpected harmonies, progressions and freedom of timbre. No. 5, a 'Sonderbare Humoreske' ('Unusual Humoresque') [9], reveals Juon's sophisticated sense of humour in its complex, unstable and constant exuberance *quasi ad absurdum*. The apparent heterogeneity of its ternary structure is gainsaid by a tragic and disconnected coda. The sixth piece, an 'Intermezzo' [10], is directly inspired by folk-music: the chordal writing in both hands sometimes moves in parallel and sometimes antiphonally, as if to suggest three male and three female voices celebrating work in the fields. It thus foreshadows both Medtner and, perhaps less expectedly, music from the Soviet era, such as Mossolov's cycle for a *cappella* mixed choir, *Collective Farm Meadows*.

No. 7 of the *Intime Harmonieen*, 'Es geht die Sage' ('The Saying Goes') [11], which has nods to both Medtner and Lyapunov, is written with a clear antiphonal sense and a deliberately archaising widening of registers. Four statement-and-answer phrases hint at the formality of a ceremonial dance. The 'Kleine Tarantelle' which follows [12] opens with a *perpetuum mobile* marked by the repetition of four phrases and the use of fourths and fifths; the central section, by contrast, might be presenting a male-voice choir. In 'Sphinx' [13], the use of $\frac{5}{4}$ bars is perhaps related to dances of Alsatian origin in $\frac{5}{8}$, $\frac{8}{8}$ and even $\frac{11}{8}$ time – though quite why is not yet clear: it may be the result of Juon's explorations in rhythm. The reference to the slow movement of Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony or to the

third act of *The Sleeping Beauty* (the ‘Sapphire Fairy’ variation) is not accidental: Juon uses the same rhythm in several other works, such as the second movement of his Piano Quartet in D minor or the first episode of the ballet suite *Psyche*. Like every enigma, this piece outlines a riddle without offering a solution, setting the radiant luminosity of the middle section against a feeling of resignation at the end. No. 10, ‘Narretei’ (‘Foolishness’), evokes an entire era with an ironic and absurd melody that is constantly interrupted, with embellished scales and abrupt contrasts in which the pantomime of a ballroom dance appears. It finds some poise in its middle section, a quasi-mazurka with hints of Chopin. The echoes of the salons of the Belle Époque – very much to the taste of the great pianists of ‘the golden era of the piano’ in which it was written – link it to works such as Godowsky’s *Alt Wien*, Mischa Levitzki’s *Waltz in A minor*¹ and Moszkowski’s *Valse Mignonne*. No. 11, ‘Ruhige Liebe’ (‘Peaceful Love’) [15], is close to the spirit of late Liszt and shares fundamental features with Wagner’s and Richard Strauss’ soundworlds. The love of the title is expressed in an ambience that moves between calm and serenity, the discourse both contained and passionate. The last of the *Intime Harmonieen*, and the longest, ‘Zu Grabe tragen’ (‘Carrying to the Grave’) [16], is a lamentation of deep sincerity and intensity, presented in magnificent sonorities – it is almost a symphonic poem for piano. Four descending notes and a repetitive dotted rhythm at the beginning establish the mournful and insistent feeling of a *marche funèbre* that grows through a series of progressions until it reaches two climaxes and a coda which dissolves into nothingness. The sense of inevitability in a slow march – heard in triplet motifs with quavers (eighth-notes) over them – suggests the timbres of trumpets and trombones, enriched here by successions of tritones and minor seconds. The dynamic and harmonic extremes, and the vehemence of the emotion given utterance here, look forward to expressionism and build a bridge between late Liszt and Wagner and the music of Richard Strauss and Bartók.

¹ The complete piano works of Levitzki are recorded by Margarita Glebov on Toccata Classics TOCC 0334.

Moments Lyriques, Op. 56

The nine *Moments Lyriques* were published by Schlesinger in Berlin in 1913. They combine sonorities reminiscent of French musical symbolism with the Russian sounds encountered in the *Intime Harmonieen*, evoking in particular the regions of the Caucasus and eastern regions of what was to become the USSR. Restrained musical textures and the restricted use of agogic indications allow the performer some interpretative liberty in both tempo and dynamics. Nearly all the pieces use an uncluttered harmony that supports the narrative line, such as the use of fifths, with which Juon also suggests the legendary and archaic.

