

Adam GORB

PIANO MUSIC
24 PRELUDES
VELOCITY

Clare Hammond

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION AND SOME THOUGHTS ON MY 24 PRELUDES

by Adam Gorb

I was born in Cardiff in 1958 and started composing at the age of ten. In 1972 I had a group of piano pieces – selections from *A Pianist's Alphabet* – accepted for broadcast on BBC Radio 3. I studied music at Cambridge University, where my composition teachers included Hugh Wood and Robin Holloway. After graduating in 1980, I spent several years as a freelance musician, working as a musical director and répétiteur in various touring and repertory theatres and drama colleges. I returned to full-time education in 1991 to study composition with Paul Patterson at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where I graduated with the highest honours, including the Principal's Prize, in 1993.

My compositions, which include orchestral, ensemble, chamber, solo and choral works, have been performed, broadcast and recorded worldwide. In the UK my works have featured at contemporary-music festivals in Canterbury, Cheltenham, Hampstead and Highgate, Huddersfield, Spitalfields and the Vale of Glamorgan, and I have had concerts devoted to my music in the UK, the USA, Canada and South Korea. I have been composer-in-residence at Luton and Bromsgrove music clubs and, in 2019, at the Chetham's International Summer School in Manchester.

My first work for concert band, *Metropolis* (1992), has won several prizes, including the Walter Beeler Memorial Prize in the USA in 1994. Three other wind-ensemble works – *Towards Nirvana* (2002), *Adrenaline City* (2005–6) and *Farewell* (2007–8) – have won British Composer awards. Many of my works for wind ensemble are in the standard repertoire and are regularly programmed around the world. Other compositions have been performed by the BBC Philharmonic and Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestras, the Maggini Quartet, the BBC Singers, the Tokyo Kosei Wind Ensemble, the Royal Marines, Psappha and the Liverpool 10/10 Ensemble.

In 2010 an album devoted to my works was released on the NMC label,¹ and in the same year a large-scale choral work, *Eternal Voices*, was premiered in Exeter Cathedral. In 2011 an album of my chamber and instrumental works was released by Prima Facie,² and my opera *Anya 17* (2012) was premiered, and well received, in Liverpool and Manchester, with productions in Germany in November and December 2013 and the USA in 2014 and 2016. An album of my large-ensemble works, *Dancing in the Ghetto*, also on Prima Facie, was released in 2015.³ My second opera, *The Path to Heaven* (2017–18), which has an accompanying ensemble of woodwind, brass and percussion, was premiered in the UK in 2018, with productions in the USA in 2019 and 2020.

Recent works include my fifth collaboration with the librettist Ben Kaye, a song-cycle, *Beggars Belief* (2020), for the soprano Yuliya Shvarko, a work for the Australian saxophonist Katia Beaugeais (2021) and a concerto for violin and viola, due to be premiered in the USA in 2022.

Since 2000 I have been Head of the School of Composition at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. I have been a Visiting Lecturer in Composition at universities and conservatoires in the USA, Canada, Brussels, Dublin, The Hague, Istanbul, Tokyo, Verona, Vienna, Vilnius and Weimar.

This is the second Toccata Classics album to feature my work: in 2019 *Desta* for string ensemble was included on Volume Three of the project *Music for My Love*.⁴
www.adamgorb.co.uk

¹ *Towards Nirvana* (NMC D154) features *Farewell* (2007–8), *Scenes from Brueghel* (1993–94), *Ascent* (1996, rev. 2004) and *Towards Nirvana* (2002), with the Royal Northern College of Music Wind Orchestra, conducted by Mark Heron, Timothy Reynish and Clark Rundell.

² *Reconciliations* (PFCD008) features *Reconciliation* (1997; with Paul Vowles, clarinet, and Simon Parkin, piano); *Klezmer* (1993; with Midori Sugiyama, violin); the Sonata for Violin and Piano (1996; with Midori Sugiyama, violin, and Ben Powell, piano); 'Epiphany in Venice', the subtitle of the Postlude from the *Prelude, Interlude and Postlude* (1992; with Gintaute Gataveckaitė, piano); *Straitjacket* (2002; with Leslie Neish, trombone, and Jonathan Fisher, piano); *Absinthe* (2009; with Graham Scott, piano); and *Agen* (2010; with Paul Vowles, clarinet).

³ *Dancing in the Ghetto* (PFCD047) presents *Dancing in the Ghetto* (2008), *Weimar* (2000), Symphony No. 1 in C major (2000), *Serenade for Spring* (2008) and *Love Transforming* (2012–13), with the Liverpool 10/10 Ensemble, conducted by Clark Rundell.

⁴ *Music for My Love*, Volume Three (TOCC 0504).

