

WORKS BY AARON COPLAND, SAMUEL BARBER, DANA WILSON, CHRISTIAN BERG, SIR RICHARD RODNEY BENNETT

**INTERSECTIONS:  
CHARACTER PIECES IN  
THE JAZZ IDIOM**  
**JONATHAN SOKASITS**  
**PIANO**

TROY1684

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## Background

This recording presents but a sampling of the wealth of jazz-inspired character pieces. In the nineteenth century, the character piece—shorter, expressive pieces often cast in ternary form and bearing evocative titles such as nocturne, impromptu, ballade, prelude, song without words—supplanted the sonata as the primary vehicle for many composers of piano music.

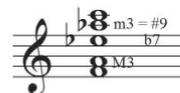
Earlier in our history, American composers and performers pursuing careers in art music looked to European masters for their training and inspiration. With the rise in popularity of the distinctly American art form, jazz, however, the direction seemed to reverse as European composers including Debussy, Hindemith, Ravel, and Stravinsky found ways to incorporate this exciting new American art form into their music in the first decades of the twentieth century.

It is not surprising that many American composers draw upon this native language, jazz, for inspiration in their art music as well. This recording explores the variety of ways that composers integrate elements of jazz—the engaging rhythms, extended harmonies, alternate scales and modes, and sense of improvisation—into their writing.

## Aaron Copland *Four Piano Blues*

Strictly speaking, Copland's *Four Piano Blues* are not blues: they do not use the twelve-bar blues progression. They do possess many harmonic, rhythmic, and aesthetic qualities to warrant the title. These four modest but engaging works took the composer over twenty years to gather into a set. The earlier pieces, *Blues 2* and *4*, come from the late 1920's and early 1930's, and share more than a kinship of their time of composition. Both use the same recurring open-voiced F major to G major chord progression in the left hand. In *Blues 2*, these chords support a right hand melody based on a clashing D pentatonic scale. In *Blues 4*, the piece most like tradi-

tional jazz, the tonality is unambiguously F major, decorated with flatted sevenths and sharpened ninths directly from the blues scale. The iconic sharpened-ninth chord, which will be heard throughout this recording, essentially juxtaposes major and minor thirds separated by octave displacement. (Fig. 1)



By contrast, *Blues 1* and *3* are from the late 1940's. These pieces show a much more elastic, improvisational sense of meter, freely moving among time signatures from 5/8 to 6/8 to 7/8 and 8/8, all to fit the mood and organic growth of each motive and phrase. The harmonic language is also more sophisticated, often incorporating extended harmonies that stack ninths and elevenths upon more customary seventh chords.

## Samuel Barber *Excursions, Op. 20*

Barber's *Four Excursions* are not solely jazz-inspired, but more broadly explore different facets of musical Americana. The first *Excursion* features a relentless boogie-woogie left hand. Barber's innovation is replacing the traditional broken seventh chord ostinato with perfect fourths (shown P4), a favored interval of his. (Fig. 2)



Against this figure, the right hand plays syncopated “blue notes” that gradually wander further afield harmonically until the final page. Here Barber reveals the harmonic hypothesis underlying the work—the juxtaposition of C major and C minor triads, suggesting the sharped ninth chord. The second *Excursion* is a clever journey through the standard blues chord progression. Barber artfully weaves together many melodic jazz clichés, but avoids predictability by dwelling on certain chords a little longer or shorter than expected through adding or removing beats from some measures. The composer travels through four “choruses” of the blues progression, but ends abruptly mid-phrase in the final chorus. The third *Excursion* is a variation set on the cowboy song “Streets of Laredo.” It is noteworthy for the air of improvisation created by juxtaposing independent rhythmic groupings in the melody and accompaniment (groups of 7 vs. 8; 5 vs. 8, etc.): imagine a singer and accompanist only rarely aligning rhythmically. The fourth *Excursion* is pure Americana; sounds emulating fiddles and banjos provide a cheerful conclusion to the set.

