

Juozas GRUODIS

PIANO MUSIC

PIANO SONATA NO. 1 IN C SHARP MINOR

PIANO SONATA NO. 2 IN F MINOR

VARIATIONS IN B MAJOR

MORNING SONG

BELLS

Daumantas Kirilauskas

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDING

JUOZAS GRUODIS Piano Music

Piano Sonata No. 1 in C sharp minor, <i>Patetico</i> (1919)	23:23
1 I <i>Allegro moderato</i>	7:42
2 II <i>Adagio espressivo</i>	7:19
3 III Scherzo. <i>Vivace, energico</i>	3:39
4 IV Finale. <i>Allegro con fuoco</i>	4:43
 5 <i>Morning Song</i> (1920)	 6:02
 Piano Sonata No. 2 in F minor (1921)	 15:44
6 I <i>Allegro moderato</i>	8:12
7 II <i>Adagio</i>	4:53
8 III Finale. <i>Allegro</i>	2:39
 9 <i>Bells</i> (1927)	 3:37
 Variations in B major (1920)*	 19:34
10 Thema <i>Andante</i>	0:57
11 Var. 1 <i>Moderato</i>	1:05
12 Var. 2 <i>Allegro</i>	0:43
13 Var. 3 <i>Allegro agitato</i>	0:39
14 Var. 4 <i>Andante</i>	1:08
15 Var. 5 <i>Largo</i>	1:55
16 Var. 6 <i>Adagio</i>	2:44
17 Var. 7 <i>Tempo di Mazurka</i>	0:54
18 Var. 8 <i>Lento</i>	1:24
19 Var. 9 <i>Allegro moderato</i>	0:52
20 Var. 10 <i>Allegro</i>	1:22

21	Var. 11 <i>Vivace</i>	0:51
22	Var. 12 <i>Alla polacca</i>	0:34
23	Var. 13 <i>Allegro non troppo, energico</i>	1:06
24	Fuga	3:20
		TT 68:24

Daumantas Kirilauskas, piano

*FIRST RECORDING

JUOZAS GRUODIS, FATHER OF LITHUANIAN MUSIC

by Edvardas Šumila

Juozas Gruodis (1884–1948) is widely regarded as one of the most important figures in interwar Lithuanian music. He was a pioneering figure who shaped the development of Lithuanian music not only as a composer but also through his role in establishing the institutions and music-scene of the emerging Lithuanian nation-state. The works presented here – though written within a span of only eight years – trace the evolution of his compositional style and offer a glimpse into the musical landscape of interwar Lithuania.

Like many of the other pioneering figures in Lithuanian music, Juozas Gruodis hailed from a modest provincial background. He was born in the tiny village of Rokėnai in the Zarasai region of Aukštaitija, in north-eastern Lithuania, on 20 December 1884. His father was a craftsman who made musical instruments, among other occupations. Gruodis demonstrated an aptitude for music from an early age and began his musical studies at the music school in Rokiškis (some forty kilometres distance from Rokėnai), which was then under the direction of the Czech musician Rudolf Liehmann.¹ From an early age, Gruodis' character and compositional style were marked by determination and independence. He was so keen to become a musician that, having worked independently as an organist in various country churches and saved some money, he went to Moscow in 1914 in the hope of entering the conservatoire. By this time, he had already composed several pieces for piano, including two large-scale fantasias. After a year of independent

¹ Liehmann (1855–1904), an organist and composer as well as a pedagogue, was known as Rudolfas Lymanas in Lithuanian. He had been a student of Dvořák in the Prague Organ School in 1871–73 and graduated from the Prague Conservatoire in 1883. He was appointed as the first director of the Rokiškis music school immediately after his graduation and naturally made the organ one of the main subjects of the curriculum.

study with Nikolai Laduchin and Alexandr Ilyinski, Gruodis was accepted into the conservatoire to pursue further studies in music theory.

