



Ian  
**VENABLES**

**Complete Works for Solo Piano**

Sonata • The Stourhead Follies • Caprice

**Graham J. Lloyd**



## Ian Venables (b. 1955)

### Complete Works for Solo Piano

Ian Venables studied composition with Richard Arnell at Trinity College of Music London, with John Joubert, Andrew Downes and John Mayer at the Birmingham Conservatoire, piano with Ronald Settle and organ with Michael Fleming and Ian Tracey. As a composer, he found his own personal style early on and has never lost the instinctive lyric-romantic expressiveness that has determined all of his music, borne of an intensity of emotion which has its roots in the English lyric tradition. Regarded as one of Britain's foremost composers of art-song, it is less well known that his early career began with a small corpus of works written for solo piano, an instrument which has featured in nearly all his compositions to date. The works on this recording range from the deeply reflective and wistful to those of a lighter vein, full of charm and *joie de vivre*.

*Caprice, Op. 35*, was commissioned by the Gloucester Three Choirs Festival in 2001 and was given its première by the pianist Phillip Dyson. In spite of being described by the composer as his "... final essay for the piano ...", it gives us an insight into how the mature composer, influenced by years of song composition, approaches the writing of abstract works for his own instrument. Like most *capricci*, it is predominantly vibrant and energetic in mood. In its outer sections, Venables uses deftly wrought but simple melodic materials which assume heightened significance as the piece progresses. Its lyrical central episode, influenced by his *Op. 28* and *Op. 33* songs, acts as a "song without words" with its *cantilena* of rapt beauty.

Sixteen years separate *The Stourhead Follies, Op. 4*, from *Caprice*, and it is here that we can, on occasions, detect those all-important influences that often inform a developing compositional style. Subtitled *Four Romantic Impressions*, they owe their genesis to a visit by the composer in 1984 to Stourhead House and Gardens in Wiltshire. Venables writes "... this memorable visit left a deep impression and prompted me to create in music the

evocative atmosphere of the gardens. *The Stourhead Follies* are essentially romantic impressions of a nostalgic character."

*Temple to Apollo* is the most overtly romantic of the four 'Impressions', where one can hear influences of two important composers of Venables' youth, Rachmaninov and Ravel. It immediately evokes a timeless atmosphere, rising with increasing intensity to its climax, ending with a return to the purity of the opening material.

*Palladio's Bridge* immediately sets in motion a hypnotically lilting rhythmic figure, which dominates much of the movement. Again there is a central climax, but this time one that is troubled and anguished rather than optimistic. Its coda provides yet another intimation of a time long past, as ideas from the work's opening are presented in a dream-like state.

*Pantheon* is by far the liveliest of the set and is in every way a paean to all the gods, its piano textures and insistent rhythms conjuring up a mood of Bacchanalian excess and joyful abandon.

*The Grotto* provides a stillness, only fleetingly alluded to in the other movements, where the mystical tranquillity of the outer sections contrasts with a more reflective central episode. The briefest of codas ends a musical journey that, as the composer says "... conveys the feelings and changing moods of structures that find themselves out of time and place ...".

The *Three Short Pieces, Op. 5*, were written in 1986 and are essentially pieces for children. Just as Debussy's *Children's Corner* invites us into a world where 'gollies' dance and dolls are serenaded, so the *Three Short Pieces* paint an imaginary world of caprices and teddy bears' picnics. Like *Children's Corner*, however, the pieces are designed not necessarily to be played by children, but are meant to be evocative of childhood, the lightness of the work's subject matter in no way detracting from its appeal.

Whereas the lively *Caprice* and whimsical *Dance of the Teddy Bears* show a lighter side to Venables'

creativity – the latter work being loosely based on the popular song "*If you go down to the woods today*" – it is the *Folk Tune* (dedicated to Kenneth Prendergast) that is the longest and most serious in mood. Influenced by his love of Vaughan Williams, Venables presents an original modal, sixteen-bar folk-tune in various stages of development. Its impressive climax winds down to a restatement of the opening material and brings to a close this satisfying musical triptych.

Oscar Wilde's short story *The Nightingale and the Rose* was the impetus behind Venables' only piece of programme music. Originally written as a children's ballet for the ballerina Marjorie Chater-Hughes, it was later heavily reworked and extended to become, *Impromptu: The Nightingale and the Rose*, *Op. 8*. Dedicated to the artist Margaret Atkinson, it tells the poignant story of a nightingale who hears the plight of a student; "*She said that she would dance with me if I brought her a red rose, but in all my garden there is no red rose.*" Finding only a white rose, the nightingale unselfishly sacrifices itself by piercing its heart in order to stain the rose red. Its sacrifice is in vain, however, as the rose is heartlessly rejected.

