

A photograph of Ronald Stevenson, an older man with white hair, wearing a light-colored shirt, smiling and playing a grand piano. The lighting is dramatic, with the piano and his hands highlighted against a dark background.

# Ronald STEVENSON

## PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME FOUR

L'ART NOUVEAU DU CHANT APPLIQUÉ AU PIANO  
ROMANCE (FROM CHARPENTIER'S 'LOUISE')  
SUITE FROM PADEREWSKI'S 'MANRU'  
SONG WITHOUT WORDS  
NINE HAIKU

Christopher Guild

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

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## RONALD STEVENSON Piano Music, Volume Four

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<b><i>Suite from Paderewski's 'Manru'</i> (1961)*</b>	<b>15:08</b>
1 I Introduction and Gipsy March	4:22
2 II Gipsy Song	3:43
3 III Lullaby	2:56
4 IV Cracovienne	4:07
5 <b><i>Song without Words</i> (1988)*</b>	<b>2:12</b>
<b><i>Nine Haiku</i> (1971, arr. 2006)*</b>	<b>13:53</b>
6 No. 1 Dedication	1:06
7 No. 2 The Fly	0:50
8 No. 3 Gone Away	2:05
9 No. 4 Nocturne	1:29
10 No. 5 Master and Pupil	0:40
11 No. 6 Spring	1:27
12 Interlude: The Blossoming Cherry (Aubade)	2:12
13 No. 7 Curfew	1:23
14 No. 8 Hiroshima	0:43
15 No. 9 Epilogue	1:58
16 <b>CHARPENTIER: <i>Louise – Romance</i> (c. 1970)*</b>	<b>3:10</b>

<b>L'Art Nouveau du chant appliqué au piano (1980–88)</b>	<b>40:53</b>
<b>Volume One</b>	<b>20:44</b>
17 No. 1 COLERIDGE-TAYLOR: Eléanore (1980)	3:53
18 No. 2 WHITE: So We'll Go No More A-Roving (1980)	5:52
19 No. 3 MEYERBEER: Romance: Plus blanche que la plus blanche hermine ( <i>Les Huguenots</i> ) (1975)	5:42
20 No. 4 RACHMANINOV: In the Silent Night (1982)	3:17
21 No. 5 BRIDGE: Go not, happy day! (1980)	2:00
<b>Volume Two</b>	<b>10:09</b>
22 No. 1 NOVELLO: Fly Home, Little Heart (?1980)	3:03
23 No. 2 NOVELLO: We'll Gather Lilacs (1980)	4:23
24 No. 3 COLERIDGE-TAYLOR: Demande et Réponse ( <i>Hiawatha</i> ) (1981)	1:28
25 No. 4 ROMBERG: Will you remember? ( <i>Maytime</i> , 'Sweethearts') (1988)	1:15
<b>Volume Three*</b>	<b>10:00</b>
26 No. 1 FOSTER: Jeanie with the light brown hair (1980)	2:44
27 No. 2 FOSTER: Come where my love lies dreaming (1980)	4:27
28 No. 3 FOSTER: Beautiful Dreamer (1980)	2:49
<b>Christopher Guild, piano</b>	<b>TT 75:17</b>

FIRST RECORDINGS\*

# SONGS WITHOUT WORDS

by Christopher Guild

‘It is by the force of melody, and not of harmony,  
that a work endures successfully through all ages’

–Sigismond Thalberg, 1853<sup>1</sup>

‘Melody is the profile of music’

–Ronald Stevenson, 1988<sup>2</sup>

This album presents a selection of Ronald Stevenson’s piano music which has the voice at its heart: operatic excerpts, transcriptions of songs, and an original piece of piano music of a lyrical nature.

