

SIR ARTHUR BLISS (1891-1975)

Piano Music Vol.2

MARK BEBBINGTON piano

Masks (1924)

- | | | |
|---|-----------------|------|
| 1 | A Comedy Mask | 1:21 |
| 2 | A Romantic Mask | 3:50 |
| 3 | A Sinister Mask | 2:22 |
| 4 | A Military Mask | 2:53 |

Two Interludes (1925)

- | | | |
|---|-------|------|
| 5 | No. 1 | 4:09 |
| 6 | No. 2 | 3:23 |

Suite for Piano (c.1912)

Première Recording

- | | | |
|---|---------|------|
| 7 | Prelude | 5:47 |
| 8 | Ballade | 7:48 |
| 9 | Scherzo | 3:32 |

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 10 | Das alte Jahr vergangen ist (1932)
(The old year has ended) | 2:57 |
|----|---|------|

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|------|
| 11 | The Rout Trot (1927) | 2:42 |
|----|-----------------------------|------|

Triptych (1970)

- | | | |
|----|---|------|
| 12 | Meditation: Andante tranquillo | 7:08 |
| 13 | Dramatic Recitative:
Grave – poco a poco molto animato | 5:48 |
| 14 | Capriccio: allegro | 5:09 |
| 15 | 'Bliss' (One-Step) (1923) | 3:15 |

Total Duration: 62:11

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Steinway Concert Grand Model 'D'

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Masks · Two Interludes · Triptych
Suite for Piano (c.1912) *Première Recording*



The
Complete Piano Music of
SIR ARTHUR BLISS
Vol.2

MARK BEBBINGTON piano

THE SOLO PIANO MUSIC OF SIR ARTHUR BLISS Vol. 2

For anyone who has investigated the piano music of Arthur Bliss, the most puzzling aspect is surely that, as a body of work, it remains so little known. The puzzle is that it demonstrates consistently high quality, and is outstandingly well-written for the instrument. The moment one puts forward those observations two possible answers – neither relevant today – suggest themselves. The first is that Bliss was not ‘known’, so to speak, as a pianist himself, and the second is that his solo piano music appears not to have been considered important during his lifetime – even by those who wrote on the composer or promoted his music.

And yet the present writer has vivid memories of seeing Bliss live on BBC television in the 1950s discussing his new works written to mark the Queen’s return from the 1953-54 Commonwealth Tour, and playing part of the splendid march *Welcome the Queen* on the piano. Bliss could play the piano to a high standard (with no qualms in demonstrating his skill live on television), and his writing for the solo instrument in the Piano Concerto of 1939 is by a composer who knew the full range and capabilities of the modern concert grand. If our first answer is his innate unwillingness to push himself forward as a capable pianist in his own works, the piano part of his early Piano Quintet (composed in 1915, during his Army service) was written for himself to play, and in 1939, after conducting an orchestral concert in Boston, Bliss was the pianist in an impromptu performance of Brahms’s Horn Trio.

Yet those who wrote on Bliss’s piano music, during his lifetime or shortly after his death, barely mentioned it. Christopher Palmer, in an otherwise admirable monograph on Bliss, devotes less than thirty words to the piano music, listing merely four principal works; the Bliss Centenary Brochure of 1988 also lists just four ‘selected’ works – but not the same four as Palmer does.

Anyone coming new to Bliss’s piano music via these publications might be forgiven for thinking that the composer’s contribution to the repertoire was of little significance, reinforced by Bliss’s autobiographical study *As I Remember* (1970), where he mentions just one of the eight works included on Volume I of Mark Bebbington’s complete recordings. However, as we may hear on both Volumes, Bliss’s piano music is remarkably wide-ranging, and, as Bebbington himself has claimed: “with the piano music he remains radical right up until the last complete work”.

Indeed, it is the consistently radical nature of Bliss’s major piano works that unites them over the decades, for his piano music appeared over a longer period – of sixty years – than that of any other genre in his output. To put those sixty years into perspective, Bliss’s first piano piece appeared soon after the pioneering flight across the English Channel in an aircraft by Louis Blériot in July 1909; his last piano composition, the magnificent *Triptych*, was written following the inaugural flight of the Anglo-French supersonic Concorde in March 1969.

Music saw many changes during those six decades, as Bliss had witnessed in his personal and creative life. He was not alone, of course, for the 1914-18 War affected every European, even those in countries not directly involved in the conflict. In *As I Remember* Bliss reveals a refreshing degree of self-awareness: ‘My temperament demands activity, not a passive role: I only feel myself in action’. We should not be surprised, therefore, to learn that Bliss volunteered for the British Army within two days of war being declared in August 1914, later serving with distinction in the Grenadier Guards. In some respects, his music would reflect those changes, as we heard in Volume I, but although the War coincided with his growing maturity as man and artist, the active temperament within him can be discerned in his pre-1914 piano music, the most significant score being Bliss’s (first) Suite for Piano

of *circa* 1912, the three movements entitled Prelude, Ballade and Scherzo, already exhibiting a radical temperament of constant activity.

More than that: it looks beyond the British Isles – perhaps to Europe rather than the USA, the land of Bliss's father's birth – for the language of the Suite already bids farewell to Edwardian England, the occasional allusion and chord-sequence in the central Ballade notwithstanding. The Ballade, in many ways, contains the most individual and original music of the three – if the Prelude leads to the Ballade, the concluding Scherzo reprises much of the *al fresco* character of the work's activity – as the composer muses over a contrasting idea, it is the energy of the early twenty-something Bliss that has the final say.

