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MICHAEL FINNISSY AT 70
THE PIANO MUSIC (5)
IAN PACE – Piano
Recital at City University, London

Tuesday September 27th, 2016, 6:00 and 7:30 pm

Concert 1: 6:00 pm

MICHAEL FINNISSY

Piano Concerto No. 6 for solo piano (1980-81)

Love is here to stay (alternative version) (1975-76)

Gershwin Arrangements (1975-88)

1. How long has this been going on? (from the musical comedy *Rosalie* (1928))
   (for John Flinders)
2. Things are looking up (from the film *A Damsel in Distress* (1937))
   (for John Flinders)
3. A foggy day in London town (from the film *A Damsel in Distress* (1937))
   (for John Flinders)
4. Love is here to stay (from the film *The Goldwyn Follies* (1938))
   (for John Flinders)
5. They can't take that away from me (from the film *Shall We Dance* (1937))
   (for John Flinders)
6. Shall we dance? (from the film *Shall We Dance* (1937))
   (for John Flinders)
7. They're writing songs of love, but not for me (from the musical comedy *Girl Crazy* (1930))
   (for John Flinders)
8. Fidgety feet (from the musical comedy *Oh, Kay!* (1926))
   (for Philip Adams)
9. Embraceable you (from the musical comedy *Girl Crazy* (1930))
   (for Beatrice Cockburn on her first birthday)
10. Waiting for the sun to come out (from the musical comedy *The Sweetheart Shop* (1920), book and lyrics by Anne Caldwell, most music by Hugo Felix)
    (for Anne Bolger)

11. Innocent ingénue baby (from the musical comedy *Our Nell* (1922))
    (for Peter Kite)
12. Blah, blah, blah (from the film *Delicious* (1931))
    (for Pierre Audi)
13. Boy wanted (from the musical comedy *A Dangerous Maid* (1921))

Concert 2: 7:30 pm

MICHAEL FINNISSY

Please pay some attention to me (1998)

Dixie Rose (first version) [World Premiere]

Nashville Nightingale (first version of 'chorus') [World Premiere]

More Gershwin (1989-90, rev. 1996-98)

1. Limehouse Nights (from the revue *Morris Gest's Midnight Whirl* (1919))
   (For Joanna McGregor)
2. Wait a bit, Susie (from the musical comedy *Primrose* (1924))
   (For Joanna McGregor)
3. I'd Rather Charleston (for 1926 London production of musical comedy *Lady, be Good!* (1924))
   (For Joanna McGregor)
4. Isn't it Wonderful! (from the musical comedy *Primrose* (1924))
   (For Joanna McGregor)
5. Nobody but You (from the musical comedy *La, la Lucille* (1919))
   (For Emma Slade and Jonathan Cross, on their engagement)
6. Swanee (from *Demi Tasse Revue*, part of *Capitol Revue* (1919), show produced and choreographed by Ned Wayburn)
   (Friedrich Hommel – zum 60ste Geburtstag)
7. Dixie Rose (used in *Sinbad* (1921))
   (For Luc Brewaeys)
8. Someone Believes in You (from the musical comedy *Sweet Little Devil* (1924))
   (For Neil Brown, on his 21st Birthday)
9. Nashville Nightingale (from the revue *Nifties of 1923*, produced by Charles B. Dillingham)
   (For Andrew Worton-Steward)

Piano Concerto No. 4 (1978, rev. 1996)

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 fifth 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.

I have an especially personal relationship to the works in tonight's programme, almost all of which I recorded in the late 1990s, returning to them now with quite different approaches. No works of Finnissy provide greater interpretive challenges than the *Gershwin Arrangements* and *More Gershwin,* on account of specific nature of the interaction between two distinct sensibilities, two different musical eras, and all the complicated issues of genre and mediation these raise for the performer. In Finnissy's other major cycle based on a single composer's work, the *Verdi Transcriptions*, there is a much clearer distance from the sources, which are often so heavily transformed as to be practically unrecognisable on the surface, or at least so heavily mediated that no-one could plausibly claim the works to be archaic pastiche. Finnissy's individual contribution to the Gershwin pieces is no less palpable, but the melodies are generally clearly recognisable, while the pianistic configuration often responds quite directly either to the published accompaniments of the Gershwin originals, or to other performance styles from the early twentieth-century.