Of all the influences on Stevenson as both a composer and pianist – Busoni, Paderewski, Grainger and more – none had more of a lasting impact than, as he put it simply, his father’s singing: ‘my father was an amateur tenor. I owe him practically everything in music.’<sup>3</sup> Although not a professional musician (he was a railway fireman), Stevenson senior made music a mainstay of daily life in the family home. It was common for him and his two sons to sing round the piano, most often popular songs of the day. Scottish and Irish folk-ballads, *Irish Melodies* by Thomas Moore<sup>4</sup> and favourites from operas by the Irish composers Michael William Balfe and William Vincent Wallace, made their appearances,<sup>5</sup> but perhaps the most enduring thing of all was the sound of Stevenson senior singing John McCormack songs.<sup>6</sup> By the age of eight, Ronald, the younger of the two sons, had been set to piano lessons

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *L’Art du Chant appliqué au piano*, Op. 70 (Cramer, Beale & Co., London, 1853), pp. i–ii, as quoted by Ateş Orga in ‘The Piano Music’, *Ronald Stevenson: The Man and His Music*, ed. Colin Scott-Sutherland, Toccata Press, London, 2005, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Malcolm MacDonald in *Ronald Stevenson*, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, 1988, pp. 10–11.

<sup>3</sup> Stevenson in conversation with Michael Oliver, *Music Weekly*, BBC Radio 3, 16 December 1979.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> MacDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Information from Marjorie Stevenson via an e-mail from Martin Anderson, 29 November 2019.

(at first unwillingly) with a local music-teacher, and had soon reached a standard where he was able to accompany his father. The music they played and sang together became a cornerstone for the boy's musical thinking. It is rare to find a concert pianist of the stature Stevenson achieved who is willing to make the most sophisticated and brilliant transcriptions of light music of the inter-War years and earlier, alongside those of more 'serious' works. What he committed to paper is, surely, on a par with the finest transcriptions heard in the nineteenth-century concert hall.<sup>7</sup>

Ronald Stevenson, who was born in Blackburn in 1928, attended the Royal Manchester College of Music (RMCM) between 1946 and 1949, shortly before the 'New Music Manchester' group (which included Peter Maxwell Davies, Alexander Goehr and others) was formed. Although Stevenson knew these composers, and was a close friend of John Ogdon, one of its most prominent members, the avant-garde music they wrote and discussed never interested him; he maintained that, after the Second World War, music was going through a period of experimentation for its own sake. He strongly agreed with Schoenberg's dictum that there was 'still plenty of good music to be written in C major'.<sup>8</sup>

Where he slaked his thirst for the 'unfashionable' music of a fading era was in the Henry Watson Music Library in Manchester. Here he would spend hours discovering music of some importance which simply wasn't being heard, because it was then unfashionable. And since the Leipzig headquarters of Breitkopf & Hartel had been bombed out, and there was a post-War paper shortage, there were few opportunities to acquire copies of scores. Stevenson therefore spent hours in the library, meticulously copying out the music in which he was interested.<sup>9</sup> Marjorie Stevenson, his widow,

<sup>7</sup> Stevenson made countless more song-transcriptions, of the widest, least-expected range of composers. That he played them a lot at home and yet never wrote them down is a serious loss to posterity.

<sup>8</sup> Schoenberg to his composition class at the University of California, Los Angeles, as quoted in Dika Newlin, 'Secret Tonality in Schoenberg's Piano Concerto', *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn–Winter 1974), p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Stevenson discovered the score of Busoni's *Doktor Faust* as part of this trawl for interesting music. When he opened it, after settling into an empty train compartment on a foggy evening in the late 1940s, the work changed his life: Busoni became his *magister in absentia*. Stevenson was also among the few mid-twentieth-century pianists to know Busoni's *Clavierübung* intimately, having copied it out in detail for himself. He soon became one of the world's foremost Busoni scholars.

believes that it was probably in this manner that he discovered Paderewski's only opera, *Manru*.<sup>10</sup>

To this day, *Manru*, premiered in 1901, has received few performances – and it is, after all, a huge financial gamble for an opera company or symphony orchestra to put on a rare large-scale work, which means that such music is likely to be heard only very infrequently. Stevenson, never one to follow trends in music, would always do what he could to promote something if he felt it to be of real quality in its own right. The most straightforward solution for him was to transcribe whatever he wanted to hear for piano solo, so that he could hear it by playing it for himself. He performed these acts of restitution throughout his life, and sometimes performed the resulting transcriptions in recital.<sup>11</sup>

