



AMERICAN CLASSICS



CARSON COOMAN

Piano Music

Donna Amato, Piano



Carson Cooman (b. 1982)

Piano Music

Seascape Passion: Midday Brightness (Third Piano Sonata) (2002; Op. 466) was commissioned for and is dedicated to pianist and composer Marco Modaro. The principal inspiration for the work is taken from the writings of the Scottish poet George Mackay Brown (1917–1996), much of whose work dealt with the transposition of religious imagery and symbolism from its traditional context into the distinctive landscape of his native Orkney Islands of North Scotland. The extra-musical starting point for this work was also religious imagery (specifically the Passion) transposed to a different landscape from its original Biblical context. In this case, however, the landscape used is that of Nantucket Island, Massachusetts – on which most of the composition of the work took place. The work is thus a Seascape Passion, with the Passion narrative projected through the midday brightness of an imagined Nantucket landscape. This work is cast in one large movement, cast into three clearly-defined sections. The basic material for the entire work is presented at the start in the opening jagged gesture in the bass register; it is in a continual state of transformation throughout. The first section is rhapsodic and dramatic. The second section is very quiet and reposed. The third section is quick and energetic. It builds to a maniacal climax, before a desolate (windswept) coda closes the work – seeking and eventually reaching a state of peace.

Kayser Variations (1997; Op. 63) was written as a tribute to Margaret Kayser on her retirement from a long career as teacher of chemistry at Allendale Columbia School in Rochester, New York. The work is a whimsical set of variations on the national anthem of the United Kingdom, *God Save the King*. In tribute to the dedicatee's profession, many of the musical transformation techniques are derived (numerically) from the super and subscripts of well-known chemical equations. This is not in any way important, however, for listening to the work.

Dream-Tombeau: Crucifixus (2003; Op. 516) for piano was written for and is dedicated to Canadian pianist, composer, and researcher Gordon Rumson. I have admired Gordon's playing, writing, and general musical understanding for some time and wished to write an

extended musical work for him. This piece was inspired specifically by his way of playing the piano and his musical insights. The work unfolds over a long duration – with a slow pace throughout. The basic material for the work consists of a series of musical objects: 1) a 12-note set; 2) a sequence of chords in an extended tonality; 3) a brief quotation from the motet *Jubilate Deo* by the Renaissance composer Orlande de Lassus (c. 1532–1594). This work takes its external inspiration from the Crucifixion, a key element and event in the Christian faith. The reflective character of the piece imagines the time that Jesus was in the tomb – between his death and his impending resurrection. There is an element of stopped time – in that the full aspects of what transpired were truly beyond human comprehension. The musical material can be viewed as representational objects as well. The 12-note set represents human experience and earthly existence; the chordal sequence represents the innate human longing for the eternal and the beyond; the Lassus quotation represents the revelation and experience of the divine here on earth. The dream aspect of the title of this piece is shown in the way the material is developed and presented. The material unfolds slowly, and the development of it transpires over an extended period of time. The development is subtle – it can be seen in the interaction and contrasts of the different objects of the work. There is an audible trajectory to the work, but one must listen with the large scale timeframe in mind.

For Gwyneth (1999; Op. 168) was written as a gift for American composer Gwyneth Walker. The brief piece alludes to some elements of her distinctive and warmly American compositional style.

Dream Etudes, Book II (2001; Op. 253) was written for and is dedicated to composer and pianist Anthony Cheung. Like the other books of *Dream Etudes* (Book I for solo clarinet, 1999, Book III for solo tuba, 2002, Book IV for solo oboe, 2002), each movement has an action title that inspired its musical content and procedures. The overall title of the work refers to the overlapping and sudden juxtapositions of elements of the basic materials (which run throughout all three movements), as if remembered through