It is evident from the pieces to be heard here that Gruodis' personality and style combined a number of the influences that became characteristic of Lithuanian music. The Moscow period, although brief, had a profound impact. It was during this time that Gruodis developed a taste for a more progressive musical language, in particular that influenced by Skryabin, and was exposed to the diverse musical environment of pre-revolutionary Moscow. Since Lithuania was then part of the Russian empire, Gruodis was mobilised into the Russian army and subsequently employed as a band leader for nine months. He fell ill at the front with an unspecified illness and was then sent to Yalta, a resort on the south-eastern coast of Crimea (later famous as the venue for the 'Yalta Conference' between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin in February 1945). He proceeded to pursue his studies independently and with the assistance of the composer community in Yalta, where he produced a diverse array of compositions, including piano pieces and vocal and choral works. It was during this period that he began writing his Piano Sonata No. 1 in C sharp minor, which was to become a seminal piece in the Lithuanian piano repertoire.

In 1920, Gruodis returned to Lithuania and, after a brief period, was awarded a scholarship to pursue his studies at the Leipzig Conservatoire, where he must have encountered an academic environment markedly different from that with which he was familiar. The traditional and classical approach to composition was countered by his teachers' efforts to incorporate the tendencies of new German music of the time, especially the work of Max Reger. Gruodis studied for a year in the class of Stephan Krehl, a renowned follower of Hugo Riemann, but found his approach to be too conservative and thus moved on to study with Paul Graener, who was moderately modernist in his approach. But it was Sigfrid Karg-Elert who arguably had the most significant influence on Gruodis. He composed in an Impressionist style and had his own distinctive approach to composition. Karg-Elert's influence is clearly evident in the Second Piano Sonata. Gruodis graduated 'with distinction' and returned to Kaunas, the city where he was to spend the latter part of his life.

Between 1843 and 1918, Kaunas – Kovno in Russian – had been the capital of the Kovno Governate of Imperial Russia, with Vilnius being made the capital of the newly independent Lithuania in 1918. When Poland seized Vilnius in 1920, the capital was moved to Kaunas and officially referred to as ‘the temporary capital’ (*‘laikinoji sostinė’* in Lithuanian, a term still in colloquial use) – a situation which endured until October 1939, when the Soviet invasion of Poland restored Vilnius as national capital. Kaunas therefore had to be transformed from a major provincial town into the capital in a short period of time, its emergent identity forged by the modern idea of city life, with new buildings, infrastructure and institutions. Like Gruodis, many émigré Lithuanians returned during this period to contribute to the newly formed state. For his part, in 1923 he assumed the role of second conductor of the State Opera, also conducting orchestral concerts and organising a song-festival (which celebrated its centenary in 2024). In 1927 he was invited to replace Juozas Naujalis (1869–1934), the long-standing director of the Kaunas State Music School and established a composition department there, and in 1933 he succeeded in having the status of the School elevated to that of conservatoire. This initiative was one of the reasons that Gruodis is considered the founder of the Lithuanian school of composition. His students included Antanas Budriūnas (1902–66), Juozas Gaidelis (1909–83), Julius Juzeliūnas (1916–2001), Vytautas Klova (1926–2009), Jonas Nabazaš (1907–2002) and Antanas Račiūnas (1905–84); indeed, until perhaps the late twentieth century, the majority of professional Lithuanian composers could trace their compositional heritage to that of Juozas Gruodis. Because of his deteriorating health, he left the position of director one year later, remaining only as head of the department of composition. In any case, Gruodis found writing music to be easiest in the countryside, where he was surrounded by peace and nature, far from all duties. In 1936 President Antanas Smetona issued a decree granting Gruodis the title of Professor. Gruodis’ talent was recognised also abroad: in 1929 he was awarded the Order of the Crown of Italy, and in 1930 he was elected an honorary member of the Latvian Conservatoire and in 1932 of the Helsinki Conservatoire.

At the time when Gruodis was engaged in his professional activities and contributing to Lithuanian cultural life, which was concentrated mainly in Kaunas, there were

extensive discussions in the press and in public about the direction that Lithuanian music should take. Following its re-establishment as an independent state, Lithuania sought to modernise itself as a new liberal democracy, with the aim of aligning itself with the essential features of a western state. It is evident that, like numerous other countries established or re-organised during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were nation-states, and thus required robust ideological and cultural foundations. The turn to folklore, a romanticism for the past and a search for origins were all, to some extent, a prerequisite for the realisation of such a political project. It is at this juncture that Gruodis makes his appearance, offering his own vision of a 'national concept of music.' As a second-generation composer within this national paradigm, he was not primarily concerned with merely incorporating folk-tunes or their quotation into a more conventional, overtly Romantic context. He had already adopted many of the progressive and modernist tendencies of the day into his compositions and recognised that in order to establish a distinctive national style and to ensure that Lithuanian music was relevant and aligned with the prevailing trends in Europe, it was essential to move beyond the replication of outdated techniques. The methods of appropriating folklore should therefore be radical and focus on its unique and most archaic aspects. This approach would create an independent musical tradition, in line with the aspirations of the newly established state.