*Manru*, a tragedy, is set in the Tatra mountains in southern Poland and tells the story of a village girl, Ulana, and her love for the gypsy whose name gives the opera its title. Stevenson's *Suite from Paderewski's 'Manru'* (1961) takes four of the highlights of the opera and presents them in a balanced and vibrant recital work, although not one which follows the development of the plot. The 'Introduction and Gypsy March' [1] begins the concert suite, and the first motif also opens the opera (played in a lower key by solo oboe). Here, Hedwig – Ulana's mother – is bemoaning the fact that her daughter has run away with the gypsy, despite Hedwig's admonition and attempts at dissuasion. The 'Gypsy March' comes much later, in Act III. The 'Gypsy Song' [2] is based on the music of the fiddler Jogu, one of Manru's band of gypsies. It is the sound of the fiddle, heard from afar, that lures Manru back to the gypsy life after he – uncertainly – renounces it in favour of staying with Ulana. The band of gypsies, heard from afar, play the music of the 'Gypsy March' which makes up the remainder of the first piece in the piano suite. 'Lullaby' [3], a soprano aria, is sung in the first scene of Act II by Ulana to her child; Manru is present, struggling between his love for her and his desire to

<sup>10</sup> Ignaz Jan Paderewski (1860–1941) – pianist, composer, briefly Prime Minister of Poland and the highest-earning classical musician of all time – was Stevenson's pianist idol. He hugely admired Paderewski's melodic gift, and often performed his works in recital. There was also a striking physical resemblance between the two men.

<sup>11</sup> Such as when he transcribed Percy Grainger's *Hill Song* No. 1, featured on Volume Three of this series (Toccat Classics TOCC 0403).

rejoin the gypsies. The final ‘Cracovienne’ [4] (or ‘Krakowiak’ in the original Polish), a choral number, is a very fast, lively dance in duple time native to Kraków and to the wider region historically called Małopolska. Stevenson adds a little signature touch in the dissonances (clashing minor seconds) when the melody is repeated after its opening statement. He does something similar in his ‘Scottish’ works when he emulates the bagpipes – as, occasionally, did Bartók. The intention here is not to ‘Scotify’ Paderewski, but to make the music sound more suitably rustic when heard on the piano.

*Song without Words* [5] is the only complete work here which is not a transcription. It was written for Martin Anderson, a close friend of Stevenson’s for some four decades, as he explains:

Ronald’s *Song without Words* was written as a kind of Valentine’s card. In autumn 1987 I moved to Paris to work at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Since the staff there numbered around 2,000, drawn from all (then) 24 member countries, you can imagine that there was a fairly active social life, and at a party of colleagues I met a fellow Scot, a very beautiful blonde lady by the name of Morven, for whom I developed a considerable shine. Since the feeling wasn’t mutual (the fact that I remembered the details of a chance meeting in London a decade earlier impressed her – but not enough) and as her birthday was coming up, I thought something more grandiose, and more personal, than the standard bunch of flowers was called for. I explained the situation to Ronald and asked if he might be prepared to write something very short for the occasion – something straightforward that she might even be able to play herself. Ronald generously obliged and wrote his *Song without Words* for the occasion (hence the quotation of ‘Happy Birthday’), and I duly presented it to the object of my affections. Unfortunately, it had the opposite effect from that intended: she felt the gesture so overstepped the line that it sank my cause, and I was left with the considerable consolation that I had at least called the piece into being. I never had the heart to tell Ronald of the outcome – and if you had told me that 30 years later I would be releasing its first recording on my own label, I would have looked at you with dumb amazement.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> E-mail from Martin Anderson, 28 August 2019.

The *Nine Haiku* [6]–[15] offer an example of Stevenson transcribing one of his own works – a cycle of songs written in 1971 to poems of the Bashō school in translations by Keith Bosley, Bashō being a master poet of seventeenth-century Japan. Stevenson wrote a brief programme note for the recording made by the Artsong Collective,<sup>13</sup> where he explained that ‘the haiku consists of three lines of five, seven and five syllables respectively. This suggested the use of pentatonic and heptatonic scales, completing a twelve-note sound spectrum.’ Both of these scales are used in Japanese traditional music, and so, as well as having an intellectual relevance to the form of poetry set, it gives the music an authentic flavour.