### **Dana Wilson *Sound Travels***

Dana Wilson’s works have been commissioned and performed by numerous prestigious ensembles and soloists. He has received grants from, among others, the National Endowment for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, New England Foundation for the Arts, New York State Council for the Arts, Arts Midwest, and Meet the Composer. His compositions have been performed throughout the United States, Europe, and East Asia. They have received several prizes, including the Sudler International Composition Prize and the Ostwald Composition Prize, as well as awards from the International Trumpet Guild and the International Horn Society, and can be heard on over twenty recording labels.

Dana Wilson holds a doctorate from the Eastman School of Music, and is the Charles A. Dana Professor of Music Emeritus in the School of Music at Ithaca College. He has been a Yaddo Fellow (at Yaddo, the artists’ retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York), a Wye Fellow at the Aspen Institute, a Charles A. Dana Fellow, and a Fellow at the Society for Humanities, Cornell University. ([danawilson.org](http://danawilson.org))

According to the composer, *Sound Travels*

“explores, among other things, ambiguity. There are elements in the first movement suggesting certain established piano styles and yet never really arriving there. The second movement combines elements of contemporary “classical” styles with those of jazz and primordial conjurings, never living in one place or another...The title is intended to reflect this ambiguity: if ‘sound’ is considered a noun and ‘travels’ a verb, the title has a very different meaning than if ‘sound’ is an adjective and ‘travels’ a noun.”

The first movement, *Take me inside*, is a rhapsodic musing on sharped ninth chords and the major and minor sonorities that arise from them. This same chord pervades the breathless second movement, *Drive me home*. Here again we encounter the juxtaposition of C major and minor, which will propel us through this movement to the wild conclusion.

### **Christian Berg *Selected Piano Works***

Bassist Christian Berg teaches jazz studies at Central State University and Otterbein University (both in Ohio). He holds a Master of Arts in Theory and Composition from Montclair State College and a Bachelor of Music in Double Bass Performance from the Manhattan School of Music. Berg enjoys an active career as performer and re-

cording artist with many leading jazz musicians. He is also active as a composer and arranger whose songs, jazz compositions, chamber pieces, orchestral works, and big band arrangements have been performed and recorded by many artists. He has also written original music for film and television, musical theatre, and video games.

Berg's dozen or so piano compositions were often inspired while teaching his piano students. When a student would arrive at a lesson with a particular musical or technical issue, Berg would often write a piece to teach that concept. *Fanfare* explores perfect fourths and fifths both melodically and harmonically. This brief sixteen-measure work is a delicate essay that demonstrates how one melodic gesture can continually be reimagined through different harmonizations. *Janizonis* is a Latin-influenced exploration of seventh chords with sustained fourths, presented in blocked form at the opening and at strategic points throughout the piece. At the composer's suggestion, I improvise through an entire chorus before restating the main theme. *The Lighthouse* is a haunting piece whose outer sections feature a left-hand theme, reminiscent of the melodic capabilities of the composer's own instrument, the bass.

### **Dana Wilson *Persona***

*Persona* for piano solo was written on commission from the Nebraska Music Teachers Association; I presented its premiere at the 2008 NMTA State Conference. As in *Sound Travels*, one can hear Wilson's highly personal blend of many disparate influences, including his background as a jazz pianist. In March of 2009, the composer replaced the final movement to conclude the set with a "colorful burner" that "provides more weight to the whole."

Following is an excerpt of the composer's remarks on the work:

"*Persona* is a Latin term referring to an actor's face mask (literally from *per sonare* which means 'to sound through')....Psychologist Carl Jung used the term to suggest that people put on various psychological masks to express who they are in different settings...sometimes appearing to have very different personalities as a result."

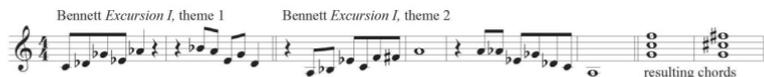
"This piece is an exploration of this phenomenon. By placing very simple melodic material (primarily the pitch interval of a third, and to some degree the major seventh) in dramatically varied contexts, it becomes transformed and appears to take on very different personalities or roles. Causing the material to 'sound through' a variety of dynamics, registers, harmonies and textures allows us to glean a full sense of its meaning."

