

COLOUR AND LIGHT

20th-Century British Piano Music

SOMMCD 0196

Céleste Series

Frederick Delius (1862-1934) · William Alwyn (1905-85)
 Elisabeth Lutyens (1906-83) · Peter Dickinson (b.1934)
 Anthony Herschel Hill (1939-2016)

Nathan Williamson *piano*

William ALWYN
Twelve Preludes

[26:07]

- 1 in E-flat 2:23
- 2 in A 2:02
- 3 in A 1:42
- 4 in F 1:34
- 5 in D (In memoriam "R.F.") 3:43
- 6 in G and F-sharp 2:38
- 7 in B 2:44
- 8 in E-flat 1:42
- 9 in C 1:20
- 10 in D 2:09
- 11 in D-flat 1:25
- 12 in D 2:41

Peter DICKINSON
Paraphrase II*

[14:26]

- 13 Theme 1:55
- 14 Variation 1 1:00
- 15 Variation 2 2:44
- 16 Variation 3 1:10
- 17 Variation 4 1:26
- 18 Variation 5 1:51
- 19 Variation 6 4:17

Frederick DELIUS

- 20 **Nocturne** 8:45
 (arr. Robert Threlfall, 1986)

Frederick DELIUS
Margot la Rouge

- (arr. Maurice Ravel, 1902)
- 21 Prelude 3:11
- 22 Duet 2:46

Elisabeth LUTYENS

- 23 **The Ring of Bone** 10:16

Anthony Herschel HILL**

- 24 Litany 6:57
- 25 Toccata 5:31

Total duration: 78:13

*First studio recording **First recordings

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Recording Engineer: Paul Arden-Taylor

Cover: Nathan Williamson by Nick Guttridge

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Booklet Editor: Michael Quinn

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 (first recordings)

Nathan Williamson
 piano



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20th-Century British Piano Music

British music from the last decades of the 19th century onwards is remarkably varied, displaying an enormous range of ideas, styles and forms. Yet it seems to be dominated in large part by a single – and singularly stubborn – question which all composers have, at some point or other, had to address: what is their stance with regards the traditional and the progressive?

Put another way, how do their new ideas relate to more established conventions and norms? Is the impact of new work heightened by association with tradition, or by breaking with it? In bringing together this collection of British piano works I have tried to create a diverse yet balanced programme loosely based around the different responses that composers have brought to this question.

What I find so fascinating about this issue, which continues to preoccupy, even obsess, many musicians in Britain today (especially those involved in creating, promoting and marketing ‘classical music’) is that the signpost seen by many listeners as to which fork in the compositional path a composer is taking them on is (quite erroneously in my view) the ‘sound’ of the music. By which they essentially mean the use or avoidance of defining triads and metered rhythm. But music drawn from a conventional soundworld can often be as radical (if not more so) in intention, structure and process than a piece using less familiar harmonies.

Comparison of the music of Frederick Delius and Elisabeth Lutyens provides an interesting case in point. Their music could, in many ways, hardly be more different. Delius was born in Bradford the son of a prosperous merchant in 1862 and his family’s resistance to his musical ambitions meant he was largely self-taught. (It was Grieg’s advocacy that eventually persuaded Julius Delius to permit his then 26-year-old son to pursue a musical career). Delius absorbed a huge number of influences as disparate as Wagner and Negro spirituals on the way, slowly and somewhat arduously, to forming his own, unique style. In 1929, *The Times* newspaper famously opined that Delius “belongs to no school, follows no tradition and is like no other composer in the form, content or style of his music”.

Although Delius suffered terribly with the effects of syphilis towards the end of his life, losing his sight and the use of his limbs, the devotion of his voluntary amanuensis, Eric Fenby, meant that he could continue composing substantial works via dictation until 1934, a year before his death. Around the same time, Lutyens, then in her late Twenties, started experimenting with serialism. She was the first British composer to seriously explore and exploit the compositional technique generally attributed to Schoenberg, although Lutyens claimed to have discovered the approach entirely for herself, stating her reaction on first seeing a score of Schoenberg’s was “Oh, he’s done this too”. Having studied in Paris and later at the Royal College of Music with Harold Darke, she grew to detest the romantic symphonic repertoire – save for Brahms, but probably including anything by Delius – saying she wished she could never hear a cadence again, and later withdrew her earliest compositions as she felt them to be too conservative. Yet she also wrote an enormous amount of film music, much of it in a more conventional style.

Despite Delius and Lutyens so clearly striking out in opposite directions on the tonal and rhythmic spectrum, their music recorded here – Lutyens' *The Ring of Bone* and Delius's Nocturne from the *Florida Suite* (or *An Nacht* as it is in the orchestral version) and the Prelude and Duet from his opera *Margot la Rouge* – suggests far more similarities than differences. Both composers seek new expression through unusual, often instinctive, musical structures, place a strong emphasis on texture and colour, and not infrequently share a visionary or dream-like atmosphere. I find all three works seductive, deeply moving, and equally 'modern' in their romantic and revolutionary spirit. Lutyens' use of spoken text – her own words, to be voiced by the pianist – in *The Ring of Bone* displays a bold and heartfelt gesture, and one certainly more directly communicative than Delius's Nocturne, which, even within its clear tonal and melodic structures, is so ambiguous, quixotic and unpredictable.