Stevenson’s original cycle was dedicated to the song-composer Norman Peterkin; the piano transcription was written at the request of the pianist Chisato Kusunoki. Kusunoki attended the 2006 summer gathering of the Ronald Stevenson Society at the Cathedral of the Isles, Millport, Great Cumbrae, an island in the Firth of Clyde, on the west coast of Scotland. She had asked Stevenson if he would consider writing her a piece. By this time Stevenson was 78 and no longer writing new music, and so, instead, he provided Kusunoki with a transcription of the *Nine Haiku*. Little has been changed between original and transcription, other than the register of the melody in places so that it can be better accommodated between the pianist’s hands amidst the original accompaniments. (The ‘Aubade’ [12] was an interlude for piano solo and retains its original form here.) Stevenson adds a brief preface: ‘Liszt and D’Albert included poetry text of their published piano transcriptions. This practice is followed here in my Haiku transcriptions to enable the pianist to become a vocalist as it were in cantabile pianism’<sup>14</sup> – an idea that will be even more relevant in considering *L’Art Nouveau du chant appliqué au piano*.

Just as opera was rarely a part of a working-class family’s musical diet (although Stevenson himself had the operatic highlights of Wallace and Balfe and the songs of McCormack ringing in his ears as a boy), it was a long time before working people furnished the main characters on the operatic stage. As Marjorie Stevenson wrote to me in 2019,

<sup>13</sup> *Sing a Song of Seasons: Song Cycles by Ronald Stevenson*, Musaeus MZCD100, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Stevenson, *Nine Haiku*, The Ronald Stevenson Society, Edinburgh, 2006, p. 2.



Ronald said that Bizet's *Carmen* and Charpentier's *Louise* were the first operas to attempt to portray something of a working class society. Hitherto, opera was of the Court, or of mythology as with Wagner. We have to wait until Berg's *Wozzeck*, Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* and Alan Bush's *The Sugar Reapers* before there is a radical move in class subject matter.<sup>15</sup>

– or, as some might put it, plots with ‘everyday working people’ at their core. *Louise* is a portrayal of working-class life in Paris, and tells the story of its heroine, a seamstress, and her love for Julien, an artist. The libretto is by Charpentier himself,<sup>16</sup> with contributions by the French symbolist poet Saint-Pol-Roux (the *nom de plume* of the Marseille-born Pierre-Paul Roux, 1861–1940). Premiered in 1900 at the Salle Favart in Paris, the opera has enjoyed fairly continuous success in performance and was widely acclaimed during Charpentier's lifetime.<sup>17</sup> The short ‘Romance’ [16], a transcription of the love duet ‘Depuis le jour’ from the beginning of the Third Act, was made by Stevenson around 1970 and dedicated to Marjorie. In the opera, the lovers sing of their happiness and love for each other upon having just moved into a cottage of their own, overlooking Paris.

The three published volumes of Stevenson's *L'Art Nouveau du chant appliqué au piano* are modelled on a collection of 22 pieces by the Swiss-born composer-pianist Sigismond Thalberg (1812–71), *L'Art du chant appliqué au piano*, written in 1853–63. Thalberg was one of the pianists who revolutionised piano-playing in the Romantic era: alongside Franz Liszt, he enlarged and extended what had been considered the limits of piano technique. Here it is worth underlining the difference between the piano and the human voice, along with bowed string, brass and woodwind instruments. On, say, the violin, one can play a note and hold it for as long as one chooses; when one reaches the end of the bow, one ‘changes bow’ – for example, a violinist playing on

<sup>15</sup> E-mail from Marjorie Stevenson, dated 1 March 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Gustave Charpentier (1860–1956), French composer whose work both anticipated Puccini's *verismo* style and recalls Wagner through use of *leitmotif*; comparisons to Gounod are also made. A bohemian figure with a contempt for authority, Charpentier envisaged a number of operas ‘for the people’ which were never completed.

