



Crown Terraces, New Zealand



CHAMPS HILL
RECORDS

THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER BENJAMIN BAKER

BEETHOVEN
ERNST
KREISLER
STRAUSS

Robert Thompson *piano*



*'Tis the last rose of summer,
Left blooming alone;
All her lovely companions
Are faded and gone;
No flower of her kindred,
No rosebud is nigh,
To reflect back her blushes,
Or give sigh for sigh.*

*I'll not leave thee, thou lone one!
To pine on the stem;
Since the lovely are sleeping,
Go, sleep thou with them.
Thus kindly I scatter,
Thy leaves o'er the bed,
Where thy mates of the garden
Lie scentless and dead.
So soon may I follow,
When friendships decay,
And from Love's shining circle
The gems drop away.
When true hearts lie withered,
And fond ones are flown,
Oh! who would inhabit
This bleak world alone?*

Thomas Moore (1779–1852)

FOREWORD

It is a great pleasure to present my debut album, recorded with Champs Hill Records. The works included are all linked by the themes of youth, love and loss.

Strauss wrote his famous Violin Sonata in his early twenties, inspired by a summer in the Italian countryside, and by falling in love with Pauline de Ahna in the same year, who was later to become his wife. Beethoven was just starting to realise the horror of losing his hearing by the time he wrote his Violin Sonata No.2 in his late twenties. Kreisler's *Alt-Wiener Tanzweisen (Old Viennese Dances)* are salon pieces which describe aspects of love including joy, sorrow and eternal love, the last of which he dedicated to his wife. The hauntingly beautiful poem by Thomas Moore upon which Ernst based his *The Last Rose of Summer* variations captures the intensity of love, of loss and of the youthful questioning of the future. The title of the Irish air the poem is set to is *The Young Man's Dream*, originally *Aislean an Oigfear*.

My heartfelt thanks to producer Matthew Bennett and sound engineer Dave Rowell for their unfaltering energy and dedication which made this project so enjoyable, and for always being such a friendly source of inspiration and guidance. Also, I'm very grateful to NZ photographer Simon Darby for capturing the last rays of summer sunshine in his striking photograph from my beautiful homeland of New Zealand.

I have been overwhelmed by the incredible generosity of David and Mary Bowerman, and their outstanding team at Champs Hill Records, whom I feel I can never thank enough. I also especially want to thank Alexander Van Ingen, Martin Denny and the Windsor Festival, Alasdair Tait and the whole YCAT team, Natasha Boyarsky, and Felix Andrievsky for all they have done in making this recording adventure possible.

Benjamin Baker

TRACK LISTING

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
SONATA NO.2 IN A MAJOR FOR VIOLIN & PIANO OP.12 NO.2

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Allegro vivace | 06'22 |
| 2 | Andante piu tosto Allegretto | 05'54 |
| 3 | Allegro piacevole | 04'53 |

HEINRICH WILHELM ERNST (1812–1865)
VARIATIONS ON THE IRISH AIR:
"THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER", ÉTUDE NO.6

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| 4 | | 10'35 |
|---|--|-------|

FRITZ KREISLER (1875–1962)
THREE OLD VIENNESE DANCES

- | | | |
|---|----------------|-------|
| 5 | Liebesfreud | 03'12 |
| 6 | Liebesleid | 03'47 |
| 7 | Schön Rosmarin | 02'09 |

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864–1949)
SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO IN E FLAT OP.18

- | | | |
|----|---|-------|
| 8 | <i>i</i> Allegro, ma non troppo | 11'25 |
| 9 | <i>ii</i> "Improvisation" Andante cantabile | 08'35 |
| 10 | <i>iii</i> Andante-Allegro | 09'01 |

Total playing time: 65'56

Produced and edited by Matthew Bennett

Engineered by Dave Rowell

Recorded on 23rd – 25th June 2014 in the Music Room, Champs Hill, West Sussex, UK

Back of booklet image "The last rays of summer sunshine on the Crown Terraces, Wakatipu Basin, NZ" by Simon Darby – Wanaka Photography

Executive Producer for Champs Hill Records: Alexander Van Ingen

Label Manager for Champs Hill Records: John Dickinson

[1-3] **SONATA NO.2 IN A MAJOR FOR VIOLIN & PIANO OP.12 NO.2**
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

The high spirits and youthful vigour of Beethoven’s second sonata for piano and violin – note the order of instruments – signal an irresistible work filled with charm. But its appealing warmth is in some ways deceptive, a genial front for a fleet of groundbreaking and unmistakably Beethovenian dramas.