a dream. The first movement, *Reflecting*, uses its title with two different meanings in mind – both to throw or bend back light and to think seriously and consider deeply. The tone of the work throughout connects to the second definition whereas the musical procedures used throughout relate to the first definition. The movement is in three sections – the opening section is strictly metered, contrasting a Lydian-flavoured sonority with dissonant filigree. A second section, in free metre, emerges in which filigree combines with a chorale-like series of recurring bright chords. In the final section, it is as though both of these previous sections (imagined as different kinds of light) have been projected onto a mirror and are being reflected back together, overlapping and interconnecting. The second movement, *Singing* (in memory of Ken Thomas), uses source material as its basis. The source material is the tune “Bower of Prayer” from William Walker’s seminal hymnal, *The Southern Harmony* (1835). In the opening section, a dissonant harmonisation of the Southern Harmony tune is presented over a rhythmically irregular ostinato. (The pedal is used to clear harmonies at different places each time in the tune so as to create a blurring of sonorities.) Eventually, the tune stops and the ostinato speeds up leading to a section of free metre in which bell-tones (based on the opening ostinato) are played under a ringing version of material derived from the tune. A final section begins as though planning to bring back a reprise of the opening material but it breaks down, and a phrase from the Southern Harmony tune is heard in its original three-part harmonisation, spare and distant. Ringing sonorities emerge and the movement fades away. The third movement, *Ringings*, presents a highly schizophrenic carillon of exuberant sound. The piece begins as if it were a minimalist toccata, but this is soon interrupted with a ringing chorale-like theme which recurs throughout the movement. These two different types of material (the contrast of many different-sized bells) interrupt each other and provide jarring juxtapositions. Huge sound masses are allowed to accumulate as the movement proceeds to its maniacal conclusion.

Postcard Paritta (2002; Op. 420) is a compilation of a series of small piano pieces written between 1999 and 2002 as gifts for friends and colleagues.

I. Postcard to Montreal was written for composer Wolfgang Bottenberg of Concordia University in Montreal,

Canada. It is an energetic march, with a lyrical interlude in the middle.

II. Postcard of Venice was written for Lorraine Van-Meter Cline. It is a lush and flowing portrait of Venice, Italy, her favourite city.

III. Postcard to the North Country was written for pianist Michael Arnowitt of Vermont (hence the “North Country” of the title). It is an energetic and driving romp around the piano, creating large masses of sound.

IV. Postcard to Galesburg was written for composer, conductor, and pianist Bruce Polay. The opening gesture of the work, from which the music gently unfolds, alludes to the initial gesture in Polay’s art song, *The Age of the Flower*.

V. A Summer Sunrise was written for composer and pianist Daron Hagen on the occasion of his marriage to composer and vocalist Gilda Lyons. The piece begins with a section marked “bells: a massive carillon coming to life”. After the carillon has reached its peak, a joyful dance emerges, filled with summer zest.

Fourth Piano Sonata (2005; Op. 620) was commissioned by and is dedicated to pianist Donna Amato, whose commitment and devotion to my music has been a continuing inspiration. The work is in three movements, each using the exact same musical material. Each movement presents a trajectory towards a greater integration of the disparate pieces of this material. The first movement, *Mourning at Sunset*, presents the basic ideas in clearly-defined blocks. An opening section of forceful, declamatory chords alternates with a more lyrical section of interlocking lines. The forceful music returns before a slow, desolate section is presented. This builds to a small climax before dying down again. The opening then returns. The second movement, *Beyond Distant Echoes*, is slow and ethereal. Sounds of distant gongs alternate with brittle, spasmodic interjections. The third movement, *Whispers of Mortality*, is inspired by the finale of Frederic Chopin’s *Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor*, op. 35 (1839). It is fast, fleeting, too short almost. The musical material transforms into pure running roulades of raw notes. Unlike the Chopin, however, the passagework is cast in a series of interlocking canonic structures of fiendish difficulty. The movement evaporates into the uppermost register.