<sup>17</sup> Also noteworthy is that it launched the career of the soprano Mary Garden.

a down-bow can seamlessly change to an up-bow to continue the sound. Singers can sustain a single note for as long as they can sustain a single breath; ditto woodwind- and brass-players – some even employ a technique called circular breathing to be able to extend the length of time that can be given to a note or phrase without stopping to breathe. All these musicians have the option of changing an aspect of a held single note as it is sounding: they can *crescendo* or *diminuendo*, quickly or slowly, according to the desired expression, and can use vibrato at will to add warmth to the note. But pianos, because they are percussion instruments, don't allow for any such flexibility. Once the key has been struck and the hammer has done its bidding, the strings vibrate until either the key is lifted and the damper has returned to its resting place on the string, stopping the note, or until the note has died away of its own accord. A freely vibrating string cannot be manipulated. The harpsichord, the guitar and the harp all have the same characteristic. In the nineteenth century especially, there were many developments, both in terms of keyboard facility and pedalling, which aimed to transcend the percussive nature of the piano, to create both an orchestral sound (a much-enlarged tonal range, in terms of both variegated timbre and sheer volume) and a singing tone, where required. All of them were aided by the technological advances in piano design and manufacture, and once steel-framed pianos had been introduced, it was much easier to deliver a crashing *fortissimo* in contrast to the most spectral *pianissimo*.

*L'Art du chant appliqué au piano* can be viewed as a statement about the future of piano-playing and how the instrument should be approached. It consists entirely of Thalberg's transcriptions of various songs and arias, all drawn from a wide historical window: Beethoven, Bellini, Donizetti, Mozart, Pergolesi, Rossini, Schubert and Weber are only a few of the thirteen composers who appear in the collection, along with an example each of Welsh and Neapolitan folksong. It should be obvious why there are no original piano pieces: the *raison d'être* of the exercise is to cultivate sonorities (or an illusion thereof) beyond the limitations of the piano, and a pianist will – and arguably can only – aspire to this ideal when playing music conceived for orchestral or vocal forces. Thalberg includes a preface to the work in which he advises

the pianist on the best ways of cultivating a singing tone. Crucially, the last piece of advice he offers is: ‘Listen to good singers, and learn to sing yourself’.<sup>18</sup>

Stevenson’s *L’Art Nouveau du chant appliqué au piano* can be seen as a statement of his own musical values. It is clear, for example, that he believes that music can wear its heart on its sleeve, and be unashamedly romantic if it wants to be – a view held in the period after the Second World War, when emotion in contemporary composition (let alone his much-prized element of melody) was vehemently rejected. By this time, transcription, and even composition, had ceased to be a *de facto* part of a pianist’s vocation. Transcription was no longer considered a serious medium. Even when Stevenson made these transcriptions, between 1980 and 1988, at the beginning of a more liberal era in classical music, he still felt it necessary to make a statement against the status quo of the contemporary musical establishment. That Stevenson had been able to listen regularly to a good singer at home, in childhood, is not fortuitous. He takes up Thalberg’s cause in his own way, as he explains in the Foreword: ‘My title for this series of transcriptions – “L’Art Nouveau du chant appliqué au Piano” – pays tribute to Thalberg’s series of transcriptions which title I have appropriated, adding the word “nouveau”’. He then continues to outline his own thoughts on how to make the piano ‘sing’, acknowledging how much of his approach he learnt through assimilating the technique of his former teacher at the RMCM, the Russian pianist Iso Elinson. Such intense focus on the production of sound, Stevenson felt, was something lacking among many modern pianists. *L’Art Nouveau* is Stevenson’s statement against ‘the modern fashion for superficial digital brilliance’, as he saw it, in piano-playing.<sup>19</sup> In presenting three short volumes of song and opera transcriptions, he is offering the modern pianist the chance to cultivate an aspect of pianism which he valued, perhaps above all else.

But sonority is only part of it. Rhetorical flourish and timing are just as important to the singer, and thus should be just as important to the pianist in emulating the

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Hamilton’s translation, in his *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p. 160.

<sup>19</sup> Foreword (dated July 1998) to *L’Art Nouveau du chant appliqué au piano*, The Ronald Stevenson Society, Edinburgh, 2002, p. 2.

manner of singing. Rubato, and flexibility with and within a melodic line, are necessary to the purpose of conveying a more human, *parlando* (speaking) quality, and not only in *recitativo* passages.<sup>20</sup> A practice technique among singers is to speak the words of a song by themselves (without pitch) so as to get the sense of the natural rhythm and cadence of the text. Pianists can do this, too, which is why Stevenson wrote the text of the Haiku songs into his *Nine Haiku*.<sup>21</sup>

