

# GREAT AMERICAN SONATAS

AARON COPLAND	Piano Sonata
LEONARD BERNSTEIN	Piano Sonata
LOU HARRISON	Third Piano Sonata
LOU HARRISON	Largo Ostinato
CHARLES IVES	Three-Page Sonata
CHARLES IVES	The Celestial Railroad, "Phantasy" for Solo Piano

Nathan Williamson *piano*

**COPLAND** *Piano Sonata* (1939-41) [25:27]

- |   |                      |       |
|---|----------------------|-------|
| 1 | 1. Molto moderato    | 9:16  |
| 2 | 2. Vivace            | 5:17  |
| 3 | 3. Andante sostenuto | 10:54 |

**BERNSTEIN** *Piano Sonata* (1938) [17:31]

- |   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| 4 | 1. Cadenza: Presto - Molto Moderato -<br>Scherzando | 6:06  |
| 5 | 2. Largo - Moderato                                 | 11:25 |

**HARRISON** *Piano Sonata No. 3* (1938) [12:10]

- |   |                                       |      |
|---|---------------------------------------|------|
| 6 | 1. Slowish and singing                | 5:26 |
| 7 | 2. Fast and rugged                    | 4:19 |
| 8 | 3. Very slow, very singing and solemn | 2:25 |

**HARRISON** *Largo Ostinato* (1937, rev.1970) 5:18

**IVES** *Three-Page Sonata* (1905)

- |    |                                      |      |
|----|--------------------------------------|------|
| 10 | Allegro moderato - Andante - Allegro | 8:48 |
|----|--------------------------------------|------|

**IVES** *The Celestial Railroad* (1925) 9:03

Total Duration: **78:19**

Recorded at The Menuhin Hall on 10 & 11 January 2016

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# GREAT AMERICAN SONATAS

Bernstein  
Copland  
Ives  
Harrison

Nathan Williamson  
*piano*

# GREAT AMERICAN SONATAS

AARON COPLAND Piano Sonata

LEONARD BERNSTEIN Piano Sonata

LOU HARRISON Third Piano Sonata, Largo Ostinato

CHARLES IVES *Three-Page Sonata*,  
The *Celestial Railroad* – “Phantasy” for Solo Piano

The sonata represents the summit of ambition for any composer writing for the piano – the equivalent of a symphony for the orchestra. This disc includes sonatas by four very different American composers writing under very different circumstances: an ambitious all-round musician in his student years; an established master at the height of his powers; an inveterate experimentalist setting himself a new problem; a dogged individualist insisting on his own way of doing things. In each case, the composer chose not to fit his music into conventional forms, but to rethink the whole idea of the sonata. America is after all the land of the clean sheet, the fresh start – of making things new.

In addition to his stellar international career as a conductor and his work as a composer, both for the concert hall and for the Broadway stage, **Leonard Bernstein** was also a gifted concert pianist. But that aspect of his multifarious life is hardly reflected in his keyboard compositions, which consist mostly of collections of occasional miniatures. The “Juvenilia” section of his catalogue, though, includes a more substantial Piano Sonata. Bernstein wrote it in 1938, during his junior year

(third of four) at Harvard University, in his native Boston area, and dedicated it to his piano teacher Heinrich Gebhard. It remained in manuscript for many years, and was made available in print only in 1979.

The Sonata is in two movements, fantasy-like in their construction but close-knit, and closely integrated, in their material. Most of the work’s thematic ideas are presented in the opening sections: a fast, gruff Cadenza; and a rhetorical episode, permeated by a recurring funeral-march motif with a double upbeat, and also pausing to admit a chromatic melody in limpid octaves. The first movement continues as a scherzo in nervous changing metres (much indebted to the Piano Variations of Copland, which Bernstein had recently played to the impressed composer at a party); this has two trio sections of soaring melody over an insistent murmuring accompaniment. The second movement begins with an extended cantilena over a quietly pulsing accompaniment in shifting rhythms; the melody splinters into rapid staccato notes, and reaches a forceful climax, including two white-notes clusters played with the forearms (an effect devised by the American composer Henry Cowell in the 1910s). A fugue follows, starting quietly and drily (in the manner of Hindemith, a major figure at the time); but from the outset it incorporates the funereal double-upbeat figure, and eventually the rhetorical episode reasserts itself. The Sonata ends quietly with a melody in “wandering” free time, a kind of mirror image of the opening Cadenza.