24 Preludes (2019–20)

It was the standard piano repertoire that fuelled my love of music from the very start. Two composers, Beethoven and Bartók, shine out like beacons over the decades. My early, over-ambitious attempts at playing through Beethoven's sonatas implanted the infinite variety of his *œuvre* into my consciousness from a very young age. And from the start of my piano lessons, my enlightened teacher avoided setting me those pictorial posies describing fairies at the bottom of the garden and cows looking longingly over village gates, in favour of the exhilarating brave new world of Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*. The succulent, scrunching clusters of 'Melody in the Mist' from Volume 4 lives with me to the present day; indeed, I pay tribute to it in more than one of these 24 Preludes.

Following the historical precedent of Bach, Chopin, Rachmaninov, Debussy, Shostakovich and others from previous generations, in 2019–20 I wrote 24 Preludes to reflect the challenge of enriching the piano repertoire in the beguilingly diverse musical climate of the present century. The music is intended to allow for flexible programming: a group taken from the 24 can be played alongside other new music or older repertoire, or the complete set (lasting around 65 minutes) could be performed in a more contemporary setting.

Variety and unity are twin issues that I grapple with whenever I set out to write a new work. They have very much formed part of the process of a composition in 24 distinct parts: examples include the jagged ninths of the First Prelude [1], which are softened into something much more conciliatory in the final fugue [24], and harmony built on clusters is employed in several of the preludes, from the violent 'Drums' [12] and 'Birthday Bash' [23], to the triumphantly clangorous 'Coming Together' [2] and the dreamily atmospheric 'A Childhood Memory' [8]. In the spirit of doing more with less, I have employed restricted modes in some of the pieces: 'Klezfest' [3], 'Tango for Two Saxophones and Broken Accordion' [5] and 'Samatha' [15]. There are palindromes to be found: the Eleventh Prelude is an exact reversal of the First, and 'Madam I'm Adam' [4] and 'Mini Mambo' [22] contain palindromic procedures.

Prelude No. 1 [1] is a one-minute call for attention, in the manner of the opening bars of Mozart's 'Jupiter' Symphony or Beethoven's *Eroica*. The cold shower of this *ritenuto* acts as an upbeat to contextualise the gentle shock of the F major triad that opens 'Coming Together' [2], an exploration of bells and resonances that celebrates community with an evolving harmonic diversity: until the final fade-out, no two chords in the main chorale idea are identical.

'Klezfest' [3] is a piece about my heritage and more particularly about Yiddish humour. The gift of laughing to conquer potential catastrophe is a wonderful characteristic of the Jewish people, and here, within a tightly limited modal framework, I pay tribute to aspects of klezmer, complete with instrumentation suggestions for a group that might be found at bar mitzvahs and Jewish wedding receptions.

'Madam I'm Adam' [4] is the first of three monodies in the set. As the title implies, it's a palindrome, and so I only had to write half of this very brief piece. My obsession with the piano, not only as an instrument inhabiting its own sound-world but also uniquely able to suggest other instrumental groups, is further explored in the fifth prelude, 'Tango for Two Saxophones and Broken Accordion' [5], which stays within the range of those instruments (although I can't be sure what the range of a broken accordion is). A possible musical ancestor here is Debussy's 'La Puerta del vino' from *Préludes*, Book 2, along with the visual world of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. The impression should be that of an illicit union in a nocturnal place, where no person in his or her right mind would choose to go. 'Siciliano' [6] is bucolic and lilting, with a chaste obsession with the interval of the perfect fourth.

Although I am not often an aficionado of pop or rock music, I have in the past been shaken and occasionally stirred by the raw energy of the vernacular sounds of my youth. 'Lift Off' [7], which is dedicated to my son, Benjamin, a guitarist and songwriter, owes something to that very sophisticated prog rock band, Emerson, Lake & Palmer, who were at their height when I was a teenager. The next prelude, 'Childhood Memory' [8], which should follow without a break, is perhaps the most impressionistic piece in the set, dreamlike and nebulous and reflecting my youthful fascination with cloud formations,

particularly in the beguiling colours of cumulonimbus clouds just before a violent storm ... which erupts in 'In The Cold Light of Day' [9]. This prelude was written to mark the 100th anniversary of the Russian composer Galina Ustvolskaya (1919–2006). A former pupil of Shostakovich, she wrote music as pitiless and violent as any composer previously or since.

'The Girl with the White Parasol' [10] is a piece very close to my heart; the title is derived from a memorable speech in the Orson Welles film *Citizen Kane*. This prelude could have been created in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, and I imagine it as somehow 'discovered' rather than written by me. Limitless in its nostalgia, it describes a beautiful and precious moment that happens just once in a lifetime.