Throughout, Venables' reflective and poignant music underpins the narrative. After the student's opening cry, the nightingale sings her song, a *cantilena* of aching beauty. In a spirit of boisterous optimism, energetic arabesques accompany her search for the elusive red rose, reaching a passionate climax as the music becomes irredeemably tinged with tragedy. It ends with the nightingale's opening lament, which haunts the final bars of the work.

*Portrait of Janis* was written in the autumn of 2000 and was first performed by the composer during a visit to California in the same year. Venables writes, "... the piece is a wistful evocation of mood, a backward glance, remembering a perfectly happy moment spent with special friends". Indeed the piece is very much about time and place, 'recollected in tranquillity', with one such friend placed at its centre: Janis. Its opening idea roots the work firmly in English soil, but within a few bars, a 'backward glance' is heard in a germ of an idea that is soon given full

expression in the 'Janis theme' proper. This contemplative chorale theme is developed over a rocking piano accompaniment, which acts as a metaphor for the passage of time. After a brief winding down, an unexpected modulation ushers in a new thematic idea. This second 'backward glance' is distinctly American in feel, and here the composer explained that the section was a brief meditation upon his visit to the United States and represents a personal thank you to all his friends in the bay area of San Francisco.

The death in 1975 of the great Russian composer Dmitry Shostakovich was the unexpected catalyst for the creation of Venables' first significant work for the piano: the *Sonata (1975): In Memoriam D.S.C.H., Op. 1*. It is not surprising that he should wish to write an *homage*, as Shostakovich was at that time a highly important influence – the Russian's Symphonies, String Quartets and Preludes and Fugues providing artistic nourishment for the young composer.

The four note D. S. (E flat). C. H. (B natural) motif, 'invented' by Shostakovich from his own name and used most notably in his *Eighth String Quartet* and *Tenth Symphony*, is a prominent but subtle interloper in the sonata's three-movement landscape. Venables writes "I was trying in this work to create a similar sound world, not to copy it, but to refract it through an Englishman's imagination."

The first movement, inevitably rooted in traditional tonality but using dissonance and occasional atonality for expressive means, begins with a chordal idea based on the D.S.C.H. motif which punctuates the work at various moments. Two outer sections impart a sense of urgency and flank a slow two-part texture much loved by Shostakovich. The third section reaches a climax of harrowing intensity before winding down to a serene coda. In the exuberant *Allegro scherzando*, Venables attempts to capture some of the wit and sardonic humour of Shostakovich and it is here that a sense of fun prevails. Inevitably parodic, its boisterous counterpoint and intentionally meretricious octave writing jostle for prominence. It is, however, Venables' witty interpretation

of a Cossack dance that seems to dominate this short but vibrant movement. The third movement *threnody* begins in a mood of ineffable sadness, as an intensely poignant melody of fragile beauty provides the movement's main *raison d'être*. Shostakovich's contrapuntal genius is the driving force behind the three-part writing that follows. Reaching a powerful and declamatory climax, the music subsides into the opening melody, which then ushers in a

coda of heightened resignation. This is a movement of great emotional commitment and powerful self-confidence and ends a work that comes from a composer whose tender emotionalism goes to the heart, because it comes from the heart.

Ian Flint

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## Ian Venables



Photograph: Graham Wallhead

Ian Venables was born in 1955 and educated at Liverpool Collegiate Grammar School. He studied music with Richard Arnell at Trinity College of Music, London and later with Andrew Downes, John Mayer and John Joubert in Birmingham.

His compositions encompass many genres, and he has added significantly to the canon of English art song. Described as "...a song composer as fine as Finzi and Gurney..." (*BBC Music Magazine*) and "...one of the finest song composers of his generation..." (*BMS Newsletter*), he has written over 60 works in this genre, which includes seven song-cycles, *Venetian Songs – Love's Voice Op. 22* (1995); *Invite to Eternity Op. 31* (1997) for tenor and string quartet; *Songs of Eternity and Sorrow Op. 36* (2004) for tenor, string quartet and piano; *On the Wings of Love Op. 38* (2006) for tenor, clarinet and piano; *The Pine Boughs Past Music Op. 39* (2009) for baritone and piano; *Remember This Op. 40* (2011) a Cantata for soprano, tenor, string quartet, and piano and *The Song of The Severn Op. 43* (2013) for baritone, string quartet and piano. Other songs for solo voice and piano include, *Two Songs Op. 28* (1997) and *Six Songs Op. 33* (2003) as well as a dramatic scena *At the court of the poisoned rose Op. 20* (1994).

