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# MICHAEL FINNISSY AT 70 THE PIANO MUSIC (6)

IAN PACE – Piano

Recital at Picture Gallery, Royal Holloway  
College, University of London, Egham

Thursday October 27th, 2016, 7:30 pm

Preceded by a pre-concert talk with Ian Pace and  
Michael Finnissy

MICHAEL FINNISSY

*Kemp's Morris* (1978)

*William Billings* (1990-91)

CASSANDRA MILLER and  
MICHAEL FINNISSY

*Sinner don't let this Harvest pass* (2014-16)

MICHAEL FINNISSY

*Beethoven's Robin Adair* (2015)

*Strauss-Walzer* (1967, rev. 1989)

1. Wo die Zitronen blühn
2. O, schöner Mai
3. Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald

## INTERVAL

MICHAEL FINNISSY

*Vieux Noël Op. 59 No. 2* (1958)

*Romance (with Intermezzo)* (1960)

*Short but....* (1979)

*Reels* (1980-81)

*Australian Sea Shanties Set 2* (1983)

*Enough* (2001)

*White Rain* (1981)

*Free Setting* (1981, rev. 1995)



employed in Finnissy's numerous folk music-inspired works (alluding to folk music from Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Aboriginal Australia) from the early 1980s.

*William Billings* was written for the 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday of James Clapperton, one of several young pianists who were championing Finnissy's work at the time of its composition. Clapperton was then studying at the State University of New York in Buffalo, with the pianist Yvar Mikhashoff; this location likely influenced Finnissy's choice of source materials. He took a selection of four hymns by the American composer and choral teacher William Billings (1746-1800), specifically 'Kittery', 'Bethlehem', 'Boston' and 'Glad then, America', from which he extracted short fragments, and also elaborated upon particular melodic material which took his interest. A more recent precedent can be found in John Cage's *Apartment House 1776* (1976) written for the bicentennial anniversary of American independence; the 'Harmonies' material to accompany the singers in this work draws upon Billings and others.

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Kittery'. The title 'Kittery' is written in a decorative font at the top left. Above the first staff, it says 'Words from Dr. Watts'. The score consists of three staves: a vocal line at the top, a piano accompaniment line in the middle, and another vocal line at the bottom. The lyrics are: 'Our Father who in heaven art all hallowed be thy Name Thy Kingdom come thy'. There are repeat signs (:S:) at the end of each line of music.

Finnissy would go on to make extensive reference to Billings' hymns (and compositional techniques) in *North American Spirituals* (1997-98) and elsewhere in the cycle *The History of Photography in Sound* (1995-2000). Another American music, that of African-American spirituals, is a presence in several Finnissy works, including *North American Spirituals*, *Folklore* (1993-94) (these works in turn employ the same spirituals set by Michael Tippett in *A Child of our Time*), as well as the free setting *Sometimes I...* (1990, rev. 1997). A recent return to this category of source came about in response to a pair of pieces by the Canadian composer Cassandra Miller, drawing upon the spiritual 'Sinner, please don't let this harvest pass'. Miller composed two pieces in 2014, specifically entitled 'Sinner, please', the second 'Sinner don't let this harvest pass'; Finnissy responded with his own pair of pieces, the first entitled 'Don't let this harvest pass', the second 'Sinner, please', to be performed as a set together with the Miller pieces, in an order chosen by the performer. Miller's alludes to the arrangement published in 1919 by H.T. Burleigh (1866-1949) (part of which is reproduced below), while Finnissy draws upon a performance by the African-American singer Marian Anderson. Both composers set the first song in E minor, the second in E-flat minor, though the second half of Finnissy's first piece is tonally diffuse, with the outlines of a melody surrounded by a seemingly random array of staccato grace notes (a technique he also used in *Folklore 2*, inspired by a similar device in Cornelius Cardew's *Two Books of Study for Pianists* (1958)). The order in which I will play these pieces tonight is MF1-CM1-CM1-MF2.

