

# David MATTHEWS

MUSIC FOR SOLO VIOLIN AND VIOLA, VOLUME THREE  
THREE BIRTHDAY VARIATIONS  
WINTER REMEMBERED  
DARKNESS DRAWS IN  
DANCING SHIVA  
FIVE FANTASIAS  
ARCTIC SUITE  
FANTASIA

Peter Sheppard Skærvø

FIRST RECORDINGS

## A BRIEF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

by David Matthews

I was born in London in 1943 and started composing at the age of sixteen. I was mainly self-taught, though I studied privately with Anthony Milner and was helped by the advice and encouragement of Nicholas Maw and Peter Sculthorpe. I also learned much from being an assistant to Benjamin Britten in the late 1960s. My output includes eleven symphonies (a twelfth is in progress), six symphonic poems, eight concertos and eighteen string quartets, the last eight of which were written for the Kreutzer Quartet, who have recorded six volumes of my works for quartet on Toccata Classics. Almost all of my many works for solo violin were written specifically for Peter Sheppard Skærved, who has played them around the world.

Many of my works are inspired by landscapes and seasons, by paintings and literary texts. I have written books on Tippett and Britten,<sup>1</sup> and have also worked extensively as an arranger, especially for the Nash Ensemble.

Between 2018 and 2022 I wrote an opera, *Anna*, to a libretto by my friend the late Sir Roger Scruton reflecting our experiences in Czechoslovakia before the 1989 revolution; it received a concert premiere at The Grange, Hampshire, in July 2023. My *Symphonic Diptych* from the opera, together with my Eleventh Symphony and Flute Concerto, were recorded by the Ulster Orchestra under Jac van Steen and were recently released on Somm. My most recent works are a Third Violin Concerto (for Anthony Marwood) and a chamber-orchestral piece, *Early Spring*, for the English Symphony Orchestra.

<sup>1</sup> *Michael Tippett, An Introductory Study*, Faber & Faber, London, 1980; *Britten*, Haus Publishing, London, 2003.

# THE SOLOS CONTINUED

by David Matthews

My now nearly 30-year collaboration with my dear friend Peter Sheppard Skaerved has resulted in my writing more works for solo violin than probably any other contemporary composer. As I wrote in the booklet text for the second volume of this series,<sup>1</sup> I don't play a string instrument myself, but writing solo pieces for Peter to play has become a regular part of my life, a kind of extension to my journal. This third volume also contains three works for viola, as Peter has recently begun giving solo-violin concerts, and the *Arctic Suite* was written especially for him.

## ***Fantasia for viola, Op. 5, No. 1 (1970, rev. 2003)***

This *Fantasia* [1] was written in 1970 and first performed by Colette Harris at King's College London in June that year. I revised the piece in 2003, but it had no more performances until Peter Sheppard Skaerved took it up a few years ago. This was my first piece for a solo string instrument.<sup>2</sup> Like many of my early works, it is written in an Expressionist, rather Bergian style. Varying slow tempi alternate with two *molto vivace* sections. The ending is marked *molto tranquillo*.

## ***Darkness Draws In for solo viola, Op. 102 (2006)***

*Darkness Draws In* [2] was written as the test piece for the 2006 Lionel Tertis International Viola Competition, held on the Isle of Man. It is a set of variations on the Manx song 'Arrane Oie Vie' ('Goodnight Song'), to which my novelist friend Robbie Lamming introduced me: it is sung on the island at close of day. The song appears only at the end: it is preceded by five variations in different tempi, followed by a return of the opening variation, which acts as a link to the twice-repeated statement of the song melody.

<sup>1</sup> Toccata Classics TOCC 0309, released in 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The second *Fantasia* in Op. 5 is for solo cello.

