



CARL
NIELSEN (1865-1931)
piano music

JOHN McCABE piano

SOMMCD 0146-2



DDD



CARL
NIELSEN
piano music

JOHN McCABE
piano

CD 1 (61:42)

1 Festival Prelude for the New Century FS 24 (1900) 1:40

Piano Music for Young and Old FS 148 (Opus 53) (1930)

Book 1: *The sharp keys* (10:35)

2 I – VI 5:32

3 VII – XII 5:03

Symphonic Suite FS 19 (Opus 8) (1894) (16:54)

4-7 I – IV

Five Pieces FS 10 (Opus 3) (1890) (7:36)

8-12 I – V

Three Piano Pieces FS 131 (Opus 59) (1928) (11:49)

13-15 I – III

Piano Music for Young and Old FS 148 (Opus 53) (1930)

Book 2: *The flat keys* (12:41)

16 XIII – XVIII 6:15

17 XIX – XXIV 6:25

CD 2 (55:44)

Humoresque Bagatelles FS 22 (Opus 11) (1894-97) (4:50)

1 I – VI

Suite FS 91 (Opus 45) (1919) (21:50)

2-7 I – VI

8 Chaconne FS 79 (Opus 32) (1916) 10:41

9 Dance of the Handmaidens FS 57 No 5 (1910) 1:13

10 Theme with Variations FS 81 (Opus 40) (1916-17) 16:47

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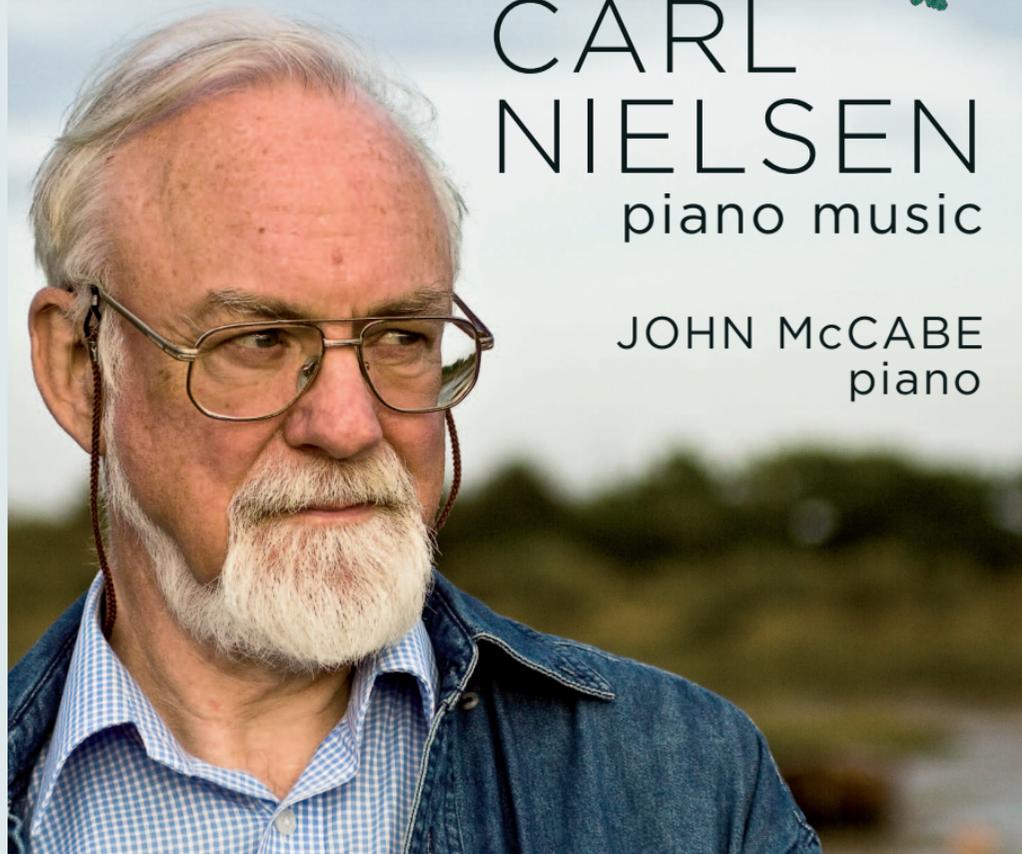
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CARL NIELSEN