The one-act opera *Margot la Rouge* has a curious history: written in 1902 in response to a competition by the publisher Sonzogno asking composers to set this specific libretto and then lost, it was re-orchestrated by Fenby from Ravel's vocal score and then rediscovered and premiered in St Louis, Missouri under Fenby's baton, in 1983. The opera depicts a simple scene, set in Paris, of love extinguished and re-ignited before ending in tragedy. As one might expect, the music strikes a more dramatic and extrovert tone than many of Delius's more well-known pieces, but these two excerpts – the Prelude and Duet – (and, indeed, the finer parts of the whole work) are distinctive particularly on account of the ravishing colours and perfectly formed shapes and textures of the orchestral writing.

The focus on these concerns is only heightened in Ravel's masterly arrangements which, in much the same way as Wagner's orchestral versions of the *Liebtestod* or

The Ride of the Valkyries, are primarily of the orchestral part and mostly dispense with the Duet's vocal lines. Transcribed into a more concentrated setting for solo piano, both pieces acquire a greater intimacy, intensity even, that allows the delicate harmonies and textures of the score to emerge more clearly. In the process, they seem, simultaneously, to evocatively allude to the opera's narrative while also exciting a greater engagement with its emotional intent.

Between the opposing stylistic poles of Delius and Lutyens can be found a myriad of composers working within well-established forms. William Alwyn was born in Northampton in 1905 and studied at the Royal Academy of Music where he later taught for some 30 years as a Professor of composition. Alongside his extensive output of chamber music, songs, symphonic repertoire and opera, he wrote nearly 200 film scores, his achievements in the medium recognised by his being the first composer elected as a fellow of the British Film Academy in 1951. He was active in public musical life, serving as a Vice President of the Society for the Promotion of New Music, Director of the Performing Rights Society, and for many years he was one of the panel reading new scores for the BBC. An annual festival celebrating his legacy takes place every October in and around his hometown of Blythburgh, in east Suffolk.

Alwyn's Twelve Preludes combine a nod to serial compositional processes with his own, rather quirky, take on triadic harmony. Like much music by his contemporaries William Walton and Ralph Vaughan Williams, these Preludes are never really tonal, but a peculiarly English combination of both tonality and modality which allows the composer very free relationship between dissonance and consonance. Alwyn described his own approach in the piece (composed

between April and June, 1958) as “experimenting with short note groups each with a strong tonal centre; a different group of notes is used for each Prelude”.

The results of this rather self-constricting musical exercise are a vivid set of miniatures, each with their own self-contained and distinctive musical characters and colours. They later clearly captured the imagination of the great British pianist John Ogdon, who memorably recorded them and gave them the following subtitles: *Haiku*, *Stormpainting*, *Flowering*, *Humoresque*, *In memoriam*, *Chordal study-Inquietude*, *Berceuse*, *Seascape*, *Balinese*, *An Afro-Hungarian caravan*, *Solitude* and *Interplay of colour and light*. The “R.F.” of the Fifth Prelude, *In memoriam* (Alwyn’s own subtitle) was the brilliant New Zealand pianist Richard Farrell, who died aged 31 in a road accident in 1958 in the midst of a stellar career. Farrell had recently moved to London following tours of the USA, and Alwyn had written his Fantasy-Waltzes for him in 1956.

Born in 1934, Lancastrian Peter Dickinson is a composer of the senior generation with many recordings of his music by leading performers, notably the three concertos for organ, piano and violin. He had a 25-year-long recital partnership with his sister, the mezzo-soprano Meriel Dickinson, with whom he made first recordings of works by American and British composers, including Dickinson’s own song cycles. An Emeritus Professor of the Universities of Keele and London, his extensive writings include books on Lennox Berkeley (two), Billy Mayerl, Aaron Copland, John Cage, Lord Berners and Samuel Barber.

Composed in 1967, *Paraphrase II*, a rather free set of variations, is representative of Dickinson’s postmodern, poly-stylistic interests, drawing freely on a broad range

of musical traditions and influences in a manner akin to the American modernist Charles Ives. The composer writes: “This 15-minute piece was written for John McCabe, who gave the first performance at the Barber Institute, University of Birmingham, on 3 December 1968. *Paraphrase II* is based on ‘Mark’, the second of two three-part motets of mine using poems that Thomas Blackburn (1916-77) wrote for me when we both taught at the College of St. Mark and St. John, then in Chelsea. The short poem ‘Mark’ is about St. Mark, author of the New Testament gospel”.

Like his earlier *Paraphrase I* for organ, Dickinson insists that neither it nor its sibling are “traditional variations, but transformations and extensions of ideas from the motets”. *Paraphrase II*, he goes on to explain, is cast in seven sections:

- “1. A declamatory exposition, with the main material: the second theme quietly in the centre
2. A two-part invention based on the main theme with the lower part in augmentation
3. An adagio with climaxes freely developed from the main theme
4. The main theme (inverted) with two variations, increasingly complex
5. A gentle capriccio using the second theme in retrograde
6. A static waltz (homage to Erik Satie) based on the main theme
7. A toccata leading to a grandiose return of the opening declamations followed by the simplest version, softly, of the motet’s main theme in canon over a pedal”.

