

Cordelia Williams *piano*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-91)

1 Fantasia in D minor, K.397 7:29

Alexander Scriabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No.2 in G-sharp minor,

'Sonata-Fantasy' [11:59]

2 Andante 7:53

3 Presto 4:05

Franz Liszt (1811-86)

4 Consolation No.1 in E major, S.172 1:34

5 Consolation No.2 in E major, S.172 3:51

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Sonata in C minor, D958 [28:09]

6 Allegro 7:37

7 Adagio 8:02

8 Menuetto: Allegro 3:11

9 Allegro 9:17

Thomas Tomkins (1572-1656)

10 A Sad Pavan for
these Distracted Times 6:03

Bill Evans (1929-80)

11 Peace Piece 7:12

Robert Schumann (1810-56)

Gesänge der Frühe, Op.133 [13:10]

12 Im ruhigen Tempo 2:39

13 Belebt, nicht zu rasch 1:58

14 Lebhaft 2:35

15 Bewegt 2:27

16 Im Anfange ruhiges,
im Verlauf bewegtes Tempo 3:29

Total duration: 72:30

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CORDELIA
WILLIAMS | NIGHTLIGHT

MOZART | SCRIBAN | LISZT | SCHUBERT | TOMKINS | EVANS | SCHUMANN

– for Richard, who knows my darkness

The idea for this recording and its repertoire came to me over several years. It formed itself during the countless hazy hours I spent awake with two newborn sons. This recording is dedicated to the many people who, for whatever reason, feel alone in the darkness. To those who experience despair or sublime melancholy during the hours before the dawn, who are searching for solace, peace or impossible hope. To anyone lost who is waiting to be found by the light.

While preparing this music I thought a lot about the phrase “dark night of the soul”, now often used to refer to our deepest trials and most challenging moments. Originally, in the 1570s’ poem of St John of the Cross, this concept had a more specific meaning still. Here, “dark night”, or *noche oscura*, refers to the process of leaving behind the self on a journey towards illumination and spiritual wholeness. The soul “departs from itself and from all things” on its path towards an unknowable destination of light. The darkness of night is a necessary step on the path of self-realisation.

This is something of my experience of growing from a pianist into a mother. I felt lost within the constant interplay of overflowing joy and love with an unbearable desperation and loneliness. Those endless nights awake, my new life of which I had no understanding or certainty, were a kind of hell – and simultaneously heaven. I felt a terrible bliss at being so untethered, floating alone in uncharted waters with this tiny child.

We depart from ourselves in challenge or transformation, and this can be felt either as anguish or as ecstasy (*ek-stasis*: ‘standing outside oneself’ or ‘drawn out of oneself’). The music recorded here sees our loneliness and darkness, recognizes and validates those unutterable feelings, and reaches out a hand of consolation. The recording ‘finds’ itself in Schumann’s *Songs of Dawn*: shimmering hope, glory just beyond the horizon.

“That sweet night: a secret.
Nobody saw me;
I did not see a thing.
No other light, no other guide
Than the one burning in my heart.

This light led the way
More clearly than the risen sun...

O night, that guided me!
O night, sweeter than sunrise!” (St John of the Cross)

Cordelia Williams © 2021



NIGHTLIGHT

Early in JM Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy*, the novelisation of his iconic *Peter Pan*, a terrifying first visit to the Darling family household by the spectral figure of the boy who wouldn’t grow up leaves behind crepuscular disquiet and unease.

Candles duly lit to cast out the darkness, and whatever other secrets it may hide, the fretful child Michael asks “Can anything harm us, mother, after the night-lights are lit?” To which his watchful guardian answers: “Nothing, precious, they are the eyes a mother leaves behind her to guard her children”.

The night has forever been a discomfiting place, its unlit stillness and chilled silence punctuated by dancing, hallucinogenic shadows and dark, Jungian lacunae. It has

the power to loosen and un-hinge the imagination from its secure daytime moorings into the uncharted, inevitably disturbing, invariably self-revealing currents of what the 16th-century Spanish mystic and poet, St John of the Cross, characterised as “the dark night of the soul”.

But night has also been a place of refuge, of calm, of collection and connection, as Dostoyevsky acknowledged in *Crime and Punishment*: “The darker the night, the brighter the stars. The deeper the grief, the closer is God!”

Cordelia Williams’ *Nightlight* explores the contrariness of what she refers to as the dark domain’s “unknowable destination”. Informed by her experience as a mother nursing her infant children through disturbed, sleepless nights, the recital charts a journey through the long hours of darkness and its myriad exhortations to introspection, its excitations of emotional extremes, its enveloping sepulchral isolation, with the redeeming maternal reassurance that light and warmth will always, and soon, follow the roaring silence and chill of the dark.

How appropriate, then, to slip into the hushed nocturnal world of introspective emotions and starkly heightened imagination, of dreams and nightmares, than in the company of Mozart, that most intuitive and heartfelt of composers.