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**Aaron Copland**, a modest giant among American composers, was also a pianist, and he wrote major as well as minor works for his instrument. Like Bernstein,

he composed a piano sonata as a student; unlike Bernstein, he withheld it from his catalogue. He began his mature Piano Sonata in 1939, and completed it in 1941 during a government-sponsored tour of central and South America (having been delayed by the theft of a suitcase containing the manuscript of two of the movements). After a “test-out” by the composer in Rio de Janeiro in November 1941, it was premiered by John Kirkpatrick in New York in January 1943; a later New York performance was given by Bernstein, who also recorded the work.

The dates of the Sonata place it in Copland’s highly successful middle period, when his ballet scores in particular seemed to be defining how the American landscape could be depicted in music. The Sonata also suggests an expansive landscape, but, with its high level of dissonance, a harsh and bleak one. There are three closely related movements, arranged in a slow–fast–slow pattern and played without a break. The first has a severely assertive first theme, linked by an extended transition (which culminates in a long downward scale) to a more lyrical second subject marked “with sentiment”. The central development section includes a dancing *Allegro* episode; the condensed recapitulation begins in massively declamatory fashion, but finds a more gentle tone before the uneasy close. The second movement is a scherzo in Copland’s characteristic vein of restlessly changing metres, and for much of its length in stripped-down two-part textures. The main theme opens out in a wedge shape, and the movement as a whole similarly opens out as it goes on, throwing off new melodic ideas. The finale has an introduction based on a repeated chordal cadence, which also punctuates the singing first theme; the slightly slower second theme introduces a figure of right-hand skips up to the high treble register. After a dramatic development

section and a recapitulation of the second theme, these skips reappear, mirrored in the bass, in the coda, which is marked “elegiac” and radiates the utmost serenity.

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**Lou Harrison** typified the open-mindedness and sheer joy in making of the American experimental tradition of composition. Born in Oregon, he grew up in California, where he studied with Henry Cowell, began a long friendship with John Cage, and later enrolled in Arnold Schoenberg’s composition class. He absorbed an eclectic range of influences: he composed in Schoenberg’s twelve-note serial technique for some years; with Cage, he explored the possibilities of percussion instruments, including instruments made from found objects; he drew on a vast selection of styles and genres from different periods of musical history; he frequently wrote for instruments in historic unequal tunings. He also had an extensive knowledge of the traditional music of many countries; in particular, he helped to create two gamelan orchestras and composed for them in Indonesian traditional style, as well as combining them with Western instruments. A pianist in his youth, Harrison wrote a great deal of piano music. The two works recorded here date from the late 1930s, when after his studies with Cowell he was living in San Francisco and working chiefly in the field of modern dance.

The *Largo Ostinato* was written in 1937 and dedicated to John Dobson, an astronomer friend; it was revised in 1970. The manuscript score describes it as for piano or orchestra, and in 1982 Harrison made a freely adapted orchestral transcription of it as the slow movement of his Third Symphony. The piano score is written without bar lines and without dynamic markings. The “ostinato” of the title

is a figure lasting four slow quavers (eighth-notes) which is calmly repeated in the left hand throughout the piece. Above it, the right hand plays a single melodic line, sometimes reinforced at the octave, which later in the piece occasionally splits into two parts. Initially, this line is confined to the pitches contained in the ostinato, but later on it becomes freer, more chromatic and more decorative.