It was partly as a consequence of this progressive stance that Gruodis became a victim of the upheaval that followed the Second World War and the Soviet occupation. The Soviet Union occupied Lithuania from 1944, in which year, as part of the celebrations for his 60th birthday, Gruodis was granted the award of 'merited artist'. Although this gesture suggested that the new regime favoured the composer, in 1947 he was condemned as a 'formalist' and to write an article of 'repentance', denouncing his own principles of creativity and pedagogy. After its publication in 1948, he suffered a heart attack and died, on 16 April of that year.

In his youth Gruodis had dreamed of being a Lithuanian Grieg, and he did eventually fulfil a role in Lithuania in the first half of the twentieth century similar to that of Grieg in Norway in the second half of the nineteenth. He wrote several works that were among

the first examples of their genre in Lithuania: the ballet *Jūratė and Kastytis* (1933) and two orchestral suites derived from it (1936), the symphonic poems *Dance of Life* (1928) and *From Lithuania's Past* (1939), the 'symphonic painting' *Autumn: Symphonic Prologue* (1923), a set of *Symphonic Variations* on folksong themes (1945), the *Šarūnas* suite for chorus and orchestra (1930), a string quartet (1924), a sonata for violin and piano (1922) and two piano sonatas (1919 and 1921). He also composed many works for choir because, having led choirs in his youth, he knew well the sort of repertoire they required. He harmonised 40 folksongs for choir and wrote 25 original choral compositions. He also composed 22 songs for voice and piano, to both literary and folk texts. Composing for the piano was a constant preoccupation: the musicologist Algirdas Ambrazas, who has devoted several books to Gruodis, has arrived at a total about 60 works for piano. Most of them were written during his Leipzig period, in 1920–21, although he continued to write for piano throughout his life.

The Sonata for Piano No. 1 ('*Patetico*'; 1919) is arguably the most striking and noteworthy piece from the initial phase of Gruodis' compositional evolution, and offers a particularly clear representation of his personality and emotional life in his early maturity. Since it marks a turning-point before his return to Lithuania and departure for Leipzig, it can be seen as a condensed summary of the influences he had received up until this point. The work is unquestionably mature, and its subtitle, *Patetico*, is an accurate description of the emotional development and ethos of all four movements. The Sonata presents a considerable technical challenge to pianists, given its unconventional and intricate harmonies. It showcases Gruodis' penchant for dense and dynamic sound, with a pronounced emphasis on multi-layered chords. It is imbued with a distinctly Romantic sensibility, characterised by vibrant harmonic passages and contrasts that seamlessly integrate into traditional sonata form.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato* [1], opens with a series of characteristics that immediately establish its distinctive character. The principal theme is introduced through a chordal section in quintuplet rhythm, imparting a sense of urgency and emotional distress. The respite provided by the nostalgic melodic line of the second subject is short-lived, as the music swiftly reverts to the persistent drama that ends the

exposition. The development section takes up the part of the main theme that uses a rising series of chords, giving an even more intense version of the material previously introduced. The recapitulation comes after a short break, proceeding in the same key as the exposition, eventually augmenting the material, and showcasing the secondary theme one last time, before the coda imparts a sense of unease that prepares the way for the next movement.

Gruodis' use of multiple-third and polyharmonic chords in this *Adagio espressivo* [2] brings a subtle shift in emphasis, though maintaining the prevailing sense of restlessness. As suggested by the tempo indication, the movement reaches its expressive climax through a growing range of registers, subsequently fading away to leave a calmer, yet mysterious, ending.

