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MICHAEL FINNISSY AT 70

THE PIANO MUSIC (4)

IAN PACE – Piano

Recital at City University, London

Thursday July 7th, 2016, 6:30 pm

MICHAEL FINNISSY

Third Political Agenda (2016) [World premiere]

1. Corruption, Deceit, Ignorance, Intolerance
2. Hier kommt 'U.K. Ichbezogen Populismus'
3. My country has betrayed me

Polskie Tance Op. 32 (1955-62)

1. Kujawiak – Kozak
2. Kozak – Drobny
3. Kujawiak
4. Zbójnicki

Four Mazurkas Op. 142 (1957)

Two Pasodobles (1959)

Autumnall (1968-71)

Freightrain Bruise (1972, rev. 1980)

23 Tangos (1962-99) [World Premiere]

1. For Belkiss Carneiro de Mendonça (1998)
2. For Laurence Crane (1999)
3. (1968-69)
4. For Jane Dudley
5. For Elliott Schwartz, to celebrate his sixtieth birthday (1996)
6. To celebrate Howard Skempton's fiftieth birthday (1997)
7. (pour les agréments). Commissioned by Stephen Gutman (1998)
8. For Colin Matthews – a fiftieth birthday tribute (1996)
9. A Valentine for P. (1998)
10. For Alison Shockledge

11. For Paul Driver (1996)
12. For Yvar Mikhashoff's International Tango Collection (1983-84)
13. For Andrew Law's 40th birthday
14. (1976)
15. For Richard Steele (1994, minor revisions 1998)
16. (1962)
17. (avec le lardon vu par Dukas) (1999)
18. In memory of Joanne Johnson
19. Birthday gift for Henrietta Brougham (1998)
20. For Eve Egoyan
21. For Thalia, with love
22. En souvenir d'estime à Salvatore Sciarrino, Bergen (1999)
23. For Jutta Avaly

INTERVAL

MICHAEL FINNISSY

Honky Blues (1996)

How dear to me (1991)

Willow Willow (1991)

Poor Stuff (1991, rev. 1996)

Sometimes I... (1990, rev. 1997)

Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man (1990)

Boogie Woogie (1980-81, rev. 1985, 1996)

Jazz (1976)

Fast Dances, Slow Dances (1978-79)

In 1996, the year of Michael Finnissy's 50th birthday, I gave a series of six large concerts in London featuring his then-complete piano works. Twenty years later, Finnissy's output for piano is well over twice that size (the five-and-a-half hour *The History of Photography in Sound* (1995-2000) alone takes the equivalent of three recitals). This concert is the fourth of a series which will take place over the course of 2016, in a variety of locations, featuring Finnissy's principal piano works, to celebrate his 70th birthday. This music remains as important to me (and as central a part of my own repertoire) as it did twenty years ago, though many ways in which I approach and interpret it – both as performer and scholar – have moved on considerably since then.

The first item in tonight's programme, the *Third Political Agenda*, is hot off the press, completed only the day before the concert. The three short pieces therein constitute Finnissy's response to the referendum of June 23rd, 2016, in which the British people voted to leave the European Union. The first two sections derive from jingoistic songs as sung by 'Promenaders': the middle line of the texture of the first section derives from Thomas Arne's 'Rule Britannia', from his *Alfred: A Masque* (1740), while the top line of the second employs Henry Purcell's 'Fairest Isle' from *King Arthur* (1692), combined with material from Charles Valentin Alkan's Marches for piano duet, and the funeral march from Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, in a Blimpish arrangement which may serve as a portrait of the (former) leader of the UK Independence Party. The third piece employs a series of Polish folk melodies from Finnissy's godfather's collection in Sandomierskie, as transcribed in the nineteenth-century by ethnographer and folklorist Oskar Kolberg in his collection *Pieśni ludu polskiego*.

The rest of the programme features a range of works inspired by jazz and dance forms, and also several pieces of juvenilia, not least several pieces inspired by Polish music and dance, programmed several months ago, but especially apt at a time when, following the referendum, Polish people have been abused and attacked, and leaflets calling for 'Polish Vermin' to go home have been put through letterboxes of Polish families in Huntingdon.

