



Aspirations

piano music by
Marcus Blunt

Murray McLachlan
(piano)

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1	The Life Force (Sonata No. 3) [1988, revised 1994]	6.59
	Seven Preludes [1967-79]	
2	No. 1 Passacaglia	2.20
3	No. 2 Theme	1.14
4	No. 3 Variation (Jiglet)	0.28
5	No. 4 Homage to Scarlatti	2.41
6	No. 5 Homage to Scriabin I	2.17
7	No. 6 Homage to Scriabin II	1.13
8	No. 7 “Adieu!”	0.38
9	Iona Prelude [1982]	3.05
10	Iona Caprice [1982]	0.40
	Sonata No. 2 [1977, revised 1998]	12.37
11	I Elegy	4.25
12	II Scherzo	3.21
13	III Fantasia	4.51
	Three Nocturnes	
14	Malta Nocturne [1987]	1.42
15	November Nocturne [1993]	1.42
16	Nocturne on the name FRAnk BAyFoRD [2001]	2.21
	Sonata No. 1 [1971-2, revised 1997]	11.28
17	I Fantasia (Allegro) –	3.24
18	II Variations (Adagio)	8.04
19	Prelude on a fugue theme by J. S. Bach [2000] (D major, BWV874)	1.40
	Three Fantasies	
20	No. 1 Fantasy on SCRiABin [1992, revised 2001/3]	6.19
21	No. 2 Fantasy on the name GABRiEL FAURÉ [2001]	2.52
22	No. 3 Fantasy on the name MURRAy MCLaCHLan [2006]	3.05
	Total CD duration	65.21

Murray McLachlan

“...of Life’s incessant aspiration to higher organisation, wider, deeper, intenser self-consciousness, and clearer self-understanding.”¹

“I am in the grip of the Life Force... The Life Force enchants me.”²

“...it is the artist’s business not only to project that which might be, but that which should be...”³

Twenty years after my first encounter with Shaw’s *Man and Superman* I found myself trying to express in music a similarly positive and purposeful philosophy of life, and ***The Life Force (Sonata No.3)*** was the result. Right from its dramatic opening the musical ideas are closely integrated, harmonically as well as melodically, continually developing and evolving. Dating from around the time of my marriage, *The Life Force* is dedicated to my wife Maureen, and following its première by John Lenehan in London it was taken up by (among others) Kathryn Stott, whose St David’s Hall performance was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1992, and Antony Peebles, who has taken it as far afield as Saudi Arabia and India.

My own journey in writing for the piano had begun with No.1 (1967) of ***Seven Preludes***. As a student I felt inclined to follow the example of Michael Tippett in preferring contrapuntal textures, with rich harmonies occurring only as an occasional by-product. However, by the time of No.4 (1969), whose structure closely mimics that of a Scarlatti Sonata, I was beginning to explore the possibilities inherent in chords made up of diminishing intervals. A deepening fascination with the luxuriant sound-world of Alexander Scriabin led to two further musical homages – No.5 (1978) reflecting Scriabin’s early Chopinesque style, whilst No.6 (1979) follows the mature composer’s example in its subtle cross-rhythms and use of a single basic chord. An ambivalent farewell (No.7) rounds off the set.

Iona Prelude is entirely based on one chord – a superimposition of *two* of my diminishing-interval chords that I had chanced upon while working on “Once in a Western Island ...”, a short piece for violin and orchestra. Scotland has been a source of inspiration since long before I moved there in 1990; “Once in a Western Island ...” was begun on Skye in 1980 and completed two years later, just before the holiday on the magical Isle of Iona that was to produce *Iona Prelude* and, a few months later, its brief offshoot the ***Iona Caprice***.

Five years previously, in ***Sonata No.2***, I had not thought to combine those two chords; instead they alternate with a gently rocking motion to form the basis of the dirge-like *Elegy*. These alternating chords reappear as the *Scherzo* nears its (relatively) calm conclusion, and twice more in the *Fantasia* – at its anguished final climax and then at the end of the subsequent rhythmic release of energy that precedes the closing flourish. One of the earliest performances of *Sonata No.2* was given by Ian Brown at York University in 1979, as part of a BBC concert broadcast early in 1980 on Radio 3.

¹ Shaw, G.B., *Man and Superman* ActIII, Constable, London, 1903

² Ibid., Act IV

³ Wilson, C., *Bernard Shaw: a reassessment*, Hutchinson, 1969

In contrast to that somewhat turbulent Sonata, **Malta Nocturne** recalls a memorable holiday in late 1987, when my *Caprice & Scotch Song* for solo bassoon was performed at a festival in Valletta. The opening melody came to me one warm and sunny morning as we arrived at a beautiful sandy cove on the island's west coast. November Nocturne was commissioned as a birthday gift for Rupert Carrick, a young pianist from Dumfries, and its theme is the musical letters derived from his name. He gave the first two performances in Ohio, USA. **Nocturne on the name FRANK BAYFORD**, a 60th birthday present for one of my oldest friends, employs the same procedure – a challenge to creativity that has clearly appealed to many other composers (Bach, Schumann, Shostakovich etc.)