Despite its outward delights to the modern ear, for listeners of Beethoven’s day its content could be positively startling. One critic wrote that the Op.12 sonatas were “heavily laden with unusual difficulties” and that after exploring them he felt as if he had “emerged tired and worn out after wandering through an alluring, thick forest”.

The piece dates from 1797–8 and is dedicated to the composer Antonio Salieri, who was one of Beethoven’s teachers in Vienna (along with first Haydn, then Albrechtsberger). Beethoven studied with him on and off up to about 1802, mainly for advice about writing for the voice, and maintained a friendly relationship with him thereafter. Salieri’s reputation has never quite recovered from the damage done to it by the spurious legend that he might have poisoned Mozart; in fact, the imperial *kapellmeister* was much loved and respected, especially by his substantial roster of pupils, who also included Mozart’s son Franz Xavier Mozart, Hummel, Schubert, Meyerbeer and the youthful prodigy Franz Liszt.

Although the opening suggests that this sonata – like many of Mozart’s, and earlier examples in the genre – was to be for piano with violin “obligato”, Beethoven treats the two instruments as equal partners throughout. The pair frequently switch material, swap roles and pursue one another through energetic figurations as if playing musical games of chase.

The first movement is constructed – typically for Beethoven – out of short, terse motifs rather than extended melody; the endless potential of a motif consisting of just two notes a semitone apart powers most of the movement. Its genial atmosphere

and effervescent energy is often punctuated by startling twists of harmony and surprising gestures, whether a sudden pause or an unexpected phrase in soft unison, and the movement closes with a playful coda batting the semitone back and forth around different registers.

The *Andante*, in A minor, inhabits a more reflective and introverted sphere. It opens with a songlike theme, the first paragraphs of which are expounded by piano alone, then restated by both instruments. Major-key episodes soften and enhance the sense of longing that hovers in the atmosphere.

The sonata ends with a graceful *rondo* that returns to the ingratiating mood of the first movement, but again presents a parade of typically Beethovenian adventures: restless modulations, off-beat accentuations, flashes of technical brilliance and several brief yet heartfelt explosions of melody.

[4] **VARIATIONS ON THE IRISH AIR, “THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER”, ÉTUDE NO.6**
HEINRICH WILHELM ERNST (1812–1865)

Born in Brno (now in the Czech Republic), Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst enjoyed a substantial career over about 18 years as one of Europe’s leading violinists. The poet Heinrich Heine called him “perhaps the greatest violinist of our time,” while the great Joseph Joachim, Brahms’s close friend and the dedicatee of his violin concerto, declared that Ernst “became my ideal of a performer, even surpassing in many respects the ideal I had imagined for myself”. His lasting influence includes such impressive credentials as having encouraged Schumann to become a musician, and spreading the repute of Beethoven’s late string quartets, especially in the UK.

Although he left a fair number of compositions for his instrument, including a well-known Violin Concerto in F sharp minor that was played by many leading virtuosos in the early 20th century, Ernst’s presence in the violin repertoire today continues chiefly via his set of five variations for solo violin on the Irish song *The Last Rose of Summer*.

The last of his *Six Polyphonic Studies* for violin – extraordinarily difficult pieces sometimes compared to, or said to exceed in their demands, the Paganini Caprices – this piece contains much to challenge the player’s grasp of sophisticated technical effects. The simple, haunting folk melody becomes the base for a kaleidoscope of transformations: among the techniques involved are triple-stopping, artificial harmonics and ricochet *arpeggio* bowings, and in the fourth variation, the theme appears in left-hand *pizzicato*, accompanied by bowed *arpeggios*.

THREE OLD VIENNESE DANCES

FRIEDRICH “FRITZ” KREISLER (1875–1962)

[5] **Liebesfreud**

[6] **Liebesleid**

[7] **Schön Rosmarin**

Fritz Kreisler, regarded by many music-lovers and musicians alike as one of the greatest violinists the world has known, was born in Vienna during the heyday of the city’s dynasty of waltz kings, the Strauss family. The spirit of old Vienna lives and breathes in his own waltzes for violin and piano, with their subtle, pliable rhythms, their flirtatious charm and their unending flow of melodic inspiration. Strange to think that Kreisler’s composition professor in his home city was not Johann Strauss II, but Anton Bruckner.

Kreisler’s early career progressed to huge acclaim, taking him on much-lauded tours across Europe and the US; in the UK he was awarded the Philharmonic Society’s gold medal in 1904 and six years later gave the world premiere of Elgar’s Violin Concerto.

