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2021-22**

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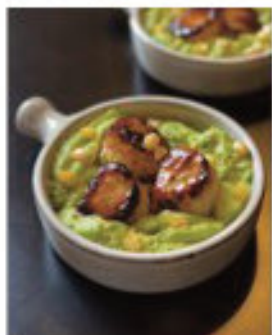
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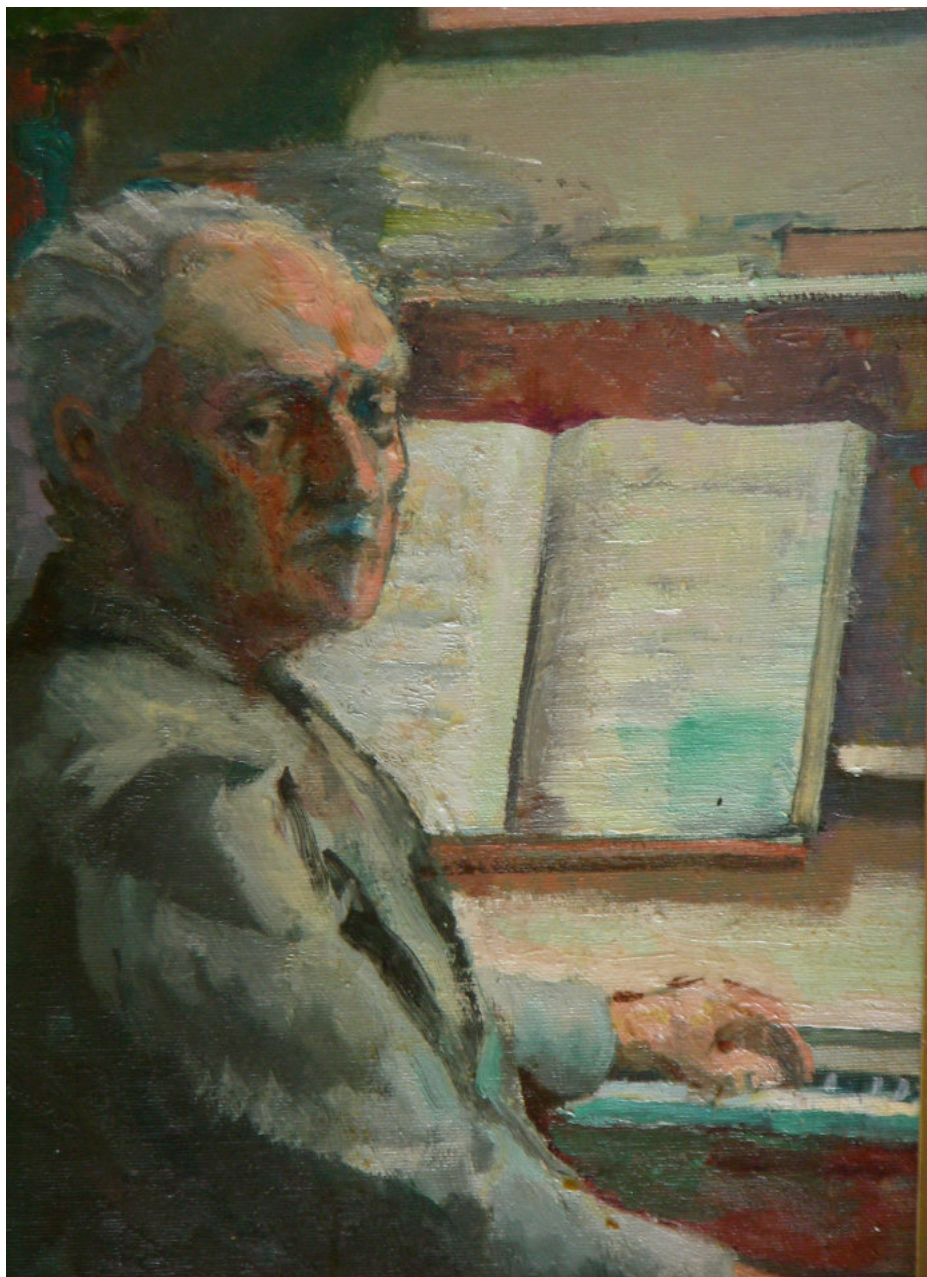
JAMES WILLSHIRE (piano)

playing

Passacaglia on DSCH

by

Ronald Stevenson



Oil painting of Ronald Stevenson
by Philip Hutton (1986)

