TOCCATA CLASSICS

Piano Sonata in E minor
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Producer-engineer: Alex Van Ingen
Editor: Will Brown

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Editor: Jennifer Howells
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TOCCATA CLASSICS

Charles O'BRIEN

Complete Piano Music Volume One

Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 14
Scottish Scenes, Op. 17
Scottish Scenes, Op. 21
Two Waltzes, Op. 25

Warren Mailley-Smith, piano

FIRST RECORDINGS

CHARLES O'BRIEN: A SCOTTISH ROMANTIC REDISCOVERED

by John Purser

Charles O'Brien was born in 1882, in Eastbourne, where his parents, normally based in Edinburgh, were staying for the summer season. His father, Frederick Edward Fitzgerald O'Brien, had worked as a trombonist in the first orchestra to be established in Eastbourne and there, in 1881, he had met and married Elise Ware. They would return there now and again, perhaps to visit her family, whose roots were in France: Elise's grandfather had been a Girondin who had plotted against Robespierre and, in the words of Charles O'Brien's son, Sir Frederick,[1] 'had to choose between exile and the guillotine. He chose the former and escaped to England, hence the Eastbourne connection'.[2] Elise died tragically in 1919, after being struck by an army vehicle.

As well as the trombone, Frederick Edward O'Brien played violin and viola and attempted, unsuccessfully, to teach his grandchildren the violin: 'it was like snakes and ladders – one minor mistake and we had to start at the beginning again', Sir Frederick recalled.[3]

Music went further back in the family than Charles' father. His grandfather, Charles James O'Brien (1821–76) was also a composer and played the French horn, and his great-grandfather, Cornelius O'Brien (1775 or 1776–1867), who was born in Cork, was principal horn at Covent Garden.

Charles O'Brien's musical education was of the best. One of his early teachers was Thomas Henry Collinson (1858–1928) – father of the Francis Collinson who wrote *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland*.[4] The elder Collinson was organist at St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh, as well as conductor of the Edinburgh Choral Union, in which he was succeeded by O'Brien himself. Charles O'Brien graduated with a B.Mus. from Pembroke College, Oxford, in 1907, and a D. Mus. from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1926. During this time, in Edinburgh and by correspondence, he took lessons in

[1] Sir Frederick O'Brien (1917–2012) was a leading QC and was knighted for services to the legal profession.
[2] Information from Sir Frederick O'Brien.
[3] *Ibid.*
[4] Routledge, London, 1966. Francis Collinson (1898–1984) was also a folksong collector and music director of the BBC radio programme *Country Magazine*.

The award-winning concert-pianist **Warren Mailley-Smith** has made his solo debuts to critical acclaim at Wigmore Hall in London and Carnegie Hall in New York. In 2011 he made his debut with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in a performance of Beethoven's 'Emperor' Concerto.

He studied at the Royal College of Music where he won numerous postgraduate prizes, including a Countess of Munster Award and the French Piano Music Prize. He then took further private studies with Peter Feuchtwanger and Ronald Smith.

Warren's solo career now sees him performing in festivals and concert venues across the UK, accepting invitations from further afield to perform in Europe, the Far East and the USA. His concerto repertoire includes works by Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Mozart, Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky, and he works regularly with duo partners Rowena Calvert (cello), Susan Parkes (soprano) and Matt Jones (violin).

He has received over thirty invitations to perform for the British Royal Family, at Buckingham Palace, Highgrove House and Sandringham House and is also in demand as a teacher.

He has recorded eight CDs, including four discs of Beethoven and Mozart sonatas and popular pieces by Chopin and Liszt on the Sleeveless label, as well as *Romantic Cello* and a live-in-concert DVD, and, more recently, recital CDs of music by Gershwin and Rachmaninov. A review in *Fanfare* commented of his Chopin recording: 'His "Revolutionary" *Etude* and G-Minor *Ballad*, for example, are quite electrifying, while his "Raindrop" Prelude and Db-Major *Nocturne* are truly heartfelt and touching'. Another *Fanfare* reviewer, of the Liszt disc, found that 'I especially enjoyed the sparkling colors of his high-octane *Jeux d'eaux* and the spontaneous phrasing of his*Rigoletto Paraphrase*'.

