Huw Watkins

In my craft or sullen art

Mark Padmore tenor
Huw Watkins piano
Paul Watkins cello
Alina Ibragimova violin
The Nash Ensemble
Elias Quartet
Huw Watkins

Sonata for Cello and Eight Instruments

1. Allegro 13'44
2. Lento 4'36
3. Allegro 5'04

Paul Watkins cello
The Nash Ensemble
Ian Brown conductor

Four Spencer Pieces

4. Prelude 5'15
5. Shipbuilding on the Clyde 1'46
6. The Crucifixion 1'49
7. The Resurrection of Soldiers 1'36
8. Separating Fighting Swans 5'51
9. Postlude 2'28

Huw Watkins piano

Three Auden Songs

10. Brussels in Winter 8'47
11. Eyes look into the well 3'31
12. At last the secret is out 2'51

Mark Padmore tenor
Huw Watkins piano

Partita for solo violin

13. Maestoso 15'02
14. Lento ma non troppo 4'07
15. Lento 1'06
16. Comodo 4'31
17. Allegro molto 1'04

Alina Ibragimova violin

In my craft or sullen art: Goodison Quartet No 4

18. Goodison Quartet No 4 17'31

Mark Padmore tenor
Elias Quartet

Partita for solo violin

19. Maestoso
20. Lento ma non troppo
21. Lento
22. Comodo
23. Allegro molto

Partita for solo violin

24. In my craft or sullen art: Goodison Quartet No 4

Mark Padmore tenor
Elias Quartet

Total timing 71'01

The Nash Ensemble

Artistic Director
Amelia Freedman CBE FRAM
Paul Watkins cello
Ian Brown conductor
Philippa Davies flute
Richard Hosford clarinet
Ursula Leveaux bassoon
Laura Samuel violin
Catherine Leonard violin
Lawrence Power violin
Duncan McTier double bass
Philippa Davies violin

Elias Quartet

Sara Bitlloch violin
Donald Grant violin
Martin Saving viola
Marie Bitlloch cello

Mark Padmore appears by arrangement
with Harmonia Mundi USA.
Alina Ibragimova appears on this recording
with kind permission from Hyperion Records.

Photo: Hanya Chlala
Huw Watkins: Composer as Musician
by Bayan Northcott

The subtitle might seem paradoxical: surely all composers, by definition, are musicians? Yet, as one listens to the unfolding of a piece by Huw Watkins, one is convinced that, for him, composition is a natural function of an all-round musicianship, rather than something that is separate from his distinguished career as a pianist. One is the more persuaded of this by the intensely creative quality of his performance of music by others: his remarkable ability to infuse any bunch of notes, no matter how contrived or arbitrary, with musical shape and meaning. Doubtless this sense of musical wholeness flows in the first instance from his family background, with his violin-making father, music-teaching mother, his equally gifted cellist (and latterly conductor) brother Paul and their playing of chamber music as part of everyday life.

Such a background, once widespread (think of Mendelssohn), now rarer (though think of Richard Rodney Bennett), is likely to endow a young composer with a special clarity of ear and ease of invention from the start, and one hears these freshly at play in the Sonata for Cello and Eight Instruments (1999), Watkins’s earliest score to attract attention. Yet such clarity, such ease, or, to use a more equivocal term, such facility, is also liable to provoke criticism. One recalls how often Mendelssohn was charged with failing to fulfil his dazzling early promise, or with all-too skillfully skating over the emotional depths; how Bennett’s sheer expertise has sometimes been held against him, as though it impaired his individuality.

Among the most insightful and open-minded of our performing artists, Watkins already seems to have been around for ages and it is easy to forget that his work list stretches back little more than a decade. To judge whether he has managed to personalize and deepen his initial musical gifts over that period, one would have to survey not just the vocal and chamber works represented on this recording, but the orchestral output, including his well-received Violin Concerto (2010), and his recent work for the musical stage. For the present, as we listen to the varied characters of the pieces on this recording, with their skillful interplay of traditional continuities and more schematic techniques, perhaps all we need to ask is whether any other contemporary composer quite writes, quite sounds like this?
Sonata for Cello and Eight Instruments (1999)

In 1998, Faber Music asked 11 of its house composers each to nominate a promising newcomer to receive a chamber ensemble commission in celebration of the Millennium. It was Thomas Adès, an outstanding all-round musician himself, who selected Watkins. The resulting Sonata for Cello and Eight Instruments (flute, clarinet, bassoon, piano, 2 violins, viola, double bass) was duly launched by Paul Watkins and the Nash Ensemble under Martyn Brabbins at the Purcell Room in March 1999. According to the composer’s programme note, the first movement is a vigorous Allegro sonata form with the cello resting only in the more lyrical central section. The middle movement he describes again as a lyrical solo against an austere background provided by the woodwind, while the finale is another Allegro, reaching a climax and dissolving into a recapitulatory coda.