The Third Piano Sonata – which, despite the title, is Harrison’s earliest published sonata for piano – was written in 1938, and first performed by the composer in a radio broadcast that year; it was edited in 1970. The work exemplifies a recurring feature of Harrison’s music, his imposition of strict rules on himself in the process of composition. Here the pitch gaps between notes of the melody and between notes of the harmony are confined to a carefully chosen range of intervals. As Leta E. Miller explains in a survey of Harrison and his works, his aim in imposing such restrictions “is to create a tightly controlled framework which he can then grace with elegant surface materials, giving the listener a sense of improvisatory freedom girded by an internal logic”. Thus the first movement, its harmonic and melodic consistency assured, is able to unfold its melodic line freely without a traditional formal scheme. The second movement, however, is couched in the form of a scherzo and trio with an exact reprise. The finale is a melodic epilogue, in clear octaves throughout until they are blurred by touches of harmony towards the end.

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**Charles Ives**, born and raised in a small New England town, was the great pioneer of American music: a graduate of Yale University who tore up the textbooks to follow his own idiosyncratic path. His music is remarkable not only for its

adventurous use of dissonant harmonies and superimposed rhythms, but also for its incorporation of vernacular elements such as the tunes of hymns, marches and popular songs, and the rhythms of ragtime. A one-time church organist, he wrote a large amount for the piano – including two full-scale sonatas, the second of them the massive *Concord Sonata*.

These are complemented by the highly compressed *Three-Page Sonata*. It was written, according to Ives’s own account, in the summer of 1905 during a camping holiday; but it was revised more than once after that, and not performed or published until 1949. (It is recorded here in a revised edition by John Kirkpatrick.) The Sonata is in three continuous sections. The first is a metrically free but strongly rhythmic *Allegro moderato*, which makes much use of the familiar B–A–C–H motif, forwards and backwards at various pitches. The second is a slow movement, beginning *Andante* but relaxing into an *Adagio* of ringing bell sounds over an ostinato bass. The finale consists of a thunderous march alternating with an insistent quick rag, both overlaid with conflicting triplet rhythms. Ives said that the Sonata was “made mostly as a joke to knock the mollycoddles out of their boxes and to kick out the softy ears!” – though there is an ironic concession to the “softy ears” at the end.

*The Celestial Railroad* is a “Phantasy” named after a short story by the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne, a member of the literary and philosophical community in Concord, Massachusetts. The piece is a free reworking of the “Hawthorne” movement in Ives’s *Concord Sonata* of 1911–15: this had itself been based on an earlier, now lost *Hawthorne Piano Concerto*, and in turn was

to be woven into the complex fabric of the second movement of Ives's Fourth Symphony. While he was writing *The Celestial Railroad* in 1921–23, Ives was also revising the parallel movement of the Symphony. The Symphony movement was first performed in New York in January 1927; *The Celestial Railroad* was given its premiere in Albany, New York in October 1928. Hawthorne's story is a variation on John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and like its model takes the form of a dream. The protagonist dreams that he is invited by Mr Smooth-it-away to travel on a speedy, comfortable train towards the Celestial City; he looks out with pity on the old-fashioned pilgrims painfully making their way on foot through the swampy countryside. After a stop at the worldly Vanity Fair, the train finally arrives at Beulah Land on the river Jordan; but when the travellers embark on the ferry for the Celestial City, they discover that Mr Smooth-it-away has disappeared and the journey was a hoax. The narrator wakes from his dream. Ives's music follows this outline, establishing the atmosphere of dreaming, depicting the train's departure and acceleration, quoting snatches of the pilgrims' singing, interpolating a tiny cameo portrait of the unctuous Mr Smooth-it-away, portraying the excitements of Vanity Fair, tracking the train's resumed journey, and marking its arrival at Beulah Land with a quiet hymn, heard in the distance as if emanating from the Celestial City. But Ives supplied his own ending to the tale: when the dream fades, the protagonist wakes to find himself amidst the hurly-burly of the Fourth of July celebrations in Concord, represented by the parodistic strains of the composer's *Country Band March*.