His songs have been performed by national and international artists that include: Patricia Rozario, Ian Partridge, Andrew Kennedy, Roderick Williams, Mary Plazas, Allan Clayton, Caroline McPhie, Howard Wong, Nathan Vale, Daniel Norman, Peter Savidge, Peter Wilman, Kevin McLean Mair, Susan Anne Jenkins, Der-shin Hwang, Nicholas Mulroy, Michael Lampard, Sally Porter Munro, Brian Thorsett and Helen Meyerhoff. His many chamber works include a *Piano Quintet Op. 27* (1995) – described by Roderic Dunnett in the *Independent* as '...lending a new late 20th Century dimension to the English pastoral...' and a *String Quartet Op. 32* (1998), as well as smaller pieces for solo instruments and piano. He has also written works for choir – *Awake, awake, the world is young Op. 34* – organ – *Rhapsody Op. 25* (1996), brass and solo piano. His music is frequently played on BBC Radio 3 and has also been aired on German, Scandinavian, Australian and United States radio.

He is an acknowledged expert on the 19th century poet and literary critic John Addington Symonds, and apart from having set five of his poems for voice and piano, he has contributed a significant essay to the book *John Addington Symonds – Culture and the Demon Desire* (Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000).

He is currently the President of The Arthur Bliss Society and Vice President of the Droitwich Concert Club. His continuing work on the music of Ivor Gurney has led to orchestrations of two of his songs (2003) – counterparts to the two that were orchestrated by Herbert Howells – and newly edited versions of Gurney's *War Elegy* (1919) and *A Gloucestershire Rhapsody* (1921), with Philip Lancaster. His vocal music is published by Novello and Company (Music Sales) and has been recorded on the Signum, Somm, Regent and Naxos labels.

## Graham J. Lloyd



Photograph: Graham Wallhead

Graham J. Lloyd was born on the Wirral in 1963. He began his piano studies at the relatively late age of fourteen and only four years later gave his début recital in Liverpool, in a performance of Saint-Saëns's *Carnaval des Animaux*. He studied at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester with the renowned Polish pianist Ryszard Bakst, and there, as a chamber musician, was coached by the late Denis Matthews. He has appeared as a soloist, a chamber musician, and, in particular, as an accompanist to many singers. His recording *The Songs of Ian Venables* received much critical acclaim, and his arrangement of four of Ian Venables's songs for string quartet and tenor has been recently recorded on the Signum label. He has also recorded Venables's music for strings and piano with members of the Coull Quartet on the Somm label. He combines a busy teaching career with performing, recording, adjudicating and arranging.

As a composer of art-song, Ian Venables is considered to be one of the most important writing today. The *Songs of Ian Venables* (8.572514), Volume 21 of Naxos's critically acclaimed English Song Series, was the first devoted to a living composer. This new recording introduces us to his music for solo piano and brings together works written between 1975 and 2001. It is Venables' singular melodic gift and highly inventive use of harmony that combine to give us works that range from the deeply reflective and wistful to those in a lighter vein, full of charm and joie de vivre.

**RVW**trust

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|---|-------|--|-------|
| ① Caprice, Op. 35 *                                     | 8:37  | ⑨ Impromptu: 'The Nightingale and The Rose', Op. 8 * | 8:23  |
| The Stourhead Follies: Four Romantic Impressions, Op. 4 | 18:52 | ⑩ Portrait of Janis, Op. 9 *                         | 6:21  |
| ② I. Temple to Apollo                                   | 4:49  | Sonata (1975): In Memoriam D.S.C.H., Op. 1 *         | 21:44 |
| ③ II. Palladio's Bridge                                 | 6:38  | ⑪ I. Molto adagio – Allegro energico                 | 9:43  |
| ④ III. Pantheon   | 1:44  | ⑫ II. Allegro scherzando                             | 2:17  |
| ⑤ IV. The Grotto  | 5:41  | ⑬ III. Molto adagio ed espressivo                    | 9:44  |
| Three Short Pieces, Op. 5                               | 6:11  |  |       |
| ⑥ I. Caprice  | 1:16  |  |       |
| ⑦ II. Dance of the Teddy Bears                          | 1:08  |  |       |
| ⑧ III. Folk Tune  | 3:47  |  |       |

**Graham J. Lloyd**

\* World première recordings

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