For reasons unknown, Mozart appears to have left his **Fantasia in D minor**, K.397 unfinished, at least on the evidence of the first published edition in 1804, some two decades or more after it is thought to have been composed and 13 years after his death. What he did produce seems born out of the emotional gyres stirred by night’s narcosis, pulled between moments of jewelled ecstasy and episodes that yield to the dangerously hypnotic allure of the introspective.

Cast in the doleful key of D minor, it has three distinct sections: a brief but grave opening *Andante*; an extended *Adagio* forming the greater part of the work; and an *Allegretto* that hints at the promise of dawn as it shifts to the warmth of D major. Here, Cordelia Williams provides her own completion of the work, her return to the minor key, she explains, “allowing the Fantasia to dissolve again into the depths, just as it gradually emerged from them”.

That sense of liquid depths into which the things of the conscious mind dissolve, subsumed into unfathomable currents that break the surface in ways as unexpected as they are dislocating, is to be found in the music of the great composer-mystic, Alexander Scriabin.

Composed over the five-year period to 1897, his **Piano Sonata No.2** in G-sharp minor was inspired by experiences of the sea, first encountered by the Moscow-born Scriabin on a trip to Latvia at the age of 20, when he began his initial sketches. It exerts its own sirenic invitation. In the composer’s own words: “The first section represents the quiet of a southern night on the seashore; the development is the dark agitation of the deep, deep sea. The E major middle section shows caressing moonlight coming up after the first darkness of night. The second movement represents the vast expanse of ocean in stormy agitation.”

Taking some of its lineage from Chopin and Liszt, Scriabin’s ideas and themes seem to spill and wash over each other like the eddies and whirls of night’s atmospheres. If the ocean’s surface is conjured by the *Andante*’s early rolling arpeggiations, the exposition’s crashing B major resolution seems to plumb its depths, the development’s clashing harmonies and part-formed phrases speaking of churning forces immediately beneath the surface. And high above the turbulence, the silvery gleam of moonlight is inked in by the piano’s glinting upper voice.

A helter-skelter *moto perpetuo*, the *Presto* finale is marked by fearful episodes that give way to an impassioned desire for resolution into which Scriabin rushes with bold, declamatory determination.

After tumult, comes calm, albeit momentarily, in two nocturne-like miniatures by Liszt taken from his two sets of **Consolations** occasionally described as “*pensées poétiques*” (poetic thoughts). From the opening of the second set (S.172), Nos.1 and 2 are both cast in the E major signature of the striking, steel-blue moonlit interlude in Scriabin’s Sonata. The key’s tentative promise of succour and consolation, underlined by its simplicity and directness, offers welcome moments of comfort, the graceful second movement an intoxicating, reassuring inducement to surrender to night’s demands.

Lulled into the limbo of sleep, and caught on the cusp between fading consciousness and the beguiling vacuum of nothingness, when light becomes dark and where the real metamorphoses into the unreal, night’s sham becomes all too apparent.

Composed in the last months of his all too short life before dying at the age of 31 in the autumn of 1828, Schubert’s **Piano Sonata in C minor**, D958 was the first of his three late, defining works for the keyboard. As such it accrues a certain poignancy to itself, one underlined by Schubert’s belatedly unabashed embracing of the Beethovenian model he had spent so much of his life’s work trying to disguise.

Here, night’s pall excites its own particular madness. We are at the bleakest still of night when, as Seneca observed, “Nothing could be fainter than those torches which allow us, not to pierce the darkness, but to glimpse it”. A sentiment the stricken Schubert, afflicted by a sense of impending death, might well have sympathised with.

The influence of Beethoven is most prominent in the loud echoing choice of its grim, conflicted key, its opening *Allegro* recalling the lowering titan’s 32 Piano Variations and *Pathétique* Sonata, the lulling memories of which find solace here in momentary reverie. Such is night’s guile.

Carried along on the ebb and flow of drifting key signatures, tonal colours that bleed into stark chiaroscuro contrasts and an atmosphere that grows more subterranean and disturbed, it ventures even deeper. The ensuing *Adagio* slides into more problematic territory, its semblance of tranquillity disturbed by the encroachment of the darker hues of an intensely concentrated chromaticism and clusters of confessional chords aching for absolution and release.

Though cast as a traditional classical minuet, the third movement *Menuetto: Allegro* is less effusive, more overcast than its inherited model. The peculiar paranoia and debilitating dread that strikes only in nocturnal dark and that haunts the concluding *Allegro*, gives way to a more fevered episode, one that conjures the shape-shifting mania of night in all its solemn supernatural pomp.

And in the darkest hour of night, when waking turmoil has exhausted emotions and emptied the mind, into the stilled silence creeps the first, distant, half-heard notes of day coming at last into light and life.

In the crisp composure of a new dawn, **A Sad Pavan for these Distracted Times** by Thomas Tomkins serves as a reflective bridge between the past (however recent) and the present (albeit still coming into form). The last of the great virginalists who defined English music in the early 17th century, in 1626 Tomkins had composed resounding music to accompany the coronation of King Charles I. Little more than two decades later he marked the king’s execution in 1649 with this exquisitely melancholic reverie.

