

MICHAEL FINNISSY AT 70
THE PIANO MUSIC (2)
IAN PACE – Piano
Recital at Hollywell Music Room, Oxford

Tuesday May 10th, 2016, 7:30 pm

MICHAEL FINNISSY

Song 5 (1966-67)
Song 6 (1968, rev. 1996)
Song 7 (1968-69)
Song 8 (1967)
Song 9 (1968)

Nine Romantics (1992)

INTERVAL

MICHAEL FINNISSY

Ives – Grainger – Nancarrow (1974, 1979,
1979, 80)

Liz (1980-81)

B.S. – G.F.H. (1985-86)

Ethel Smyth (1995)

Joh. Seb. Bach (2003)

Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sind (1992)

Rossini (1991)

What the meadow-flowers tell me (1993)

*Preamble zu “Carnaval”, gefolgt von der
Ersten und zweiten symphonischen Etüde nach
Schumann* (2009-10)

One Minute W... (2006)

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 second in 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.

Tonight's programme features an important cycle of early pieces, an extended work from the 1990s, and a varied selection of tribute pieces, musical portraits, and transcriptions.

It is with the series of *Songs 5-9* (1966-69) for piano – part of a bigger cycle of works for solo instruments, voice, or ensemble, of which 18 pieces exist to date – that Finnissy's mature pianistic idiom, that for which he would become renowned, was established. All the major archetypal qualities are there, above all contrasts of extremes of density and stasis, register (very high and very low), tempo, dynamics, and so on, with very little 'middle ground'; the juxtapositions of such starkly characterised material types instantly provides a level of immediate comprehensibility and informs the drama and temporal structure. Some aspects of this idiom were not entirely without precedent, and can be found in works of Karlheinz Stockhausen (*Klavierstück X* (1954-55, rev. 1961)) or Sylvano Bussotti (*Pour Clavier* (1961)), not to mention in Charles Ives' Piano Sonata No. 2, *Concord, Mass., 1840-60* (an important early enthusiasm for Finnissy), and piano works of Schoenberg and the early Boulez.

Finnissy has spoken of his early interest in anthropology, the study of archetypes as found in the work of Jung, and structuralist views of the world in terms of 'binary oppositions' as encountered in the writing of Claude Lévi-Strauss. But the primary inspiration for these pieces was extra-musical, specifically the silent short 8mm films of the same name by the experimental film maker Stan Brakhage. (*Songs 1-22* were made in 1964-65, then others from 1968-69). Finnissy describes his first encounters with the films as follows:

I first saw his films at an impressionable age (17 or so) at the NFT, and was seriously overwhelmed by their 'visual music', the rhythm and detail of his editing, the intimacy and introspection, the obvious self-involvement, the sense of 'documenting' rather than fantasy-narration - his work has remained a visual model of my ideal 'montage' but also over-arching 'content and character'. His Songs seem to me: aphoristic (as are Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus' and the music of Webern) - investigative; imploded compressions of material sometimes deliberately disregarding legibility; and inevitably they present what can seem like foretastes of later, much more thoroughly explored, material.

Brakhage's *Song 5* (1964), subtitled 'A childbirth song', features a woman giving birth, followed by images of the new-born child, and then her happily greeting the

father of the child. But this action comes in short moments of relative clarity in amongst extremely light or dark abstract images, some of which are developed out of the 'real' images, but to which the latter are ultimately subservient. The impression is of an abstract drama of extremes (of mood, perception, or whatever) for which the actual events are a type of illustration. *Song 6* (1964) is subtitled 'The painted veil via moth – death'. A moth is filmed in claustrophobic close-up dying against a linoleum floor, with indistinct imagery turning at first towards extreme brightness, then darkness. The linoleum is gradually revealed to contain a flower pattern, upon which the camera stays relatively fixed for a period.

Song 7 (1964), subtitled 'San Francisco', centres upon images of the sea, filmed from various angles, and also a series of windows and doors, some of which are superimposed upon the sea. Later come long-range shots of blocks of houses. Once again, the image often turns into complete or near-complete white canvasses, into which most images dissolve. In *Song 8* (1964), subtitled 'Sea creatures' slowing moving sea creatures are filmed so as to look like folds in some material, which then merge into the sea. This then turns to darkness and dancing images in yellow and bronze, somewhere between hell and a disco. Towards end the images emerge briefly into clear view. *Song 9* (1965) is subtitled 'Wedding source and substance', and has the most intense drama of these. We see just the feet, legs or other bodily parts (including some nudity) of human figures, not full view of their bodies (no faces). Someone jumps on a bed with a soft toy; another appears to be getting changed. A cloud formation also appears like a wedding dress. There is more black in this film than the others, including darkened human figures looking like part of some deathly ritual. The montage of the film becomes more rapid as it proceeds, and circles of light and other abstract shapes appear towards the end, as well as a brief glimpse of a rhinoceros.

Brakhage himself had a major interest in the music of Olivier Messiaen at the time that he made the *Songs*, and it has been suggested that some of the varying speeds and use of irregular non-repetitive rhythmic structures of the films draw upon corresponding features in Messiaen's music and theoretical writings on rhythm.