When young, Finnissy came to know Polish and Hungarian friends of the family working with his father at London County Council, from who he developed a lifelong fascination with Eastern European folk music of many types. One friend from the Polish Air Force gave Finnissy's parents a volume entitled *Polskie tańce ludowe* (Tomasz Glinski and Irena Łukaszewicz, *Polskie tańce ludowe/Polish folk dances* (London: Maxwell Love & Co, 1943)) during the war, which supplied the melodies for Finnissy's *Polskie Tance Op. 32* (opus numbers in Finnissy's juvenilia do not signify any particular chronology or quantity of works), begun when he was not yet ten years old. A certain indebtedness to the music of Szymanowski and Bartók is evident, but equally what would become a recurrent preoccupation with close intervals and a tonal blurring through continuously fluctuating harmonies and bass lines. The titles come from specific dance genres, as of course is also true of the *Four Mazurkas Op. 142* (only the first two of which have been published, and all of which may never have been played together before this evening), a varied group of pieces in which the influence of the essays in that genre of Chopin, Szymanowski, Scriabin and others is clear. The *Two Pasodobles* take their title from a Spanish dance of French origin in fast duple-metre, which became an important ballroom dance in the twentieth century. The second piece consists of overlapping strings of long held

pitches with wide, extravagant contours that anticipate some material in *English Country-Tunes*, *Fast Dances*, *Slow Dances* and other pieces.

Autumnall takes its title from John Donne's poem 'The Autumnall':

No spring, nor summer beauty hath such grace,
As I have seen in one autumnall face.
Young beauties force your love, and that's a rape,
This doth but counsel, yet you cannot scrape
If 'twere a shame to love, here 'twere no shame,
Affection here takes reverence's name
Were her first years the Golden Age; that's true,
But now she's gold oft tried, and ever new.
That was her torrid and inflaming time,
This is her tolerable tropic clime.
Fair eyes, who asks more heat than comes from hence,
He in a fever wishes pestilence ...

The piece is a free reflection on the meanings of autumn as outlined in this poem (which I identify in terms of the violence of seasonal change, and a sense of loss), but does not mirror its narrative structure. The pianistic idiom develops that found in the five *Songs* for piano (heard in the second concert in this series), but with a greater degree of sustained linear motion.

The basic materials are rapid, angular gestures, interspersed with grace notes, in the treble register; more spacious lines, with longer durations; and long sustained notes, with durations given in seconds. The first of these is developed to span the whole keyboard, with the addition of clusters, arpeggios, and differing dynamics for different notes. Some very hushed notes, marked *ppppp*, are interspersed in some passages to generate a sense of multiple 'layers' of activity (as in Ives' *Concord Sonata*, a favourite work of Finnissy's from young), and ultimately all the materials come together in a brief form of distant explosion.

In the 1970s, Finnissy regularly played piano for a variety of dancers and dance teachers, including the Americans Jane Dudley, a founder member of the Martha Graham Dance Company (to whom *Tango 4* is dedicated), Kris Donovan, with whom Finnissy toured, and for whom several of his piano pieces were written, Matt Mattox and Robert North, and the Macedonian dancer Maria Zybina. *Freighttrain Bruise*, *Boogie-Woogie*, *Jazz*, and *Fast Dances*, *Slow Dances* were all inspired by Finnissy's improvisational work for dancers, especially Mattox, for whose classes the composer played in the 1970s. In the early 1970s, Charlotte Holtzermann was an American student at The Place in London; she collaborated with Finnissy on the piece, and it is dedicated to her. The idiom derives from the recordings of Errol Garner, Thelonious Monk, Art Tatum and others, but in a chromatic fashion which avoids stable tonality, as well as fragmentations, silences and other distortions which are described by Finnissy as 'bruises' on its surface, places where the ripe fruit of jazz hit the cold floor of late twentieth-century 'angst'!

The 23 *Tangos* are heard here in their entirety for the first time; back in the 1990s I played other cycles from this set as it approached completion. The cycle is less a through-composed work as a loose collection beginning with six early pieces brought together in 1996, to which Finnissy kept adding new works from the until 1999, many of them tributes to or portraits of friends and colleagues. The original numberings

were different, and when the cycle was collected, some individual pieces were modified to work in some cross-references and add a sense of unity.

