

Kenneth Hamilton Plays Ronald Stevenson, Volume 1

Kenneth Hamilton (Piano)
Ronald Stevenson (1928-2015)

Reminiscences of Ronald Stevenson

Kenneth Hamilton

I first heard of the Scottish composer-pianist Ronald Stevenson when I was still a student in the 1980s. Lawrence Glover, my piano teacher at the then Royal Scottish Academy of Music in Glasgow (now Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) was a great friend of Stevenson's, and mentioned him frequently during lessons, speaking with something akin to awe of his "astonishing keyboard mastery" and encyclopaedic awareness of the arcana of Romantic pianism. When I played Balakirev's Oriental Fantasy Islamey to Lawrence, his immediate reaction was "Ronald Stevenson will really have to hear this!".

By this time, Stevenson was already a respected but contentious figure in the cultural life of Scotland and the UK as a whole. His multifarious musical passions, the wide scope of his output, and his outright rejection of the more alienating elements of contemporary Western composition had led him to be labelled by some as a neo-Romantic reactionary (especially ironic, given his left wing social and political views) or even as a socialist-realist composer (which at least took into account these views). Born in Blackburn, Lancashire, in 1928, of Scottish and Welsh working-class stock, he had studied at the then Royal Manchester College of Music, moved to Scotland in 1952 with his wife, Marjorie, and thereafter strongly identified with his Celtic heritage.

But he had been born out of his time, as the aesthetic winds were then blowing in a direction that he found distinctly uncongenial. A generation of students from the same College only a few years younger than Stevenson, most prominently Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies (both born in 1934), would go on to represent the so-called New Manchester School of musical modernism, while Stevenson carried on in a decidedly different vein. Despite this, the sheer scope, power and mastery of his Passacaglia on DSCH (1963) finally brought him international recognition.

Two piano concerti followed. The first, A Faust Triptych, was based on themes from Busoni's eponymous opera; the second, The Continents – premiered by its composer at the 1972 BBC Proms – was an ambitious essay in world music, again before its time. Most critics were either baffled by it or hated it (or both). Nevertheless, significant commissions kept coming in with a certain sporadic regularity, including from Benjamin Britten for a song cycle, Border Boyhood (to words by Hugh MacDiarmid) for the Aldeburgh Festival; from Yehudi Menuhin for a violin concerto, The Gypsy (1979); and from the BBC for a cello concerto (1996). Stevenson's last major work, the Choral Symphony Ben Dorain, was premiered by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and chorus in 2008. The cheering audience was something of a vindication for a composer who had defiantly ploughed his own furrow over the previous decades. And now that the concept of cosmopolitan postmodernism in music has become mainstream, he is easier to categorise.

Time has caught up with Stevenson's aesthetic outlook. It was not until 1990 that I actually met Stevenson himself in his cottage in West Linton, near Edinburgh, after an introduction brokered by the actor, writer and convivial polymath Derek Watson, who lived in the same village. By then I was keen to meet Stevenson not just because of his legendary pianistic prowess, but also because of his compositions. I had recently come across a recording by Stevenson himself of his magisterial Passacaglia, and had been stunned by both the piece and the playing.

Stevenson proved personally to be as generous and many-sided as his music, a fundamentally Lisztian figure transplanted into the late 20th century – although he physically rather resembled Paderewski, another of his great enthusiasms. To complete the quartet of artistic affinities, we should also add the names of Ferruccio Busoni and Percy Grainger. Stevenson studied and played the music of both these composers with a fervour amounting to obsession, and they had an ineluctable influence on his own artistry. Thus it is that the *Three Elizabethan Pieces* heard on this CD have a strong flavour of Bach-Busoni, and the *Three Scottish Ballades* more than a hint of Grainger.