Critics nevertheless expressed disapproval upon finding him programming his own compositions in his recitals. To get around this, he began to pass off many of his pieces as works by others, telling the press that he had discovered a cache of manuscripts in the possession of monks at one of the oldest monasteries in Europe... Eventually he came clean about it in 1910: a critic in Berlin objected to him

including one of his pieces beside two fine waltzes supposedly by Lanner, until Kreisler revealed that the latter – *Liebesfreud* and *Liebesleid* – were in fact also his own. Once published, under his name, his solo pieces became enormously successful. They remain favourite encores in the repertoire of countless recitalists today.

Liebesfreud (*Love’s Joy*) is an exultant dance featuring lively double-stopping and lilting melody. *Liebesleid* (*Love’s Sorrow*), its counterpart, is wistful and tender, with the piano providing hints of countermelodies. *Schön Rosmarin*, their companion piece, is more playful in spirit and features some beautifully delicate *rubati*. In 1915 it was choreographed by the great Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova as a solo called *The Dragonfly*.

SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO IN E-FLAT, OP.18

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864–1949)

[8] *i* Allegro, ma non troppo

[9] *ii* “Improvisation”, Andante cantabile

[10] *iii* Andante-Allegro

Richard Strauss’s passion for the female voice was a vital driving force in his creative life; it was probably no coincidence that his operas contain some of the 20th century’s finest operatic roles for sopranos and mezzo-sopranos. If he had a strong affinity for the violin as well, perhaps that is only natural.

At the time he wrote his only violin sonata, Strauss was 24 years old, had become third conductor of the Munich Court Opera and had just met a strikingly gifted if somewhat cantankerous soprano named Pauline de Ahna. Seven years later, he married her. In the sonata, he makes the most of the violin’s expressive closeness to the sound of operatic singing; and it overflows, too, with the distinctive musical personality that soon blossomed in his tone poems, including *Ein Heldenleben* and *Don Juan*.

The sonata shows its youthful composer at something of a crossroads in terms of musical direction – and it says much for his cleverness as well as his talent that he

could assimilate several different strands of influence, draw out the best in each and weave them into a language entirely his own. Classicism is never far away: the sonata's meaty writing, strong outlines and defined structures connect young Strauss strongly to the influence of Brahms and, behind him, Beethoven and Mozart. Nevertheless, its outpouring of high spirits is equally close to the dramatic sound-pictures of high romanticism, an idiom that derives from Liszt and Wagner, and likewise its overt virtuosity, delivered with considerable relish. Strauss played both instruments himself and here presents his performers with challenges that would not disgrace a full-blown concerto, though perhaps the piano receives the lion's share of technical travails.

The *Allegro ma non troppo's* heroic opening generates hot-blooded drama at once, before giving way to a soaring second subject with a typically Straussian wide wingspan. The sonata-form movement bursts its boundaries during its development, travelling far afield in terms of tonality and sending the thematic material through a succession of inspired transformations.

The *Andante cantabile* was the last movement that Strauss completed. Entitled "Improvisation", it is essentially an aria without words, offering an open-hearted, straightforward expressiveness that makes it a soulmate to the composer's many fabulous solo songs. Its central section enters a turbulent world, again Lieder-like, glancing in the direction of Schubert's *Erkönig*. Over time this movement has acquired an independent existence and remains popular as a recital encore.

The finale opens with an introduction for piano alone that carries music and listeners to darker places still; but this mood is soon dispelled by headlong violin flourishes that usher in a main theme full of Don Juan-like glamour. A sensual second subject follows, over ripples of ecstasy in the piano; the instruments then exchange material and set off with all flags flying through a roller-coaster of dashing musical adventure almost worthy of Don Juan himself.

Jessica Duchon

Born in New Zealand in 1990, Benjamin Baker first picked up a violin at the age of three. Four years later he had notched up seven television appearances in New Zealand and played with the celebrated violinist Nigel Kennedy, who recommended he apply to The Yehudi Menuhin School in London. Benjamin was given a scholarship, and in 1998 moved with his family from Wellington to London. He went on to complete his studies at the Royal College of Music with Natasha Boyarsky and Felix Andrievsky, graduating in 2014 with a Masters and was



awarded the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Rose Bowl. He was selected for representation by Young Classical Artists Trust (YCAT) in 2013.