After Schubertian angst and Tomkins' regretfulness comes the calming acceptance of jazz virtuoso Bill Evans' Satie-like **Peace Piece**. An extended, rippling ostinato laced with the fantasy induced by the delirium of night's last hours fading into and fusing with the day's first minutes, it serves as a moment of transforming osmosis: the eternal, troubled hours of darkness giving way to the reassuring, sun-lit possibilities offered by a new day.

It is claimed that Evans borrowed the two-chord ostinato bass figure in Leonard Bernstein's 'Some Other Time' from *On the Town*, although Chopin's Op.57 *Berceuse*, employing a similar device, also provides a model. Both composers clothe it with an ornamented melody that Evans described as "written out improvisation".

As night's grip starts to weaken, the influence of Chopin's lullaby points to tranquil, if exhausted, release and with it a newfound clarity after nocturnal turmoil. As Schumann's Op.133 **Gesänge der Frühe** (*Songs of Dawn*) suggests, when glimmering light replaces glowering blackness, night's terrors and doubts can be overcome, wrested free from their dark magnetism.

Composed in October 1853 as Schumann's mental health began to rapidly deteriorate – by Easter the following year his attempted suicide would see him incarcerated in a mental asylum – these five short wordless songs were among the last notes he wrote for solo piano.

It is tempting to hear in their concentrated variety the mania that had come to dominate and disfigure Schumann's inner life. A mania that night's necromancy can cast over even the strongest of souls. Certainly, the intricately scored *Gesänge der Frühe* carry themselves with a particularly interior sense of being at once becalmed and storm-tossed, of safety giving way to threat, of the dark consuming even as it

liberates. As Schumann's wife, Clara, said of them: "very original as always, but hard to understand, their tone is so very strange".

That strangeness finds its own apotheosis as the first shards of warming light illuminate the dark. Schumann himself described the set as depicting "sensations at the approach of dawn".

Inspired by Friedrich Hölderlin's poems hymning his employer's unobtainable wife – whom he dubbed 'Diotima' and lionised in his novel *Hyperion* – Schumann had initially intended to dedicate the set to her but eventually dedicated it to "the poetess Bettina [Brentano]".

Marked *Im ruhigen Tempo* (in tranquil tempo), No.1 flows with a mesmerising and shapely liquescence, undisturbed by its irregular phrase-lengths and enhanced by the gentle blooming of chromatically accented harmonies.

No.2, with its strong contrapuntal leanings and latent combustibility, and No.4, a veritable cascade of demisemiquavers, seem to anticipate Brahms's later intermezzos in their deft intertwining of melody and accompaniment while serving as prelude and postlude to the sudden sunburst of rhythmic energy in No.3.

In No.5 the last of night's shadows are dispersed by a gentle, embracing lyricism, its glow fanned by the gradual absorption of the movement's main theme into smooth, free-flowing semiquavers. After tempest, calm. After isolation, togetherness. Might Schumann have been thinking of his beloved Clara here as the D major arpeggios at the end return, full circle, to the opening D minor arpeggios of Mozart's *Fantasia*? Perhaps, after all, the brightest *Nightlight* is that of love.

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Photograph: Benjamin Ealovega

Cordelia Williams is recognised for the poetry, conviction and depth of her playing. "Commanding and sensitive" (*Sunday Times*), she has performed all over the world, including concertos with the English Chamber Orchestra (in Mexico City), City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (at Barbican Hall, London), as well as recitals at Wigmore Hall, Royal Festival Hall and Beijing Concert Hall. Her recordings include the music of Schubert and Schumann; her third CD, featuring music by JS Bach and Arvo Pärt, was described as a "superb concept... brilliantly realised" (*International Piano*). Cordelia particularly enjoys presenting and introducing the music she plays, and has recently started making films about pianists and the piano for her YouTube channel.

She is interested in forming unusual collaborations and creating innovative projects with other musicians and across disciplines. Alongside her performing career she gained a First in Theology from Clare College, Cambridge; her curiosity towards religions and faith led to her year-long project, *Between Heaven and the Clouds: Messiaen 2015*. In partnership with award-winning poet Michael Symmons Roberts, former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Rowan Williams and artist Sophie Hacker, this ambitious series of events and performances explored the music, context and theology of Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant-Jésus*. Following this, she was delighted to be appointed in 2018 as Piano and Chamber Music Coach, and Lecturer in Vocational Contexts, at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama.

Since becoming Piano Winner of BBC Young Musician 2006 she has enjoyed traveling around the world, and especially the time she spent performing, teaching and filming in Kenya. Cordelia welcomed her first son in 2017, who has accompanied her on several concert tours and was recently joined by a brother. Cordelia's first book, *The Happy Music Play Book*, is written for parents of young children who, like her, want to make music a joyful part of everyday family life.

cordeliawilliams.net

 [YouTube CordeliaWilliams](https://www.youtube.com/CordeliaWilliams)

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