After this island of feeling, the total detachment of 'edulerP' [11] seems appropriate. A palindrome of 'Prelude No. 1', it leads neatly to 'Drums' [12], which both celebrates the piano as a multi-percussion instrument and indulges my ongoing passion for most things percussive.

'Sliding Doors' [13] is a mini suite of three pieces that all start with identical material but travel in different directions. It is a comedy with a fragile culmination. The F sharp and the E that conclude the piece act as a bridge for 'Adagietto' [14]. Dedicated to my wife, Elizabeth, this intentionally Mahlerian nocturne not only pays homage to the fourth movement of that composer's Fifth Symphony but also features the throbbing rhythmic heartbeats that start his Symphony No. 9.

This prelude is the first of a series of slow movements that could be thought of as the emotional and spiritual heart of the complete set (until the final fugue, that is). 'Samatha' [15] (a Buddhist term for tranquillity of the mind) is a five-minute meditation – the softer and slower, the better. 'Survivor' [16] is dedicated to Clare Hammond and, although I am full of admiration for her extraordinary pianistic technique and dexterity (*Velocity* [25], a very different piece, is also dedicated to her), I wanted to pay tribute to her true inner musicality in this second of three monodies – a 'cello solo' which can be played by either the left or right hand, with an added 'cathedral' acoustic provided by the *sostenuto* pedal.

Following the tradition of Chopin and Shostakovich, I have observed a traditional key-pattern throughout these preludes, in this case moving downwards through the circle of fifths following the major/minor scheme (Chopin and Shostakovich used an ascending circle). Some of the preludes could be described as atonal, or pan-tonal, or indeed 'percussive', but I think there are enough diatonic signposts to guide the listener in an overall tonal direction. 'Autumn Leaf' [17], a study in fragility and poignancy, is clearly in a harmonically extended C sharp minor, although the piece starts in C minor. The silent bars are as significant as the ones containing notes.

'Globalisation' [18] attempts to capture a scene of gamelan-like innocence, complete with bamboo flute and gongs. Here I make my one foray into preparing the piano by asking the pianist to insert two tuners' wedges in the gaps between the strings (in this case, the F sharp above middle C), to give a dry, drum-like sound. The detuned octaves that dominate the piece are eventually infected by chords of richer harmonies, at first insidious, but becoming more menacing. 'Valse triste' [19] is a brooding and melancholic nocturne, with one wild outburst from which it never fully recovers.

The next four preludes mark an overall increase in excitement and goal-directed dynamism. The constantly exhilarating sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti are the inspiration behind 'Ouverture française' [20] (the title notwithstanding). The third of the three monodies, this purposeful and resolute piece recalling the style of a Baroque French overture is dedicated to my daughter, Juliette (a fluent French speaker). 'Prelude No. 21' [21] follows the implications of the First and Eleventh Preludes, this time at full speed for less than a minute. 'Mini Mambo' [22] is a short homage to the pungent harmonic and rhythmic idiom of the outstanding music-theatre works of Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim, complete with a twelve-tone theme and a brash and vulgar coda. The penultimate prelude, 'Birthday Bash' [23], pushes the stark brutality of 'Drums' [12] with reckless abandon into a new, manic and frantic territory.

At the start of this project, I flirted briefly with the idea of writing 24 Preludes and Fugues. But I soon talked myself out of this impossibly ambitious enterprise, realising that Bach is the true master of fugue, and that what I could produce would only be a pale compromise. In any case, the fugue that is the final prelude, ending in

C major [24], took considerably more time to write than any of the other preludes, and at just over seven minutes it is the longest and most complex piece in the set. After a jagged opening, with a prominence given to the interval of the ninth, the music settles into something tranquil and flowing unlike anything heard previously. Towards the end, a fleeting reference is made to ‘The Girl with the White Parasol’ [10] – I couldn’t resist it!

Velocity (2014)

I wrote the six-minute *Velocity* [25], which rounds off this album, for Clare Hammond in 2014. I have always admired her constant championing of new music and how she integrates new works with those of the standard repertoire to attract audiences into listening out of their comfort zones. The genesis for this piece was a 1994 film, *Speed*, in the middle section of which Sandra Bullock is compelled to drive a bus, always above 50 mph, through city traffic to stop a bomb detonating on board. I have attempted to capture the spirit of this wonderfully frenetic sequence in six minutes of utmost freneticism – *Prestissimo accelerando*.⁵ The direction of the piece swerves from extreme abrasiveness to something more streamlined as the music takes flight.

Acclaimed as a ‘pianist of extraordinary gifts’ (*Gramophone*) and ‘immense power’ (*The Times*), **Clare Hammond** is recognised for the virtuosity and authority of her performances. In 2016, she won the ‘Young Artist Award’ of the Royal Philharmonic Society in recognition of outstanding achievement and in 2020 she was engaged to perform at the International Piano Series in the Southbank Centre in London.

