

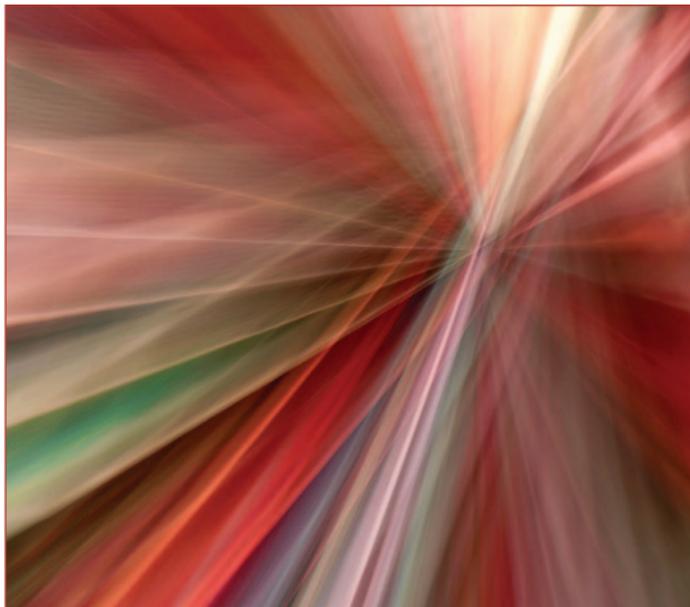
NAXOS

STRAVINSKY

Piano Music

Sonatas • Serenade in A • Four Etudes

Victor Sangiorgio



Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

Piano Music

It is a remarkable achievement for a composer whose chief instrument was the piano to score so imaginatively and, in respect of his early Russian period, so ambitiously and colourfully for a large orchestra. While possessing no ability to play an orchestral instrument, except when he acquired a cimbalom in 1915 for inclusion in *Renard* and a drum set a few years later for its rôle in *The Soldier's Tale*, the piano was the medium through which Stravinsky channeled his creative energies, and from which he drew, often stimulated by the instrument's inherent percussive sounds, original textures and rich sonorities. For Stravinsky the piano was a vital compositional aid, a sort of crucible for refining ideas where, in an observation to Robert Craft, 'Each note that I write is tried on it and every relationship of notes is taken apart and heard on it again and again'.

Composing at the piano was a life-long preoccupation for Stravinsky, whose music for the instrument spanned a forty-year period, and reflected his distinct stylistic changes, his associated domestic and financial status and the geo-political situations in which he lived. Thus, prior to his trilogy of pre-war Russian ballets, his piano music up to 1908 might be regarded largely as imitative and can be viewed very much through the lens of other composers. It was as a twenty-year-old law student at St Petersburg University that Stravinsky first showed his earliest piano pieces to Rimsky-Korsakov - whose son Vladimir was there also as a law student. In the agitated rhythms of the modest ternary form *Scherzo in G minor* of 1902 Stravinsky shows considerable promise and, in its harmonic vocabulary, a debt to Tchaikovsky.

A year later Stravinsky began his ambitious four-movement *Piano Sonata in F sharp minor*, turning again to Rimsky-Korsakov for help when his inexperience of large-scale structures led him into difficulties with its formal organization. Here, Tchaikovsky and also Glazunov are influences although

Stravinsky recalls of this early sonata in later years that it was 'an inept imitation of Beethoven'. Possibly this first effort points more to a composer attempting to use traditional Germanic models for his own ends, rather than any direct borrowing of Beethoven. While there are, of course, no specific traces of Beethoven, one can hear in the sonata's outer movements a dramatic weight and, if a little uncharitably, a certain failure to foreshorten over-used material. It is, however, in the infectious *Vivo* and elegant charm of the *Andante* (with its echoes of Rachmaninov) that supporters of this posthumously published work will be found.