The Scherzo, marked *Vivace, energico* [3], far from being playful, begins with a dotted, dactylic rhythm, where the harmonic foundation is sustained through a firm but harmonically progressive bass line. The movement is clearly divided into three smaller sections, with the second transforming the dotted triple rhythm into a swaying and tranquil middle panel, before it intensifies dynamically and returns seamlessly to the reprise.

The finale, *Allegro con fuoco* [4], grows ever more intense, with a returning refrain accompanied by scalar and harmonic passages intertwined with different themes, among which echoes of the first movement can be heard. A series of different subjects then try to establish themselves but are constantly interrupted by a kind of diabolic frenzy. The refrain, as if through a struggle, after a cadence resembling those of Lithuanian folksong, breaks through for the last time to end the Sonata resolutely.

Gruodis' *Morning Song* (1920) [5] – from his Yalta period, when he was studying independently – presents him in a very different light, although even in this miniature his basic temperament is evident. An elegiac melody, developed through several repetitions, extends over a rising *ostinato*, with harmonic turns creating a sense of drama. The middle section synthesises a dance rhythm, and playful passages echo some figures from the First Sonata, although here the patterns are clearer, and Gruodis employs octaves and

clearer chord-progressions enriched with polyphonic elements, until the piece wanders off, with its basic question reiterated rather than answered.

Gruodis' Variations in B major, composed in the same year, were not the first variation-set in his output: a year earlier, for example, he had composed another set of piano variations on a Lithuanian folksong, entitled 'Bernužėli, neviliok' ('Don't tease me, boy'). The Variations in B major demonstrate an endeavour to write in a salon-like piano style, potentially to gain proficiency in a more Romantic approach and form, and to comprehend the development of thematic material, techniques he would go on to use in his own way, though these variations are modest in both stylistic and harmonic terms. Even so, Gruodis' penchant for intricate and expansive harmonic patterns is evident in the overall character of the piece, particularly in Variations III ^[13] and IV ^[14], as well as the final fugue ^[24]. By contrast, other variations adhere closely to the Chopinesque style and tradition, as exemplified by the nocturne (Variation VI) ^[16], which is subtitled 'A la Chopin' and was subsequently arranged for various instruments and became independently popular. Additionally, the mazurka (Var. VII) ^[17] and polonaise (Var. XII) ^[22] also align themselves with this tradition. The character of the piece as a whole is defined by the theme itself, which is composed with meticulous attention to detail. It features a conventional accompaniment in the left hand, a concise development of the lower voice and a discernible AABA structure.

Piano Sonata No. 2, although still exhibiting the hallmarks of Gruodis' harmonic thinking, is also markedly distinct from his previous compositions. It comprises three movements and was created as part of his studies in Leipzig. The compositions written there display more variety and chromatic richness than his previous works. The First Sonata may be characterised as monolithic, insofar as it appears to be driven by a single trenchant idea. In this Second Sonata, Gruodis is less inclined to anchor the harmonic progression in fundamental harmonic principles, instead juxtaposing chords from seemingly disparate tonal centres. The approach to harmony espoused by the teaching staff at the Leipzig Conservatoire may have encouraged a more functional approach, and the stylistic influences he encountered were predominantly German, particularly those of Max Reger and earlier figures, not least Schumann and Brahms. The Second Sonata

also has some Impressionist tendencies. One might say that the piece sacrifices unity in favour of presenting more variety of material in a more concentrated form.

The first movement, *Allegro moderato* [6], opens with what might be regarded as the principal theme, a perpetually re-emerging initial phrase, wherein a distinctive two-triplet motif concluding each phrase is promptly counterbalanced by a calmer one. It is the secondary theme that takes a more Impressionist direction. It relies on a beautiful, melancholic melody that derives its colour from subtle harmonic turns. Although the work initially resists easy analysis, a sonata-like form does become evident. A development section takes up the principal theme and extends it both harmonically and in terms of range. The secondary theme then re-emerges, and only after that does Gruodis offer a rather conventional reprise, where, following a reiteration of the principal theme, the secondary theme is once more fully disclosed, enriched with double triads, and he ends the movement with a fervent coda.