Andante

Voice

Sin-ner, please doan let dis har-ves' pass; Sin-ner,

Piano

*f* *mf*

please doan let dis har-ves' pass Sin-ner, please doan let dis

har-ves' pass, an' die an' lose yo' soul at las'

The image shows a musical score for a voice and piano. The tempo is marked 'Andante' and the time signature is 2/4. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is divided into three systems. The first system shows the voice line starting with a rest, followed by the lyrics 'Sin-ner, please doan let dis har-ves' pass; Sin-ner,'. The piano accompaniment begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The second system continues the voice line with 'please doan let dis har-ves' pass Sin-ner, please doan let dis'. The piano accompaniment features a triplet in the bass line. The third system concludes the voice line with 'har-ves' pass, an' die an' lose yo' soul at las'' and includes another triplet in the piano accompaniment.

Beethoven's *Robin Adair* was written over a four-year period, culminating in a co-commission by the York Late Music Concert Series for the first two pieces, dedicated to myself and Steve Crowther (artistic director of the series). It takes as its starting point Beethoven's *Irische Volksweise* WoO 157, Nr. 7, 'Robin Adair', an innocuous melody given a parlour-room style arrangement. Nonetheless, Finnissey transforms this material drastically in a set of seven extended fantasias (rather as Beethoven did with an unremarkable waltz by Diabelli in his monumental set of variations), which range between pensive quasi-expressionist ruminations, acerbic waltz-like writing, Arcadian lyricism, and mysterious, unmeasured, other-worldly *spettrale* writing in the high registers. Parts of the cycle were written for Andrew Toovey on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday (No. 3), for Andrea Rauter, commissioned by the Forge Camden (No. 4), for Thalia Myers, commissioned by the ABRSM for the collection *Spectrum 5* (no. 6), and for Leo Grant and Chris Sarantis (No. 7).

## Irische Volksweise.

(Robin Adair.)

N<sup>o</sup> 7.

Andante amoroso.

Violino.

Violoncello.

Pianoforte.

Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \*

**SOPRANO.**

Since all thy vows, false maid, are blown to air, — and my poor heart be - tray'd  
 Some gloomy place I'll find, some dole - ful shade where nei - ther sun nor wind  
 Wild fruit shall be my meal, I'll drink the spring; cold earth shall be my seat;  
 Da dei - ne Schwü - re all', Fal - sche! ver - wehn, ich je - den Hoff - nungs - strahl  
 Ho - tief die Schat - ten sind ein - sam im Haag, dass we - der Sonn' noch Wind  
 Früch - te der Wild - niss sind, was mich er - nährt, Trank, wo die Quel - le rinnt,

**TENORE.**

**BASSO.**

sempre pp

Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \*

to sad de - spair, in - to some wil - der - ness, my grief I  
 cer en - trance had: in - to that hol - low cave, there will I  
 for co - ver - ing, I'll have the star - ry sky my head to  
 muss schwin - den schu, will, ich der Ein - samkeit kla - gen mein  
 ein - ge - hen mag, such ich den still - sten Ort, klag' und be -  
 wird mir ge - währt, Nachts sei das Ster - nen zell ü - ber mein

pp

\* Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \* Ped. \*

B. 259.

Finnissy provided the following note for the first performance, which I gave at the York Late Music Concert Series on May 7<sup>th</sup> this year:

*Part of my ongoing project to visit and compositionally re-claim the entirety of Music, including the darker corners, and - of course - mostly my eccentric enthusiasms: Beethoven's folksong arrangements, the 'objet trouvé' of folk music, not field-work and slowed-down wax-cylinder recording, but the paper transcription. A conversation of sorts between Western European intellectual training (or just intelligent and curious listening, if the word 'training' seems too sinister) and the rigorous (often secretive and closely-guarded) conventions of traditional folk performance. Dislocation, re-contextualisation, aesthetic corruption - and, put like that - who*