Song 5 is the most fragmentary of these pieces of Finnissy, consisting of 14 different fragments between which one can perceive some relationships, but for the most part without any noticeable sustained forms of continuity. These fragments variously feature gnarled gestures around the compass of the instruments, more sustained lines (especially in the upper registers) with extravagant ornamentation, terse utterances, single notes and chords, and only towards the end a type of combination of some of these in highly dense and virtuosic writing, with a grandiose bravura reminiscent of Bussotti. *Song 6* is an almost aphoristic piece, alternating between material in the treble, bass, or encompassing the whole of the piano, as well as juxtaposing mostly rapid figures with long sustained pitches (a process which would be developed further in *Snowdrift*). By the conclusion he obtains something of a synthesis, with more moderate figuration encompassing a relatively broad tessitura but avoiding as many extremes. *Song 7* is constructed entirely out of a syncretic accumulation of binary oppositions, containing 16 fragments each characterised by a diminuendo from *fff* to *niente*. The opening bars are in bi-partite form; the first contrasts single notes and chords in the bass with single notes and clusters in the treble, whilst the second

contrasts irregular with regular rhythms, though both interspersed with grace notes. Other contrasts include that between sound and silence.

Song 8 and *Song 9* exhibit somewhat greater degrees of linear development. *Song 8*, whose occasional use of cluster glissandi is a clear allusion to Stockhausen's *Klavierstück X*, effects a gradual transition between brilliant rhetorical writing (including hushed pitches which create the effect of superimposed layers of activity), through the introduction of silences and sustained pitches and chords creating threads upon which other more rapid material can be placed, towards a mysterious succession of fragments from lines and chordal progressions. *Song 9* uses longer silences than the previous pieces, described by Finnissy as an attempt to realise in musical terms the experience of certain phenomena – a car passing behind a building, or the sun behind a cloud, so that the phenomenon is re-identified in a more advanced state, the mind being left to fill in the experiential gap. The score opens with the instruction, 'The song must start as though the pianist had already been playing for some considerable time before the first chord becomes audible – as though another person suddenly opened a door to the room where he is playing'. Beginning with the type of grandiose gestural writing found at the end of *Song 5*, Finnissy indicates stresses and pauses on particular notes and chords, which form a *cantus firmus* in a somewhat different manner to the sustained pitches and chords in *Song 8*. Lightning-like flashes of activity, which disappear as immediately as they are made apparent, interrupt the main flow, and eventually Finnissy shifts towards a series of multiple lines in which each note has a different dynamic, an allusion to the sound of integral serialism, but this is soon evened out as a transition back to the more opulent material. The work ends with a short set of four aperiodic chords, then a more strident range of periodic spread chords, like the blackened figures in Brakhage's film.

Finnissy would develop this idiom into new contexts, generally with a greater degree of extended continuity and development of material, in subsequent early piano works such as *Autumnall*, *Snowdrift*, *Ives*, *Wild Flowers* and *Jazz*, and of course also in *English Country-Tunes*.

Nine Romantics is one of Finnissy's bleakest and most disturbing pieces, inspired by an account of the life of Victorian artist Simeon Solomon, who enjoyed critical and commercial success until he was caught in the act of cottaging. A mixture of homophobia and anti-semitism, combined with outrage that an artist previously placed on a pedestal would have been prone to more human, earthly desires, Solomon's reputation plummeted, and he was reduced to working as a pavement artist. Finnissy structures the work in nine sections, the first three of which present three very different types of material: (a) flamboyant, operatic and tempestuous, with voices hemmed into a dense texture; (b) a monophonic melody in a middle register, quite animated, based upon Hebrew liturgical chant, as a tribute to Solomon; (c) very slow, quite but intense chromatic polyphony derived from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, moving slowly upwards in register. Then each is presented in the 'guise' of the others (B as A, C as B, B as C, etc.) by combining pitch material from one with another's tempo, density, or other characteristics. Each 'character' is thus stripped of its essential identity and made to parade in a different manner, often sounding grotesque. Some of the slower sections seem to extend far beyond their natural course, whilst in others the material seems unduly hurried; in the eight section the

music almost ‘dies’, and in the last section the combination of voices seems fundamentally unbalanced.

Ives includes a flurry of rapid activity interspersed with clusters and strident chords, reminiscent in part of some of Ives’s own piano writing. *Grainger* takes its inspiration from a letter of Grainger, relating to his observing the waves on Albert Park Lake in Melbourne, and the need to liberate rhythm and pitch, which would lead to his experiments with ‘Free Music’. Finnissy sets the piece at the extreme ends of the keyboards, combining free and angular outer melodic lines with inner lines of trills, as an attempt to evoke the sound of Grainger’s ‘Kangaroo-Pouch Machine’ constructed in 1952 from multiple oscillators. *Nancarrow* has a superficial resemblance to some of Nancarrow’s *Studies for Player Piano*, with a polymetric relationship between the two hands, the right at first playing flourishes of notes of equal durations, the left with palindromic rhythms, before an interlude of irregularly spaced single *staccato* notes, before the situation of the hands is reversed.