Even the aesthetic attitudes were similar in significant respects, most obviously in the large number of transcriptions, recreations and reworkings in Stevenson's oeuvre. In fact, he often said that he believed there to be no fundamental difference between "original" composition and arrangement, regarding both as aspects of the same creative process. And as with Liszt and Busoni, Stevenson's arrangements have their own unmistakeable flavour, partly deriving from his fondness for a symmetrical inverted counterpoint that produces a multiplicity of unexpected effects, from the bracingly energetic to the sensuous. The central fugal section of the *Peter Grimes* Fantasy is a fine example of the former, while we can hear the latter in the gently dissonant harmonies created by the additional counterpoint in *Tauberiana*. The influence of Busoni's music is obvious here, as were the contrapuntal theories of Bernhard Ziehn (1845-1912). Indeed, in 1976 Stevenson edited a reprint of Ziehn's ground-breaking *Canonic Studies* that to some extent forms a key to the harmonic practice in his own music, and he remained fascinated by the formal possibilities inherent in fugal techniques and textures.

During our first conversation, he cited his *Prelude and Fugue on a Theme by Liszt* (for organ) and the *Chorale and Fugue in Reverse on Themes of Robert and Clara Schumann* (recorded for the first time on this CD) as examples of this. The *Chorale and Fugue in Reverse*, a short, concentrated and touching piece, was written in November 1979, in memory of Lawrence Glover's son Stephen, who had met a very untimely death in a car accident. The *Chorale* aptly stems from Robert Schumann's setting of the words "Alles vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis" ("Everything transient is merely a parable") from the famous final scene of Goethe's *Faust*, but Stevenson changes the tune, turning the first falling fifth into a tritone (the so-called devil in music on account of its dissonance) to produce a more poignant, uncanny effect. And when the fugue itself begins (at 1'03" in this recording), it starts not with the usual exposition, but with the stretto—a piling up of overlapping voices normally reserved for the climax towards the end of the piece.

This is what Stevenson meant by *Fugue in Reverse*: not a reversal of the fugal theme itself, but of the usual structure. It begins at the greatest point of intensity, and thereafter gradually attenuates. As it does so, another quote, this time from Clara Schumann's song "Geheimes Flüstern hier und dort" ("Secret whispers here and there") is slyly introduced (at 2'30") in what is described in the score as a "lyrical cadenza". This has both a musical motivation (the new theme has a decided resemblance to the Chorale) and a personal one. Stevenson told me that he had heard Lawrence Glover give a strikingly memorable performance of the Liszt transcription of "Geheimes Flüstern" a little while before writing his own work, and the two tunes had become merged in his mind. It's not necessary to understand the range of references here to understand or to be moved by the music, but awareness of them undoubtedly enriches the experience.

Many of Stevenson's works come with a similarly evocative "metatext", or allusions outside the music, in a related manner to Robert Schumann's own op.17 *Fantasy*, where a quote from Schlegel appended to the score refers to a "a softer note" running through the piece, to be "overheard by those who listen in secret", or to Liszt's Symphonic Poems with their ornately descriptive prefaces in prose. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Stevenson's *Symphonic Elegy for Liszt*, composed to mark the centenary of Liszt's death in 1986, adopts an identical approach, with multiple allusions to Liszt's music and related literature. He mentioned that the basic musical model for the work was not "the virtuoso Liszt of the Hungarian Rhapsodies and Opera Fantasies" but the "introverted late Liszt of the Venetian Funeral Gondola Elegies" – darkly undulating barcarolles composed in peculiar premonition of the death of Richard Wagner.

The *Symphonic Elegy* is, accordingly, an extended barcarolle, but the first section to be written was not the Hungarian-style recitative of the opening measures, nor the ensuing main barcarolle theme (0'38"), nor even the "Hungarian-Scottish" tune with snapped rhythms heard afterwards (3'01") but instead the Romanticamente passage now placed at the centre of the piece (7'14") marked to be played "with a full blown Summer air". This is a musical mirror of a stanza from Edward Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khyyam*, a poem that Stevenson always found especially evocative:

And we, that now make merry in the room
They left, and Summer dresses in new bloom,
Ourselves must we beneath the couch of earth
Descend, ourselves to make a couch – for whom?