During the 1980s my music had become more and more permeated by diminishing-interval chords, extending to most of the melodic lines as well as all the harmonies. However, **Sonata No.1** shows the process still in its early stages – although contrapuntal initiatives tend increasingly to build up into those now-familiar chordal patterns. The 13-note theme of the *Variations* (following on from the opening *Fantasia* without a break) includes all of the 12 notes within the octave – my closest encounter with the Schoenbergian dodecaphonic system! Despite this, repeated low A pedal-notes give the theme a strong sense of tonality; indeed both movements begin and end with this feeling of A being the key-note. (Incidentally, most of the *Variations* were composed within a mile of where the present recording was made!)

Prelude on a Fugue theme by J S Bach was my own small tribute to that great composer in his anniversary year of 2000. Together with *Nocturne on the name FRANK BAYFORD* it was premièred by Peter Evans at Dumfries Music Club in 2002. It is based on the theme from Bach's BWV874 in D major (from *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II*).

Fantasy on SCRIBIN was my first attempt to create piano music out of a name. The five usable letters produce an appropriately Scriabinesque sonority, and thereafter form an ever-present, ever-evolving theme. In 1995 this piece won 2nd prize in the Purcell Composition Competition.

When I came to write a piece for Kathryn Stott, I realised that the name of one of her favourite composers was richly endowed with musical letters. Coincidentally, the first three notes/letters of my **Fantasy on the name GABRIEL FAURÉ** could easily suggest the opening of that master's celebrated Pavane. And FAURÉ translates into F, A, C (= "Ut" in French), D (= "Ray" in Tonic Sol-fa), E – which, when the E is flattened, form a series of diminishing intervals. Despite these two favourable omens, there were several false starts spread over a few years before this short piece reached completion.

Fantasy on the name MURRAY MCLACHLAN was written just a few weeks before this recording was made. As with all my 'name-pieces' the sequence of letters is present throughout – albeit not always clearly discernible, and with slight chromatic adjustments at times. After its calm and quiet opening, a wide variety of moods are evoked before the music builds to a powerful conclusion

Notes © Marcus Blunt (November, 2006)

Marcus Blunt was born in Birmingham in 1947. Although around the age of 9 he had piano lessons from his father for a year or more, and made his first attempts at composition, his interest in music did not really take off until he was 14. He went on to study composition at University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, graduating in 1970. After a remarkably wide variety of abodes – in rural Warwickshire, Manchester, York, and London – and occupations – ranging from warehouse packer and photographic processor to department manager at a music publishers – he settled in Derby in 1976 as a teacher of woodwind instruments. In 1990 he and his wife Maureen decided to seek a more congenial environment for his composing work, and are now enjoying the gentler pace of life just North of the Border. In 1997 Dumfries Music Club appointed him as their Hon. Composer-in-Residence.

His output so far is mainly instrumental, for anything from piano solo to large orchestra, and has been performed – internationally (Canada, Finland, France, India, Italy, Japan, Mallorca, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sri Lanka, USA) as well as throughout Britain and on BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM – by artists such as the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, the Joachim Piano Trio, and Kathryn Stott. Competition successes include 2nd place in the Purcell Composition Prize in 1995 (*Fantasy on SCRiABin* for piano), 1st in the Surrey Sinfonietta Composers' Workshop in 2000 (*Sonatina No. 2* for clarinet & piano), and the Judges' Prize in the Oare String Orchestra's 2012 Composing Competition (*Concertino* for viola & string orchestra) (the judges included violist Martin Outram and composer John McCabe).

In July 2002 he was a featured composer at the Victoria International Arts Festival, Gozo (Malta), with seven performances and a pre-concert talk, all broadcast on local radio. In 2004 he was commissioned to write a *Fanfare* to open the Dumfries & Galloway Silver Arts Festival. In 2009 his *Two Serenades* for violin, clarinet, cello & piano were chosen for inclusion in the London Schubert Players' EU-funded *Invitation to Composers* project, with performances in Edinburgh, Paris and Namsos (Norway), as well as a CD recording released in December 2011. This recording was reissued by Nimbus in November 2012 as part of a 3-CD set entitled *A European Odyssey*.

“Murray McLachlan is a pianist with a virtuoso technique and a sure sense of line. His timing and phrasing are impeccable, and his tone-full but unforced in the powerful passages, gentle and restrained in the more lyrical- is a perpetual delight” (*BBC Music Magazine*)

Since making his professional debut in 1986 at the age of 21 under the baton of Sir Alexander Gibson, Murray McLachlan has consistently received outstanding critical acclaim. Educated at Chetham’s School of Music and Cambridge University, his mentors included Ronald Stevenson, David Hartigan, Ryszard Bakst, Peter Katin and Norma Fisher. His recording career began in 1988 and immediately attracted international attention. Recordings of contemporary music have won numerous accolades, including full star ratings, as well as ‘rosette’ and ‘key recording’ status in the Penguin Guide to CDs, and ‘Disc of the month’ and ‘Record of the month’ in ‘Music on the web’ and ‘The Herald’. McLachlan’s discography now includes over forty commercial recordings, including the complete sonatas of Beethoven, Myaskovsky and Prokofiev, the six concertos of Alexander Tchernin, the 24 Preludes and Fugues of Rodion Shchedrin, Ronald Stevenson’s ‘Passacaglia on D.S.C.H.’ the major works of Kabalevsky, Khatchaturian and the complete solo piano music of Erik Chisholm.