PROGRAMME

Approx.
duration
(minutes)

Ronald Stevenson (1928-2015)

Passacaglia on DSCH, for piano Op.70 (1962)

80

PARS PRIMA

1. Sonata allegro
2. Waltz in rondo-form
3. Episode 1: presto
4. Suite (Prelude, Sarabande, Jig, Sarabande, Minuet, Jig, Gavotte, Polonaise)
5. Pibroch Urlar: Cumha na Cloinne (Lament for the Children)
6. Episode 2: Arabesque variations
7. Nocturne

PARS ALTERA

8. Reverie-Fantasy
9. Fanfare, Forebodings/Alarum, Glimpse of a war-vision
10. Variations on 'Peace, Bread and the Land' (1917)
11. Symphonic March
12. Episode 3: volante scherzoso
13. Fandango
14. Pedal Point: 'To Emergent Africa'
15. Central Episode: études
16. Variations in C minor

PARS TERTIA

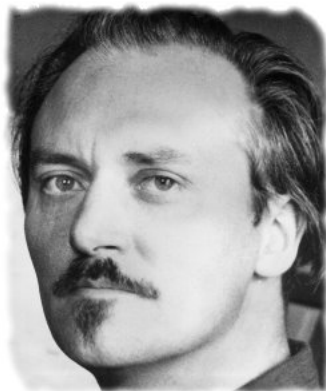
17. Adagio: Tribute to Bach
Triple Fugue over ground bass
18. Subject 1: andamento
19. Subject 2: BACH-DSCH
20. Subject 3: Dies Irae (in memoriam the six million)
21. Final Variation on a theme derived from the ground (adagissimo barocco)

Note that there will be no interval in this performance

Ronald Stevenson (1928-2015)

Passacaglia on DSCH Op.70 (1962)

Ronald Stevenson – where to begin? One of the finest of our living older pianists, Philip Fowke, who played here in 2016, said to me in the Tontine that as a pianist Stevenson's control of the keyboard was quite unique. Beyond virtuosity, his playing was noted for its grandeur and eloquence. I was lucky enough to hear him in the eighties, in his prime.



As a composer he tackled everything except opera and film music. There is a choral symphony, a violin and a cello concerto, chamber and choral works, a solo violin suite, many songs and an immense volume of piano music, miniatures and monsters, that pianists are now picking through.

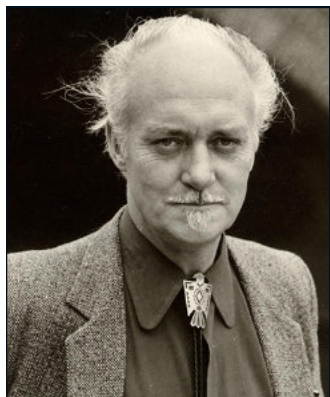
The Passacaglia is the big ambitious work that has made a legend of itself, and pianists who have conquered this Everest, John Ogden, Raymond Clarke, Richard Black, Mark Gasser, James Willshire, and recently, and with much online publicity, Igor Levit, have recorded the work on CD, YouTube or streaming.

Passacaglia
on
D S C H

The image shows a page of a musical score for the piece 'Passacaglia on DSCH Op. 70' by Ronald Stevenson. The tempo is marked 'Allegro moderato'. The score is for piano, with a 'Piano' instruction and a 'ff' (fortissimo) dynamic marking. The music is written for both hands on a grand staff. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. The second system continues the piece, featuring more complex harmonic structures and dynamics like 'f' (forte) and 'ff'. The score is attributed to 'RONALD STEVENSON (opus 70)'.

