

# BAGATELLES

Piano music by Bernard Hughes

Matthew Mills *piano*

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|     |                                                                            |      |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| I.  | Song of the Walnut                                                         | 1:31 |
|     | <b>Partita Contrafacta</b>                                                 |      |
| 2.  | I. Boogie-woogie – <i>instead of a Prelude (after L. Couperin)</i>         | 3:58 |
| 3.  | II. Tango – <i>instead of an Allemande (after J.S. Bach)</i>               | 2:07 |
| 4.  | III. Ländler – <i>instead of a Courante (after H. Purcell)</i>             | 2:36 |
| 5.  | IV. Boléro – <i>instead of a Sarabande (after E. Jacquet de la Guerre)</i> | 1:52 |
| 6.  | V. Halling – <i>instead of a Gavotte (after J.P. Rameau)</i>               | 1:38 |
| 7.  | VI. Mazurka – <i>instead of a Minuet (after G.F. Handel)</i>               | 2:04 |
| 8.  | VII. Tarantella – <i>instead of a Gigue (after F. Couperin)</i>            | 1:54 |
| 9.  | Song of the Button                                                         | 1:48 |
|     | <b>Bagatelles</b>                                                          |      |
| 10. | I. Study: for dexterity in alternating between the hands                   | 1:32 |
| 11. | II.                                                                        | 0:40 |
| 12. | III.                                                                       | 1:26 |
| 13. | IV. footprints                                                             | 1:42 |
| 14. | V. Study: for accuracy in the playing of double octaves                    | 0:54 |
| 15. | VI. If Eros laughs                                                         | 1:13 |
| 16. | VII. Bog-Face                                                              | 1:40 |
| 17. | VIII. 26th April 1827, morning                                             | 1:17 |
| 18. | IX. Study: for evenness in executing scale passages                        | 0:59 |
| 19. | X. Grazioso                                                                | 1:07 |

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|     |       |                              |       |
|-----|-------|------------------------------|-------|
| 20. | XI.   |                              | 1:48  |
| 21. | XII.  | Nocturne                     | 0:38  |
|     |       | <b>Miniatures</b>            |       |
| 22. | I.    | Melody                       | 0:36  |
| 23. | II.   | Danny's Dance                | 0:48  |
| 24. | III.  | Simple Canon                 | 0:38  |
| 25. | IV.   | Walse                        | 0:39  |
| 26. | V.    | Dialogue                     | 0:56  |
| 27. | VI.   | Tuesday's Tune               | 0:27  |
| 28. | VII.  | Cat's Cradle                 | 0:34  |
| 29. | VIII. | Bist du                      | 2:40  |
| 30. | IX.   | Molly's Tune                 | 0:35  |
| 31. | X.    | Fughetta                     | 1:42  |
| 32. | XI.   | Anacharsis Cloots            | 1:37  |
|     |       | <b>Three Studies</b>         |       |
| 33. | I.    | Count Me Out                 | 2:46  |
| 34. | II.   | The Cornice Fish Passacaglia | 2:54  |
| 35. | III.  | False Alarm                  | 2:35  |
| 36. |       | O du Liebe meiner Liebe      | 5:50  |
| 37. |       | Strettos and Striations      | 9:35  |
| 38. |       | Cradle Song                  | 1:17  |
|     |       | Total playing time           | 70:51 |

# THE MUSIC

This album brings together pretty much all my music for solo piano written over the course of more than 30 years, the earliest from when I was still at school and the latest written just weeks before being recorded, in October 2022. The inspiration was my pianist and friend, Matthew Mills, who suggested the project and who has put untold hours into learning and animating the music, some of which is very straightforward, and lots of which is very much not.

And this variety is very much the point for me. As in all aspects of my compositional work, I don't have a single piano 'style', but cut my cloth according to the occasion. Although there are several of techniques, textures and devices I return to over and over again – as will be obvious to anyone listening straight through – there is also a huge range of approach, from music written for piano beginners up to the most virtuosic I could imagine, and from simple blink-and-you-miss-them melodies to ferocious, post-minimalist studies. In some cases, I don't know what possessed me.