### **Arctic Suite for viola, Op. 172 (2024)**

My little *Arctic Suite* is based on memories of a cruise I made with my wife, Jenifer, in March 2024 from Bergen up the Norwegian coast to Kirkenes, high above the Arctic Circle. I wrote some of the last piece, 'Second Northern Song' [7], on the boat, originally for solo cello as a seventieth-birthday present for my friend Olivia Kilmartin. 'First Northern Song' [3] came next, as a present for Peter Sheppard Skaerved to play on his newly acquired viola. I then soon wrote the other three movements: 'Northern Lights' [5], which contrasts deep darkness – low chords on the viola – with glimmering light effects on harmonics (sadly I didn't see the Aurora Borealis on the cruise); 'Mountains' [4], with the viola tracing up-and-down contours; and 'Snow' [6], a busy little scherzo with a *senza vibrato* coda evoking the frozen paths and streets on which we attempted to walk in the Arctic towns.

### **Three Birthday Pieces, Op. 167 (2023)**

These three pieces for solo violin were composed for the special birthdays of three friends in 2023: the conductor John Carewe's 90th birthday in January, the composer Robin Walker's 70th in March and the pianist William Howard's 70th in May.

All three pieces are brief sets of variations. The first [8] is based on the letters of John Carewe's surname, so far as it can be translated into notes: C–A–R (Re = D)–E–E. There are four variations in different tempi. The second piece [9] is based on the opening theme of Robin Walker's solo-cello piece *His Spirit over the Waters*. There are six variations, the last a coda. The third [10] is based on the tenth of Beethoven's Eleven Bagatelles, Op. 119 (perhaps the shortest piece of music ever written). It seemed appropriate to choose a piano work for a pianist. There are six variations, and again the last is a coda.

### **Six Fantasias for Violin, Op. 147, Nos. 2–6 (2017)**

The first of my *Six Fantasias*, on Paganini's Second Violin Concerto, was included on Volume Two of *Music for Solo Violin*. The remaining five were all composed in 2017 for friends' significant birthdays. No. 2, 'Capriccio-Fantasia' [11], was written for Howard Skempton's 70th birthday. It is in a bright D major, *Allegro giocoso*, and deliberately as far away from Howard's own style as I could imagine. No. 3, 'Brno Fantasia' [12], was written

for the 60th birthday of my Czech composer friend Pavel Zemek Novák. I first met Pavel in his home-town of Brno in 1986, and he has now become one of the finest composers in the Czech Republic. The overall mood of the piece is contemplative. No. 4, 'Sibeliad' [13], celebrates the 70th birthday of Edward Clark, who is President of the UK Sibelius Society. It is based on three letters from his name, E–D–C, but also includes brief quotations from all seven Sibelius symphonies, in numerical order. No. 5, 'Fantasia on Rachmaninov's Prelude in G minor' [14], is largely a partial transcription of Rachmaninov's famous prelude, and was written for Justin Broackes' 60th birthday. Justin is a philosopher but also a fine pianist who is especially fond of Rachmaninov, and I have since made an arrangement for him of the Third Piano Concerto with string quintet, which he has performed. No. 6, 'Midwinter Song' [15], was composed for the 70th birthday of Robbie Lamming (as in *Darkness Draws In*, above). It is the largest in scale of these five Fantasias, and mostly slow and lyrical, but has a *molto vivace* central section, all of it *tremolo*.

### ***Dancing Shiva, Op. 160a***

I originally wrote this piece in 2021 for string quartet and string orchestra, and called it *Shiva Dances*. I had initially thought of my Second String Trio, where the form is based on North Indian classical music, with a slow contemplative introduction leading to a fast dance-like movement. I decided to use a variation of this form again, where in the first version the solo quartet play elaborate solos, something in the manner of the Indian sitar. I happened to listen to a recording of a radio talk by Aldous Huxley about symbols. I was struck by his description of Shiva, the god of creation and destruction:

The figure stands within a great circle [...], which has flames going out [...], and this is the symbol of mass, energy, space, time. [...] within this Shiva dances. [...] He is everywhere in the universe. [...] it is all an immense manifestation of play. [...] His lower right hand is held up in this attitude which means 'be not afraid; in spite of everything, it is all right'. [...] It includes [...] the idea of the infinite energy dancing timelessly and forever through this world [...].<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> 'Speaking Personally': Aldous Huxley interviewed by John Chandos on 7 and 11 July 1961, released on Landsdowne LRS0003/4 (LP) in 1973 and Artifact Records ARTSWCD 001 (CD) in 2002; available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32oo0oyLUdE>.