Stevenson the searcher found many mentors, and a way of overriding cultural and historical chasms that made (to elide the list of names that crowded his mind) J S Bach and Dmitri SHostakovich into familiars. Of the many coded references, the notes D-S-C-H (in Anglophone usage D, E flat, C, B natural) is a constant repetition, the grid that fixes our attention throughout this long piece. Late on, another code arises, the B flat, A, C, B natural that German usage gives as B-A-C-H. Audible signals are scattered throughout. The triple fugue section which combines the names of Bach and Shostakovich is heralded by the high semitone twiddle that signals Bach's Organ Toccata, and launches that wrestling of German and Russian motifs.

The Passacaglia expresses the internationalism of his own life and travels. Born in Blackburn, Lancashire, trained in Manchester's Royal Northern College of Music, living since 1956 in the house in Main Street, West Linton (where his

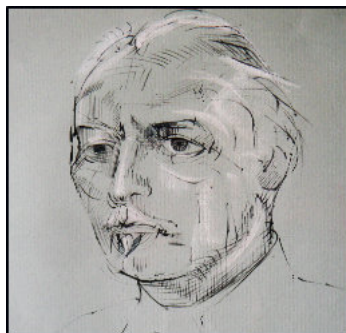


widow Marjorie remains) his journey took him to Italy, South Africa, Germany ,the USSR, China, Australia, Canada, the USA and, most fondly, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries. These were travels of friendship and exchange, research, performance and intensive listening. What he declined was the narrow suitcase-and-hotel life of the pure concert pianist. Family life, the well-being of his pupils, friends, his children at Peebles High School and beyond, were the bedrock he returned to.

Woven into the seamless fabric early on are a suite of dances culminating in a Polonaise (chivalric thundering of hooves) and a Pibroch (Lament for the Children, whose semitones uncannily suggest the great pipes) and later, unmistakably (for the pianist rises from his seat to beat the strings) a pedal-point "To Emergent Africa".

None of this was recycled music-tourism clichés. RS heard for himself the feats of rhythm in a display of Bantu drumming while in South Africa in the early sixties, teaching at Cape Town University. It was here that the DSCH motif grew into a seven bar theme that hungered for the completing eighth bar, so bringing round the next variation, variations that "grew like Topsy".

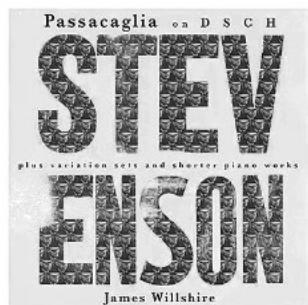
Stevenson was master of all the regular forms, for him sonata form or Schönbergian serialism were “colours in the palette” and are themselves digested within the Passacaglia. But he had a definite view on the inclusive additive ethic of variation writing, distinct from the combative dialectic of classical sonata form. “Winner-takes-all” may be wonderfully exhilarating in Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, but the modernist need to accommodate the pain and complexity of the twentieth century required something else. To build that something else was and is the huge task of a major artist. That is why the Passacaglia is the direct heir of Bach’s Goldberg Variations and Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations. At this point, in his talk or his music-making, Ronald would bring in the name Busoni, and that Italian master’s massive Fantasia Contrapuntistico of 1910. A day-long performance of these four terminal works would be some Day of Judgement.



*Drawing of Ronald Stevenson
by Philip Hutton (1998)*

Raymond Clarke’s 1994 essay describes the culmination notes the “progressive diminution of rhythmic values, showing a kinship with the ‘Arietta’ from Beethoven’s Sonata opus 111.... At one point Stevenson specifies a passage to be played ‘*con un senso di spazio quasi Gagarinesco*’ (Yuri Gagarin’s space orbit was news in 1961)....as the piece approaches its end a huge culmination appears to loom ahead...[but instead] Stevenson offers us a non-committal coda which is convincing because of its open-endedness. Even the last bars refuse to confirm whether the tonality is major or minor...the enigmatic, unharmonised final low D leaves this for the listener to decide.”

Programme note by Philip Hutton



ON SALE IN THE FOYER

James Willshire: Ronald Stevenson’s Passacaglia

“a major achievement... Very strongly recommended” (*International Record Review*)

“It’s hard to imagine this music better played” (*BBC Music Magazine*)

“James Willshire’s pianism often evokes Stevenson’s own” (*Gramophone*)

Below is the text of Ronald Stevenson's address to Dmitri Shostakovich during the presentation of the score of Passacaglia on DSCH to the Soviet composer, at the George Hotel, George Street Edinburgh, during the 1962 Edinburgh Festival.