The first piece features constantly shifting meters, and juxtaposes hammering chords at the extremes of the piano with gentler chords in the central register. The composer likened these sudden dynamic shifts to closing the window on the noisy bustle of life going on outside one's room. The second movement features a meandering theme that explores the conflict between major and minor thirds. The third movement is a breathless exploration of running half-steps and their inversion, major sevenths, often played by both hands in unison. After generating a torrent of energy, this piece quietly slithers away. The fourth movement is a poetic meditation again exploring major and minor thirds in extended harmonies drawn directly from the jazz idiom. The final movement opens with shimmering seconds alternating between hands; a breakneck ragtime full of spiky dissonances emerges from this enveloping haze.

### Sir Richard Rodney Bennett *Excursions*

English composer Sir Richard Rodney Bennett pursued three diverse and seemingly incompatible career paths with equal success. He garnered Academy Award nominations for three of his many film scores: *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1967), *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971), and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974). After relocating to the United States in the 1970's, Bennett's career as a jazz pianist flourished, first through arranging for and accompanying many notable singers, and then accompanying himself. Bennett has the distinction of being the first pupil that serial composer Pierre Boulez accepted. Bennett gave the English premiere of Boulez's formidable *First Sonata* and many other cutting-edge modernist piano works. Until the mid-1990's, Bennett enjoyed great success in writing serial music of striking beauty and clarity. The three *Excursions* of 1993 foretell a turning point in his career during which the composer abandoned this style of writing in favor of a decidedly tonal language.

One can almost trace this metamorphosis of styles through the course of the *Excursions*. The first movement presents a five-note opening theme whose second phrase is an inversion of the first. The second contrasting melodic idea uses the same intervals and inversion procedures. True to his serial training, Bennett reveals the harmonic possibilities latent in these melodic gestures by extracting both quartal and dominant seventh/thirteenth chords from the melody to serve as the harmonic underpinning of the movement. (Fig. 3)



The second *Excursion* uses the standard twelve-bar blues progression with a chromatic melody of broken thirds with many extended harmonies. Retracing the melodic contours of the themes of the first *Excursion*, Bennett presents five statements of the blues progression that modulate from the tonic F major to F-sharp major, B minor, C major, and back to F major. (Fig.4)



The boisterous final *Excursion* could only have been written by someone well-versed in the jazz language. Bennett keeps everyone on their toes by removing beats from measures at the end of each major phrase before modulating through different keys.

—Jonathan Sokasits

### About the performer:



Jonathan Sokasits is Professor of Piano at Hastings College (Nebraska), where he teaches studio piano and class piano, piano literature, piano pedagogy, and chamber music. He has previously served as Assistant Professor at Ithaca College, and Instructor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dr. Sokasits holds Master of Music and Doctor of Musical Arts degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he was a student of Howard Karp and three-time recipient of prestigious Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation Graduate Fellowships. He holds the Bachelor of Music in Music Education and Applied Music from Ithaca College.

Dr. Sokasits is active performing in solo, duo, and chamber recitals. He has appeared as soloist with the Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp Festival Band, Hastings College Concert Band, Hastings Symphony Orchestra, UW-Madison Symphony Orchestra, Madison Chamber Players, Northwest Wind Symphony, and the Ithaca College Wind Ensemble, with whom he recorded Karel Husa's *Concertino for Piano and Wind Ensemble* under the supervision of the composer. Dr. Sokasits appears on Mark Custom Records (with the Ithaca College Wind Ensemble and the Ithaca Children's Chorus) and Albany Records (with flutist Leonard Garrison). Sokasits has appeared in recital with the Chiara String Quartet, Oakwood Chamber Players, Petrella percussion and piano duo, Nebraska Chamber Players, and numerous faculty colleagues and students.