Anthony Herschel Hill is perhaps most striking of all the composers on this disc for displaying such an individual compositional voice whilst so clearly taking his cue from the tradition of the virtuoso pianist-composer stretching from Liszt and Rachmaninov through to Bartók and Prokofiev. Born in Shropshire in 1939, he studied with Cyril Smith, Herbert Howells and Nadia Boulanger. His output is not large: various piano pieces and chamber works, including several written for younger performers (they have often been chosen for ABRSM exams), and some outstanding choral anthems. He was for many years director of the distinguished choir of St. Simon Zelotes church, Chelsea.

Recorded here for the first time, his *Litany* and Toccata were not written together – the former composed in 1992, the latter seven years earlier – but pair beautifully. Both are single movements in simple ternary form displaying the clear expressive bent of the concert piece, a peerless command of every colour and sound of the piano, and some of the most gorgeously idiomatic and exhilarating piano writing of any late-20th-century composer I have encountered. *Litany* (written for Lucy Parham) follows Liszt's example through *Funérailles* and *Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude* in bringing a spiritual, transcendent element into the concert hall, while the decidedly more profane, Mephistophelian Toccata is all the more powerful for its avoidance of glib virtuosity, remaining foreboding and unsettling despite terrific pianistic fireworks.

Nathan Williamson © 2019

The Ring of Bone

They were all alone – quite –
t-o-gether – we were to-gether to the end –
Endless happiness nullified the pain.
Bread – not alone bread – but nevertheless vital
to life; lived, loved, breathed, feared:
– a bewitching horror – just one.

...one.

Just one – a bewitching horror –
feared, breathed, loved, lived to life
vital – not bread alone – but nevertheless bread.
The pain nullified endless happiness;
to the end we were to-gether – to-gether
quite alone – all alone they were

...alone.

Elisabeth Lutyens © 1975

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NATHAN WILLIAMSON

“A superb recital... Unerring mastery”

Bryce Morrison, *International Piano Quarterly*

“Williamson understands the mould-breaking environment of this repertoire, and offers committed insight”

Ateş Orga, *Classical Source*

Nathan Williamson leads an individual career as pianist, composer and artistic director. Alongside solo, chamber and concerto performances, he is in demand as a composer and stages and facilitates projects at local and national level, ranging from collaborations on new repertoire, performances for concert hall and theatre, and music-making activities for all ages and abilities.

Nathan has performed at Wigmore Hall, Carnegie Hall, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Barbican Centre, Purcell Room, LSO St Luke's and the Aldeburgh, Lucerne, Bolzano and Spoleto festivals. He has collaborated with numerous living composers and artists including Claire Bloom, James Gilchrist, Guy Johnston, The Gryphon Trio, Alexander Baillie, Ensemble Endymion and the Allegri and Sacconi Quartets. Since 2016 Nathan has been a member of the renowned new-music ensemble Piano Circus, artists-in-residence at Brunel University London, who have commissioned over 100 works from leading composers and undertake regular international tours.

Nathan's debut recording, *Brahms and Schubert: Late Piano Works*, was reviewed by Donald Sturrock as “a truly electrifying debut from a musician with a rare marriage of thoughtfulness and passion”. His first CD for SOMM Recordings, *Great American Sonatas*, was hailed as “a landmark in recordings of American piano music” (*Musical Opinion*) and, along with a disc of British 20th-century works with violinist Fenella

Humphreys for Lyrita, received five-star reviews in *Classical Music*, *International Piano Quarterly* and *BBC Music Magazine*. Nathan's own *Trans-Atlantic Flight of Fancy* is featured on NOW Ensemble's *Dreamfall* (New Amsterdam Records) and *Homecoming*, a commission for violinist Piotr Szewczyk, was recorded on Navona Records following performances by Szewczyk and others worldwide.



Photograph: Nick Guttridge

Recent compositions include *The little that was once a man*, a song cycle to texts by Bryan Heiser, premiered by James Gilchrist and the composer, and a major Sonata for cello and piano commissioned and premiered by Charles Watt and the composer at the 2018 William Alwyn Festival. A short children's opera, *Machine Dream*, commissioned by Mahogany Opera, has been performed in primary schools across the UK as part of the ground-breaking 'Snappy Operas' project. Other recent commissions include works for the Daejeon Philharmonic, Tuscaloosa Symphony Orchestra, Bury St Edmund's Cathedral, piano-duo Julian Jacobson and Mariko Brown, and Ensemble Endymion. Nathan has also composed several works for young and amateur performers commissioned by Pro Corda and Music Works chamber music courses, Rugby School, Waveney and Blyth Arts, and Chamber Music 2000.

Nathan studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Oxford University and Yale University, where he held a prestigious fellowship. He founded and directs the Southwold Music Trust and Southwold Concert Series, and was recently appointed director of the William Alwyn Festival for 2019 and 2020.

nathanwilliamson.co.uk

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