The tune generated by this "Summer" stanza catalysed the composition of a series of variants in 6/8, 5/8, 4/8 metre, respectively representing Spring (1'59"), Autumn (9'38") and Winter (11'12"), "like the gradual unleaving of a tree" according to Stevenson. Also varied is the Elegy's opening recitative, which is repeated immediately after the "Summer" stanza as a macabre etude (08'00") recalling both the equally macabre last movement of Chopin's second sonata, and Schumann's description of it as "the winds whistling through through the gravestones". This leads directly into a developed recapitulation of the barcarolle theme itself—in the treble this time, rather than the bass, in a setting imbued with a richly bittersweet nostalgia.

But despite the multiple allusions to stylistic aspects of Liszt's (and Chopin's) music, the piece includes only one direct quote, namely the opening scales of the Liszt Sonata, reworked canonically like the dissonant tolling of funeral bells (4'47"). It is true that yet another new theme appears at the very end of the haunting coda that certainly sounds like a quote, marked out as it is with two chords in the treble acting almost as inverted commas (12'08"). When I first studied the Elegy with Stevenson, I asked him where this tune came from, and he at first replied that he had no idea—it just seemed right. Then he made the connection with the opening of the first movement of Mahler's 10th Symphony, which he had transcribed for piano around the same time as he was writing the Elegy. "I see now", he later wrote, "that Mahler's wide-ranging Alpine melody has influenced the coda of my Liszt piece. So it ends alone on a mountain." He was subsequently very amused when I pointed out that the tune was also – appropriately enough for a Liszt Elegy – similar to the main theme of Wagner's *Faust Overture*, which Stevenson had often played in concert in Hans von Bülow's transcription. "I must have been unconsciously thinking about that too", he said, "and possibly so was Mahler!".

The grippingly dramatic *Peter Grimes Fantasy*, composed on themes from Benjamin Britten's opera, naturally comprises a whole array of quotes, in this case initially taken from the villager's accusatory exclamations "Peter Grimes!"; then the inquest scene (which provides the fugue subject of the fantasy); Grimes's own "arias", "Now the great Bear and Pleiades where earth moves/Are drawing up the clouds of human grief" and "What harbour shelters peace"; and finally the *Dawn and Storm Sea Interludes*. The extended sonata form structure and working out of the *Fantasy* is, however, entirely Stevenson's own, along with the decision to twist the fugue theme into the Locrian mode – which creates a prominently sinister tritone, like the *Chorale and Fugue in Reverse*, and gives an especially acerbic quality to the fugal passages themselves.

As in some of Liszt's best essays in the genre, the reworked and restructured music concisely recreates the operatic narrative in miniature, with an especially intense focus on the protagonist's psychological development and disintegration. For this reason, and no doubt also because of its stunningly imaginative and effective keyboard writing (which includes particularly haunting passages for plucked strings), the *Peter Grimes Fantasy* has become one of Stevenson's most frequently played pieces. Modelled more on the modest length of Busoni's *Carmen Fantasy* than Liszt's encyclopaedic *Reminiscences de Don Juan*, it was composed following a commission by the BBC in 1971, and much admired by Britten himself, who was given a private play-through by Stevenson shortly before the public premiere. Stevenson mentioned that Britten had made one recommendation, which was to extend the length of the central fugue a little, in order to prepare more fully for the shattering climax. "It was good advice" Stevenson said. "There was one viable stretto combination of the fugue subject that I hadn't yet used, and so I revised the section to include it in the final version."

Just as the *Peter Grimes Fantasy* gains even more in intensity from being heard against the backdrop of the opera as a whole, enjoyment of the *Three Scottish Ballades*, set by Stevenson for piano in 1973, is further enhanced by some acquaintance with the poetry to which the traditional tunes were sung. The first two ballades tell tales of the Scots borders that would likely be regarded as too melodramatic – and certainly too bloodthirsty – even for a modern TV soap opera, but do have some kinship with the family feuds of Greek tragedy. In *Lord Randal* a mother's anxious enquiries gradually reveal that her son has just been poisoned during a hunting trip by his girlfriend. The poem, and the accompanying music, accordingly follows the question and answer form typical of such ballades:

"O where ha you been, Lord Randal, my son?
And where ha you been, my handsome young man?
'I ha been at the greenwood; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm wearied wi hunting, and fain wad lie doon.