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CD 1
(61:42)

1 **Festival Prelude for the New Century** FS 24 (1900) 1:40

Piano Music for Young and Old FS 148 (Opus 53) (1930)

Book 1: The sharp keys [10:35]

- | | | | |
|---|------|--|------|
| 2 | I | <i>Allegretto</i> (C major) | 0:37 |
| | II | <i>Allegretto</i> (A minor) | 0:31 |
| | IIIa | <i>Allegro scherzoso</i> | 0:39 |
| | IIIb | <i>Grazioso</i> (G major) | 0:50 |
| | IV | <i>Andantino</i> (E minor) | 0:33 |
| | V | <i>Allegro giocoso</i> (D major) | 0:49 |
| | VI | <i>Poco lamentoso</i> (B minor) | 1:30 |
| 3 | VII | <i>Marziale</i> (A major) | 0:37 |
| | VIII | <i>Cantabile</i> (F sharp minor) | 0:36 |
| | IX | <i>Allegretto civettuolo</i> (E major) | 0:33 |
| | X | <i>Lugubre</i> (C sharp minor) | 1:18 |
| | XI | <i>Andantino poco tiepido</i> (B major) | 0:50 |
| | XII | <i>Adagio drammatico</i> (G sharp minor) | 1:05 |

Symphonic Suite FS 19 (Opus 8) (1894) [16:54]

- | | | | |
|---|-----|-----------------------------|------|
| 4 | I | <i>Intonation: Maestoso</i> | 2:00 |
| 5 | II | <i>Quasi Allegretto</i> | 3:31 |
| 6 | III | <i>Andante</i> | 7:15 |
| 7 | IV | <i>Finale: Allegro</i> | 4:06 |

- Five Pieces** FS 10 (Opus 3) (1890) [7:36]
- | | | | |
|----|-----|-------------------|------|
| 8 | I | <i>Folk Tune</i> | 2:36 |
| 9 | II | <i>Humoresque</i> | 1:33 |
| 10 | III | <i>Arabesque</i> | 1:00 |
| 11 | III | <i>Mignon</i> | 0:54 |
| 12 | III | <i>Elf-Dance</i> | 1:31 |

Three Piano Pieces FS 131 (Opus 59) (1928) [11:49]

- | | | | |
|----|-----|-----------------------------------|------|
| 13 | I | <i>Impromptu: Allegro fluente</i> | 3:25 |
| 14 | II | <i>Molto adagio</i> | 2:34 |
| 15 | III | <i>Allegro non troppo</i> | 5:49 |

Piano Music for Young and Old FS 148 (Opus 53) (1930)

Book 2: The flat keys [12:41]

- | | | | |
|----|-------|---|------|
| 16 | XIII | <i>Andantino carino</i> (F major) | 0:55 |
| | XIV | <i>Capriccioso</i> (D minor) | 0:54 |
| | XV | <i>Adagio espressivo</i> (B flat major) | 1:20 |
| | XVI | <i>Alla contadina</i> (G minor) | 0:50 |
| | XVII | <i>Largo con fantasia</i> (E flat major) | 1:35 |
| | XVIII | <i>Preludio</i> (C minor) | 0:39 |
| 17 | XIX | <i>'Alla Bach'</i> (A flat major) | 0:39 |
| | XX | <i>Con sentimento</i> (F minor) | 0:54 |
| | XXI | <i>Marcia di goffo</i> (D flat major) | 0:55 |
| | XXII | <i>Allegretto pastorale</i> (B flat minor) | 1:07 |
| | XXIII | <i>Etude (Allegro)</i> G flat major | 0:48 |
| | XXIV | <i>Molto adagio: Allegretto comodo</i> (E flat minor) | 2:00 |