Once again a childhood influence was important, as Finnissy's parents also enjoyed ballroom dancing, and collected a number of records of Edmundo Ros and others. Characteristically, Finnissy explores how to push to the limits a type of composition which retains some recognisable aspects of the idiom, most notably the *habanera* rhythm, and the use of keening and meandering semitones. Nos. 1-4, 8, 13-16 and 20-21 are all 'original' works employing no other source materials; each can be considered a type of free composition maintaining some generic elements. Some cyphers are employed in the music: one for H(ow)A(r)D S(k)E(mpton) in No. 6, and on A(lison) S(hockledge) for No. 10.

The dedicatee of No. 1, Belkiss Carneiro de Mendonça, introduced Finnissy to Brazilian tango, which is mellower and slower than the Argentinian version and often contains sliding chromatic harmony in the centre of the texture. Some of the composer tributes relate to the personalities and music in question: No. 2, for Laurence Crane, has an almost claustrophobic intensity using small variations around a single basic figure; No. 5, for Elliott Schwartz, is effusive, extravagant and somewhat bombastic; No. 6, for Howard Skempton, uses allusions to Erik Satie (including some of his humorous tempo indications) within an otherwise extremely intimate and hushed type of music; while No. 22, for Salvatore Sciarrino, is distant, fragile, refined and allusive (drawing upon a fragmented rendition of Ferruccio Busoni's *Sonatina super Carmen*). No. 8, for Colin Matthews, is more enigmatic in terms of its relationship to its dedicatee; in a piece less than a minute long, Finnissy presents a dazzling, almost overloaded (and quite transcendental to play) range of rapid and angular figurations above a bass line in tango rhythms.

Other pieces are tributes to various individuals active in new music who have worked with Finnissy: critic Paul Driver in No. 11, drawing on heavily disguised songs of Sibelius; consultant and former Director of Artistic Policy at the Royal College of Music Richard Steele in No. 15; Alison Shockledge, who worked in promotions for Oxford University Press, in No. 10; former Managing Director of United Music Publishers (UMP) Jutta Avaly in No. 23, which combines several disjunct passages from the slow movement of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* Sonata with a melody from a *tango criollo*; former Head of Promotions at UMP, Andrew Law, in the boisterous No. 13; and a later Head of Promotions at UMP, Henrietta Brougham, also co-editor of the volume *Uncommon Ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy* and tireless promoter of my 1996 series of Finnissy's piano works and many other concerts, in No. 19, entirely in widely spaced chords and almost entirely very hushed, alluding to the music of Morton Feldman, aloof but with a distant grandeur. No. 18, originally conceived for organ, was written in memory of a former student of Finnissy's at Sussex University, Jo Johnson, who tragically took her own life after a history of mental illness. No. 9 was written as a Valentine's present for Finnissy's partner Philip Adams, recalling an experience where Adams took remembered material from the Tallis Lamentations with randomly added accidentals, to which Finnissy elaborated the bass-line.

The remaining pieces were written for pianists: Yvar Mikhashoff (in whose memory Finnissy's *Yvaroperas*, heard in the third concert of this series, were written), who

compiled an 'International Tango Project' in the early 1980s (consisting of 127 different pieces, now collected in the library of the State University of New York at Buffalo) and was a championship ballroom dancer as well as a pianist; Canadian pianist Eve Egoyan in the impassioned No. 20; British pianist Thalia Myers in No. 21, written for her second *Spectrum* collection of new music for ABRSM grade exams; and British pianist Steven Gutman, for whom both No. 7 and No. 17 were written, commissioned as parts of projects based upon the Debussy *Études* and Rameau's *Le Lardon* (which also forms the basis for Paul Dukas's *Variations, interlude et final sur un theme de Rameau* (1899-1902)) respectively. Both pieces share material, and both evoke in part French harpsichord writing, but otherwise are wholly different (though both amongst the most extravagant in the cycle). It was not surprising that, of all the Debussy pieces, Finnissy should be asked to write something based upon *pour les agréments*; here he responds with some of his most opulent post-Bussottian writing (a little like the final section of the *Seventeen Immortal Homosexual Poets*), with a thread from the Debussy running through the whole piece, to which Finnissy adds parodistic allusions to music influencing or influenced by Debussy: Couperin, Schumann, Wagner, Satie and Barraqué. No. 17 is a much dryer and more brittle affair, which appears to draw upon material from Dukas's variations, but with recurrent gnarled patterns in a similar tessitura in each hand (such as might be practical on a two-manual harpsichord).