Donna Amato

Donna Amato was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she also received her earliest musical training. Since her orchestral debut at the age of fourteen and her early studies with virtuoso pianist Ozan Marsh, she has received many honours and awards. After graduating from college she travelled to Europe to study with Louis Kentner in London, Gaby Casadesus in Paris and Guido Agosti in Italy; she also studied in Mexico with Angelica Morales von Sauer. Her concert and recording career flourished over the following years, with appearances throughout Europe, in Mexico, Canada and the United States, and broadcasts for the BBC as well as the inaugural live broadcast on Classic FM. Her recordings include the two concertos of MacDowell with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the sonatas of Dutilleux and Balakirev, a recital disc entitled *A Piano Portrait*, a Skryabin disc, two collections of works by Sorabji, a disc of music by Ethelbert and Arthur Nevin, a collection of MacDowell's piano sonatas, Nancy Galbraith's *Piano Concerto No. 2*, and a disc of the early piano works of Scelsi. Rapidly earning a reputation for an innovative approach to programme planning, her concerts have always received public and critical acclaim. Her first appearance at the Wigmore Hall in London in 1988 was universally praised, as was her New York debut the following year. She has appeared as a soloist with leading British orchestras and other performances have included her appearance as a guest artist at Sir Charles Groves' 75th Birthday Gala with the English Sinfonia in London; she also gave a memorable account of the rarely heard Franz Xavier Mozart second concerto with the Victoria Symphony Orchestra, British Columbia. Several leading composers have written works especially for her, which she has performed, broadcast and recorded. In 2003 she performed and broadcasted the world première of Sorabji's *Fifth Piano Concerto* in the Netherlands. In 2004 she appeared at New York's Carnegie Hall in collaboration with flutist Julie Seftick and gave the world première of Sorabji's *Fifth Piano Symphony* at New York's Merkin Hall. Donna Amato currently teaches piano at the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University and is a member of the faculty at Duquesne University.

Carson Cooman

Carson P. Cooman (b. 1982) is one of the most active American composers of his generation, with over six hundred musical works in many forms, ranging from solo instrumental pieces to operas, and from orchestral works to hymn tunes. He is in continual demand for new commissions, and his music has and continues to be performed on all six inhabited continents. His work is published primarily by MMB Music, Inc., Musik Fabrik (orchestral/instrumental music) and Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc. (organ/choral music). Recordings of Cooman's music appear on over seven record labels and his music appears in the collections of most music libraries in the United States. Cooman's primary composition studies have been with Bernard Rands, Judith Weir, Alan Fletcher and James Willey. As an active concert organist, Cooman specializes exclusively in the performance of new music. Over 120 new works have been composed for him by composers from around the world, and his performances of contemporary composers can be heard on a number of CD recordings. Cooman is also a writer on musical subjects, producing articles and reviews frequently for a number of international publications. He is currently the editor of *Living Music Journal* and has edited musical works of other composers for numerous music publishers. For more information about Cooman's music, visit his website at: <http://www.carsoncooman.com>



Photo of Carson Cooman by Louis Otzer

Playing
Time:
77:12

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Carson
COOMAN
(b. 1982)

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| 1 | Seascape Passion: Midday Brightness (Third Piano Sonata) (2002) | 12:23 |
| 2 | Kayser Variations (1997) | 5:59 |
| 3 | Dream-Tombeau: Crucifixus (2003) | 21:30 |
| 4 | For Gwyneth (1999) | 2:49 |
| | Dream Etudes, Book II (2001) | 10:09 |
| 5 | I. Reflecting | 4:08 |
| 6 | II. Singing | 2:59 |
| 7 | III. Ringing | 2:59 |
| | Postcard Partita (2002) | 9:01 |
| 8 | I. Postcard to Montreal | 1:34 |
| 9 | II. Postcard of Venice | 1:10 |
| 10 | III. Postcard to the North Country | 0:58 |
| 11 | IV. Postcard to Galesburg | 2:03 |
| 12 | V. A Summer Sunrise | 3:10 |
| | Fourth Piano Sonata (2005) | 15:02 |
| 13 | I. Mourning at Sunset | 7:39 |
| 14 | II. Beyond Distant Echoes | 5:41 |
| 15 | III. Whispers of Mortality | 1:40 |

Donna Amato, Piano

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American flag, folk artist, 1880s



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This disc presents a survey of the piano music of American composer Carson Cooman, performed by pianist Donna Amato, for whom the virtuosic *Fourth Piano Sonata* was composed. The works range in character – from the passionate, landscape-inspired drama of *Seascape Passion: Midday Brightness (Third Piano Sonata)*, to the mystical contemplation of *Dream-Tombeau: Crucifixus*, to a light-hearted and celebratory treatment of “God Save the King / My Country ’Tis of Thee” in *Kayser Variations*. *Dream Etudes, Book II* explores the piano’s ringing sonic possibilities, while *Postcard Partita* consists of short movements originally written as brief musical gifts for the composer’s friends and colleagues.

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