Liz was written for the 75th birthday of Elizabeth Lutyens, the first significant British twelve-tone composer, and is characteristically abstract, consisting of three continuous polymetric lines (in ratios 11:9:7 from the top to the bottom) of chords, then single pitches in a high register, decreasing in dynamic from beginning to end, though also increasing the tessitural range. *B.S.* and *G.F.H.* are tributes to Bernard Stevens and Georg Frederick Händel respectively; the first consists of a continuous melodic line with two secondary melodic parts above a continuously oscillating B-flat and E-flat to represent the composer’s initials, while the second takes as its point of departure the opening of Händel’s Trio Sonata op. 1 no. 1 (which appears initially in the third from the top of the four simultaneous lines), which is divided into pitch cells which are progressively permuted and otherwise permuted (as is the rhythm) as the writing weaves down the keyboard. Eventually, when no line can be discerned as resembling the Händel, Finnissy interrupts with a sudden *sffz* chord and moves everything down an octave, from where it continues to descend and fade into nothing.

Ethel Smyth is another character piece, presenting a series of aspects of Smyth’s character: strident and rumbustious, elegant and aloof, volatile, and languid. Both *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöthen sind* and *Joh. Seb. Bach* are occasional pieces written for collections of Bach-inspired pieces, the former collected by Nicolas Hodges, the latter by Anthony Gray. The former contains free chromatic contrapuntal writing varying between two and four parts, very loosely based on the Organ Chorale Prelude BWV 668, while the latter leads from free variation into a reasonably clear appearance (albeit with modifications of rhythm and pitch) of the melody (mostly descending, with strings of descending two note figures) from the first movement of the Cantata *Ich elender Mensch, wer wird mich erlösen*, BWV 148.

Rossini was written for Father Gordon O’Loughlin of Saint Paul’s Church, Brighton, and is a more straightforward transcription of Idreno’s Aria ‘E se ancor libero’ from Act 1 of *Semiramide*, in which the Indian King expresses his desire for the princess Azema. Finnissy presents a free rhapsodic version of Rossini’s melody, which was accompanied by rhythmically regular, somewhat militaristic, passages in chords in the original, and turns the aria into a duet with a tenor line very loosely relating to the main melody.

What the meadow-flowers tell me, is another occasional piece, written as a Valentine's Day present for Finnissy's partner Philip Adams. It is made up of a series of superimposed fragments selected from the second movement of Mahler's Third Symphony presented in a warm and sensuous fashion mostly in the central registers of the piano.

With respect to the music of Robert Schumann, which explicitly informs Finnissy's *Preamble zu "Carnaval"*, *gefolgt von der ersten und zweiten symphonischen Etüde nach Schumann*, Finnissy says the following:

I was initially put off Schumann by trying, and failing, to play his music well for college exams. I initially got to grips with his world via the Second Symphony, the opera Genoveva and piano-duet Bilder aus dem Osten (early on), the Violin Sonatas (when I had a regular duo with Roger Garland), Waldszenen, (working with the great American choreographer Jane Dudley) and, more recently, the songs.

A pianist named Ben Binder commissioned the Preamble to head up a series of new Carnaval pieces written by young Americans (Jason Eckhardt among them) and the composers had asked for me to 'introduce' them. I have no idea what (if anything) came of the project, but the act of 're-imagining' the Preamble - which is more direct in some places than many of my previous transcriptions - was instructive. The two Symphonic studies, and the third for 2 pianos are a bit later, but continue 'experiments with displaced (?) tonality'. Nic Hodges commissioned the solo studies for a concert he was doing at Radio Luxembourg, and they paid for them. He wasn't specific, so far as I remember, but the Schumann pieces have always been favourites to listen to, and I was thinking of maybe making a set of pieces (effectively variations)... the idea of 'veränderungen' (literally 'alterations') comes from Bach's Goldbergs, and I take the word to mean something deeper and more thoroughgoing than a typical 'variation' (along the lines of Beethoven's Prometheus set, or at least the opening of it).

The *Preamble* presents Schumann's opening gesture, a little modified and overlaid with *pp* material as type of ghostly overlay (as found back in the *Songs*, and before that in Ives' *Concord Sonata*). Schumann's brilliant passage work is transformed into unmeasured complexes of grace notes, intercut with allusions to the double-dotted rhythms also in the Schumann. The two *Symphonische Etüden* (a third also exists, for two pianos), allude to the fragmentary nature of Schumann's music, the first with a clear allusion to fifth of Schumann's 'supplementary variations', the second dissolving a melody within the type of unmeasured figurations also found in the *Preamble*.

Various virtuoso pianist-composers, including Moriz Rosenthal, Leopold Godowsky, and Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, have created their own somewhat unhinged versions of Chopin's *Minute Waltz*, op. 64, no. 1. Finnissy's contribution to this genre is based upon various permutations and modifications of the G-A-flat-C-B-flat figuration at the outset of the Chopin, including a polyrhythmic combination of this with a rendition of the second subject (Rosenthal also combines the two), and should be able to be played in a minute, unlike most other versions (including the Chopin)!

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 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, 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 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*.

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*.

With profound thanks to Nigel McBride for his help in making this concert happen.