The first five pieces in the second half are occasional works: *Honky Blues* (1996) is a rather melancholy free fantasy on generic blues figurations written for the Belgian pianist Marcel Worms. *How dear to me* and *Willow willow* were further gifts for Philip Adams, the former drawing on the 37th number in Alfred Perceval Graves's *The Irish Song Book* (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 1895)). *Poor Stuff* derives its material from the surname of the dedicatee, Molly Money, an elderly lady in the congregation at St Mary de Haura in Shoreham, who took care of Adams when Finnissy was undergoing heart surgery. *Sometimes I...* originally commissioned for a charity event by composer Geoff Hannan, and is a free fantasy around the African-American spiritual 'Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child', leading towards a rather angry and explosive conclusion. Finnissy's rendition of Jerome Kern's *Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man* (from *Show Boat* (1927)), written for the pianist Joanna McGregor, is also free and chromatic, but clearly identifiable in the manner of various of Finnissy's *Gershwin Arrangements*. The climax of the piece is both joyful and exuberant on one hand, but strident and astringent on the other; it was written during one of the most homophobic times in recent British history, which saw the enactment of the notorious 'Section 28', because of which a performance of Finnissy's *Unknown Ground* was cancelled.

The final three pieces are a set, all epitomising the frenetic and improvisatory virtuoso style characteristic of much of Finnissy's piano writing from the late 1970s and early 1980s (as with *We'll get there someday* and *all.fall.down*, heard in the third concert in the series), and drawing on his work as an improviser. *Boogie-Woogie* evokes Piet Mondrian's painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43). The 'boogying' element is in the left hand, whilst the right hand is wild, leaping, irregular and angular. This combination is similar to that found in Finnissy's *Kemp's Morris* (1978), but also to Conlon Nancarrow's *Study No. 3*; in the manner of the latter, Finnissy employs in the right hand a mixture of accented staccato notes and chords, and short two- and three-

note/chord phrases, which alternate with more continuous lines (later in two simultaneous parts).

Like *Boogie-Woogie*, *Jazz* exhibits a much more dissonant and atonal idiom than its generic influence. Here the cue comes from the music and playing of Jelly Roll Morton; the initial draft contained the instruction 'Pianist should remove tie and play throughout as closely to the style of Jelly Roll Morton as possible: Blues and Stomp in alternation'. Finnissy has suggested that the playing of jazz pianist Mike Westbrook was a further inspiration. For the tempo structure of the piece, Finnissy turned to the series of tempos in Beethoven's *Sechs Bagatellen*, op. 126: 1. *Andante con moto/L'istesso tempo/(non troppo presto)*; 2. *Allegro*; 3. *Andante: cantabile e grazioso*; 4. *Presto*; 5. *Quasi allegretto*; 6. *Presto – Andante amabile e con moto – Tempo I (Presto)*. He also created three categories of material: (a) melancholy and bluesy, mostly in the outer registers of the piano, sometimes with an accentuated line in the middle; (b) fantastic macabre plundering of the bottom of the keyboard, first as a stomp, then a series of trills and tremolos; (c) a stomp around the whole keyboard, at first with ratios of 10:9 between the hands.

Fast Dances, *Slow Dances* similarly took Beethoven's *Elf Bagatellen*, op. 119 as its structural model, though is quite a different piece to *Jazz*, employing a wider range of material type, in particular in the sixth, ninth and tenth sections a continuous line (in single notes or strings of dyads and other chords) in the upper bass register, punctuated by two groups of chords in different metrical units, once again in the manner of Nancarrow. Such punctuation can be found from the beginning, in which a series of dense bass chords punctuate two lines in the upper register of the keyboard, the higher one monadic, the lower one beginning in chords, then thinning down. Otherwise, this extended work constitutes something of a compendium of Finnissy's 'abstract' compositional devices, styles and idioms up to this point and as such is of an archetypal nature. Whilst not quite as relentless or manic as *English Country-Tunes*, *all.fall.down* or the Third and Fourth Piano Concertos, nonetheless it is unsparing in its demands on both pianist and listener, avoiding any obvious tonal implications except in moments of a sort of generalised diatonicism when the pitch material is restricted to white notes (and similarly with pentatonicism when a filters eliminates all but black notes), and larger than life in its fearsome gestural language in a manner which pays contemporary tribute to Beethoven.