Yet these few pointers scarcely hint at the playful intricacy of the actual score. For while it indeed appears to be composed against the background of traditional movement forms – with even a hint of neo-classicism in the woodwind apostrophes of the slow movement – the harmony sounds more as if generated from gradually shifting modal note-collections. And the volatile foreground argument is both obsessive and fragmented in manner, occasionally suggesting a fortuitous analogy with the brightly-faceted late ensemble textures of Stefan Wolpe, whose music Watkins had hardly heard when he wrote the piece. Tightly composed and nicely contained within its 14-minute span, the Sonata could well attain a standing in Watkins’s output comparable with the pregnant Sinfonietta, Op. 1 in that of Benjamin Britten.

Three Auden Songs (2009)

for tenor and piano

These settings were commissioned by the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie for the tenor Mark Padmore and his accompanist Andrew West, who gave the premiere in Brussels in 2009. The three chosen texts, dating from 1938, 1940 and 1936 respectively, are all fairly early, elliptical Auden, dense with riddling allusions. Watkins articulates this density through tenor lines that alternate parallel and subtly counter the verbal rhythms of the text, while confining his accompaniments to a consistent, unifying texture for each song. ‘Brussels in Winter’ unfolds as a...
lyrical succession of asymmetric phrases for tenor, with high, icy figures
underpinned by a slower-moving bass line
for piano – and just a momentary
harmonic enrichment at the words: ‘The
winter holds them like an Opera-House’.
‘Eyes look into the well’ is accompanied
throughout by a steady five-beat-to-a-bar
tread of chords, simply rising or falling,
thickening or thinning to match the
ominous sense of the words – a strikingly
different approach to this chilling text from
the more declamatory and sectional setting
by Lennox Berkeley in his Five Poems of
W. H. Auden (1960). In the nervy, jazz-
inflected ‘At last the secret is out’, voice
and accompaniment often stop and start
in rhythmic unison. Somewhere in the
background one hears an echo of Britten’s
setting of ‘As it is, plenty’ from his early
Auden settings On this Island (1937). It is
the tradition of Britten and Berkeley that
Watkins actively renews in these beautifully
wrought Auden settings.

**Partita (2006)**
for solo violin

Watkins composed this virtuoso work for
the brilliant young violinist Alina
Ibragimova, who gave the first performance
in the Wigmore Hall in November 2006: it
was commissioned jointly by BBC Radio 3
and the Royal Philharmonic Society as part
of the New Generation Artists scheme.

Considering the title and the medium, one
might expect a Bach homage. But apart
from its finale, which Watkins describes as
‘a very fast, relentless gigue’, the Partita
encompasses little that could be described
as neo-Baroque: no double-dotted
rhythms, no courante, sarabande or
gavotte. The opening Maestoso is a slow,
rondo-like prelude in which a principal idea
of grinding, four-note chords alternates with
more ruminative episodes. Watkins
describes the brief, gentle second and
fourth movements as interludes. These
frame an extended, largely linear central
Lento which feels its lyrical way forward in
varied repetitions and extensions of
arabesque-like phrases characterized by
successions of thirds. As for the Molto
Allegro finale, any Bach-like inflections are
soon subsumed in the more folk-like
skirlings and cross-rhythms of its climactic
firework display.

**In my craft or sullen art (2007)**

Since 2004, the financier, arts
administrator and sometime chairman of
the Stock Exchange Sir Nicholas Goodison,
and his wife Judith Goodison, have been
commissioning a series of string quartets
with voice for the Wigmore Hall, with In my
craft or sullen art – launched by Mark
Padmore and the Petersen Quartet in May
2007 – comprising Goodison Quartet No.
4. The structure of this substantial piece,
however, has very little to do with classical
quartet forms or even with such a
precedent as Schoenberg’s String Quartet
No. 2. Rather, it comprises a continuous
fantasia-like structure, during which, most
unusually, the same text is given two
contrasting settings for tenor voice.