The deliberate simplicity and exquisite harmony of the opening 'Menuet' [17] comes close to the musical language of French composers such as Fauré and Roussel. In the outer sections the music floats weightlessly over the barlines, to which the vigorous central section, with its evocation of rustic bagpipes and drums, offers stark contrast. No. 2, 'Élégie' [18], opens with a chant-like figure in the left hand – introspective and lamenting – and suggests the sound of the guitar as it exploits the fifths typical of that instrument. The recitative of the central section, declamatory and exploratory at the same time, evokes speech. At the top of the 'Intermezzo' [19], Juon writes 'bassoon and flute', as a suggestion or guide to the sound that he wants, or perhaps he also had a possible instrumental version in mind using those instruments: two woodwind sections in constant dialogue, with a central section consisting of a brief march followed by a syncopated rhythmic cadenza with both hands in unison in different registers. This passage seems to recall Armenian dances such as the *tamzara* and the *shoorchpar* that he might have heard during his time in the Russian Orient. The opening bars of No. 4, 'Intimité' [20], which bears the marking *Amoroso*, have a three-beat structure which constantly dissolves, giving the impression of an imprecise slow waltz; and Juon suspends the third beat, so as to suggest the freedom of an improvisation. The central section, *Poco animato*, is dominated by an ostinato of intermittent but intense triplets, very close to the traditional sound of some Sufi chants, leading to a climactic section and a brief and introspective bridge that brings back the opening material. The apparent simplicity of No. 5, 'Bagatelle' [21], is reminiscent of the volatile intimacy of some of Grieg's

Lyrical Pieces, with a *martellato* of brief motifs that repeat and alternate playfully until the noble second section, *poco tranquillo*, written as a chorale or hymn that has just a suggestion of Scotland about it, probably by chance. The melodic writing and harmony of 'Nostalgie (Valse lente)' [22] has its basis in symbolism and impressionism, but also foreshadows the sounds of New Age music. The dialogue between the triple-time left-hand accompaniment and its silence when the melody begins in the right hand – perhaps one of the most original features of this piece – results in a bittersweet effect that suggests a musical carousel; the work continues to a climax using contrapuntal devices in augmentation. No. 7, an 'Étude' [23], is an exhilarating *perpetuum mobile* with some turns and intervals proper to the music of some regions of the Russian Caucasus and the stringed instruments of Azerbaijan, such as the *saz* and the *barbat* – relatives of the *oud* (Arabic lute). The piece requires that both hands maintain an unyielding and tenacious spirit, with open chords in contrary movement, and yet the execution must be *legato* throughout and the voices of the polyphonic texture held in tonal balance. The penultimate *Moment Lyrique*, a 'Berceuse' [24], begins in the left hand, with a brief and intermittent four-note ostinato in a recurrent circle of hypnotic character; it is then entwined with a profound and free-flowing melody: a distant and sweet lullaby like the Russian *kolibyelnaya*. This section is repeated with a descant until the more luminous middle section, the diaphanous textures of which might call to mind the movement of a troika in the snow. It is followed by a reprise of the first section before the piece vanishes as in a dream.

As in the *Intime Harmonieen*, the last² of these character pieces, No. 9, 'Cortège' [25], is a kind of processional. Although a feeling of conclusion is evident in its writing, there is also a link with the 'Menuet' that opened the cycle in the use of the same kind of chords in triads and the repetition of notes in the upper melody. The opening of the piece – built upon a little rhythmic-melodic motif – develops by gradually incorporating elements (mainly *pianissimo*) which undergo a gradual *crescendo* until they reach a

² The final work in the cycle, as published, a 'Chant Russe (Variations)', is open to inclusion or separate performance, and indeed may have been published with the other *Moments Lyriques* for purely practical reasons. It has been omitted from this recording for aesthetic reasons, being out of character with the other pieces in Op. 56, and will therefore be recorded later in this series.

fortissimo, from which it immediately recedes. The central section, a chorale of solemn beauty, is close to Russian Orthodox chant, and it returns before the piece concludes in a luminous C major.

A Personal Note

There are creators of sonorities in which silence plays an eloquent part – sonorities which open a path into an unsuspected personal identity. My encounter with the work of Paul Juon has been exemplary in that sense; it has been a powerful and original inspiration born of his extraordinary musical sincerity and conviction. The spontaneity of his invention arises from profound musical knowledge and freedom of expression, and manifests itself in an extraordinary melodic inspiration, which makes the oblivion into which this prolific composer has fallen all the more surprising.