McLachlan’s repertoire includes over 40 concertos and 25 recital programmes. He has performed the complete Beethoven piano sonata cycle four times, as well as the complete piano music of Brahms. He has given first performances of works by many composers, including Martin Butler, Ronald Stevenson, Charles Camilleri, Michael Parkin and even Beethoven! He has appeared as soloist with most of the leading UK orchestras. His recognition has been far-reaching, bringing invitations to perform on all five continents. At the same time he continues to give numerous concerts and master classes in the UK.

McLachlan teaches at the Royal Northern College of Music and at Chetham’s School of Music in Manchester where he has been Head of Keyboard since 1997. He is the founder of the Manchester International Concerto competition for young pianists as well as the Founder/Artistic Director of the world famous Chetham’s International Summer school and festival for Pianists, Europe’s largest summer school devoted exclusively to the piano. As a teacher McLachlan continues to be very busy and in demand. Many of his students have won prizes in competitions and continued with their own successful careers as performers.

Murray McLachlan is editor of 'Piano Professional' Magazine, as well as Chair of the UK section of the European Piano Teachers' Association (EPTA UK). As well as performing and teaching, he is well known internationally for his numerous articles on Piano technique and repertoire. This includes extended columns which have appeared in 'International Piano' 'Pianist' and 'Piano' Magazines. In 2012 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Dundee for outstanding services to music and education. This follows on from a knighthood awarded in 1997 by the Order of St John of Jerusalem in recognition of his services to music in Malta.

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Aspirations

Recorded on May 29, 2006 in the Whiteley Hall, Chetham's School Of Music, Manchester, by kind permission of the Director of Music.

Recording, editing and production; Jim Pattison, Dunelm Records

Recording Assistant: Joyce Pattison

Originally released as Dunelm DRD0269

Remastering (2013): Stephen Sutton, Divine Art Records

Piano technician: Peter Lyons

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All musical works published by Modus Music

Front cover image: Sunset on Isle of Iona, June 1982 (photo by Marcus Blunt)

Back cover image: Murray McLachlan and Marcus Blunt at the recording session
(photo by Jim Pattison)

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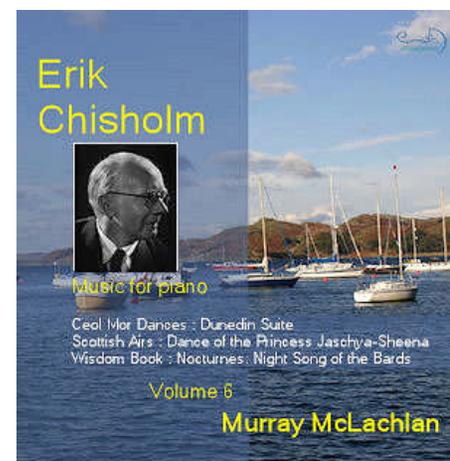
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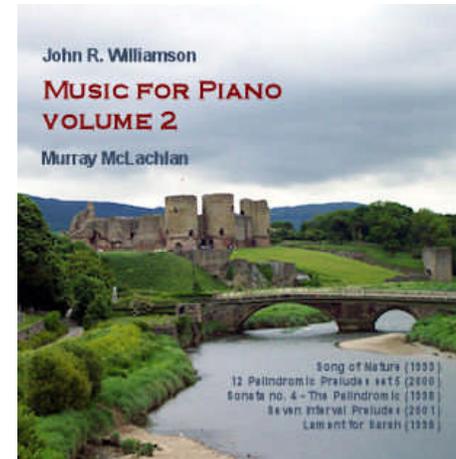
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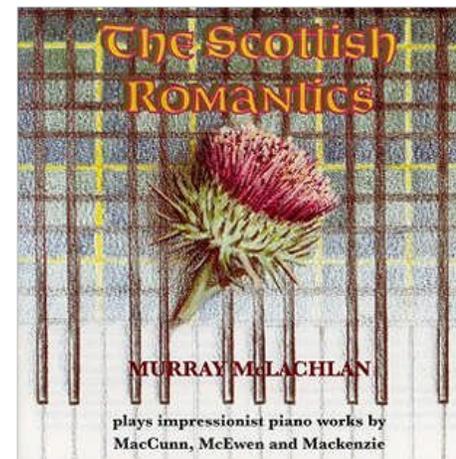
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Murray McLachlan (seated) and Marcus Blunt at the recording session