Stevenson re-harmonises the tune and changes key with each verse, until the unfortunate aristocrat's collapse and death is clearly depicted in the final cadence.

The Dowie Dens O' Yarrow is yet another incestuous internecine conflict, this time a narrative recounting the death of a husband at the hands of his brothers in law:

O late at e'en, and drinking the wine
Ere we made the lawing
We set a pact o' the two between
Tae fecht it in the dawning.
O stay hame, stay hame my bonny bairn
Bide wi' me the morrow
For my cruel brothers will ye betray
On the Dowie Dens o' Yarrow

Unlike *Lord Randal*, *The Dowie Dens* is arranged by Stevenson in a melancholy and contemplative rather than combative manner, with a straightforward use of canon in two of the verses, and the imitation of bardic harps in another. Lest the listener begin to wonder whether anyone at all could have been left alive in the medieval Scots borders, the final Ballade, the *Newhaven Fishwife's Cry*, strikes a jollier, distinctly less murderous note, and includes at the beginning and end some fairly unusual atmospheric effects of harmonics at the keyboard. These are achieved by lifting the dampers of certain chords, but not striking the the relevant keys – the strings are instead set in motion by sympathetic resonance with other notes struck simultaneously. Stevenson dedicated the *Newhaven Fishwife's Cry* to his own wife.

Similar harmonics underpin the memorable opening to *Heroic Song for Hugh MacDiarmid*, commissioned by the BBC in 1967 in honour of the great Scots poet's 75th birthday. Stevenson was a good friend of MacDiarmid – the two families lived only a few miles away from each other – and the politics of both men had a similarly left wing, national bent. The Heroic Song, its title adapted from MacDiarmid's poem to his wife, *Heroic Song for Valda Trevlyn*, begins and ends with a musical greeting, a quote from a medieval Scots new year's song. The hazy effect of "highland mist" in the background is again provided by harmonics, this time facilitated by silently depressing the white notes of the lowest three octaves of the keyboard with the left arm.

The following sections of the piece, which the composer described as "a song of the high hills, of space and solitude", are portraits of MacDiarmid in various moods, namely "the poet speaks" (the opening section), "the poet laughs" (starting at 1'36") – MacDiarmid had a very characteristic high pitched laugh – and "the poet dreams (3'52)". When I first studied the *Heroic Song* with Stevenson, he also mentioned that the short section beginning at 3'34" was inspired by the following lines from MacDiarmid's poem *Bagpipe Music*:

Let me play you tunes without measure or end
Tunes that are born to die without a herald
Let me play you tunes without measure or end
Tunes that are born to die without a herald

Beltane Bonfire has further Celtic connotations, even down to plucked strings evocatively imitating the clarsach, or Scots harp. The title alludes to the ancient Beltane (Mayday) festival, when cattle were driven through fiery hoops as a ritual of purification. This process is depicted in the slowly winding, processional fugue beginning at 3'30" , but the piece as a whole is energetically celebratory, with distant echoes of the introduction of Chopin's Ab Polonaise at the opening, leading to a vigorous pentatonic theme. As was typical with Stevenson, the idea of purification by fire led him to make further fertile connections with earlier music, most strikingly the "Trial by Fire" from Mozart's *Magic Flute*, which is first hinted at (00'59"), then directly quoted towards the end of the piece (6'31") as if an initially dim memory were suddenly recalled with complete clarity. A thrilling work of vastly varying sonorities, *Beltane Bonfire* was commissioned for the 1990 Scottish International Piano Competition, which partly accounts for its many technical challenges – although as another friend of Stevenson's once ruefully said to me, "Ronald is incapable of writing a genuinely easy piano piece, no matter how hard he tries."