CARL NIELSEN

piano music JOHN McCABE piano

CD 2
(55:44)

	Humoresque Bagatelles FS 22 (Opus 11) (1894-97)	[4:50]
1	I Hello! Hello! <i>Allegretto</i>	0:40
	II The Spinning Top: <i>Presto</i>	0:43
	III A Little Slow Waltz: <i>Valse lente</i>	1:00
	IV The Jumping Jack: <i>Poco allegretto</i>	0:43
	V Puppet March: <i>Allegro moderato</i>	0:53
	VI The Musical Clock: <i>Allegretto scherzando</i>	0:48
	 Suite FS 91 (Opus 45) (1919)	 [21:50]
2	<i>Allegretto un pochettino</i>	3:19
3	<i>Poco moderato</i>	2:46
4	<i>Molto adagio e patético</i>	4:59
5	<i>Allegretto innocente</i>	1:41
6	<i>Allegretto vivo</i>	1:14
7	<i>Allegro non troppo ma vigoroso</i>	7:48
8	Chaconne FS 79 (Opus 32) (1916)	10:41
9	Dance of the Handmaidens FS 57 No 5 (1910)	1:13
10	Theme with Variations FS 81 (Opus 40) (1916-17)	16:47

NB: Due to the age of the master tapes, we have encountered a few minor technical issues, which we have been largely successful in eliminating during mastering.

The piano music of CARL NIELSEN

The international reputation the Danish master Carl Nielsen (1865-1931) enjoys is essentially that of a major symphonist. Although having been born in the same year as Sibelius, it was the Finn who first gained an international reputation, as a consequence of the support of several greatly-admired conductors and of having written several pieces that later generations would identify as 'hits' – *Finlandia* and the *Valse Triste* especially. Although Nielsen's music contains many attractive features, he wrote no 'hits' as such, and despite being regarded principally as a symphonist, Nielsen's achievements in opera, chamber music, songs and choral music, although considerable, have not always enjoyed a similar acceptance as have his symphonies.

In terms of general acceptance, the piano music of both Sibelius and Nielsen has much in common, and although Sibelius's output of piano music was greater than Nielsen's, there can be little doubt that Nielsen's is more significant, as a body of work, than that of the Finn. Like Sibelius, Nielsen's solo piano music appeared throughout his life. His output contains five major works for the instrument – albeit no sonatas (Sibelius followed Grieg in composing just one early example) – as well as a number of much shorter and less significant pieces which in total admirably demonstrate Nielsen's range within the medium. A curious aspect of Nielsen's works is that his opus numbers do not always indicate consecutive composition or publication, giving no more than a very general idea. A far more reliable means of identifying Nielsen's works is the catalogue compiled by Dan Fog and Torben Schousboe published in 1965, each work given the prefix FS.

In considering Nielsen's piano music in chronological order, one not insignificant point should be made, which is that – unlike Grieg or Sibelius – Nielsen was not a gifted pianist himself. He could play the piano, of course, to a certain standard, but not quite to the level of those other Scandinavian masters. The individual nature of Nielsen's piano writing has occasioned comment, but despite such technical difficulties as his piano music occasionally poses, the inherent quality and originality of Nielsen's work in this field over-rides any passing issues.

Five Pieces FS 10 (Opus 3) (1890)

I – Folk Tune; II – Humoresque; III – Arabesque; IV – Mignon; V – Elf-Dance

Apart from one or two short and quite insignificant earlier examples, this set constitutes Nielsen's first published work for solo piano. Some of the pieces were probably written rather earlier, the set being finally issued in 1891. In giving each movement a characteristic title, Nielsen followed Grieg's *Lyric Pieces* (by 1890, the first four of Grieg's eventual ten books of pieces had been published), for in the first and last of the pieces Nielsen adopts virtually identical titles as Grieg had used in his Opus 38 (no 2) and Opus 12 (no 4) sets. Nielsen prefaces the *Arabesque* with a quotation from J P Jacobsen: 'Har Du faret vild i dunkle Skove? Kjender Du Pan?' (Have you become lost in the shadowy forest? Do you [know] Pan?), a curious, rather nervous study (as we should expect), contrasting finely with the gently evocative *Mignon* (albeit with its peremptory ending).