Four years passed before Stravinsky wrote for the piano again, and in his *Quatre Etudes* of 1908 there is a strikingly different influence. Noticeable now, particularly in the first two studies, is the voice of Scriabin (handed down from Chopin) where the use of complex rhythmical patterns between the hands; 2 or 3 against 5 and 4 or 5 against 6 and extensive chromaticism makes for fiendishly difficult execution. A poetic languor, more akin to Rachmaninov, characterizes the third study, while the harmonic drive and irrepressible energy of the fourth creates a superb *moto perpetuo* that is all his own. The insistent rhythms of this *tour de force* are perhaps the first indicator of a percussive manner that was to dominate his style for the next few years, and heard in *Petrushka* and the third of the pre-war ballets, *The Rite of Spring*.

While the war years produced only a handful of miniature piano works, it was with larger projects such as *Renard*, *Les Noces* (its scoring revised in 1921 for an 'orchestra' of four pianos and percussion) and *The Soldier's Tale* that occupied Stravinsky during this period when he was living a precarious existence with his young family in Switzerland. *Piano-Rag-Music* dates from 1919 and began life soon after the completion of *The Soldier's Tale*. This short work reflects his interest in jazz, which had found expression in the earlier stage work and his instrumental *Ragtime*,

an ensemble piece for eleven players completed the previous year. In its deconstruction of ragtime, where fragments of the jazz style are broken up and distorted in a grotesque Cubist image, *Piano-Rag-Music* also mirrors contemporary trends in art and the work of Picasso. The score is dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein as recognition of the pianist's financial help when Stravinsky was in difficult circumstances and whose 'strong, agile, clever fingers' came to mind when writing the piece.

After the war the piano developed a wider significance for Stravinsky and reflected both his new musical direction with its focus on classical transparency of line and texture and his unsettled financial affairs, made uncertain by his status as a Russian exile living in Switzerland and from 1920 in France. Thus he created opportunities for additional income by the performance of his own works and both the 1924 *Sonata* and *Serenade in A* of the following year were written for himself to play and became part of his new subsidiary performing career. From the same period date his *Concerto for Piano and Wind* and his *Capriccio* for piano and orchestra of 1929, both of which Stravinsky reserved exclusive performance rights for himself.

The *Sonata* was written in Biarritz and Nice and dedicated to the celebrated patron of the arts the Princess Edmond de Polignac. In the clarity of each of its three movements the musical language of the eighteenth century is recalled. In the opening movement's two-part texture, with its recurring thirds in the right hand and substitute Alberti bass in the left, the sound world of Clementi and Haydn is evoked. By contrast the elegiac lyricism and ornamentation of the *Adagietto* has superficial echoes of Bach, whose spirit in the third movement is recalled by an agile and quirky two-part invention.

Between the completion of this *Sonata* in October 1924 and the *Serenade in A* Stravinsky embarked on

two groundbreaking tours; a first visit for ten years to Warsaw and then, early the following year, to the United States, where he signed his first recording contract for Brunswick. It was for this company that he wrote the *Serenade*, designing each movement to fit neatly on one side of a 78rpm gramophone record. Like the *Sonata* the transparent textures recapture the spirit rather than the letter of Classicism. A dignified 'choral' *Hymne* (that Poulenc appears to 'pirate' for his own *Hymne* - the second of his *Trois Pièces* written a few years later) was envisaged by Stravinsky as being a 'solemn entry' before the 'ceremonial homage by the artist to the guests' depicted by the arioso style of the *Romanza*. Here guitar-like gestures embrace a central song. The *Rondoletto*, marked by almost constant semi-quaver movement, provides an overview of eighteenth-century dance types linked to a cadenza finale where bell-like figuration creates a more formal and sober concluding *Epilogue*. The title of the work refers more towards its pull and focus towards the note A rather than the actual key of A with its major and minor implications.

Music for solo piano featured less prominently in later years and apart from his *Tango* and *Circus Polka* the instrument appears only within a number of orchestral works. Not long after leaving for the United States in September 1939 Stravinsky settled in California where, in 1940, he wrote his entertaining *Tango*. Conceived originally as a song, its halting rhythms and evocative mood convey something of the nostalgia that the composer must have experienced in his newly adopted country. Two years later he began his *Circus Polka* which, improbable as it may seem, was commissioned by Barnum and Bailey's circus. Thus Stravinsky's last work for solo piano was designed to be danced by young elephants in the unlikely form of a 'ballet'.