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## Nathan Williamson

*"Williamson's approach is visionary and romantic. But in this he is never crude, mannered or artificial. Rather one senses he has looked deep inside these works and explored their complex interior with thoughtful contemplation as well as love and empathy."*

Donald Sturrock

Nathan Williamson leads a varied and individual career as pianist, composer and artistic director. Alongside regular solo, chamber and concerto performances, Nathan is in demand for new work from a wide variety of artists both at home and abroad. He also stages and facilitates projects at local and national level, ranging from collaborations on new repertoire, performances for the theatre and concert hall, and outreach work for musicians of all ages and abilities.

Nathan's performing career has led to appearances at the Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, De Doelen, Carnegie Hall, Bargemusic, the Southbank Centre, and the Aldeburgh, Lucerne, Bolzano, Spoleto and William Alwyn festivals. Recent concerto performances include works by Mozart, Schumann and Brahms with orchestras in London, Suffolk, Sussex and Salamanca. Nathan has collaborated with a wide variety of artists including Claire Bloom, James Gilchrist, Guy Johnston, Arisa Fujita, The Gryphon

Trio, Njabulo Madlala, Alexander Baillie, Linda Merrick, and the Allegri and Sacconi Quartets, as well as working alongside numerous living composers in performances of their work. In April 2016 Nathan was appointed a member of Piano Circus, one of the world's leading contemporary music ensembles.

Nathan's debut solo disc, *Brahms & Schubert: Late Piano Works*, was released in 2013, to acclaim from leading authorities such as Bryce Morrison, who wrote: "There are very few recordings of these works that equal this. The artist's technique and pianistic command allows him an ideal musical freedom. The effect is of intense commitment and an ultimate sense of poetry". A CD of British 20th Century violin and piano music with violinist Fenella Humphreys, including Sonatas by Doreen Carwithen and Thomas Pitfield, will be released by Lyrita in February 2017. *Trans-Atlantic Flight of Fancy*, commissioned by NOW Ensemble, was featured on NOW's album *Dreamfall* (New Amsterdam Records) and *Homecoming*, a commission for violinist Piotr Szewczyk as part of his *Violin Futura* project, is available on Navona Records.

Nathan's music has been performed throughout Europe and North America. Highlights include *The little that was once a man*, a song cycle to texts by Bryan Heiser, written for tenor James Gilchrist and premiered with the composer at the piano, a Cello Sonata for Charles Watt, works for the Daejeon Philharmonic Orchestra, Bury St Edmund's Cathedral, piano-duo Mariko Brown and Julian Jacobson, Tuscaloosa Symphony Orchestra and Endymion. A cycle of String Quartets has led to premieres by the Tin

Alley and Barbirolli Quartets. Nathan has premiered several of his own piano works in recitals, and in 2010 conducted the first performances of his opera, *A Fountain Sealed*, to a libretto by Thomas Walton.

Nathan studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama with Joan Havill and Malcolm Singer, at Oxford University with Robert Saxton, and Yale University with Ezra Laderman, Martin Bresnick and Joan Panetti, where he also held a prestigious fellowship. He lives in Southwold, on the Suffolk coast, where he founded and directs the Southwold Concert Series and the Southwold Music Trust, which aim to make music central to the local community. Nathan is also director of 'Music at Wardens', staging events at Ness House, Sizewell. He is a regular coach and outreach leader at the Yehudi Menuhin School, is involved in various education projects at Aldeburgh Music, and has been commissioned work for younger performers by Pro Corda and Music Works chamber music courses, Rugby School, Waveney and Blyth Arts, and the Chamber Music 2000 project.



[www.nathanwilliamson.co.uk](http://www.nathanwilliamson.co.uk)