Symphonic Suite FS 19 (Opus 8) (1894)

I – *Intonation: Maestoso*; II – *Quasi Allegretto*
III – *Andante*; IV – *Finale: Allegro*

Nielsen's First Symphony, his Opus 7 (FS 16), appeared in 1894, and was a notable success, with Nielsen himself playing in the second violin section under Johann Svendsen. Almost immediately, he began work on this next symphonic work, this time for solo piano, on a rather smaller scale but similarly in four movements. The title of the first may need clarification; as Nielsen explained, whilst writing the piece during a stay at a farm in Gjorslev, he was drawn to a large old oak tree from which he 'received a strong impression, which I then tried to reproduce in a succession of powerful chord progressions.' This clearly refers to the character of the robust and forceful opening movement, which is followed by two contrasted movements, the first a gently-flowing study and the second a somewhat lengthy exordium succeeded by the first genuinely symphonic (i.e., developmental) writing in the work. The finale is a discursive and fleet study, full of inner movement of almost Brahmsian stamp, but already Nielsen's character is unmistakably identifiable.

Humoresque Bagatelles FS 22 (Opus 11) (1894-97)

I – Hello! Hello! *Allegretto*; II – The Spinning Top: *Presto*

III – A Little Slow Waltz: *Valse lente*; IV – The Jumping Jack: *Poco allegretto*

V – Puppet March: *Allegro moderato*

VI – The Musical Clock: *Allegretto scherzando*

The overall and individual titles of Nielsen's piano work indicate a very different collection, begun not long after the Symphonic Suite had been completed. Doubtless conceived as a contrast to the composer's twin symphonic utterances, these delightful miniatures inhabit the opposite end of the scale, the six movements' total playing time, in John McCabe's characteristic performances, being less than five minutes.

Festival Prelude for the New Century FS 24 (1900)

Composed to mark the dawn of the 20th century, and first published on January 1st 1901 in the national Danish newspaper *Politken*, this suitably heraldic prolegomenon has a hymn-like character.

Dance of the Handmaidens FS 57 No 5 (1910)

Nielsen's output of incidental theatre music was extensive in providing music for no fewer than 22 productions. This haunting piece comes from music composed in 1910 for Adam Oehlenschläger's play *Hagbarth and Signe* (1815), based on a Danish legend, the first production of the Copenhagen Open Air Theatre. This Dance is dated May 16, 1910, being composed concurrently with the Third Symphony, and sharing something of that masterpiece's relaxed character, as the handmaidens of the title seek to calm the troubled Queen Bera.

Coinciding with the opening of the production, Nielsen's publishers issued his piano solo arrangement of the Dance.

Chaconne FS 79 (Opus 32) (1916)

As John McCabe has commented: 'Nielsen's piano music, especially his later works, has a great deal in common with that of Beethoven, for they share a similar grittiness and nobility of character expressed in music that is sometimes rather clumsily written for the instrument. In both cases, the music achieves its greatness because of the forcefulness of the conception behind the notes – the challenge to the performer and the listener is immensely rewarding to accept. Indeed, were their music more 'comfortably' written for the instrument, it might be less impressive, since some of the essence of the music is the sense of struggle and challenge.

The Chaconne, written in 1916 and Nielsen's first really masterly piano work, is a good example of this. It begins with a bare, nobly expressive bass theme forming the basis of the variations, and from this simple beginning he raises a structure of great and varied power. The key is D (mostly minor), and his subtlety in retaining the pull of the home key during digressions into other, quite remote, keys is fascinating.