*doesn't have any amount of this going on all the time? 'Robin Adair' might be an Irish tune (as Beethoven thought), maybe Scots. Basic gestalt - a rising scale, tiny rhythmic syncopations. I am not excited by the notion of re-cycling this and tidying it up, polishing and veneering for the concert-hall, but engaging with it as raw (?) compositional-matter which is heavily-laden with socio-political significance (from the circumstances of the song's original inspiration, to the current view of folk music). Seven different versions (2012 - 16).*

The *Strauss-Walzer* began as some of Finnissy's first mature transcriptions at the time of their early version in 1967. Johann Strauss II's waltzes are a staple of the transcription literature; arrangements by Carl Tausig, Moriz Rosenthal, Ignaz Friedman, Adolf Schulz-Elver, Edouard Schütt, Leopold Godowsky, Ernst von Dohnányi and Abram Chasins were for a long time favourites of late romantic pianists (and many recently been revived by new generations curious about this literature). The most obvious precedents for Finnissy's transcriptions are the four transcriptions by Godowsky, quasi-symphonic works in which the original melodies are surrounded, sometimes almost overwhelmed, by a range of chromatic elaboration and contrapuntal overlays, in a hyper-virtuosic manner. Godowsky's works, three of which were written between 1905 and 1912 (a fourth for left hand alone dates from 1928) make explicit a quality of decadence implicit in the Strauss originals.

Strauss's work - originally a form of *Unterhaltungsmusik* which would later be considered part of a 'higher' artistic realm - responded to the decaying world of mid-to late-nineteenth-century Vienna with a music which mixes charm, sentimentality and unforced mild pathos, employing some melodic and harmonic devices which overlap with other forms of nineteenth-century popular musics (such as leading notes which resolve down rather than up). Some of his best known works come from a painful period in Viennese history, from the stock market crash of 1873 through the subsequent six-year depression, a period which saw a marked increase of suicides. The Emperor Franz Josef said that 'When Vienna gets gay, things are really serious', while satirist Karl Kraus is alleged to have commented that 'In Berlin, things are serious but not hopeless. In Vienna, they are hopeless but not serious.' (both of these quotes are cited with relish in Terry Eagleton's satirical novel *Saints and Scholars* (1987)). Godowsky's arrangements, written during the period of the final decline of the Habsburg Empire, respond to a changed cultural environment, one which in the Germanic world had also bequeathed Richard Strauss's *Salomé* and the art of the *Jugendstil* and the *Wiener Secession*, and re-create Johann Strauss II in a manner which is brilliant but almost at breaking point through the relentlessness of its detail and ostentation. Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji's *Valse-Fantasie (Hommage à Johann Strauss)* (1925) dissolves Strauss's harmonic language even further in a clangorous texture frequently employing parallel dissonant chords and mannered devices for evoking exoticism and sensuousness.

In Finnissy's *Strauss-Walzer*, the world of Strauss's Vienna is viewed through the lens of the late twentieth-century, with increased use of fragmentation, disorientation, and lack of musical closure. The first two waltzes set - *Wo die Citronen blüh'n!* op. 364 (1874), *O schöner Mai*, op. 375 (1877) – both originally date from the period of the depression. Whilst maintaining a basic 3/4 waltz pulse, Finnissy's writing is texturally and harmonically discontinuous, shifting between blocks of material. In the first of these, Straussian (and Strauss-Godowskian) harmonies are a regular presence

(though the Strauss originals are only obliquely recognisable in places), Finnissy goes even a stage further than Godowsky in terms of elaboration, whilst featuring Sorabjian top-heaviness, though with much more refined and imaginative use of pitch. Ultimately, a series of flourishes coalesce into longer patterns which serve to smudge and ‘wipe out’ the clearer lines, though a melodic fragment remains at the conclusion. The second waltz is calmer and more measured, but uses similar flourishes which do ultimately obliterate the material at the end. In Finnissy’s setting of the slightly earlier *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald*, op. 325 (1868) (notable for its use of a zither), Straussian/Godowskian sentimentality is more explicit, though offset by more chromatically dense and harmonically blurred responses, as well as moments of drastic thinning of texture, almost as if the music is drawing to a halt, and an overloading of texture which exceeds both the previous pieces. By the end of this work, Finnissy appears to be approaching some ultimate tonal resolution, but stops short of this at the very end, leaving the music ‘up in the air’.