I bought a small dancing Shiva statue myself for inspiration, and following Huxley's description I devised a piece with an extensive slow introduction, based on its opening melody, which is in a modal C major with flattened B, followed by a set of four dances, based on the four elements: earth (loud and vigorous), water (a series of virtuoso solos followed by a *moto perpetuo*), air (a light scherzo) and fire (an energetic waltz). The dances culminate in a *fortissimo* repeat of the opening theme, in its initial C, and a quiet coda which reaches out towards the timeless.

I made this solo-violin version [16] in 2022 for Peter Sheppard Skærved. In transforming the original piece into a work for solo violin I inevitably lost a lot of the underlying harmony, but since my original inspiration was music from a solo sitar, I was able, I think, to present the work in an equally satisfying way.

## A PERSONAL VIEW OF DAVID MATTHEWS' WORKS FOR SOLO VIOLIN AND VIOLA

by Peter Sheppard Skærved

After a recent performance in New College Chapel, Oxford, an older gentleman came up to me with a stack of CDs, brandishing a pen: 'I hope that you won't mind,' he said, 'and I know that it's pretty nerdy, but I collect CDs – would you sign these?'. On the top of the pile was a disc that I made thirty-odd years ago (not actually my first solo disc, but my fourth): first recordings of solo works by Erwin Schulhoff and André Jolivet rub shoulders with my collaborating composers, Nigel Clarke, Hans Werner Henze, Peter Sculthorpe, Dmitri Smirnov and David Matthews – his *Winter Journey* provided the title for that disc.<sup>1</sup> That piece was the first of his solo works which I played. It remains central to my repertoire, and, in the 32 years since I learned it, David's extraordinary vision of the violin became a touchstone to my own relationship to the instrument. My understanding of my instrument is, literally, in the hands of all

<sup>1</sup> Fish Ear FECD621 (1995). *Winter Journey* is recorded also on Volume One of the current series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0152, released in 2013.

the composers, and especially those to whom I return most often. Telemann, Tartini, ... David Matthews. They have had the most substantial impact on the way that I play.

I am fascinated by David's approach to other composers, his acknowledgement of their importance for his own music. Over the years, we have spoken many times about his love of arranging, and he often has told me that it is difficult for him to delineate between the act of arranging the music of others and composing his own. Of course, his music is always immediately recognisable. Collaborating with him on arrangements, of Beethoven, Skryabin, Bach, Elgar (and more), has made it evident to me that he is as diligent about that process as working on his own compositions. It is a fascinating overlap of practices, complicated and enhanced by his habit of reconfiguring his own works (an example of which finishes this new programme).

David's creative devotion to fellow-composers includes various models of transcription, paraphrase and variation. The latter form is, at least on the surface, the most classical, or that might be how it seems. As he notes, the last of his *Three Birthday Pieces*, Op. 167 [10], 'is based on the tenth of Beethoven's *Eleven Bagatelles*, Op. 119'. It is a 'traditional' set of variations, reaching back to the origin of the conceit: 'divisions', which in the early Baroque involved increasing the amount of material between melodic pitches, 'dividing'. But there is another layer: he has also arranged Beethoven's Op. 119 *Bagatelles* for string quartet, which my Kreutzer Quartet premiered, plays and has recorded.<sup>2</sup> So his return to the tiny tenth bagatelle (which is the hardest to play for a four-person ensemble!) has the added 'resonance', both for composer and violinist, that he is 're-inhabiting' a space in which we have both already established residence!