The variations fall into groups, at first with increasing elaboration of the theme and then subsiding to a simple, affecting interlude before starting the ascent to the powerful and dramatic climax, at the peak of which the theme is thundered out canonically in octaves. This mood, however, descends into more peaceful

realms for the Coda, a superbly sustained section in D major in which the main tune is extended and surrounded by lovely, rippling scale textures. Finally, the music sweeps off into the distance, leaving behind it a beautiful, very simple final cadence.’

Theme with Variations FS 81 (Opus 40) (1916-17)

Begun shortly after the score of the Chaconne had been completed, this work consists of an original theme followed by fifteen variations. The theme itself opens in B minor and gravitates towards G minor at the close, obliging each of the variations to do the same. This tonal dichotomy, as we might expect, drives the work to where, as the variations reach their climax, Nielsen likened the music to ‘the wild response of a man, fighting with his back to an iceberg, finally – as though drunk and exhausted by the conflict – staggers away.’ The notion of being ‘punch-drunk’ is no exaggeration, for the last page is marked *come ubbriaco* (‘as though drunk’), requiring the performer to supply whatever might be necessary in realising Nielsen’s intentions, settled in a final chord of B major. The result is one of the 20th century’s finest works in the genre of theme and variations for keyboard.

Suite FS 91 (Opus 45) (1919)

*Allegretto un pochettino; Poco moderato; Molto adagio e patético;
Allegretto innocente; Allegretto vivo; Allegro non troppo ma vigoroso*

John McCabe writes also on this work: ‘Among 20th-century piano works, and in the keyboard output of Carl Nielsen himself, this Suite occupies a remarkable position – it is his largest piano work, and stands as a monument of

a particular kind of composition of which he was a master. It was perhaps his most important work between the Fourth and Fifth Symphonies and is typically rich in detail, with piano writing of great brilliance and understanding of the medium, a complex overall plan underpinned by a thoroughly Nielsenesque tonal structure (moving from the opening F sharp tonality to a clear and powerful B flat at the close), and an immense variety of moods.

The plan of the Suite is unusual: six movements, of which three (the first, third and sixth) are powerfully symphonic in style while the others (number two, four and five) are shorter and lighter in texture, more like Intermezzi, lightening but not banishing the tensions of the larger movements. The charm and innocence of the fourth and fifth movements in particular are delightful, and contrast vividly with the dramatic, even tragic emotions of the Adagio third movement. It is in the outer panels, however, that these contrasts are more directly juxtaposed to convey the struggle within the music – in both cases, a seemingly innocent opening soon turns to darker, more turbulent matters, a characteristic device and one of which Shostakovich was later to prove another master. The triumph at the close of this majestic, sometimes awe-inspiring work is hard-won, and all the greater for the intensity with which the argument is pursued.

Nielsen uses simple, diatonic materials and wildly chromatic, sometimes highly dissonant textures, contrasting these with clear, hymn-like chordal themes in a way that marks him out as a great master of the art of synthesising totally different kinds of material into a single, coherent and integrated musical world. It is an achievement of colossal dimensions, and it is heartening to see his music

receiving wider currency in recent times, though pianists have still been slow to realise and relish the quality of his finest piano works such as the Chaconne, the Theme and Variations, and this unique Suite, whose Beethovenian grandeur belies its misleadingly modest title.’

Three Piano Pieces FS 131 (Opus 59) (1928)

I – *Impromptu: Allegro fluente*; II – *Molto adagio*; III – *Allegro non troppo*

Coming from the final period of Nielsen’s creative life, the Three Piano Pieces may initially appear to be a heterogeneous group, but their common unpredictability imparts a cohesion that over-rides individual differences. However one approaches these pieces, one should bear in mind that they are among the final thoughts of a great and true original, and as such do not readily reveal their subtleties. Equally, they represent a distillation of Nielsen’s direct yet never predictable expression, as well as forming a ‘classically’-shaped triptych in terms of overall tempos.