Johann Strauss, from *Geschichten aus dem Wienerwald*

The three pieces are dedicated to three pianists, all young at the time of the composition of the final version, who like Clapperton (and myself, from a few years later) were part of a new generation championing Finnissy’s work: Jonathan Powell, Nicolas Hodges, and Ben Morison.

Two quite remarkable pieces of juvenilia feature at the beginning of the second half of tonight’s programme. *Vieux Noël Op. 59 No. 2*, written when Finnissy was just 12, is a harmonisation of a traditional Basque Annunciation carol, somewhat inspired by the music of Erik Satie. No significance should be read into the opus number – as a child Finnissy for a while imagined that such things were merely parts of titles and could be

used freely! The *Romance (with Intermezzo)*, from two years later, a lyrical piece in ternary form, may reflect the composer's early fascination with the music of Brahms (to which he would return in later works such as the piano trio *In Stiller Nacht* (1990, rev. 1997), the string quartet *Sehnsucht* (1997), and the more recent *Brahms-Lieder* (2015); the tempo indications in this piece of *Andante teneramente* and *Allegretto un poco agitato* are also those of the fourth and sixth of Brahms's *Klavierstücke*, op. 118. Finnissy employs a form of 'developing variation' technique, with micro-motives in a state of continual flux, though with a far less stable sense of tonality, more akin to the work of Schoenberg, who himself adored Brahms's music; this link would later influence Finnissy's composition *Mit Arnold Schönberg* (2002).

*Short but...* is a characteristically enigmatic piece in three simultaneous parts, all closely spaced together, moving between denser and slightly more spacious textures, starting at the centre of the piano, moving briefly a little higher, then returning to the original register. Finnissy has written that 'Maybe 'sweet' would not be the word to most readily spring to mind' as an explanation for the absence of that word in the title.

*Reels* reflects Finnissy's interest in Scottish *pìobaireachd* bagpipe playing and especially its types of ornamentation, as detailed in *Logan's Complete Tutor for the Highland Bagpipe* (1901), from which the work draws freely for its sources. The work consists of six pieces, alternately fast, with a single line, and slow, with two part counterpoint, using increasingly stratified dynamics.

Finnissy spent two periods teaching in Australia in the early 1980s. During the first of these, he wrote eight works all relating to Aboriginal music, and then followed up with a shorter series of pieces on colonial melodies, including the three sets of *Australian Sea Shanties* (1983) for amateur choir, piano and recorder consort respectively. All of these draw upon common sources, made explicit in the first set: the shanties 'Bound for South Australia', 'Little fishy', and 'My true love he is fair (Ten thousand miles away)'. The first of these two pieces for piano is a melancholy work (Finnissy has described the pieces as conveying a sense of loneliness and exile) combining a primary and a secondary melody (the former first in the bass, then in the treble) in a variety of metrical relationships. The second is somewhat more involved and elaborate, with wide leaps in the right hand.

*Enough*, written for the pianist John Tilbury, who also performed and recorded some of Samuel Beckett's work in the early 2000s. Finnissy takes a cue from Samuel Beckett's short text *Assez* (1965), published in English as *Enough*. This text has interested a variety of commentators, appearing somewhat uncharacteristic of Beckett's development after its immediate radical predecessors, *All Strange Away* (1963-64), *How It Is* (1964) and *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1965), or its successors *Ping* (1966) and *Lessness* (1969). In contrast to these dense works, told as if by hyper-solipsistic narrators, *Enough*, a story of a parting of the ways from an older man, returns to a more immediate and measured form of prose, like a throwback to his earlier prose work ('Quoi qu'il en soit je filai sans me retourner. Hors de portée de sa voix, j'étais hors de sa vie. C'est peut-être ce qu'il désirait. On voit des questions sans se les poser. Il ne devait plus en avoir pour longtemps. Moi en revanche j'en avais encore pour longtemps. J'étais d'une tout autre generation. Ça n'a pas duré'/'Whatever it was he meant I made off without looking back. Gone from reach of his voice I was gone from his life. Perhaps it was that he desired. There are