A feeling of 'shared space' marks out the fourth of his *Fantasias*, Op. 147 [13]. As David notes, it is dedicated to Edward Clark, an enthusiastic advocate of Sibelius for many years. Nearly all the material in the piece is from Sibelius symphonies, and I have a suspicion that its strict ordering is an affectionate hat-tip to Edward's devotion to the arc of Sibelius' output. But this 'Sibeliad' also reminds me of what I owe Edward. My devotion to David's music was initiated and encouraged by Edward: at the beginning of

<sup>2</sup> On Toccata Classics TOCC 0318.

my work with the Kreutzer Quartet, Edward encouraged us to play *all* the Sibelius string quartets, and the piano quintet – and to programme them alongside David’s quartets. Indeed, an early Kreutzer Quartet programme which the Sibelius Society presented at the Wigmore Hall reflects the shared enthusiasms I am articulating here: it consisted of David Matthews’ Fourth Quartet, Op. 27, Sibelius’ D minor *Voces Intimae*, Op. 56, and Beethoven’s C sharp minor, Op. 132.

David’s ‘Fantasia on Rachmaninov’s Prelude in G minor’ [14] starts out as a direct transcription. David retained the key of the original (something which, for instance, Liszt did not do with all his reworkings of Paganini *Capricci*). Rachmaninov’s chosen key and note choices make the famous opening ideal for the violin (indeed, ‘straight’ violin transcriptions begin with almost identical chord choices). However, the fun starts when David cannot resist composing, fantasising. As a non-pianist, I have no skin in such a game, or rather, I don’t when it comes to Rachmaninov (I can, and do, edge my way through Beethoven bagatelles when no one is listening), and so this ‘Fantasia’ was my very first opportunity to play any Rachmaninov – I have never been a professional orchestral player, and have not performed his two piano trios. Thus the piece has become *my* Rachmaninov, and David’s fantastical excursions just as much part of that as the original material, as if I were simply the composer improvising, if on the wrong instrument.

Like nearly every composer before him, David finds ways to reconfigure, repurpose his own works. The outcomes can be small-scale: his Three Fugues, Op. 88a (2001–2) for piano, are transcriptions of three of Fifteen Fugues, Op. 88, for solo violin, written for me.<sup>3</sup> As he notes, one of the movements of his *Arctic Suite* [7] was originally for solo cello. But he also reduces, boils down, larger works. *Dancing Shiva* [16] reworks his *Shiva Dances* for orchestra, and as he notes, he embraced the manifold limitations of the single violin, to evoke something of the sitar solos that had inspired the original piece.

All David’s vary-ing and fantasy-ing constantly reminds me that, to varying degrees, every composer, every artist, every writer carries on constant dialogue with the voices of

<sup>3</sup> Recorded on TOCC 0152.



the past, singing and speaking, using their voices and cadences, though evolved, just as they had done before. The great Neoteric poet of late Republican Rome, Gaius Valerius Catullus, was also the greatest thief – his acclaimed ‘Ille mi par esse deo videtur,’<sup>4</sup> is Sappho’s ‘φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν,’<sup>5</sup> though completed. Bach’s A minor Concerto, BWV 1065, is Vivaldi’s B minor Concerto, Op. 3, No. 10, but with four harpsichords, not four solo violins, and with the *concertante* cello part subsumed into the keyboards.

In David Matthews’ music, the nature of influence can be both overt, as noted above, but can also be obscure, and I have always had a sense that the complexities extend into his dedications. Most of his smaller solo works are dedicated to friends and colleagues. Some use, or vary, musical material from those friends (his Sixteenth String Quartet, Op. 161 (2021),<sup>6</sup> is constructed around, enshrines, a fragment of music by Hugh Wood, whom the piece memorialises). The second of *Three Birthday Variations* [9] uses a theme by its dedicatee, Robin Walker (again, as that was a cello piece, it affords me the chance to play music not otherwise available to my violin). And David is not averse to imitating the style, or emotional content, of a composer to whom he pays homage: ‘Brno Fantasia’ [12] feels very much like playing the music of Pavel Zemek Novák (he has written extensively for me). One might argue that David’s determination to write decidedly ‘un-Skempton-like’ music when he created the ‘Capriccio-Fantasia’ recorded here [11] is also an affectionate form of such imitation, carving sound from material that his fellow composer would not use. There is an extraordinary sensitivity at work here.