Piano Music for Young and Old FS 148 (Opus 53) (1930)

Book 1: The sharp keys

I – *Allegretto* (C major); II – *Allegretto* (A minor)
III – *Allegro scherzoso; grazioso* (G major); IV – *Andantino* (E minor)
V – *Allegro giocoso* (D major); VI – *Poco lamentoso* (B minor)
VII – *Marziale* (A major); VIII – *Cantabile* (F sharp minor)
IX – *Allegretto civettuolo* (E major); X – *Lugubre* (C sharp minor)
XI – *Andantino poco tiepido* (B major)
XII – *Adagio drammatico* (G sharp minor)

Book 2: The flat keys

XIII – *Andantino carino* (F major)
XIV – *Capriccioso* (D minor); XV – *Adagio espressivo* (B flat major)
XVI – *Alla contadino* (G minor); XVII – *Largo con fantasia* (E flat major)
XVIII – *Preludio* (C minor); XIX – ‘*Alla Bach*’ (A flat major)
XX – *Con sentimento* (F minor); XXI – *Marcia di goffo* (D flat major)
XXII – *Allegretto pastorale* (B flat minor); XXIII *Etude (Allegro)* (G flat major)
XXIV – *Molto adagio: Allegretto comodo* (E flat minor)

We began our notes on Nielsen’s piano music with a consideration of his first published work in the genre, clearly written with the amateur pianist in mind. Forty years later, as he approached the end of his life (he was to die the following year, aged 66) he returned to music for the aspiring pianist. The result is a collection of miniatures, one in each of the 24 major and minor keys, split into two ‘books’ – one for ‘sharp keys’ and one for ‘flat keys’, with each piece in a major key followed by one in the relative minor, the pairs rising by a fifth from their predecessor. Thus, there is a slight educational element in the series (not least in solving the more rarely-encountered tempo indications), albeit no more than that which Bach often employed in his keyboard music.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2015

JOHN McCABE

John McCabe's distinguished career as both composer and pianist established him as one of Britain's leading classical musicians, with an international reputation in both fields. His set of the complete Haydn Piano Sonatas, recorded in the 1970s, still stands as a landmark. Widely praised at the time, the set, now on 12 CDs, continues to sell across the world. McCabe's love for the music of Nielsen was also deep, and his set of what was then regarded as the complete Nielsen piano music was recorded around the same time as the Haydn. His devotion to music led McCabe to explore and perform the work of composers of many different kinds – Bax, Grieg, Schubert, Hindemith, Howells, Copland and Schumann are among those whose work he recorded. He was deeply interested in contemporary music also, and performed and promoted with great generosity the work of his fellow composers, and in due course of time, that of younger composers. He also made outstanding recordings of his own piano music.

As a composer he ranks among the foremost in Britain, with seven symphonies, two full-evening ballets – *Edward II* (Stuttgart, 1995) and *Arthur* (Birmingham Royal Ballet 1999/2001), *The Chagall Windows* and *Notturmi ed Alba* among his leading works, together with much chamber, keyboard and vocal music. *Cloudcatcher Fells* is a classic of the brass band repertoire. Among his recent works have been *Symphony on a Pavane* (LPO), *Symphony Labyrinth* (RLPO), and his Cello Concerto *Songlines*, written for Truls Mørk and the Hallé Orchestra. *Joybox* was written for the Proms 2012, and most

recently *Christ's Nativity* for double choir/organ, was premiered by the Hallé Choir (December 2014)

John McCabe was appointed CBE for services to British music in 1985, and in 2006 the Incorporated Society of Musicians honoured him with their Distinguished Musician Award. In May 2014 he was the recipient of the British Academy of Songwriters and Authors IVOR Award, while the Iles Medal was awarded to him in September 2014 for services to the brass band movement.

Monica McCabe © 2015

John McCabe was born in Huyton, Liverpool on April 21, 1939
and died in Kent on February 13, 2015 aged 75.

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