There is nothing quite like British composer Peter Dickinson’s witty musical parody, with its humour at various levels. Who else would make a rag and a set of blues out of hymn tunes? Or turn the main themes of his *Piano Concerto* (TROY360) into a rag, which is actually played during the course of that work on an upright piano at the back of the orchestra? Or make a blues setting of Byron’s ‘So we’ll go no more a-roving’ using a chord progression from Ravel and turn the whole thing into an *Organ Concerto* (TROY360)? Or have an offstage pianist piecing together fragments of a piano rag during his *String Quartet No.2*? Or make a blues version of Edward MacDowell’s salon classic, *To a Wild Rose*, calling it *Blue Rose* and consequently climaxing on Skryabin’s mystic chord? And following this with a *Wild Rose Rag*?

Musically this can be as disconcerting and moving as the poetry of Stevie Smith, which Dickinson has chosen for his unconventional cycle of popular songs called *Stevie’s Tunes*. And few singers can match the artful sophistication of Meriel Dickinson, the composer’s sister, for whom all these songs were written. This record is a collection to be enjoyed: five piano rags, five blues, three reworkings of Satie, two blues songs and two sets of songs, all presented as a complete program in the immediately attractive manner of all the Dickinsons’ recitals, broadcasts and other recordings.

**Notes on the Music by Peter Dickinson**


This cycle is based on melodies which Stevie Smith specified or obviously had in mind when she wrote these poems. In a letter to Sally Chilver in 1948 she explained her method:

“I am still haunted by the missed-shot tunes I seem to hear and cannot always reproduce...What I shall do is to get (the tunes) so into my mind that sometime a poem will fit itself to them, that is the way it does happen.”

The opening refrain, ‘O circle of Trismegistus, O where is your circumference?’ comes from Smith’s novel, *Over the Frontier* (1938). Hermes Trismegistus (Latin Hermes Termaximus= thrice greatest) was the name given by the neo-Platonists and devotees of mysticism and alchemy to the Egyptian God Thoth, more or less identified with the Greek Hermes. The recurring Trismegistus refrain is set to the only melody not implied by Stevie Smith. In his *Symphony No.6* (1893) Tchaikovsky was preoccupied with death, a favourite topic of the poet’s too, and the second subject of his first movement fitted the Trismegistus refrain too well to be ignored. It brought
On the Walls of a dull furnished Room: ‘I hang old Photos of my Childhood Girls’
2 Weird Happenings in Haarlem No.1: ‘Four Windmills, Acquaintanceships’
2 Weird Happenings in Haarlem No.2: ‘O People! My People!'
Italian Extravaganza: ‘Mrs. Lombardi’s month-old son is dead’
Last Night I drove a Car: ‘Last Night I drove a Car’

This rag is the basis of my String Quartet No.2, commissioned by the Alberni Quartet and first performed by them at Harlow, Essex, on 30 January 1977. In the tradition of ragtime the Quartet Rag was built from pieces written at different times. The first three strains come from early student works and the last strain is from the third of my Juilliard Dances (1959) written for a ballet and first performed when I was at the Juilliard School.

This is a blues version of To a Wild Rose (Woodland Sketches, Op.51, No.1 1896) by Edward MacDowell which I made when preparing a seminar on MacDowell. When Jennifer Bate commissioned an organ work I based it on this blues and my rag version of the tune as well. She gave the first performance of Blue Rose Variations on 2 April 1986 at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York.

Rags have often been made from existing music. In this case MacDowell’s popular piano piece provides the first two strains and the trio is based on my Blue Rose.

[7] THREE SATIE TRANSFORMATIONS No.1
[8] THREE SATIE TRANSFORMATIONS No.2
[9] THREE SATIE TRANSFORMATIONS No.3
These three paraphrases are based on Erik Satie’s first three Gnossiennes (1890), much as he reworked Clementi in his Sonatine Bureaucratique and Irving Berlin in the Ragtime from Parade.
[14] FOUR BLUES No.1: Extremely slow and quiet
[15] FOUR BLUES No.2: Very slow and intense
[16] FOUR BLUES No.3: Very quiet and intimate
[17] FOUR BLUES No.4: Slow and sustained

The Four Blues were originally written as part of a chamber work for string quartet, piano and tape-playback commissioned by Lancaster University in 1973 which was later substantially reworked as the American Trio (1985). Each Blues is based on a hymn-tune but too remotely for it to be worth tracing.

The first solo performances of Concerto Rag, Wild Rose Rag, Hymn-Tune Rag, Blue Rose, and Blues Nos.1 and 2 were in a BBC Radio 2 series At the Piano played by the composer on 14 July 1985. The first public performances of all the rags and blues for piano (except Patriotic Rag) and ‘So we’ll go no’ more aroving’ were at the British Music Information Centre, London, on 6 December 1985, with the composer and Meriel Dickinson.