The Second Sonata was not published during the composer's lifetime, although the second movement, *Adagio* [7], was released as a separate piece titled *Lietuvoje* ('In Lithuania'). It provides an excellent illustration of Gruodis' approach to the incorporation of folkloric material into his compositions. It is based on the Lithuanian folksong 'Tykiai tykiai Nemunėlis teka' ('Quietly flows the Nemen river'), which is enhanced by developing the theme harmonically and augmenting its material through added counterpoint and modulations that synthesise his established stylistic traits with those acquired more recently. The magic of Gruodis' slow movements is that they evoke a feeling of a sustained and stable pace, although the material never stops shifting and developing; at moments where one would expect a section to end, it flows into the next one seamlessly. This movement ends when one hears the theme for the last time, reinforced by a cadence low on the piano.

The finale, *Allegro* [8], also has something of the function of a scherzo, in that it maintains a constant playful drive, as if leading the listener towards a specific destination. Gruodis reused this movement in an even shorter form in his 1933 ballet, *Jūratė and Kastytis*. As the material is developed through a lively set of motifs, it evokes the prominent ballets of the time, particularly those of Stravinsky and the Neo-Classical

tradition. The movement is particularly short and ends without an elaborate coda, concluding with a playful and swift cadence.

As the last of the five works recorded here, *Bells* (1927) [9] – *Varpai* in Lithuanian – may be considered to mark the advent of the third phase in Gruodis' compositional development. Having relocated to Kaunas, he stopped writing longer works and concentrated on producing a corpus of short piano pieces. The majority of these compositions are accompanied by programmatic titles – *Lamentation*, *Lithuanian Dance*, *Joke* and so on. Each of these compositions demonstrates the emergence of new elements in his musical language, and they exhibit a variety of approaches to engaging with folkloric material. This one is remarkable not only for its distinctive evocation of bells through a striking harmonic use of fourths and fifths, but also for its unique approach to integrating folkloric elements into the musical fabric. The influence of folksong is subtle and developed through whole-tone harmony, although it can be recognised by those familiar with the colliding seconds in the Lithuanian folksinging genre of *sutartinės* (*sutartinės* are sung in canon, in a very narrow melodic range, resulting in the constant conflation of dissonant tones). The rhythm and dynamics are developed consistently, without any separate sections, which creates a sense of a more open form. The work does not follow a conventional narrative structure; instead, it ends in development, as if the bells still reverberate after the piece concludes.

Edvardas Šumila is a scholar, writer and curator working in music and visual arts. He is currently a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York, an adjunct professor at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre and a curator at the Contemporary Art Centre in Vilnius. Having started out as a pianist, he turned his activities towards musicology. Gradually he established his interests mainly in critical theory, aesthetics and politics, artistic intersectionality and political engagement, with a particular focus on the thought of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno. More recently, he has been working on theories of second nature in relation to those of the environment, especially the notion of 'milieu'.

Daumantas Kirilauskas is a Lithuanian pianist and Professor at the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre. He graduated from the M. K. Čiurlionis School of Art in Vilnius in 1991 and studied at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg, graduating with a Master's Degree in Arts *cum laude*, his teachers being Liucija Drašutienė (1984–94) and Karl-Heinz Kämmerling (1994–2000). He is a laureate of several national and international competitions. In 2019 he was given the title of Bösendorfer Artist and in 2021 was awarded a 'Golden Disc' by the Lithuanian Musicians Union for artistic excellence and the frequency of his concerts.

He has toured most European countries, the USA and Iran, performing with all Lithuanian orchestras, as well as the Sinfonietta Riga in Latvia, the Lappeenranta City Orchestra in Finland and the Kremerata Baltica Soloists. He has taken part in many festivals and is a frequent guest of the International Thomas Mann Festival and the Gaida Contemporary Music Festival, both in Lithuania. His repertoire ranges from the Baroque to the most recent works of the 21st century, with a number of premieres to his credit, although he reserves the most prominent place for music by Beethoven. Besides his solo performances, he plays chamber music with acclaimed Lithuanian and foreign soloists and ensembles, the recently disbanded Artis Quartett of Vienna among them. He has released no fewer than seventeen solo albums. In 2018 the label RNM included his recording of *Sideralis*, a composition by the Lithuanian composer Feliksas Bajoras, on the album *Modern Music for Piano*. The archives of Lithuanian radio hold many recordings of his performances, and he has also contributed to the soundtracks of films and plays.



Photograph: Dmitrijus Matvejevas



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