

NOTES FROM A SMALL ISLAND

MARK BEBBINGTON
PIANO

A trio of lunchtime concerts
showcasing major works for
piano by British composers of
the 20th and 21st centuries,
accompanied by some
well-travelled repertoire



ST JOHN'S SMITH SQUARE

FRIDAY 4th JUNE 2021

1pm

ROBERT MATTHEW-WALKER:

Adagio in B minor: The Evening of Memory (2021) – Premiere

Fantasy-Sonata: Hamlet (Piano Sonata No 3) Opus 34 (1980)

WILLIAM ALWYN:

Sonata alla toccata

JOHN IRELAND:

Sarnia: An Island Sequence

There will be no interval

* * * * *

ROBERT MATTHEW-WALKER (b. 1939)

'The Evening of Memory' – Adagio in B minor for solo piano

Op. 200 (2021)

***** *World premiere performance* *****

"In the summer of 1960, as a serving soldier in the British Army, I was one of a squad driven to Shepperton Studios to take part in a feature film, *Tunes of Glory*, starring Alec Guinness and John Mills. During a break in filming, I got into conversation with a Hollywood actor, who was appearing in another film on a nearby set.

The actor was surprised that we were genuine soldiers, and spoke of one of his fellow-countrymen, General Douglas MacArthur, whose 80th birthday had occurred some months earlier. He told us with such passion about the General that any future reference to MacArthur always intrigued me. In 1964, MacArthur visited West Point military academy to lecture the cadets, during which he spoke of hopes for peace in his 'evening of memory', a

phrase so typical of his outlook.

I have never forgotten his words, and on writing this solo piano piece – music almost wholly contemplative in character – I used General MacArthur's phrase. My work, *The Evening of Memory*, is not at all militaristic: it has three ideas, each with the interval of a fourth. Whilst inherently different, near the close these intervallic emotional features unite, as if 'recollected in tranquillity.'

© Robert Matthew-Walker 2021

**Fantasy-Sonata: Hamlet (Piano Sonata No 3)
Op. 34 (1980)**

"My *Fantasy-Sonata: Hamlet* was commissioned by the Australian pianist Rhondda Gillespie for her recital at the 1980 Buxton Festival, which that year had a Shakespearean theme. The work is neither programmatic nor a character portrait – although I trust the emotional content is clear – and is in one continuous movement. In character the sonata is, in so far as music can be, a metaphysical work wherein events occur causing changes of a quite distinctive nature, unified by a constant pulse and its multiples and by a linking tonal thread, ultimately centred upon F minor.

During the sonata's journey the work proceeds through five sections, prefaced by a slow introduction. A fiery *Allegro* is followed by a quiet *Scherzando* section full of incessant irregular triplets, before a dramatic middle section, obsessive and wild, melts into an extended nocturne, the sonata's first moment of calm, leading to an aleatoric line over steady tolling. The sonata, dedicated to Hans Keller, ends with the faintest hint of an unanswered question."

© Robert Matthew-Walker 2021

WILLIAM ALWYN (1905–1985)

Sonata alla Toccata

1. Maestoso – Allegro ritmico e jubilante
2. Andante con moto e semplice
3. Molto vivace

The three-movement *Sonata alla Toccata* was composed in London between February 1945 and June 1946. The title page of the original manuscript bears the heading 'Sonata' with the words 'alla Toccata' having clearly been added later. Although composed during a period when Alwyn was experimenting with neo-classicism, the work is in essence romantic.

The first movement begins majestically in C major in which the main idea of the whole work is stated. This then leads headlong into the toccata-style *Allegro*, making much use of cross-rhythms and accented notes, which is maintained throughout the movement. By contrast the second movement, an *Andante* in F major, is very simple in nature with bell-like repeated Fs appearing throughout, leading to a mysterious F minor conclusion. The final movement, marked *Molto vivace*, begins with a lively triplet idea that is maintained throughout much of the movement, incorporating once again those repeated Fs from the *Andante* and the use of cross-rhythms featured in the first movement. A broader theme provides the second subject, which develops more and more brilliantly before culminating in an extended restatement of the works opening *Maestoso* theme but, this time in the key of A flat major, leading to a *Presto furioso* that brings the work to a dramatic conclusion.

Sonata alla Toccata received its premiere in a BBC Home Service broadcast by Joan Davis on 30 July 1947. It was later championed by the English pianist and musicologist Denis Matthews (1919-1988).