It opens with a shadowy interplay of string
arpeggios and lamenting chord
progressions, waywardly developed as an
extended prelude to the first setting of
Dylan Thomas’s two-verse meditation on
his poetic calling. Here, Watkins’s
response to the text is relatively contained,
a little plaintive, only momentarily bursting
out at the words: ‘Not for the proud man
apart! From the raging moon I write...’
The setting ends over dark chords, which
revolve onwards into an extended central
movement for quartet, with a return of the
arpeggio idea and a gradual working up
into an agitated climax. The second setting
of ‘In my craft or sullen art’ is also agitated
and rhetorical, with, this time, some
repetitions of words, and only calming for
the final lines – leaving the quartet to add
a poignant postlude which ebbs away on
the arpeggiated pitches from which the
work first emerged. If the double setting of
the Thomas is an ingenious response to a
richly suggestive text, one is compelled to
add that the handling of quartet texture,
harmony and part writing shows a mastery
and finesse that many might labour a
lifetime to achieve.

*Introduction and notes
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Brussels in Winter
Wandering through cold streets tangled like old string,
Coming on fountains rigid in the frost,
Its formula escapes you; it has lost
The certainty that constitutes a thing.
Only the old, the hungry and the humbled
Keep at this temperature a sense of place,
And in their misery are all assembled;
The winter holds them like an Opera-House.
Ridges of rich apartments loom to-night
Where isolated windows glow like farms,
A phrase goes packed with meaning like a van,
A look contains the history of man,
And fifty francs will earn a stranger right
To take the shuddering city in his arms.

At last the secret is out
At last the secret is out, as it always must come in the end,
The delicious story is ripe to tell to the intimate friend;
Over the tea-cups and in the square the tongue has its desire;
Still waters run deep, my dear, there’s never smoke without fire.
Behind the corpse in the reservoir, behind the ghost on the links,
Behind the lady who dances and the man who madly drinks,
Under the look of fatigue, the attack of migraine and the sigh,
There is always another story, there is more than meets the eye.
For the clear voice suddenly singing, high up in the convent wall,
The scent of elder bushes, the sporting prints in the hall,
The croquet matches in summer, the handshake, the cough, the kiss,
There is always a wicked secret, a private reason for this.
W. H. Auden

Eyes look into the well
Eyes look into the well,
Tears run down from the eye;
The tower cracked and fell
From the quiet winter sky.
Under a midnight stone
Love was buried by thieves;
The robbed heart begs for a bone,
The damned rustle like leaves.
Face down in the flooded brook
With nothing more to say,
Lies One the soldiers took,
And spoiled and threw away.

In My Craft or Sullen Art
In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms,
I labour by singing light
Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.
Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.

Dylan Thomas

Huw Watkins

Huw Watkins is a prominent figure in British music in the triple, and mutually supportive roles of pianist, composer and teacher. Born in South Wales, he studied at Chetham’s School of Music, at King’s College Cambridge with Robin Holloway and Alexander Goehr, and with Julian Anderson at the Royal College of Music, where he now teaches composition and piano.

As a pianist, he performs regularly as a soloist and in chamber music – often in partnership with his elder brother, the cellist Paul Watkins, and with violinists Alexandra Wood and Alina Ibragimova. He has premiered concertos by John Woolrich and Michael Zev Gordon.

His recent compositions include a Piano Trio for the Florestan Trio and a Violin Concerto for Alina Ibragimova, which was premiered at the 2010 BBC Proms by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Edward Gardner.

He is currently writing an opera for a joint production between Music Theatre Wales and Scottish Opera.

Who was this? Schott Music

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First year Graphic design student student at Central Saint Martins. Currently living in London; from North Norfolk. Interested in a broad range of visual communication.

Saba Keynejad writes:
The passive experience of music can take you anywhere. The composer takes you on a journey, one that is carefully devised with altitudes and emotions. Attempting to visualise music is hard, and like everything else we all harbour our own opinions. I can’t say you will be able to listen to this music and instantly create a semantic relationship with the cover. I would like you, the listener, to think about what you would do if you were to create this CD cover.

www.sabbakeynejad.com

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NMC’s Debut Discs Series includes releases by Huw Watkins, Sam Hayden and Dai Fujikura. For more information visit our website at www.nmcrec.co.uk/debut-discs
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DAVID LEFEBER Recording Engineer/Producer

Partita for solo violin was recorded by BBC Radio 3 on 15 October 2007 at St Silas Church, Kentish Town, London.

LINDSAY KEMP Recording Producer

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FOR FURTHER DETAILS PLEASE CONTACT:

NMC Recordings Ltd,
Somerset House, Third Floor, South Wing,
Strand, London, WC2R 1LA

Tel. +44 (0)20 7759 1827/8
Fax. +44 (0)20 7759 1829
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