Programme notes © Ian Pace 2016. With thanks to Michael Finnissy for supplying various additional information about some of the pieces and their sources.

IAN PACE is a pianist of long-established reputation, specialising in the farthest reaches of musical modernism and transcendental virtuosity, as well as a writer and musicologist focusing on issues of performance, music and society and the avant-garde. He was born in Hartlepool, England in 1968, and studied at Chetham's School of Music, The Queen's College, Oxford and, as a Fulbright Scholar, at the Juilliard School in New York. His main teacher, and a major influence upon his work, was the Hungarian pianist György Sándor, a student of Bartók.

Based in London since 1993, he has pursued an active international career, performing in 24 countries and at most major European venues and festivals. His absolutely vast repertoire of all periods focuses particularly upon music of the 20th and 21st Century. He has given world premieres of over 200 piano works, including works by Patrícia de Almeida, Julian Anderson, Richard Barrett, Konrad Boehmer, Luc Brewaeys, Aaron Cassidy, James Clarke, James Dillon, Pascal Dusapin, Richard Emsley, James Erber, Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy (whose complete piano works he performed in a landmark 6-concert series in 1996), Christopher Fox, Wieland Hoban, Volker Heyn, Evan Johnson, Maxim Kolomiets, André Laporte, Hilda Paredes, Alwynne Pritchard, Horatiu Radulescu, Lauren Redhead, Frederic Rzewski, Thoma Simaku, Howard Skempton, Gerhard Stäbler, Andrew Toovey, Serge Verstockt, Hermann Vogt, Alistair Zaldúa and Walter Zimmermann. He has presented cycles of works including Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke I-X*, and the piano works of Ferneyhough, Fox, Kagel, Ligeti, Lachenmann, Messiaen, Radulescu, Rihm, Rzewski and Skempton. He has played with orchestras including the Orchestre de Paris under Christoph Eschenbach (with whom he premiered and recorded Dusapin's piano concerto *À Quia*), the SWF Orchestra in Stuttgart under Rupert Huber, and the Dortmund Philharmonic under Bernhard Kontarsky (with whom he gave a series of very well-received performances of Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand). He has recorded 34 CDs; his most recent recording of Michael Finnissy's five-and-a-half hour *The History of Photography in Sound* (of which he gave the world premiere in London in 2001) was released by Divine Art in October 2013 to rave reviews. Forthcoming recordings will include the piano works of Brian Ferneyhough (to be released in 2016), the Piano Sonatas of Pierre Boulez, and John Cage's *The Music of Changes*. The 2015-16 season sees appearances in Oslo, Kiev, Louth and around the UK.

He is Lecturer in Music and Head of Performance at City University, London, having previously held positions at the University of Southampton and Dartington College of Arts. His areas of academic expertise include 19th century performance practice (especially the work of Liszt and Brahms), issues of music and society (with particular reference to the work of Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School, and their followers), contemporary performance practice and issues, music and culture under fascism, and the post-1945 avant-garde, in particular in West Germany, upon which he is currently completing a large-scale research project. He co-edited and was a major contributor to the volume *Uncommon Ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy*, which was published by Ashgate in 1998, and authored the monograph *Michael Finnissy's The History of Photography in Sound: A Study of Sources, Techniques and Interpretation*, published by Divine Art in 2013. He has also published many articles in *Music and Letters*, *Contemporary Music Review*, *TEMPO*, *The Musical Times*, *The Liszt Society Journal*, *International Piano*, *Musiktexte*, *Musik & Ästhetik*, *The Open Space Magazine*, as well as contributing chapters to *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, edited Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), *Collected Writings of the Orpheus Institute: Unfolding Time: Studies in Temporality in Twentieth-Century Music*, edited Darla Crispin (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), *The Modernist Legacy*, edited Björn Heile (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), and *Beckett's Proust/Deleuze's Proust*, edited Mary Bryden and Margaret Topping (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Forthcoming articles will appear in *Search: Journal for New Music*, and the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*.