The programme opens with one of the pieces closest to my heart. *Song of the Walnut* was written for my son while *in utero*, 'the walnut' being the way in which my wife and I referred to him before he was born, based on his size when we first knew of him. He is by now very much not walnut-sized. Neither is my daughter Matilda button-sized, although she was when *Song of the Button* was written, as her matching pre-birth gift. I understood even then the potential perils of not doing them a piece each.

The *Partita Contrafacta* – 'counterfeit partita' – was written especially for Matthew Mills to premiere on this disc. It is in some ways simple in conception, in some ways convoluted. I like the suite form, and the baroque idea of each movement having a single 'affect', the necessary contrast coming between, rather than within, the individual dances. As is clear across my output, I like to build pieces on pre-existing pieces, and in this case each movement of the *Partita Contrafacta* is based on something by a baroque composer of suites (although the origin pieces don't all come from suites). I had the idea of taking the typical baroque suite dances and replacing them with unlikely alternatives, and so I switch the conventional allemande for a tango, the minuet for a mazurka, and so on. Finally, I bind it all together by each movement starting with the last note of the previous one.

In a way, the precise identities of the source material don't matter, as my pieces need to stand or fall on their own merits. But I spent a long time finding these sources, and some of the transformations I wrought on them entertain me greatly. The 'Boogie-woogie' is based on an unmeasured prelude by Louis Couperin, and is an *homage* to the player piano studies of Conlon Nancarrow. The 'Tango' takes the chord sequence of the final movement of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* and nods to Piazzolla. The 'Ländler' gives a bucolic, slightly drunken lilt to the sombre march from Purcell's *Funeral Music for Queen Mary*. The 'Boléro' re-imagines a sarabande by Elizabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, the 'Halling' a famous bit of Rameau, and the 'Mazurka' a not-famous bit of Handel. The 'Tarantella' detained me the longest, until I happened on the solution of putting a François Couperin gigue into the minor, and the rest flowed.

The *Bagatelles* date from the late 1990s and early 2000s and, as with the whole album, aim at a diversity and variety of sound and texture. The three 'studies' are insanely difficult parodies of Czerny, for alternating hands, for double octaves and for scales (the tones and semitones derived from bell-ringing patterns). Movements 4, 8 and 12 are based, like the *Partita*, on pre-existing pieces: respectively, Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige* (from the first book of preludes), a standalone Schubert allegretto (containing within it the most extraordinarily unlikely chord in the whole of Schubert), and a John Field nocturne (this movement is dedicated to the memory of my friend Alan Sizer). Of the others, 'If Eros laughs' was dedicated to Paul and Bjørg Lewis on their wedding, and 'Bog-Face', a setting of a haunting poem by Stevie Smith, is dedicated to Matthew Mills, who gave the premiere of the complete *Bagatelles*.

The *Miniatures* are a graded sequence of 11 short pieces, from beginner music to about ABRSM grade 5 standard. Some are very old: the 'Walse', 'Dialogue' and 'Fughetta' all dating from the early 1990s, when I was still at school. 'Tuesday's Tune' is dedicated to Juanita Sharp, 'Molly's Tune' to Molly Sharp – and 'Anacharsis Cloots' to my son Pen Hughes, aka 'the walnut'. I am always determined, in my music for non-professionals, never to condescend, and I take these little pieces as seriously as the more overtly serious ones.

This also applied to the *Three Studies*, the first and third of which were written for St Paul's Girls' School, where I have worked since 2015, with the middle one added later. They are all attempts to engage with aspects of minimalism and a pianism shorn of romantic excess. I am interested in hands getting out of sync, of patterns set up only to break down. There is a stricter process in 'The Cornice Fish Passacaglia' (the phrase inspired by my school-mate Paulo Saldanha). Loosely following the 'escalator series' principle of Piers Hellawell, the repeating phrase rises from the bottom of the texture to the very top of the piano keyboard.