The three volumes of *L'Art Nouveau* take in the music of Stevenson's youth: the late-Romantic era of high art and the light music (the 'pop' music) of the inter-War years. The whole set is noteworthy for the sheer respect and admiration Stevenson expresses for songs from, for instance, the earliest Broadway musical (*Maytime*) and to examples by Ivor Novello and Stephen Foster: he treats them with the same sophistication as when setting Meyerbeer and Rachmaninov, composers of what most perceive as 'high art'. All of the songs he transcribes here are largely sentimental, their muse being adoration or nostalgia.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Hamilton, a fellow champion of Stevenson's piano music, corroborates this approach in his book *After the Golden Age*, *op. cit.* He mentions that even J. S. Bach sought to emulate the human voice – and that would have been on the harpsichord, a keyboard instrument with no means of differentiating tone; it would all have had to have been done with timing. *Parlando* would have been a mainstay of keyboard-playing in this era (*After the Golden Age*, *op. cit.*, p. 140).

<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps a little curious, then, that Stevenson did not write the words of any of the songs in *L'Art Nouveau* into his scores – but this omission should not preclude any pianist from doing his or her own research.

<sup>22</sup> Even though *L'Art Nouveau* had been published in 2002, Stevenson still seems to have viewed its contents as fluid. When Martin Anderson compiled the worklist that was published in *Ronald Stevenson: The Man and his Music* three years later, he added a footnote (on p. 434) stating that:

The final form of *L'Art Nouveau du Chant appliqué au Piano*, described by Stevenson as 'an appendix to Thalberg' and bearing the explanatory subtitle 'Piano Transcriptions of Victorian and Edwardian Songs being Études in the Lost Art of bel canto piano-playing by Ronald Stevenson', is as follows:

No. 1: 'Scenes that are Brightest' – after W. Vincent Wallace for left-hand solo

No. 2: 'In Happy Moments Day by Day' – after W. Vincent Wallace for left-hand solo

No. 3: 'Come where my Love Lies Dreaming' – after Stephen Foster

No. 4: 'Beautiful Dreamer' – after Stephen Foster

No. 5: 'Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair' – after Stephen Foster

Stevenson often exploits the tenor register: it is a particularly sonorous area of the piano. It may, of course, also refer – consciously or otherwise – to that earliest and most important influence on him musically, his father’s singing. Not that the principal melodic line in each piece is fixed in the tenor register: it changes, frequently. Doing so helps create variety in ‘orchestration’: it means the figurations and counterpoint that embrace the tune must also change, which helps vary tone-colour. Stevenson uses these devices in transcribing strophic songs so that, in the absence of words, a piano transcription can maintain a sense of narrative and progression, avoiding the repetitiveness from which a literal piano reduction would suffer.

A good example is the first song in the set, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor’s ‘Eléanore’ <sup>[17]</sup> (the last of the Six Songs, Op. 37), a setting of a poem by Eric Mackay. Each verse explores a different pianistic texture, and in the case of the second and third, presents the melody in the tenor, then the upper treble register. ‘So We’ll Go No More

No. 6: ‘When Other Lips’ – after Balfe

No. 7: ‘Go Not, Happy Day’ – after Bridge

No. 8: ‘Eléanore’ – after Coleridge-Taylor

No. 9: ‘So We’ll Go No More A-Roving’ – after Maude Valérie White

No. 10: ‘Demande et Réponse’ – after Coleridge-Taylor

No. 11: ‘La Mattinata’ – after Leoncavallo

No. 12: ‘My Lagan Love’ – after Hamilton Harty

No. 13: ‘In the Silent Night’ – after Rachmaninov

No. 14: ‘At Dawning’ – after Cadman

No. 15: ‘Kathleen Mavourneen’ – after J. Nicholls Crouch

No. 16: ‘Fenesta Vascia’ – Neapolitan Song

No. 17: ‘Spring Waters’ – after Rachmaninov

No. 18: ‘Sylvia’ – after Oley Speaks

No. 19: ‘Si mes vers avaient des ailes!’ (‘If my rhymes were only winged!’) – after Reynaldo Hahn

No. 20: ‘The White Peace’ – after Bax.