Finnissy has been kind enough to provide some new thoughts on these works. Whilst acutely aware of the danger of the 'intentional fallacy' when considering artworks, and also of either performer or writer acting as a passive mouthpiece for a composer or other musician/institution (something about which I have been severely critical of some ethnomusicological work), nonetheless I quote some of this text as likely to be of critical interest. He has described the gestation of his Gershwin-based works as follows:

I've known Gershwin's music since I was a child (like Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Richard Rogers and Gilbert and Sullivan) it was music my parents, and other close family, played on the gramophone. This is what most people in the 1940s did. These show-tunes were also what most people wanted to hear in the 1960s, and so what I played at gatherings, parties, bars, jazz-dance classes. I had crib-sheets for the half-dozen GG songs I used, and I worked one or two of them up over the three or four years I was doing this kind of work. I only made one 'more elaborate' version (Love is here to stay) and worked this over again when I decided to offer it (as a suitable concert 'encore') to the Five Centuries Ensemble, whom I had heard play at Royan in 1974, and who had asked me to send them stuff. They shortly asked me to compose a piece for them (Commedia dell' Incomprensibile Potere…), and the ensemble encore (for soprano, counter-tenor, 'cello and harpsichord) was put on one

side. It was too blatantly 'atonal' to match the other piece when I actually started writing the set of GG 'Arrangements'.

Gershwin's music is mostly conceived in terms of clear hierarchies between melody and harmony, though this is by no means necessarily the case for Finnissy. Even when employing the basic pianistic configuration provided by Gershwin, as for example in the chorus of 'A foggy day in London town', Gershwin's inner parts, essentially harmonic filling, or accompaniments, are transformed into more amorphous chromatic lines, rarely simply repeating pitches, defamiliarising the sense of tonality and thus recontextualising the melody, which is presented without significant modification. All of this frustrates the relationship between Gershwin melody and other parts, with what was a reasonably innocuous accompaniment in Gershwin attaining an ominous and sinister quality, clashing in a dissonant manner with the melody. The music is re-conceived in light of Schoenbergian atonality, Brahmsian 'developing variation', and various other influences, and sometimes attains a level of horizontality which implies pre-Baroque contrapuntal writing. The opening 'Blah, blah, blah' line in the arrangement of the song of that name becomes enmeshed with another line of single notes and chords, finally extricating itself (marked 'recovering' in the score), in a manner reminiscent of someone ultimately keeping going despite being talked over. In 'Boy wanted', menacing (but also sensuous) trills come regularly to the fore, offsetting the relatively light-hearted melody.

All of this adds many new meanings to the works, but also creates challenges for the performer. If the melody (the most recognisable aspect of the Gershwin) is always foregrounded, so that the other parts serve as local harmonic colour which provide a background for, but do not fundamentally challenge, that line, then in my view some of the resulting psychological and emotional complexities of the music become relatively muted. On the other hand, if one does not play out the melody, or even avoids too-great 'shaping' of it such as might lead to inadvertent prominence within a contrapuntal texture, as used to be my strategy, then the total result can equally sound 'flat' and monochrome. This resembles the problem faced by those playing Bach fugues on a dynamically variable keyboard, wondering whether or not to foreground certain lines. 'Isn't it wonderful' can sound either tender and warm, or irretrievably bleak (in the manner of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*), depending upon the particular approach to voicing, shaping of both melody and inner parts, pedalling, rubato.

The interpreter of this music brings their own understanding and priorities as regards *both* Finnissy *and* Gershwin to bear upon the performance; as with all significant composers, these can take many forms. Having once been quite keen to avoid overly nostalgic connotations when playing this music – evoking some lost, glamorous world of Broadway and Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s – but over time have become more interested in the extent to which the songs by no means present a rose-tinted picture of the era, in particular the time of the Great Depression, from which period many of the original songs in the first set were written. Finnissy writes:

The period these songs were written (1918 - 1938) was one of the most disastrous in recent history, political turmoil and deceit, economic catastrophe. I like the description 'dancing on the edge of a volcano' although this does not mention the complex of other ingredients - Eastern-European background, celebrity status, aspiration to write 'serious' concert music….

Finnissy once described ‘Shall we dance’ to me as written with the terrible dance contests of the 1930s in mind. These offered one possible means to find financial relief for those suffering from great economic hardship, and were portrayed in Sidney Pollack’s film *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They*? Other piecesresonate with more contemporary concerns; the final song in the second book, ‘Nashville Nightingale’, was written when the dedicatee was dying from an AIDS-related illness. Finnissy expropriates a single line from the woozy opening blues, then develops this towards climactic hammering out of the melody in a raging and defiant manner.