The next step towards the dedicatee is the use of his or her name, as is the case with John Carewe in the first of the variation sets here [8]. The essence of such miniature-crafting is portraiture. Portraits have at any given time veered between the celebration of (put broadly) subjects’ attributes, environments, enthusiasm and characters. That is assuredly the case with David’s work, and I certainly feel John’s irrepressible verve and fervour on the podium when I play the piece (I first led a student orchestra under him when I was eighteen years old).

<sup>4</sup> ‘He seems to me to be equal to the gods’: Catullus 51.

<sup>5</sup> Sappho 31.

<sup>6</sup> Recorded by the Kreutzer Quartet on TOCC 0732.

Sometimes, however, where the dedicatee is an artist, elements of his or her work may secrete themselves in the composer's creative imagination. I had a powerful sense, when I first played 'Midwinter Song' [5], that it reminded me of something. The piece is dedicated to the novelist R. M. Lamming, whose *The Notebook of Gismondo Cavalletti* is set in the Florence of da Vinci and Michelangelo, a book David has read and loves. Playing the piece sent my imagination directly to the first chapter of that book, which describes an unusual Florentine winter:

In piazzas, gardens and courtyards, the statues were transformed. Snow veiled their shoulders, their limbs were thickened and altered, the shields and spears they held were turned into shapes with mysterious meanings, and as for their faces, modified by the snow that clung where a lip curled or a nostril dilated, they no longer seemed serene nor familiar to us. We saw them as if for the first time.<sup>7</sup>

I am not sure what David's answer will be when I ask him about such an instinctual, personal link. When David told my wife and me that he and his wife, the artist Jenifer Wakelyn, were planning to travel to the Far North, by ship, in the winter, we responded enthusiastically, talking about the wonders of Tromsø in the snow, *fjell* rising sheer from the water and the Northern Lights. A few months later, I found myself premiering his resulting *Arctic Suite* on a warm summer afternoon in a sleepy Oxfordshire village hall. I and my wife enjoyed another type of recognition, that Jenifer and David had seen and loved the same things we do at the Arctic Circle, and here I was singing about it. The collaboration between composer and performer is personal, evoking shared stories.

As David notes, he has written more music for solo violin than perhaps any other living composer. From the very start he experimented with longer single movements for solo string instruments: the viola *Fantasia*, Op. 5, No. 1 (1970) [1], is ten minutes long, and *Winter Journey* takes quarter of an hour. It was no surprise, then, when David showed me the score of *Dancing Shiva* to find it was a fifteen-minute single movement. After an early performance, in Sandwich Guildhall, my colleague and friend, the cellist Neil Heyde noted, 'It just keeps going, there's more and more'. Strangely, a glance at the

<sup>7</sup> R. M. Lamming, *The Notebook of Gismondo Cavalletti*, Arena Books, London, 1985, p. 8.

score will not give any indication of quite how overwhelming the piece can be, for both performer and listener: the manifestation of Shiva that David refers to is 'Nataraja', cosmic dancer of life and destruction. The effect of the music on the player reflects this power: its performance is exhausting.

David showed me a 'Nataraja Shiva' sculpture that he had bought while he was writing the piece. It was an interesting moment, as I told him, that at home, I am always close to a beautiful small 'Padmasana [sitting] Shiva', an exquisite antique bronze figure given to me by a girlfriend when I was in my teens. My Shiva is in 'Lotus' position, important to me, as yoga is part of my 'daily bread'. Somehow, David had written a piece which counterpointed my practice, things around me daily. It felt the closest that David has come to writing me a piece that might be about me, who I am, even if by accident. David's awe-inspiring dance of Shiva resolves into transfigured tranquillity. His poetic exploration reminds me of T. S. Eliot's response to the 'Nataraja'. Both poet and composer reach for the 'Still point of the turning world':

Where past and future are gathered.  
Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline.  
Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, ll. 16–21.