*Ronald Stevenson with
Dmitri Shostakovich, 1962*

My dear Dmitri Dmitrievich

As a Scottish composer and admirer of Soviet achievements - among which your own work ranks high - I wish to present to you, on the occasion of your festive visit to Edinburgh, my composition *Passacaglia on DSCH*, for piano solo, which I dedicate to you. I worked for a year and a quarter on the *Passacaglia*, which takes one hour and a quarter to perform. It consists of hundreds of variations on the musical motif made from your initials, DSCH.

The work is written in an international (though not cosmopolitan) spirit and includes, within the larger framework, dances from many countries. It also contains a long drum-like passage marked 'to emergent Africa'. Another section is based on speech-intonation associated with the classical slogan of 1917: 'Peace, Bread and the Land'.

Yet another passage was inspired by the idea of the Soviet hammer beating the Nazi swastika into a sickle. The idea of the hammer is, of course, inherent in the mechanism of the piano; and though music is (mercifully) powerless to paint a swastika, it can certainly suggest the mechanistic devilry and brutality of which the crooked cross is but the symbol. As contrast to that passage, but linked with it, is another in which I have combined the motif DSCH with the time-honoured motif BACH, as a symbol that Russian and German and the whole of mankind can and will live as brothers in harmony and peace.

The work contains a triple fugue, with the ground bass ever present. The third theme of the triple fugue is the *Dies Irae*, which I have expressly marked: in memoriam the six million Jews. The whole work is consummated in a final series of variations marked *adagissimo*. In one passage of this section I have used the expression '*con un senso di spazio quasi gagarinesco*' (as though with Gagarin's perception of space).

Since 1914 the terrain of Western music has been a no-man's land. Melody's rainbow has been dispersed in fragments. I want you to know that some young Western composers look to you with gratitude and hope because you have preserved the lineage of the great masters.

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Friday 4th March 2022, 8:00pm

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Sunday 27th March 2022, 8:00pm

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JAMES WILLSHIRE

Heralded for performances of “spectacular musicianship and technical brilliance” (The Scotsman), “evangelising urgency” (International Record Review) and “freshness and lucidity” (The Herald Scotland), James Willshire has been praised for the virtuosity and intelligence of his pianism and has developed a reputation for his interpretations of British



and French music. He has appeared as soloist at the Royal Festival Hall, Barbican, Bridgewater Hall, St John’s Smith Square, Purcell Room, Palau de la Musica (Petit Palau), Glasgow City Halls, Queens Hall Edinburgh, Perth Concert Hall, St George’s Bristol, Caird Hall and the Fairfield Halls.

A specialist in the music of Debussy, in 2018 James performed the complete cycle of the composer’s solo piano music. These concerts, described by The Herald Scotland as “an unmissable opportunity to hear these demanding pieces live”, included complete cycles in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and individual concerts in the Leeds International Concert Season and at Chetham’s School of Music. James’s interest in Debussy extends beyond performing and he has given talks on Debussy and his piano music, with a special focus on Debussy’s unique approach to sound.

James is a committed advocate of contemporary music, and has given over 25 world premiere performances of works by Ronald Stevenson, John McLeod, Rory Boyle, Nicola LeFanu, Robin Holloway, Errollyn Wallen, Thomas Simaku, Jay Capperault, Jia Chai, Lynne Plowman, David Lancaster, Michael Parkin, Ailís Ní Ríain and David Power. His performance of ‘Endlings’ by Jay Capperault with the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland received a five star review from The Herald and was broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland. In 2015 James premiered the revised version of John McLeod’s Piano Concerto, also with NYOS, in a performance that was given a five star review from the Scotsman.