Nonetheless, I remain sceptical about considering these works with the priorities to be found in much contemporary Anglophone musicology, which favours hermeneutical readings of musical works which can be pinned to fixed ‘meanings’, especially where allusions to texts and other phenomena can be located. There are various autobiographical elements which have been read into these works of Finnissy, but I believe there remains value in considering them relatively abstract compositions, intensely meaningful for sure, but not necessarily to be conceived in terms of concrete representation. Finnissy has described how:

The ‘Gershwin’ of my title is George, not to be confused with Ira. I knew about GG’s ’Songbook’ where he stored the tunes that Ira eventually wrote the words to. The tunes interest me, the words don’t…indeed I more often go right against the lyrics (particularly in ’Nashville Nightingale’, ‘Innocent Ingénue Baby’, ’Shall we dance?’…). OF course I am interested in the phenomenon of ‘show biz’, and kitsch and tackiness, but I rarely try to make compositional currency of this side of our ‘business'.

Only in a few cases does Finnissy respond directly to the text, as for example with the lnies ‘Just one look at you, my heart grew tipsy in me/You and you alone bring out the gypsy in me’ in ‘Embraceable You’, which is followed by a raucous figuration, alluding obliquely to the ‘gypsy’ style in Liszt’s Hungarian Rhapsodies (especially the famed second piece), though with a much greater degree of dissonance.

In a few cases Finnissy has mentioned specific performances of the songs: that by Fred Astaire of ‘Things are looking up’ in *A Damsel in Distress*, and the heartbreaking rendition by Judy Garland of ‘But not for me’ in *Girl Crazy*. Others stylistic references come from further afield; in his setting of that same song, Finnissy employs a repeated figure of a falling minor second preceded by a larger interval as a reference to Liszt’s *La lugubre gondola I* (also used in *The History of Photography in Sound*). When the melody is configured in chords accompanied by an underlying flow of quavers, in the manner of many of Rachmaninoff’s most well-known piano works, this figuration serves to ‘taint’ the accompaniment, adding unresolved dissonant progressions, as if an omen of death. ‘I’d rather Charleston’ attempts a conflation of a recording by Frede and Adèle Astaire with a figuration obliquely alluding to Busoni’s Toccata. Finnissy also mentions an inspiration for ‘Limehouse Nights’ of the opening of Stephen Spielberg’s *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, beginning in a Shanghai nightclub, though with a Cole Porter rather than Gershwin song; he also draws upon a deliberately stereotypical portrayal of Chinese music. Other pieces in the second book clearly evoke various styles of 1920s jazz piano, as in ‘Wait a Bit, Susie’ or ‘Dixie Rose’.

Overall, the earlier set generally have a more introspective quality, focused predominantly around the central registers of the keyboard, and often with quite dense and involved counterpoint. The second set are more expansive, extroverted and a little less intense. Mostly Gershwin's verse-chorus setting is preserved, though sometimes with the addition of introductions, codas, or free fantasias on some of the material.

Following the two major sets of pieces, Finnissy composed a further arrangement in 1998, called *Please pay some attention to me*, derived from a very little-known song, 'Pay Some Attention to Me' (1937) which George and Ira Gershwin had originally written for the film *A Damsel in Distress*, but abandoned it incomplete. Finnissy obtained the manuscript for this from the late composer Richard Rodney Bennett, and first made a version for soprano and piano duet which was performed at Steyning Music Club, then transformed this into a solo piano work in which Gershwin-derived material is alternated with a type of imaginary dodecaphonic music, as an evocation of the tennis games which Gershwin played with Schoenberg at the former's Hollywood mansion during the last year of his life. Also included tonight are some earlier versions of sections of 'Dixie Rose' and 'Nashville Nightingale', and of 'Love is here to stay', which was originally an ensemble piece for the Five Centuries Ensemble, much more angular than the later version.

Finnissy composed seven concertos for piano between 1975 and 1981, of which only the first two feature an orchestra or large ensemble. Nos. 3, 5 and 7 all employ a small ensemble of five or six players, whilst Nos. 4 and 6 are both for solo piano. Both of these latter works take their cue from Charles Valentin Alkan's *Concerto for Solo Piano*, in particular the idea of creating distinct types of configuration for the instrument representing 'solo' and 'tutti' writing (generally the former tend to be more linear and registrally focused, the latter more chordal, often saturating registral space).