David Truslove

Victor Sangiorgio



Photograph: Zoe Summer

Born in Italy, Victor Sangiorgio moved to Perth in Western Australia at the age of four and began his musical training there. He gave his first public performances at the age of five and by nineteen had been a soloist with all the major Australian orchestras as well as recording and broadcasting extensively for both Australian National Radio and Television. He was also soloist with the Australian Youth Orchestra and with the West Australian Symphony on their tours of China, Hong Kong and Singapore. After winning Australia's most prestigious awards, he lived and worked abroad in Siena, Rome and the United States before moving to the Britain. Since settling in London he has broadcast frequently for the BBC World Service, Radio 3, Radio 4 and Classic FM. He has performed throughout

England, Scotland, Ireland, America, Asia, New Zealand and America. In America he has broadcast live in Chicago and Los Angeles for the WFMT Radio network and has appeared on American television. He has collaborated with such conductors as Claudio Abbado, Sir Charles Groves, Andrew Litton, Jane Glover, En Shao, Stanisław Skrowaczewski, André Previn, Jorge Mester and Carl Davis. As a frequent visitor to Australia he broadcasts regularly for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation as well as giving numerous recital and concerto performances with Australian orchestras. As well as playing extremely varied repertoire, Victor Sangiorgio has a continuing interest in chamber music and this has seen collaborations with the Brodsky Quartet, his Piano Trio the Fiorini, violinists Ruggiero Ricci and Hu Kun, horn player Eric Ruske, the actor Andrew Sachs and principals from the London Symphony Orchestra. He has given master-classes in many cities throughout the world and has also been artist-in-residence at the Western Australian Conservatorium of Music and Visiting Lecturer in Piano at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Colchester Institute, and the Birmingham Conservatoire. He was the WAPAA's 2003 artist-in-residence. Victor Sangiorgio's recordings have met with extensive critical acclaim and include such diverse repertoire as Stravinsky's complete solo piano music, concertos by Rachmaninov and Mendelssohn with the Western Australian Symphony and Vladimir Verbitsky, Liszt Transcriptions for piano and orchestra with En Shao and the Queensland Symphony, the solo keyboard sonatas of Cimarosa, and music by the Australian composer John Carmichael.

Composing at the piano was a life-long preoccupation for Stravinsky, whose music for the instrument spans a forty-year period and reflects his distinct stylistic changes. In his *Four Etudes* of 1908 the use of complex rhythmical patterns between the hands makes for fiendishly difficult execution. The clarity of each of the 1924 *Sonata's* three movements recalls the musical language of the eighteenth century. In 1925 Stravinsky embarked on a groundbreaking tour of the United States, where he signed his first recording contract for Brunswick. It was for this company that he wrote the *Serenade*, designing each movement to fit neatly on one side of a 78rpm gramophone record.

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|---------------------------------|--------------|--|--------------|
| 1 Piano-Rag-Music (1919) | 3:12 | Four Etudes, Op. 7 (1908) | 8:01 |
| 2 Circus Polka (1941-42) | 3:32 | 11 Etude No. 1 in C minor | 1:33 |
| Piano Sonata (1924) | 10:29 | 12 Etude No. 2 in D major | 2:41 |
| 3 ♩ = 112 | 2:50 | 13 Etude No. 3 in E minor | 1:54 |
| 4 Adagio | 5:20 | 14 Etude No. 4 in F sharp major | 1:53 |
| 5 ♩ = 112 | 2:19 | 15 Scherzo (1902) | 2:14 |
| Serenade in A (1925) | 11:52 | Piano Sonata in F sharp minor (1903-04) | 27:57 |
| 6 Hymn | 3:32 | 16 Allegro | 10:53 |
| 7 Romanza | 3:40 | 17 Scherzo | 4:52 |
| 8 Rondoletto | 2:25 | 18 Andante | 5:43 |
| 9 Cadenza | 2:14 | 19 Allegro - Andante | 6:29 |
| 10 Tango (1940) | 4:04 | | |

Victor Sangiorgio

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