**Peter Sheppard Skærved** is acclaimed internationally for performances of a vast range of solo repertoire. His repertoire stretches from the late sixteenth century to hundreds of works written for him, including major works by composers by established ‘greats’ such as Hans Werner Henze and George Rochberg, to the many young composers with whom he collaborates worldwide.

He is a Grammy-nominated recording artist, with over 100 albums to his name, ranging from concerto recordings, with orchestras that include the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, to the complete Tartini solo sonatas (on six Toccata Classics releases), 24 Telemann Fantasies, cycles of Beethoven, Mozart and Schubert sonatas, eight albums of solo works from the seventeenth century and many recordings of works dedicated to him. He is currently performing, filming and recording on important instruments in the collections of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the Metropolitan Museum, New York City, and the Paganini violins kept in Genoa.

He is an Honorary Professor at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music, London, Artist in Residence at Lund University, Sweden, and visiting Research Fellow of Goldsmiths, University of London. He frequently gives master-classes and workshops at schools across the USA, including Peabody Conservatoire, Vanderbilt University, Ithaca College, Middlebury College, Cornell University and many more.

His wide-ranging ‘Knowledge Exchange Violin’ Project brings together institutions ranging from the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and the Museo Stradivari in Cremona through to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in the UK, with a linked series of concerts, recordings, residencies, films, recordings, podcasts and much more. This project can be followed via <https://www.peter-sheppard-skaerved.com/?p=30925>. His YouTube Channel ([www.youtube.com/@PeterSheppardSkaervedviolin](https://www.youtube.com/@PeterSheppardSkaervedviolin)) features over 600 films, recordings and talks.

*[www.peter-sheppard-skaerved.com](http://www.peter-sheppard-skaerved.com)*



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Hertfordshire, UK

Engineer-Editor: Jonathan Haskell

Producer: Peter Sheppard Skærved

With thanks to Ben Hebbert and the Royal Academy of Music for the loan of the instruments heard  
on this recording:

violin – Girolamo Amati, Cremona, 1629

viola – Jakob Rayman, Southwark, 1641

Booklet texts: David Matthews and Peter Sheppard Skærved

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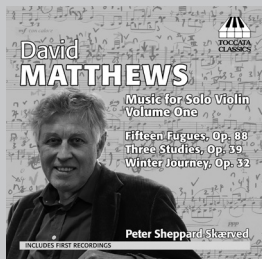
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TOCC 0309

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—Richard Bratby, *Gramophone*

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# DAVID MATTHEWS Music for Solo Violin and Viola, Volume Three

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1 *Fantasia for viola, Op. 5, No. 1* (1970, rev. 2003) 8:52

2 *Darkness Draws In for viola, Op. 102* (2006) 8:26

*Arctic Suite for viola, Op. 172* (2024) 10:14

3 I First Northern Song 1:34

4 II Mountains 2:26

5 III Northern Lights 2:50

6 IV Snow 1:46

7 V Second Northern Song 1:38

*Three Birthday Pieces for violin, Op. 167* (2023) 11:20

8 No. 1 For John Carewe 3:36

9 No. 2 For Robin Walker 4:14

10 No. 3 For William Howard 3:30

*Six Fantasias for Violin, Op. 147, Nos. 2–6* (2017) 17:43

11 No. 2 Capriccio – Fantasia 3:07

12 No. 3 Brno Fantasia 3:21

13 No. 4 Sibeliad 1:48

14 No. 5 Fantasia on Rachmaninov's Prelude in G minor 3:38

15 No. 6 Midwinter Song 5:49

16 *Dancing Shiva for violin, Op. 160a* (2021, arr. 2022) 14:11

TT 70:48

FIRST RECORDINGS

**Peter Sheppard Skærvæd**

viola: Jakob Rayman, Southwark, 1641 11–17

violin: Girolamo Amati, Cremona, 1629 8–16