questions you see and don't ask yourself. He must have been on his last legs. I on the contrary was far from on my last legs. I belonged to an entirely different generation. It didn't last.'). But there are dark themes of child molestation and abuse ('Quand il me disait de lui lecher le pénis je me jetais dessus. J'en tirais de la satisfaction. Nous devions avoir les mêmes satisfactions' .... 'Je devais avoir dans les six ans quand il me prit par la main. Je sortais de l'enfance à peine.'/'When he told me to lick his penis I hastened to do so. I drew satisfaction from it. We must have had the same satisfactions.' ..... 'I cannot have been more than six when he took me by the hand. Barely emerging from childhood.');

the gender of the narrator is not clear, though some have suggested they may be female.

Finnissy's *Enough* is not a direct representation of Beckett's text, but draws upon elements of its discursive style, with rhetorical figures, sometimes relating directly to earlier ones, separated by silences but grouped together by common dynamics of tempo to form musical 'paragraphs'. From near the beginning near-tonal progressions appear, though usually combined with other material in a dissonant relation to these. These progressions become gradually more extended as the piece progresses, culminating in a long *Adagio* featuring a free retrograde from Mozart's *Ave verum corpus* KV 618; a liberation of the body, enabling the narrator of *Enough* finally to walk away, having always walked in the shadow of the suffocating older man.

*White Rain* was inspired by the art of Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), following an exhibition of his work in London. Hiroshige returned continuously to the issue of how to represent rain, specifically the heavy rain in Japan, sometimes through parallel lines, other times through more irregular white near-smudges, as in *White Rain, Shono* (1833-34), to demonstrate the effect of sunlight upon showers. Finnissy's piece consists of twelve separated streams of material of varying lengths, all in the central treble region, and similar in nature, each consisting of two or three chromatic lines comprised of single pitches and chords, of differing degrees of angularity. Despite the intensity of the material (in which parts regularly cross each other) the effect is of a similar material viewed from different angles, in different cross-sections, or 'lit' in different ways, as with a linked series of artworks.



Hiroshige, *White Rain, Shono* (1833-34)

The final piece in the programme, *Free Setting*, is more straightforward, a rampageous piece written for the Siobhan Davies Dance Company (one of the various companies or dancers with whom Finnissy worked regularly). Cutting between quite metrically fixed dance material generally remaining quite close in tessitura, a more transparent writing in the outer registers, and two passages of syncopated lines accompanied by more periodic (but metrically irregular) lines and ‘punctuation’, as well as some intercutting of long sustained pitches (added to the revised version), the piece is relatively characteristic of his virtuoso idiom of the period.

**The next concert in Ian Pace’s series of the piano music of Michael Finnissy will take place on Monday November 7th, 2016 at the Holywell Music Room, Oxford, at 19:30. It will include a complete performance of Finnissy’s *Second Political Agenda* (consisting of three extended works drawing on the music of Erik Satie, Arnold Schoenberg, and Alexander Scriabin respectively), as well as diverse range of shorter works (including *Elephant*, *De toutes flours*, and *Zwei Deutsche mit Coda*), and the more extended *Choralvorspiel* (*Koralforspill*) from 2012.**

**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 Verstockett, 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 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 2017), the Piano Sonatas of Pierre Boulez, John Cage's *The Music of Changes*, and the piano works of Marc Yeats. The 2016-17 season includes appearances in London, Leuven, Basel, Prague, Lisbon, 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 *Music and Letters*.