During his studies Benjamin won numerous prizes and awards including 1st Prize and the Audience Prize in the 2013 Windsor Festival International String Competition, 1st Prize in the 2012 Royal Over-Seas League Competition, 2nd Prize at the 2011 Postacchini International Violin Competition in Italy and the 2013 Development Prize from the Michael Hill Violin Competition in New Zealand.

In 2007 Benjamin's debut at the Royal Albert Hall with the Royal Philharmonic Concert Orchestra was described by *The Daily Telegraph* as 'hugely impressive'. He went on to appear as

soloist with the Philharmonia Orchestra (conducted by Nicholas Collon), the Orchestra Wellington, London Mozart Players, Joven Orquesta de Salamanca, Orpheus Sinfonia, Haydn Chamber Orchestra, Bath Philharmonia, the Romanian State Radio Orchestra and New English Concert Orchestra.

I BIOGRAPHY - ROBERT THOMPSON

Benjamin has given concerts at major venues and festivals throughout Europe and further afield, including Wigmore Hall, Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, The Sage Gateshead, Cadogan Hall, the Bath International Festival, Gstaad Festival and Pedrera Hall Barcelona, among many others. He has broadcast for BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM, and in 2005 his first solo CD *Arcadian Strings* won the Classic FM Next Big Thing Competition.

Committed to chamber music, Benjamin has taken part in the International Musicians Seminar at Prussia Cove, appeared in the Northern Chords Festival, and toured Sweden, Denmark, France, Singapore and New Zealand with the Trio Boyarsky.

Hugely popular in New Zealand, Benjamin returns whenever he is able, to give concerts and appear on radio and television. In 2014 he appeared as soloist in the Royal New Zealand Ballet's production of Johan Kobborg's *Les Lutins*, touring with the company throughout New Zealand. He is very grateful to be awarded Honorary Membership of the Rotary Club of Port Nicholson for his commitment to children's charities.

"Kobborg's work Les Lutins is a sparkling and humorous dialogue between dancers and musicians, displaying the extraordinary talent of 24 year-old violinist, Benjamin Baker."

Theatreview | Royal New Zealand Ballet in Auckland | July 2014

"A fine account of Vaughan Williams' Concerto Accademico with Ben Baker, a sleek-sounding young soloist; hugely impressive."

Daily Telegraph | Gstaad Festival | 2009

www.benbakerviolin.co.uk

A consummate musician, Robert is equally at home as soloist and chamber musician. He has performed as soloist at Wigmore Hall, Bridgewater Hall, the Leeds and Nottingham International Piano Series, and chamber music performances at Wigmore Hall and The Sage Gateshead.

As a chamber musician Robert regularly collaborates with instrumentalists including cellist Philip Higham, violinists Benjamin Baker, Thomas Gould and Bartosz Woroch, and the Heath Quartet.

For ten years Robert was a member of the Rhodes Piano Trio. During their time together they were selected by YCAT and also won 2nd Prize in the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition. They went on to give recitals at Wigmore Hall, Barbican, the Louvre, Aldeburgh, Verbier, Aix-en-Provence, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Schwetzingen Festival. For one year they were fellows at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and resident ensemble as part of the Ones to Watch series at Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in Singapore.

Robert studied at Chetham's School of Music and at the Royal Northern College of Music. He completed his Master's with Peter Frankl at Yale University where he received the Charles S. Miller prize for outstanding work. He has taken part in masterclasses in Appeldorn (Holland), the Britten-Pears School Aldeburgh, Verbier, Aix en Provence and IMS Prussia Cove, and worked with Andras Schiff, Stephen Hough, Charles Rosen amongst others, and enjoyed intensive Chamber Music coaching from Mitsuko Uchida, Menahem Pressler, Alasdair Tait, Ferenc Rados, Ian Brown and Gabor Takacs-Nagy.

He has performed widely as a concerto soloist in repertoire ranging from Mozart to Shostakovich, regularly taken part in the Lake District Summer Music Festival as Rising Star, and given recitals at venues and festivals across the UK.



Photograph: Kaupo Kikkas

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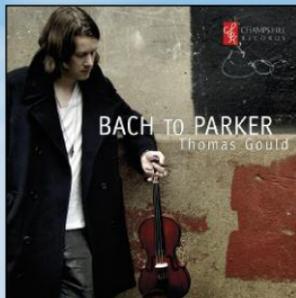
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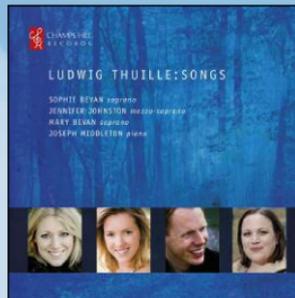
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