Intriguingly, only eight of the transcriptions published in *L’Art Nouveau* in 2002 recur in this later list. But Stevenson didn’t much care for the sort of precision that fuels musicological debate. When Martin Anderson, who often stayed with the Stevensons to bring in the New Year, discovered – under the bed in the guest room – the transcription of a song by Ernst Hermann Meyer that had escaped mention in his catalogue, he asked Stevenson about it. Stevenson just shrugged and said: ‘Oh, yes – so that’s where it went’ (information from Martin Anderson, 26 November 2019).

A-Roving' [18], a setting of Byron, is one of the best-known songs of Maude Valérie White (1855–1937). Byron's nostalgic poem is one of 'moving on', the impossibility of perpetuating a romance that cannot continue, or perhaps of accepting the inevitability of aging. 'Romance: Plus blanche que la plus blanche hermine' [19] is from *Les Huguenots*, a grand opera by Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864), the plot of which is based on the love of a Protestant woman and a Catholic man in sixteenth-century France and culminates in the St Bartholomew's Day massacre of 1572. This transcription is perhaps the most pianistically varied of all in *L'Art Nouveau*, including a long passage (at the very beginning) for left hand alone. 'In the Silent Night' [20] is the third of Rachmaninov's *Six Romances*, Op. 4, originally setting a text by Afanasy Fet; and 'Go not, happy day!' [21] transcribes Frank Bridge's setting of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The Bridge transcription is dedicated 'to the evergreen memory of Ben Britten and Kate Ferrier'. Stevenson has retained Bridge's perpetual swirling piano accompaniment figure.

Volume 2 begins with two Ivor Novello songs. To 'Fly Home, Little Heart' [22], Stevenson appends the following footnote:

The verse is transcribed as an arpeggio-study with a Delian 'bird'-motive thrown in. The chorus is transcribed as a Graingeresque study in sonority [...]. What a beautiful melody is this chorus! It consists of the purest open intervals: octave, fifth, fourth, second and third; seldom a sixth, never a seventh. It is a pure skyscape of melody: a masterpiece.<sup>23</sup>

Stevenson's rising arpeggio motif, like a gesture of releasing a bird from the cup of one's hands, is constant throughout, and the temporal space required for this motif to speak means that the transcription must have more breadth than the brisk original. 'We'll Gather Lilacs' [23] is also as much Stevenson as it is Novello: the accompaniment figure here is taken directly from the accompaniment of Rachmaninov's song 'Lilacs', and fits the former as if Novello had conceived it thus. Insightful connections of this sort are a trademark of Stevenson's art. 'Demande et Réponse' [24] is an instrumental interlude from Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's oratorio *Hiawatha*, and is the only piece in *L'Art Nouveau* which isn't a song – although it is expansively song-like in nature. Stevenson adds an

<sup>23</sup> Dated 4 December 1983, and published in Ronald Stevenson, *L'Art Nouveau du chant appliqué au piano*, loc. cit., p. 2.

inner melodic part (in fact, the melody set in canon an octave below), turning this piece into the ‘miniature waltz in canon-form’ that the subtitle identifies. He does the same thing in ‘Will you remember? (Sweethearts)’ [25] from *Maytime*.

Volume 3 contains three songs by Stephen Foster (1826–64), the self-taught musician who is regarded as a father figure in American music. His output consisted of songs for blackface minstrel shows (his lyrics for the famous Christy Minstrels being consciously more respectful towards African-Americans, the subject of these shows, than many similar songs at the time) and sentimental songs ‘of the hearth and home’,<sup>24</sup> such as the three songs Stevenson sets here: ‘Jeanie with the light brown hair’ (1854) [26], ‘Come where my love lies dreaming’ (1855) [27] and ‘Beautiful Dreamer’ (1864) [28]. Again, one can hear how Stevenson uses each verse as an opportunity to explore different pianistic sonorities and textures.