Since 2010 James has recorded with Delphian Records, with his most recent disc a 2019 recording of the chamber music by Judith Weir with the Hebrides Ensemble. His double-disc recording of Ronald Stevenson was described as “a major achievement” and awarded an IRR Outstanding by International Record Review, and was reviewed by BBC Music Magazine, Gramophone, and Classical Music magazine. Gramophone pronounced as “uncompromising” and “all-encompassing” his recording with Fraser Langton of music for Clarinet and Piano by Rory Boyle, and his recording of the piano music by David Jennings was chosen as one of MusicWeb International’s Recordings of the Year 2013. Future recordings include the complete solo piano music by Cecil Coles, in April 2020, and a recording of the 10 New Debussys project: 10 new works inspired by the piano music of Debussy.

James is a keen educator with an active diary of children’s concert engagements. With the Willshire Piano Duo, incorporating his wife Philippa Harrison and himself, he has developed a series of interactive concert events that the Duo have taken to schools around the UK. He has given masterclasses at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Chetham’s School of Music, and York, St Andrew’s and Aberdeen Universities, and in October 2019 will be a member of the jury for the 6th European Conservatoires Music Competition. Chamber music also forms a key part of James’ music making, with partnerships as part of the Willshire Piano Duo, Trio Dramatis, the Hebrides Ensemble, with singers Ailish Tynan and Njabulo Madlala, and instrumentalists Fraser Langton, Rosalind Ventris and Matthew Featherstone.

In 2018 James curated and managed the Debussy Festival at St Cecilia’s, an eight concert festival devoted to the chamber, vocal and piano music of Debussy held at St Cecilia’s Hall in Edinburgh. Further festival appearances include performances given by James at the 2015 The Piano Festival at Glasgow Royal Concert Halls, the Lichfield, Cheltenham and Winchester Festivals, the Hebden Bridge Piano Festival, the Kilkenny Arts Festival, the Cantilena Festival, the Edinburgh Fringe, the Roman River Festival, ‘Il Festival di Londra’, the Victoria International Arts Festival and the Paxos International Festival.

James maintains a strong interest in music education and is on the Keyboard Department faculty at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.

MUSIC *in* Peebles

NEXT CONCERT

Tuesday 16th November at 7.30pm in the Eastgate Theatre

GAIA Duo



Programme

Duncan Strachan

Elizabeth Maconchy

Arcangelo Corelli

Sally Beamish

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird *

Theme and Variations

Sonata for Violin and Cello Op.5 No.9

Stone, Salt and Sky *

* Commissioned for GAIA by Chamber Music Scotland

Please note changes from programme announced in season brochure.

GAIA are an award winning duo, comprising two of Scotland's most distinguished young chamber musicians, **Katrina Lee** (violin) and **Alice Allen** (cello), familiar to the Peebles audience as members of the Brodick Quartet.

Their fascinating programme showcases their commitment to supporting contemporary, especially female, composers, whilst also honouring the great legacy of string music from the baroque masters, in this case Corelli. Duncan Strachan, composer of the opening work, is best known as cellist in the Maxwell Quartet.

Alongside two new commissions, they will also play a work written in 1951 by Irish-English composer Elizabeth Maconchy, described as 'one of the most substantial composers these islands have yet produced'.

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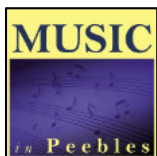
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In its 75th season, Music in Peebles faces unprecedented uncertainty.



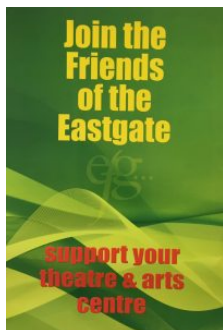
We remain committed to presenting high-quality live concerts. However, until audiences return to pre-pandemic levels, there is no doubt that our ability to maintain the number and quality of concerts will be under pressure.

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MUSIC *in* Peebles

Patron: Gina McCormack

2021-2022 Season

Sunday 5 September 2021 at 7.30pm

CLARE HAMMOND

Tuesday 5 October 2021 at 7.30pm

CARMENCO

Tuesday 2 November 2021 at 7.30pm

JAMES WILLSHIRE

Tuesday 16 November 2021 at 7.30pm

GAIA

Monday 13 December 2021 at 7.30pm

KWON-LIM DUO

Sunday 9 January 2022 at 2.30pm

PATRON'S CONCERT

Sunday 6 February 2022 at 2.30pm

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