© Andrew Knowles

JOHN IRELAND (1879–1962)

Sarnia: An Island Sequence (1940–41)

- 1 *Le Catioroc*
- 2 *In a May Morning*
- 3 *Song of the Springtides*

John Ireland's most important scores appeared predominantly during the interwar years, when Britain was for all intents and purposes playing catch-up with the latest continental trends. In Ireland's case, his thorough musical training based on Germanic principles became fused with a French predilection for impressionistic washes of colour and a Russian neo-classical delight in re-appropriating the music of yesteryear. His reputation became based largely upon the profound intimacy of chamber of music, the pictorial, as exemplified by his first two important orchestral works – *The Forgotten Rite* (1917) and the tone-poem *Mai-Dun* (1921) – and exquisite miniatures, most notably his songs and piano music. *Sarnia* takes its title from the Roman name for Guernsey, second largest of the Channel Islands after Jersey. In a rare moment of explanation, Ireland revealed that whatever the music's wistful qualities or hints of perceived regret "it is rather the unalloyed beauty to which the music is a reaction." *Le Catioroc* refers to a striking Neolithic monument that sits on a coastal headland, while *In a May Morning* and *Song of the Springtides* are poignant reminders of the island before Ireland's evacuation in 1940 in the wake of Nazi occupation.

© Julian Haylock

* * * * *

MARK BEBBINGTON, PIANO

The critical plaudits which have greeted Mark Bebbington's performances and recordings have singled him out as a British pianist of the rarest refinement and maturity ("Bebbington is without doubt one of Britain's finest pianists." wrote Michel Fleury recently in *Classica*).

Internationally recognised as a champion of British music, in particular, Mark has recorded extensively for the Somm label to critical acclaim, with no fewer than nine of his recent CDs awarded 5***** by BBC Music Magazine. Recent CDs include three British Piano Concertos with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, an all-Gershwin album with Leon Botstein and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra ('Recording of the Month' from MusicWeb International). A CD of Concertos by Grieg (including the premiere of his sketches for a Second Piano Concerto, edited by Robert Matthew-Walker) and Delius with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Jan Latham-Koenig was released in April 2018 and became 'CD of the Week' in *The Times* and *Mail on Sunday*. Most recently, Mark has received glowing reviews for his new recordings on Resonus Classics of works by Francis Poulenc with conductor Jan Latham-Koenig and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, featuring Poulenc's

Piano Concerto, the rarely-recorded piano version of the *Concert champêtre*, the Trio for Piano, Oboe & Bassoon, and the Sonata for Oboe & Piano.*

Mark's premiere recordings include an Arnold Bax's Piano Concertino coupled with John Ireland's Piano Concerto and *Legend*, and premieres of Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia* and William Mathias's first two Piano Concertos (Ulster Orchestra). In addition to concerto recordings, Mark completed his John Ireland and Frank Bridge solo piano series and released a CD of piano works by William Alwyn in 2017. As well as his BBC Music Magazine success, he has won Gramophone Magazine's 'Editor's Choice' International Record Review's 'Outstanding' accolade and many others. International Piano Magazine wrote of him, "Bebbington's revivals of British piano music are second to none; he could well be dubbed the concert pianists' Richard Hickox. Bebbington has almost single-handedly demonstrated that 20th-century British piano scores have an exciting role to play in the concert hall and recording studio".

Over recent seasons Mark has toured throughout Central and Northern Europe and in the United States (both as recitalist and as soloist with some of the world's leading orchestras), as well as the Far East and North Africa. In 2017 he made his Carnegie Hall debut with Leon Botstein and the American Symphony Orchestra and also appeared with the Buffalo Symphony Orchestra and on tour with the Israel Camerata and Czech National Orchestra. Within the UK, he has appeared in concertos with the London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic and Philharmonia Orchestras, Flanders Symphony Orchestra, the London Mozart Players, Orchestra of the Swan and BBC Concert Orchestra. He has featured both as soloist and recitalist on BBC Television and Radio and also on major European Television and Radio networks.

Mark studied at the Royal College of Music where he was a recipient of numerous international awards and prizes, including a Leverhulme Scholarship, a Winston Churchill Fellowship and the Ivan Sutton Recording Prize – the latter awarded to the one outstanding graduate of the combined London Music Colleges. He later studied in Italy with the legendary Aldo Ciccolini.

Mark's programming demonstrates a commitment to the music of our time and he regularly includes contemporary composers as diverse as Takemitsu, Julian Anderson, John McCabe, David Matthews, Pierre Boulez and Elliot Carter in his recital series.

www.markbebbington.co.uk

* Mark Bebbington and his fellow soloists can be heard performing the **Poulenc pieces for piano and woodwind** on **24th June 2021** in St Giles-without-Cripplegate as part of **Summer Music in City Churches**. He will also be playing **Finzi's Eclogue** with the London Mozart Players in the festival's opening concert on **17th June**. www.SummerMusicCityChurches.com

Concert presented by Kestrel Music www.kestrelmusic.co.uk

St John's Smith Square Charitable Trust

Registered Charity no. 1045390. Registered in England – company no. 3028678