Juon's worklist contains 99 opus numbers – and some of these opera consist of several extensive and diverse cycles – and presents a wide spectrum of unusual sounds, particularly where rhythm and harmony are concerned. They point to an individual personality, one which resists simple classification. As I explored his corpus of chamber music, solo-piano output, symphonic works and concertos, I was astounded by the huge emotional range of his musical language, which is always personal and powerful, and I discovered in his writing an agogic liberty with a feeling close to improvisation. It sits alongside his constant use of imitative counterpoint – which is never used in a rigid or obvious way and mixes with the frequent use of elements taken from folk-music, whether by way of inspiration or the direct incorporation of irregular bars, complex metres and cross-rhythms. And although Juon remains within the late-Romantic tradition, his constant harmonic exploration pushes at the boundaries of tonality – which at times leads him to experiment with form and structure in a manner remarkable for his times.

Paul Juon's music is a crucible in which the various musical languages of his convulsed times amalgamate with an exploration of more distant sound-cultures. In this unique stylistic mix one can discern a hint of new currents, arising both from tradition and from influences more peculiar to him. No particular aspect of this heterogeneity – whether as a folklorist or theorist, as a Romantic, Modernist or Impressionist – is dominant in

his musical language. That also makes it difficult to talk in simple terms about his final place in the history of music. Indeed, the difficulties in pigeon-holing Juon begin with his origins and national identity: Russian, German or Swiss? Born and brought up in Russia, he spent most of his life in Berlin and finally, although granted Swiss nationality through his paternal ancestry, he remained something of an outsider in his country of adoption. During his final residence in Vevey from 1934 until his death in 1940, he received no recognition at all, nor was he invited to join the Swiss composers' union. Only very recently, thanks to the efforts of the late Thomas Badrutt in compiling and classifying Juon's output, and the promotional work of the International Juon Society that Badrutt founded,³ has interest begun to grow. His music shares a spiritual lineage with such Russian composers as Medtner and Mussorgsky and, like theirs, it has a narrative character that points to the oral traditions of legends and traditional tales.

The Mexican pianist **Rodolfo Ritter** has established himself as one of the most remarkable musicians to have emerged from Latin America in recent years, being recognised especially for his unusually broad repertoire and his poetic, eloquent sound. His commitment to strengthening Mexico's cultural image is evident from countless performances worldwide, with premieres of Mexican works included alongside mainstream repertoire. Since his debut with the National Symphony Orchestra of Mexico (OSN) in 2003, with the Brahms First Concerto, Rodolfo Ritter has been a frequent soloist with most of the major Mexican orchestras, performing the complete piano concertos of Bartók, Brahms, Rachmaninov, Shostakovich and Stravinsky, as well as less-well-known concertos by Martínů, Miguel Galvéz-Taroncher and Xavier Scharwenka, alongside the world premieres of the Second Piano Concerto by Manuel Ponce, the Ricardo Castro Piano Concerto and the Second and Third Piano Concertos by Gonzalo Curiel, works which he has also recorded – Ponce for Sterling and Curiel for Toccata Classics.



³ Its website can be found at www.juon.org.

His other recordings include three volumes of an anthology of Mexican *concertante* and symphonic works with the Sinfónica de San Luis Potosí on the Sterling label, featuring the piano concertos of Castro and Ponce. And his release *Primer Piano*, on the Mexican label Tempus, presented solo-piano repertoire by Bach-Busoni, Buxtehude-Prokofiev, Bartók, Brahms, Marcello-Bach and Rachmaninov. Future recording plans include the concertos by Carlos Chávez, Arnulfo Miramontes, José Pomar and José F. Vásquez and solo-piano works by the German Woldemar Bargiel and Hungarian Emanuel Moór.

Rodolfo Ritter first came to national prominence in 2003, when he won first prize, a gold medal and a number of special prizes in the Angélica Morales-Yamaha Competition and the Parnassòs International Piano Competition, including the audience prize. In 2008 he became the youngest member of the Concertistas de Bellas Artes, the most prominent cultural institution in Mexico, and was recently nominated a Yamaha Artist.

His solo performances, averaging around 50 a year, have taken him to many countries: Austria, Canada, Cuba, Denmark, Ecuador, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and the United States. He is also a frequent concerto soloist and chamber musician, and presents an online programme, *La Vida Secreta*, on Código CDMX Radio Cultural en Línea, which includes classical discoveries and interviews with composers, directors and performers. An all-round musician, he also composes piano and chamber music for short films, produces recordings and arranges Mexican traditional music.

Rodolfo Ritter studied with the composer Gustavo Morales and Andrés Oseguera before completing his formal studies at the Escuela Superior de Música in Mexico City under Yleana Bautista. Further studies took him to Austria, Germany and Israel, where he received invaluable advice from Valery Afanassiev, Victor Derevianko, Rudolf Kehrer, Jorge Luis Prats, Ferenc Rados and György Sándor.



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This album is dedicated
to Lhú Cortés.

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In memoriam Zaeth Ritter

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