Dr. Sokasits is a regular presenter at conferences of professional organizations including the Music Teachers National Association and the College Music Society. A devotee of contemporary music, he has worked with composers including Christian Berg, Karel Husa, John Psathas, Christopher Rouse, and Dana Wilson, whose piano pieces, *Persona—Five Pieces for Piano* and *Constellations—Eleven pieces for piano inspired by jazz and the blues*, were given their premiere performances by Sokasits. In the summers, Dr. Sokasits serves on the piano faculty at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in Michigan.

### **Acknowledgments**

Recording location: Edith Blodgett Recital Hall, Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp, Twin Lake, Michigan

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Recording Engineer: Steve Albert, Station Manager, Blue Lake Public Radio

Piano Technician: Dave Postma

Piano: Bösendorfer Imperial

Editing: Steve Albert and Jonathan Sokasits

Bio photo: Kristen Laing (kristenlaingphotography.com)

Cover photo: Jonathan Sokasits — Lake Michigan sunset at the Old Channel near Montague, Michigan

I would like to thank the Stansell Family and the staff at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp for graciously allowing me to record this disc at the camp during the off-season. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my recording engineer and friend Steve Albert.

I wish to acknowledge the support of the Music Department (chair, Robin Koozer) and the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost (dean, Gary Johnson) of Hastings College. This recording project arose from a sabbatical to study jazz; it would not have been possible without the support of release time and faculty development funds and discretionary grants from my department and college. As I took my first steps in studying the jazz language, numerous friends generously and patiently shared their time, talents, and expertise. They include bassist and composer Christian Berg; pianist Phillip Burkhead; pianist, author, and teacher Phil DeGreg; saxophonist Eric Koppa; and trombonist Marc LaChance.

For Karen

Aaron Copland—*Four Piano Blues* New York/London: Boosey & Hawkes, Inc.

Samuel Barber—*Excursions, Op. 20* New York/London: G. Schirmer, Inc.

Richard Rodney Bennett—*Excursions for piano solo*. London: Novello Publishing, Ltd.

Christian Berg—*Fanfare; Janizonis; The Lighthouse* (available from the composer)

Dana Wilson—*Sound Travels* (available from the composer)

Dana Wilson—*Persona: five pieces for piano* (available from the composer)

# INTERSECTIONS: CHARACTER PIECES IN THE JAZZ IDIOM

## JONATHAN SOKASITS PIANO

### Aaron Copland

*Four Piano Blues*

- |   |                    |        |
|---|--------------------|--------|
| 1 | Freely poetic      | [2:38] |
| 2 | Soft and languid   | [2:47] |
| 3 | Muted and sensuous | [2:50] |
| 4 | With bounce        | [1:19] |

### Samuel Barber

*Excursions, Op. 20*

- |   |                     |        |
|---|---------------------|--------|
| 5 | Un poco allegro     | [3:23] |
| 6 | In slow blues tempo | [3:54] |
| 7 | Allegretto          | [3:28] |
| 8 | Allegro molto       | [2:46] |

### Dana Wilson

*Sound Travels*

- |    |                |        |
|----|----------------|--------|
| 9  | Take me inside | [4:00] |
| 10 | Drive me home  | [4:54] |

### Christian Berg

*Fantasia*

- |    |  |        |
|----|--|--------|
| 11 |  | [1:20] |
|----|--|--------|

- |    |                  |        |
|----|------------------|--------|
| 12 | <i>Janizoris</i> | [3:57] |
|----|------------------|--------|

- |    |                       |        |
|----|-----------------------|--------|
| 13 | <i>The Lighthouse</i> | [1:59] |
|----|-----------------------|--------|

### Dana Wilson

*Persona for piano*

- |    |  |        |
|----|--|--------|
| 14 | Hammering                              | [1:59] |
| 15 | Freely, reflective but quasi-rhapsodic | [2:06] |
| 16 | Relentless                             | [1:49] |
| 17 | Intimate, timeless                     | [2:16] |
| 18 | Warm and colorful but insistent        | [2:22] |

### Sir Richard Rodney Bennett

*Excursions for piano solo*

- |    |               |        |
|----|---------------|--------|
| 19 | Vivo          | [3:37] |
| 20 | Andante lento | [4:30] |
| 21 | Allegro       | [2:51] |

Total Time = 60:57



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