Seen in its entirety, *L’Art Nouveau du chant appliqué au piano* offers an unusually distinctive set of pieces. Malcolm MacDonald put it best when he said that Stevenson had

in a sense, returned to his roots, to the parlour in Blackburn, to that childhood fusion of piano tone and [his father’s] tenor voice as the cardinal symbol of music that reaches the heart [...]. One wonders if there is another composer [...] who would be able to adorn, en-halo, enflower this particular repertoire as Stevenson has done, wholly without satirical intent, even apparently without irony [...]. It is the very *unblushingness* of Stevenson’s delight in unwrapping these melodic sweetmeats of yesteryear that undermines our own attempts at sophistication.<sup>25</sup>

The same holds true for the rest of the music on this album. Stevenson’s close interest in Paderewski was rare indeed in the years after the Second World War; rare, too, that a composer outwith eastern Europe should endeavour to transcribe what was, in 1961, a fairly obscure opera.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> ‘Foster, Stephen C[ollins]’, *The Grove Concise Dictionary of Music*, ed. Stanley Sadie, Macmillan, London, 1980, p. 285.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 92–93.

<sup>26</sup> The first complete recording was released (by the Polish label Dux) only in 2004.

It is true that one's feeling for certain types of music is often the result of one's earliest experiences. It can be the music which one grew up listening to, and one's earliest experiences can have the most profound and lasting influence on a composer's mind: in childhood, the brain is far more pliable and receptive than in later life. So it makes sense that the human voice, that of his father, is an underlying influence on Ronald Stevenson's work: essentially, it was the voice of home, the voice of his roots, and the sounds of his earliest memories which both informed how he wrote and played, as well as what.

**Christopher Guild** is becoming increasingly well known for his work on the piano music of Scotland and the rest of the British Isles. Hailing from the Speyside region of Moray, he has performed as soloist and chamber musician at some of the most prestigious concert venues in the UK, including the Wigmore Hall, St John's, Smith Square, the Purcell Room and the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

Following studies at St Mary's Music School, Edinburgh, and with Andrew Ball at the Royal College of Music, London, Chris' career was launched with invitations to tour the UK under the auspices of the Countess of Munster Musical Trust Recital Scheme; and to perform on the South Bank in London as a Park Lane Group Young Artist. While still a student, he performed as an orchestral keyboardist with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and City of London Sinfonia.

He has worked with numerous composers, among them Judith Weir, and co-founded the Edison Ensemble, a contemporary-music group based in London. Following a year's tenure as the Richard Carne Junior Fellow in Performance at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Chris went on to become Head of Instrumental Music at the Godolphin School in Wiltshire. He is now a visiting teacher at several schools, including Millfield, Salisbury Cathedral, Reigate Grammar and Graveney School, and is on the permanent staff at Junior Trinity in London. He lectured on Francis George Scott and Ronald Stevenson at the Musica Scotica Annual Conference in 2019, and has written articles on Scottish classical music for *iScot* magazine.

This is Chris' sixth album for Toccata Classics, and he has recorded also for Champs Hill Records. Writing in *International Record Review* Calum MacDonald was unstinting in his





praise of *Ronald Center: Instrumental and Chamber Music, Volume One* (Toccata Classics TOCC 0179): ‘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’.

[www.christopherguild.co.uk](http://www.christopherguild.co.uk)

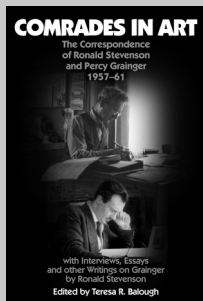
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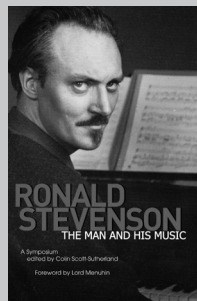
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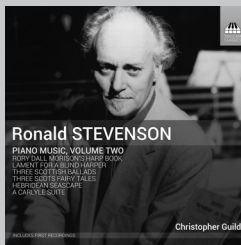
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## **The Ronald Stevenson Society**

The Ronald Stevenson Society was established in 1993 to publicise and promote the music of Ronald Stevenson through performance, recording and the publication of Stevenson scores. Those currently available include a wide selection of solo songs, choral, chamber and piano works. CDs which include Stevenson works are also available. New members are welcome. A Newsletter is published three times per year and a symposium/workshop is held bi-annually, subject to demand. Membership of the Ronald Stevenson Society is open to all. The benefits include an informative newsletter three times a year and an annual summer school.

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Piano: Steinway D

Recording engineer and producer: Adaq Khan ([www.adaqkhan.com](http://www.adaqkhan.com))

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*Christopher Guild*

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