The appeal of Continental Europe becomes more manifest in Bliss's next work for solo piano, the *Valses Fantastiques* of 1913 (in Volume I of Mark Bebbington's survey) but his next significant work for solo piano – the *Masks* suite – did not appear until 1924, by which the time his creative character had been fired by the experience of war and of personal loss within the conflict. The Continent of Europe had also lost some of its pre-War allure. From 1917, America's involvement in the War and the framing of the Versailles Treaty had made the USA a major player in world affairs for the first time, and American 'jazz' music had caught the imagination of young Europeans, including Bliss, who responded to the sweeping popular dance crazes – spurred by the rise of the portable gramophone and birth of national broadcasting – with a one-step, appropriately entitled '*Bliss*'. The One-Step was a popular dance in 2/4 time, somewhat faster than earlier ragtime styles.

Masks is in four movements, each character 'wearing' a distinctive mask – a pianoforte refraction, perhaps, of the four characteristic movements of *A Colour Symphony* of

1922, the first major orchestral work of Bliss's career, the premiere of which, at that year's Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester, had made a deep impression. It was the first orchestral work by Bliss to be performed in the United States, for which country the Bliss family had left soon after the London premiere of the symphony. The American premiere, in December 1923, was by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Monteux and did much to spread the word of the young English composer, including a new commission for the same orchestra and conductor.

Written in the United States, each of the four 'Masks' breathes the air of the early-1920s – the 'Romantic' aspect of the second movement surely a reflection of wide emotional experience – and the sudden, rather frightening aspect of the 'Sinister' third movement in the concluding bars leaves one in no doubt of underlying military reminiscences, which are initially on the surface in the 'Military' finale, soon fading in a contemplative coda, surely depicting the ultimate sacrifice military might demands.

Masks is clearly an important work in Bliss's output. It led directly to Bliss's next piano works, the *Toccata* and the better-known *Suite*, as well as the *Two Interludes* of 1925, each dedicated to a distinguished American patroness of the arts: Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge (who commissioned Bliss's Oboe Quintet of 1927) and Ethel Roe Eichheim (a neighbour of Bliss's father in Santa Barbara, California). The *Interludes* form an intriguing pair: ostensibly independent pieces, they 'follow' one another as contrasting sides of a similar coin, their individual character unmistakable.

Bliss married his American-born wife Trudy in Santa Barbara in June, 1925 and they returned to England soon afterwards. As with the One-Step, the Charleston and the Fox-Trot, another popular dance of the era was the Trot, not so dissimilar from the One-Step and marginally more syncopated in earlier rag-time (i.e., 'ragged'-time)

style. In 1927, Bliss took a theme from his earlier (1920) work *Rout* (one of several pre-*Colour Symphony* scores that caused him to be labelled an *avant-gardiste*), and published *The Rout Trot* for piano solo.

As *A Colour Symphony* had declared Bliss's significance at the beginning of the 1920s, so his (unnumbered) second symphony, *Morning Heroes*, reinforced his stature at the end of the decade, paying final tribute to those who fell in the War – including his brother Kennard, whose death affected him deeply. Bliss was now approaching 40, established as a leading figure among the younger generation of British composers. In that capacity he was one of several British composers invited by Harriet Cohen to make an arrangement for solo piano of a work by JS Bach, the collection published by Oxford University Press. Bliss chose the chorale prelude *Das alte Jahr vergangen ist* (The Old Year has Passed) BWV 614, making a contemplative and restrained setting, imaginatively reworked for the modern piano keyboard.

With the exception of two short pieces, Bliss's significant contributions to the solo piano repertoire conclude with two major works – the Sonata of 1952 (on Volume I) and the final *Triptych* of 1970. This last work was written for and is dedicated to Louis Kentner, who gave the first performance at the newly-opened Queen Elizabeth Hall in London in March 1971. Effectively, it is a second Sonata for piano, but as Christopher Palmer commented on the composer's work in general: "Bliss was not a 'symphonic' composer: each movement is a superbly-crafted dramatic mood-piece", a comment that applies with as much validity to Bliss's last great solo piano work as it does to the early Suite of sixty years before, the titles of the *Triptych's* three movements remaining as clear pointers to the consistently radical nature of the composer's music, and how best we should respond to it.

Robert Matthew-Walker © 2015

MARK BEBBINGTON

Mark Bebbington is fast gaining a reputation as one of today's most strikingly individual British pianists. His discs of British music for SOMM have met with unanimous critical acclaim and notably, his cycles of Frank Bridge and John Ireland, have attracted seven consecutive sets of 5***** in BBC Music Magazine.

Over recent seasons Mark has toured extensively throughout Central and Northern Europe, the Far East and North Africa and has performed at major UK venues with the London Philharmonic, Philharmonia, Royal Philharmonic and London Mozart Players. As a recitalist, he makes regular appearances at major UK and International Festivals.

Mark made a highly successful Carnegie Hall début in October 2014 with Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra in the US première of Richard Strauss's *Parergon* and he returns to New York next season for his recital début at Alice Tully Hall. Dates during 2015/16 include London performances with the Royal Philharmonic and London Philharmonic Orchestras, concerts with the Flanders and Jerusalem Symphony Orchestras and a two-week European tour with the Czech National Orchestra and Libor Pešek.

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