*O du Liebe meiner Liebe* is the only piece on this album to have been previously recorded. It was commissioned by Ted and Jenny Salmon for William Howard's *Contemporary Long Songs* project, and premiered by him in 2017. It recomposes an astonishing canonic Fauré prelude (op. 103, no. 6) using a rotational technique that I learned from my teacher Param Vir many years ago, before adding a Bach chorale into the mix.

This same rotational technique is behind every note of *Strettos and Striations*, the biggest piano piece I have ever written, and the most strictly systematic. It was commissioned and premiered by its dedicatee Jakob Fichert in 2005. It starts from another of my kind-of-minimalist textures, which gathers frenetic energy to a dizzying climax, before the calm seas of the final section. After which excitement the improvisational *Cradle Song* is a quiet goodnight to end the album.

I must pay tribute to Matthew Mills for his work on this project, approaching my most unreasonable demands with a commitment to getting things 'just-so'. I am forever in his debt. Likewise engineer and editor John Croft, the third leg of our musical stool, whose skill and musical understanding never fails to delight and amaze me.

Lastly, my thanks must of course go to my wife Kate Hughes for her unfailing love and support through this, as through all the other projects, both musical and familial.

BERNARD HUGHES, LONDON, FEBRUARY 2023

# BIOGRAPHIES

## **Bernard Hughes - composer**

Bernard Hughes's music has been performed by ensembles including the BBC Singers and the London Mozart Players at major British venues including the Royal Albert Hall and St Paul's Cathedral. His music has won a number of awards both in the UK and internationally and is regularly broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in the UK. Bernard Hughes's BBC commission *Birdchant* was premiered at the Proms festival in August 2021. This was the culmination of Bernard's long relationship with the BBC Singers, which also included a major portrait concert in January 2020, leading to *I Sing of Love* being nominated for an Ivor Novello Composer Award. An album of Bernard Hughes's choral music, *I am the Song*, performed by the BBC Singers, was released in 2016. His orchestral works for family concerts, *Bernard & Isabel* and *The Knight Who Took All Day* are frequently performed around Britain and were recorded by the Orchestra of the Swan on a release from February 2020. In 2015 he provided music for the comedy film *Bill*, a fantastical account of Shakespeare's early years. A second album of choral music, *Precious Things*, sung by the Epiphoni Consort, was released in May 2022 and was described by Judith Weir as 'choral music as we rarely hear it - generous, light-footed, surprising.' Bernard lives in London where he is Composer-in-Residence at St Paul's Girls' School, a position he has held since 2015. He is a keen cricket fan, both as a watcher, a player and as chairman of Chiswick Cricket Club in London.



## Matthew Mills - piano

For almost three decades, Matthew Mills has enjoyed a busy and diverse freelance career as a pianist, composer, and conductor. With a repertoire encompassing music from five centuries, he has performed across the UK as a soloist, chamber musician, and accompanist, in addition to establishing a reputation as a sympathetic and creative dance accompanist.

A committed supporter of young composers and contemporary music, Matthew founded and directed a contemporary music ensemble at Royal Holloway, University of London, with whom, assisted by his own conducting students, he led workshops and performed works by student composers, as well as established twentieth-century names. He has enjoyed a long collaboration with the British composer Bernard Hughes, having given the first performance of his *Bagatelles* for piano and participated in the first performances of his chamber opera *Dumbfounded!* at the Riverside Studios, London.

Matthew studied at the Universities of Oxford and London, and at Trinity College of Music, London. His teachers have included Christopher Elton (piano), Daryl Runswick, Andrew Lovett, and Simon Holt (composition), and Gregory Rose (conducting). An award from Oxford University enabled a period of specialist study of contemporary piano repertoire with Rolf Hind, and he has appeared in masterclasses in composition with Michael Finnissy and George Benjamin, and in piano with John Lill and Rosalyn Tureck.





Matthew Mills - Recording session



Matthew Mills



John Croft and Bernard Hughes



Bernard Hughes

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Session photos and photos of Matthew Mills: Bernard Hughes

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Bernard Hughes - composer