Similar pianistic challenges abound in the transcriptions that bring this CD to a close. The *Three Elizabethan Pieces after John Bull* are taken from the Fitzwilliam Virginal book, reworked in a manner redolent of Busoni, but with characteristic Stevenson touches. He retained a fondness for these early arrangements (they were written in 1950) throughout his life, and they were some of the first works I heard him play. When I studied them myself (in 1993) he wrote a revised and expanded ending to the last piece, *The King's Hunt*, for me, and made several minor changes to the other two. This is the premiere recording of the revised version, and also of the wonderfully imaginative transcription of Richard Tauber's song "My Heart and I" (from the operetta *Old Chelsea*) entitled *Tauberiana*. Here the tune is first introduced as a hushed reminiscence, recalled late at night in a darkened room, before finally bursting forth as a swaggering Viennese waltz. Ivor Novello's "We'll Gather Lilacs" is likewise treated with a beautifully deft originality, ingeniously accompanied by a figuration derived from Rachmaninov's *Lilacs*. I include a performance of the Rachmaninov as a prelude to the Stevenson, to make the connection immediately audible. Stevenson loved this music – and this love is unmistakable in his arrangement.

Ronald Stevenson was an inveterately generous supporter of young musicians, his "comrades in art" as he put it, teaching and advising, like Liszt, without a fee but with a shared love of music, and with the added advantage of the welcoming hospitality of his wife Marjorie. I was one of these musicians, and worked with him not just on the pieces recorded here, but on many others from the standard repertoire. Most instructive of all, or course, was his own magnificently individual playing. He expected a similar individuality from his colleagues, and there was certainly no question of him wanting to create a "school of piano playing" or the like. But there's also no doubt that significant stylistic aspects do trenchantly remain in the memory and in the fingers, especially when it comes to the performance of his own piano music. It may not be music to everyone's taste (what music is?) but it does have its own unique fascination – and it very definitely has something to say.

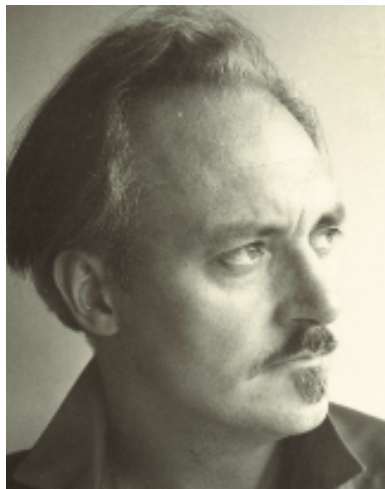
Kenneth Hamilton

Described after a concerto performance with the St Petersburg Symphony Orchestra “as an outstanding virtuoso – one of the finest players of his generation” (Moscow Kommersant), by the New York Times as a performer “full of energy and wit”, and by the Singapore Straits Times as “a formidable virtuoso”, Scottish pianist Kenneth Hamilton performs worldwide as a recitalist, concerto soloist and broadcaster. He was himself a student of Ronald Stevenson and Lawrence Glover, and has appeared frequently on radio and television in Britain, the US, Germany, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and Russia, most recently as soloist in a performance of Chopin’s first piano concerto with the Istanbul Chamber Orchestra on Turkish Television, and as pianist and presenter for the television programme “Mendelssohn in Scotland”, broadcast in Europe and the US by Deutsche Welle Channel. He is a familiar voice on BBC Radios 3, and has numerous festival engagements to his credit.

Well known also as a writer on pianists and pianism, he is Professor of Music at Cardiff University, Wales, UK. His last book, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (Oxford University Press) was welcomed as “full of wit and interest, and written with passion” by Charles Rosen in Times Literary Supplement and as “a wonderful book” by James Fenton in The Guardian. Another recent solo CD on the Prima Facie label is *Back to Bach* – a collection of Bach tributes and transcriptions by Liszt, Busoni and Rachmaninov.



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