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THE ARTISTS
MERIEL DICKINSON

Meriel Dickinson began her long career after studying in Manchester and Vienna. Her concert repertoire ranged from Monteverdi to Boulez and Berio, and she also had particular success in operas and musicals ranging from Handel to Kurt Weill. Her work with her brother Peter, performing music he wrote for her and broadcasting and recording other works they commissioned, was a central feature. She toured Europe and the USA many times with the pioneering vocal group Electric Phoenix and has worked with some of America’s leading composers such as Aaron Copland, John Cage, Elliott Carter and Virgil Thomson.

See Outcry (TROY360) and SongCycles (TROY365) for more performances by Meriel Dickinson.

PETER DICKINSON

Peter Dickinson was born at Lytham St. Annes, Lancashire, England, on 15 November 1934. He went to The Leys School, Cambridge, was Organ Scholar of Queens’ College, Cambridge, and then spent three formative years in New York, initially at the Juilliard School, where he was a pupil of Leo Schrade, and later at City College, where he was a member of the faculty. He was a founding member of the American Composers Alliance, and has written many works for voice and piano, with choral and vocal ensembles, for orchestra, and for chamber ensembles. He has also written music for television and radio, and has been involved in many other aspects of music, including performance, teaching, and administration. He has been involved with the British Music Information Centre since its inception in 1971.
TEXTS FOR SONGS

[1] STEVIE’S TUNES: AN ANTHOLOGY. Stevie Smith (1902-71)

Heber (20)
I love little Heber
His coat is so warm
And if I don’t speak to him
He’ll do me no harm
But sit by my window
And stare in the street
And pull up a hassock for the comfort of his feet.
I love little Heber
His eyes are so wide
And if I don’t speak to him
He’ll stay by my side.
But oh in this silence
I find but suspense:
I must speak have spoken have driven him hence.

O Happy Dogs of England (94)
O happy dogs of England
Bark well as well you may
If you lived anywhere else
You would not be so gay.
O happy dogs of England
Bark well at errand boys
If you lived anywhere else
You would not be allowed to make such an infernal noise.

In Canaan’s Happy Land (126)
Fair waved the golden corn
When I was stepping out,
When all the churchyard bells they rang
The day I turned about.
It’s nice to get abroad,
It quickens and refines,
But now I find myself at home
My heart to peace inclines.
The bells ring for my friends
Who were untimely slain,
But I was luckier than they
And go my rounds again.
I take the cart I took,
I take another horse,
I sell my goods from door to door
And smother every curse.

To the Tune of the Coventry Carol (25)
The nearly right
And yet not quite
In love is wholly evil
And every heart
That loves in part
Is mortgaged to the devil.
I loved or thought
I loved in sort
Was this to love akin
To take the best
And leave the rest
And let the devil in?
Unser Vater (139)

Unser Vater
Du der im Himmel wohnst,
Behold my child,
His prayers and his complaint.
He was conceived
In sin and born to set it on,
The sin is his,
His strength to act upon.
Oh, Father, heed
Thy child, let not the grave
Seal him in sin
Beyond thy power to save.
Strike at his strength,
Leave weakness only for her vaunt,
Unser Vater,
Du der in Himmel wohnst.

Numbers refer to pages in the Allen Lane/Penguin complete poems.
These poems are used by kind permission of Stevie Smith’s literary executor, James MacGibbon.

[3] EXTRAVAGANZAS.
Gregory Corso (1930-)

Three No.1
The streetsinger is sick
crouched in the doorway, holding his heart.
One less song in the noisy night.

Three No.2

Three No.3
Death weeps because Death is human
spending all day in a movie when a child dies.
On the Walls of a dull furnished Room
I hang old photos of my childhood girls -
With breaking heart I sit, elbow on table,
Chin on hand, studying
the proud eyes of Helen,
the weak mouth of Jane,
the golden hair of Susan.

2 Weird Happenings in Haarlem No.1
Four windmills, acquaintanceships,
were spied one morning eating tulips.
Noon
and the entire city flips
screaming: Apocalypse! Apocalypse!

2 Weird Happenings in Haarlem No.2
O people! my people!
something weirdly architectural
like a rackety cannibal
came to Haarlem last night
and ate up a canal!

Italian Extravaganza
Mrs. Lombardi’s month-old son is dead.
I saw it in Rizzo’s funeral parlour,
A small purplish wrinkled head.
They’ve just finished having high mass for it;
They’re coming out now
they’re too small to off it.
The original release called *Rags, Blues and Parodies* was recorded by Bob Auger at Rosslyn Hill Chapel, Hampstead, London, on 9 December 1985 and produced by Alison Wenham and John Kehoe for Conifer Records Ltd. Piano: Bösendorfer Imperial. For this CD Peter Dickinson has made new recordings of *Concerto Rag* and *Hymn-Tune Rag* and added first recordings of *Three Satie Transformations* and *Patriotic Rag* all made at Potton Hall, Suffolk, on 30 October 1999. The engineer was Tryggvi Tryggvason; he and John Kehoe were producers; and the Steinway piano was tuned and regulated by John Eastoe.

Dickinson’s music is published by Novello & Co. Ltd., 8/9 Frith Street, London W1V 5TZ (music@musicsales.co.uk) or G.Schirmer Inc., 257 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10010 (USschirmer@mscgis.com).