The *Piano Concerto No. 6* (1980-81) is one of Finnissy's strangest works for solo piano. Other than an explosive opening, and a few passages of relatively rapid figuration later on, one of them extended, and one further *fff* outburst, the piece is extremely still and quiet, including unexpectedly long *spettrale* passages in the outer registers. The use of the outer reaches of the keyboard was not a new development for Finnissy by this stage (he had used it in such works as *English Country-Tunes*, *all.fall.down* and *We'll get there someday* – and once in an interview attributed this simply to the position in which he felt most comfortable at the keyboard), and the close-packed but always well-defined harmonies at the top and bottom are reminiscent of moments in *English Country-Tunes* in particular. But if that work was dynamic and explosive, this is static and aloof, traversing narrow areas of tessitura with minimal development. The centrepiece is a 3'42" passage of slow arpeggio figures at a dynamic of *pppp!*, before finally building in dynamic towards a mini-climax, before the coda to the work reduces everything from before to a long series of changing trills in both hands.

With its many hushed, ghostly sonorities, Finnissy creates his own type of 'night music', in the tradition of Schumann's *Nachtstücke* and Bartók's *Out of Doors Suite* (a tradition also continued by such composers as Heinz Holliger or Salvatore Sciarrino).

But the *Piano Concerto No. 4* (1978, rev. 1996) is anything but static. It is many ways the most demanding of all of Finnissy's works, at least in its unrelenting difficulties throughout; approaches to piano composition which can be found in other works from this time, including other piano concertos, are taken to a new extreme here. Brian Ferneyhough described the resultant instrument in the *tutti* passages as a 'meta piano'

First composed in 1978, Finnissy himself played it often, including on various occasions to accompany dances from Kris Donovan, but then it lay dormant for a long period. I had heard about the work, which held a type of mystical fascination for some pianists, a few of who had seen the score but none owned a copy. Finally, Finnissy revised it (and dedicated the final version to me) for my 1996 series of his piano works. He incorporated material from the second of now-withdrawn set of *Piano Studies* (1977-79) (specifically the wrenched gestures, infused with clusters and spanning the whole keyboard, at the outset, and then around half-way through the work), and also from the withdrawn piano and ensemble piece *Long Distance* for the canon at the end.

The piece is loosely structured in four main sections: an introduction beginning with violent gestures, then a type of transcendental *tutti* writing, from which some solo lines begin to emerge; two central sections (separated by a return to the opening gestures), then a manic coda. The first central section revolves around an extremely rapid series of whirling semiquavers, sometimes forming distinct non-regular scales moving up and down the keyboard (a little reminiscent of Debussy's *Étude* "pour les huit doigts"), mutating into alternating notes and then chords (in particular seconds, thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, then clusters at the climax of this section). This material is intercut with rapid-fire lines of wide arpeggios, which gradually resolve into angular lines, palindromic figures in both hands in the upper registers, overlapping streams of double notes, and towards the end, a quasi-improvisatory section with wide brilliant passagework in the right hand accompanied by highly rhythmic riffs in the bass (as Finnissy would use in a very different way in *Kemp's Morris*). The second section, after an introduction returning to the palindromes, is a hysterical quasi-fugue in four parts (some pages of which have achieved a certain notoriety amongst those interested in this type of music), in which the melodic line is ultimately drowned by the angular figuration in the other parts. The final coda uses the Nancarrow-like idiom found in other works such as (naturally!) *Nancarrow* and *Fast Dances, Slow Dances*, and is an equally manic three-, later five-part canon (with five different time signatures).

The next concert in Ian Pace's series of the piano music of Michael Finnissy will take place on Thursday October 27th, 2016 at the Picture Gallery, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham Hill, Egham, at 19:30. It will include the London premiere of Finnissy's *Beethoven's Robin Adair* (2015), premiered earlier this year in York by Ian Pace and an electic range of other works including *Kemp's Morris*, *Strauss-Walzer*, *Reels*, *Australian Sea Shanties Set 2*, *Enough* and *Free Setting*.

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 Kolomiiets, 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 Zaldua 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 2015), 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 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*.