She is a champion of modern repertoire: this is her eighth album of music by a living composer. Earlier releases, of etudes by Chin, Kapustin, Lyapunov and Szymanowski, and of music by Kenneth Hesketh (both on BIS), drew praise for their ‘unflinching bravura and conviction’ (*Gramophone*), with *The Observer* describing her as a ‘star interpreter of contemporary music’. For Toccata Classics she recorded an album of the piano works of

⁵ This tempo direction may seem to be asking a lot, but it should, I hope, be more readily realised than the sequence of tempo requirements in the first movement of Schumann’s Piano Sonata No. 2 in G minor, Op. 22: ‘So rasch wie möglich’, ‘Schneller’ and ‘Noch schneller’ – ‘As fast as possible’, ‘Faster’ and ‘Faster yet’.

Robert Saxton (TOCC 0458), a review in *Fanfare* reporting that ‘Clare Hammond’s performances are almost certainly definitive’. She has given 50 world premieres to date, including those of works by Benjamin Attahir, Ninfea Cruttwell-Reade, Roxanna Panufnik and Robert Saxton.

Performances during the pandemic included recitals for the Wigmore Hall and Aldeburgh Music, a live recital broadcast for BBC Radio 3 Lunchtime Concerts from St David’s, Cardiff, and broadcast recordings of works by Samy Moussa and Doreen Carwithen with the BBC Symphony Orchestra (conducted by Geoffrey Paterson) and the BBC Concert Orchestra (conducted by Gavin Sutherland). In previous seasons, she has performed with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and Vasily Petrenko, the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra with Jacek Kasprzyk and the Philharmonia with Jamie Phillips. She gave the world premiere of *Uncoiling the River* by Kenneth Hesketh, with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales under Martyn Brabbins, and released the complete keyboard works of Josef Mysliveček with the Swedish Chamber Orchestra under Nicholas McGegan on BIS Records in 2019.

She completed a BA at Cambridge University, where she obtained a double first in music, and undertook postgraduate study with Ronan O’Hora at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama.





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Recorded on 19 and 20 October 2021 in Wyastone Concert Hall,
Wyastone Leys, Monmouth, Wales
Producer-engineer: Michael Ponder

RVWtrust

I gratefully acknowledge financial assistance for the recording from the RVW Trust,
the Ida Carroll Trust and the Royal Northern College of Music. *Adam Gorb*

Booklet text: Adam Gorb
Cover design: David M. Baker (david@notneverknow.com)
Typesetting and lay-out: Kerry Press, St Albans

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

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ADAM GORB Piano Music

24 Preludes (2019–20)		68:18
1	No. 1 <i>Prestissimo rit.</i> throughout	1:12
2	No. 2 Coming Together: <i>Lento</i>	3:47
3	No. 3 Klezfest: <i>Scherzando</i>	3:27
4	No. 4 Madam I'm Adam: <i>Prestissimo</i>	1:15
5	No. 5 Tango for Two Saxophones and Broken Accordion: <i>Andante pesante</i>	3:07
6	No. 6 Siciliano: <i>Andantino</i> with a lilt	2:10
7	No. 7 Lift Off: <i>Vivace energico</i> –	1:24
8	No. 8 Childhood Memory: <i>Adagio</i>	4:25
9	No. 9 In the Cold Light of Day: <i>Allegro pesante</i>	1:29
10	No. 10 The Girl with the White Parasol: <i>Poco vivace leggero</i>	3:03
11	No. 11 edulerP: <i>Gravissimo accel.</i>	1:19
12	No. 12 Drums: <i>Allegro</i>	2:18
13	No. 13 Sliding Doors: <i>Allegretto vivace</i>	3:07
14	No. 14 <i>Adagietto</i>	3:31
15	No. 15 Samatha: <i>Gravissimo</i>	5:04
16	No. 16 Survivor: <i>Lento rubato</i>	3:50
17	No. 17 Autumn Leaf: <i>Allegro misterioso</i>	2:40
18	No. 18 Globalisation: <i>Lento recitativo</i>	3:43
19	No. 19 Valse triste: <i>Allegretto</i>	2:40
20	No. 20 Ouverture française: <i>Vivace con brio</i>	2:35
21	No. 21 <i>Prestissimo</i>	0:59
22	No. 22 Mini Mambo: <i>Allegro molto</i>	2:29
23	No. 23 Birthday Bash: <i>Prestissimo</i>	1:33
24	No. 24 Fugue: <i>Grandioso</i> – <i>Andante tranquillo</i>	7:11
25	Velocity (2014): <i>Prestissimo accelerando</i>	6:01

Clare Hammond, piano

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FIRST RECORDINGS