

A close-up portrait of Peter Ritzen, a man with dark, wavy hair and a goatee, wearing a black tuxedo jacket, a white shirt, and a black bow tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some bokeh light spots.

Peter Ritzen
The Art of
Improvisation

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The art of improvisation has always retained a place of some kind in Western music. Singers of baroque repertoire are accustomed to improvised ornamentation, even if prepared and rehearsed, while those realising a figured bass have their own task of improvisation over a given harmonic background. Free improvisation has a particular place still in the training of organists, whose church duties often demand the improvised accompaniment of ritual. The art itself reached a notable height in French organ-playing, where fugal improvisation on a given or invented theme has been part of the expected skill of a player. Jazz-players, of course, preserve the ability to offer spontaneous variation, the essence of their art. In one field, however, improvisation has fallen into general desuetude. This is in the modern concert hall. Here a pianist, a soloist in a classical concerto, may offer an improvised cadenza, although the practice has become increasingly rare. Still less frequently heard are public improvisations of the kind once familiar in the age of Mozart and Beethoven, when the most gifted composers would compose in public, offering newly invented music, created on the spur of the moment. More recent tendencies have led towards a more literal approach to written music. Singers may ornament their *da capo* arias, guided often by surviving written examples, harpsichordists may realise their figured basses inventively, organists may fill empty gaps in the liturgy, but concert performers, except for organists, generally no longer offer their audiences free extemporisation nor is it any longer a standard part of musical training. Nevertheless suggestions of free improvisation have crept into avant-garde repertoire in the use of the aleatoric in some modern compositions, the use of pure chance, a practice that has its dangers.

Peter Ritzen, an established pianist and composer of large-scale orchestral compositions, has had a gift for natural improvisation since his early childhood. Over decades he has confronted his audiences with his surprise improvisations as *encores*. This has become a Ritzen trademark at his numerous concerts around the world. Audiences have been surprised and delighted by his improvisations on notes suggested by the audience or completely free extemporisation. As in the present recording, these improvisations grew spontaneously, after some 'classical' recording sessions. Ritzen subsequently invented the titles.

Transfiguration is a moment of deep thoughts, in melancholic mood, peppered here and there with adventurous harmonies.

Metafora is a metaphor in meditative mode. It truly depicts scaffolding circles of sound-colours.

The *Notturmo* pays reverence to one of Ritzen's favourite piano composers in his youth, Alexander Scriabin. An *inner virtuosity* comes to a flamboyant climax, to grow calmer in a kind of 'philosophical pianism'.

China Bells is the result of the composer's profound affinity with Chinese culture, perhaps a synthesis of some rhapsodic form, or a longing for a Buddhist temple somewhere in Tibet. We hear tolling bells, moved by the wind, followed by some deep gongs.

Passion could be a song, or, better, this *is* a song in its purest form, embodied in orchestral tone-colours. Some could believe they heard the strings, with chorus (so typical for Ritzen's compositions).

The next piece has the title *For China*. This time we are confronted with a rather free compositional structure. It is a symphonic poem, a Chinese poem, but on the piano. The instrument he plays here is a

unique Steinway, built in 1913, in the piano collection of his intimate friend, the world-famous pianist-composer Jörg Demus.

Nostalgico are remembrances of the first steps on the piano as life began. *Do-re-mi-fa-sol*: but with skilful variations added in the harmonic language of Ritzen's inheritance, the French Harmony School, César Franck, beloved by Ritzen, as a result of his education. His earliest harmony teacher was a pupil of Paul Dukas (Franck's disciple) and a graduate of the Ecole

Normale de Musique de Paris Alfred Cortot, Ritzen's *alma mater*, of later years.

It has been said that Ritzen is a true disciple and interpreter of Rachmaninov. While he seldom plays this composer in public, a deep affinity can be felt here, in his *Poème-Tableaux*.

The last piece, *Arpeggi di Sonoro*, is a true etude on pianism and its profoundest sonority. This little piece is a testament to the philosophy of the pure pianist. In true respect and true art.

Nicholas Ward
Beijing, October 2012

Peter Ritzen

Peter Ritzen was born in the historic Flemish city of Ghent, in Belgium. He studied piano and chamber music at the Royal Conservatory in Ghent and continued his studies at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, with the renowned Russian pianist Tatiana Nikolayeva (1924-1993). He graduated with the Diplôme Supérieure d'Exécution for piano from the Ecole Normale de Musique de Paris 'Alfred Cortot' in 1984. As a concert pianist, Ritzen has performed throughout Europe, Asia and the U.S. He is an acclaimed interpreter of Franz Liszt and Theodor Leschetizky, and has made several CD albums for Naxos featuring the latter. His deep immersion in Chinese culture has given Ritzen, a composer of large scale works, a whole repertoire of compositions inspired by China and Chinese traditions. Peter Ritzen possesses an unparalleled gift for free improvisation on the piano. His improvisation draws strongly and unmistakably on the great traditions of the 19th century. Peter Ritzen is a recording artist for Naxos, the world's leading label of Classical Music.

Peter Ritzen is part of a long composer–pianist tradition, and his artistry is already represented in fine recordings of his own and César Franck’s *Piano Quintets* on Naxos 9.70142, as well as his *Piano Concerto ‘The Last Empress’* (8.223969) and *Chinese Requiem* (8.223980). Ritzen surprises and delights audiences with improvised encores after his performances, and here he brings his trademark gift to the recording studio. This is a fascinating series of pieces which explores the sonorities and colours of the piano, reflecting Ritzen’s deep affinity with China, with lyrical expression and rich orchestral textures, and with composers such as Scriabin, Franck and Rachmaninov.

**Peter
RITZEN**

(b. 1956)

The Art of Improvisation

Free Improvisations for Piano

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|----------|--------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Transfiguration | 6:51 |
| 2 | Metafora | 5:26 |
| 3 | Notturmo | 7:36 |
| 4 | China Bells | 5:56 |
| 5 | Passion | 6:05 |
| 6 | For China | 14:47 |
| 7 | Nostalgico | 5:22 |
| 8 | Poème-Tableaux | 6:44 |
| 9 | Arpeggi di Sonoro | 5:25 |

Peter Ritzen, Piano

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Producer: Stella Chang, Renaissance Music Society New York–Beijing • Engineer: Georg O. Luksch
Booklet notes: Nicholas Ward • Piano: Steinway C

Cover photo of Peter Ritzen by Chang Ko-Pin, courtesy of the photographer