His website can be found at www.warrenmailley-smith.com.

***Deux Valses*, Op. 25**

Although the *Deux Valses*, Op. 25, belong in the ballroom, they are intimate pieces, composed with the lightest of touches. The first, 'L'Adieu' 5, expresses a sweet reluctance, more polite than heartfelt, as though any separation is to be but brief. The melody of the second, 'Souvenirs' 6, is first heard in the tenor voice, but the soprano responds, and the central Trio takes a delightful spin around the ballroom floor before returning to the opening mood of fond memories.

***Scottish Scenes*, Op. 17**

Scottish Scenes, Op. 17, was composed in 1917. O'Brien makes good use of typical Scottish dotted rhythms, hints of pentatonic melody and underlying drones. These pieces are entertaining images for the drawing-room, drawn from a delightful musical sketchbook. The first of them, 'Moorland' 7, pictures the moors in varying weathers, its central section sunny by comparison with the more rugged and misty moods which flank it. The summery start of 'Voices of the Glen' 8 soon turns sterner. These are the voices of nature, as though a brief but dramatic rain-storm had passed over the mountains, leaving behind full streams which flow in trills around the gentle pastures of the opening music. The final piece, 'Harvest Home' 9, is a high-speed reel – pretty fast to dance, and with a central quick march over drones that happily change key. It's light-footed and full of fun.

***Scottish Scenes*, Op. 21**

The *Scottish Scenes*, Op. 21, are in similar vein to those of O'Brien's Op. 17 and also date from 1917. The opening 'Tor and Tarn' 10 blends its many Scotticisms with pianistic flourishes, allowing its more rugged character to bring the scene to a dramatic close. 'Mid the Bracken' 11 is more reflective. Its appealing song-like melody, wholly Scottish in character, is contrasted with a delicate, lilting central section. The final scene is 'Heather Braes' 12, to be played with martial decisiveness. O'Brien restrains his bravura keyboard gestures with a more airy passage or two, but in the end the drawing room expands into the grand salon, where the heather is undoubtedly in full bloom.

John Purser is the author of Scotland's Music *(Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh 2007) and an award-winning composer, poet and playwright. He is a Researcher and Lecturer at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic College on the Island of Skye, where he lives and crofts with his American wife, Barbara.*

composition from Hamish MacCunn, perhaps the best-known Scottish composer of the day,[5] who was, as usual, blunt in his comments, writing to Charles in 1903: 'As to the Variations.[6] In the first place they are unnecessarily *thick* and heavy'. MacCunn went on to write alternative versions 'instead of the splashy broken chords you use. This would be simpler and more to the purpose'.[7] But he never fully succeeded in curing O'Brien of his love of splashy broken chords, though he did acknowledge O'Brien's progress – as well he might.

> I have not time now to say more than that you have made very decided progress in these essays,[8] compared with what you showed me in Edinburgh.[9]
>
> I hope that you will persevere and go on writing, and that the Academy is flourishing.[10]

The 'Academy' in question (which, according to Sir Frederick O'Brien, appears to have been a somewhat *ad hoc* organisation) was never very large, with O'Brien himself and one or two others constituting the teaching staff. How long it survived is not known.

Some years later, MacCunn had received a copy of O'Brien's Sonata in E minor, Op. 14, for piano. He was impressed, and wrote in a letter of 27 April 1914:

> I see much to admire. It is gratifying and encouraging, in these days, to see anyone doing as you have so well done in addressing yourself to so serious and lofty a style of composition. I hope you will go on with ever increasing success and technical power.[11]

Charles recalled all this instruction (which was given freely – 'it was a labour of love on his part'[12]) with the deepest gratitude, even though it is clear that it was frequently trenchant. O'Brien reveals as much in a brief essay he prepared in 1967, for a broadcast for the centenary of MacCunn's birth.

[5] Latterly MacCunn (1868–1916) is remembered solely for his concert overture, *Land of the Mountain and the Flood*, Op. 3 (1886–87), thanks not least to its use as the theme music for the BBC television series *Sutherland's Law* in 1973–76. But for two decades, from 1882, MacCunn was regularly commissioned (by the Crystal Palace Saturday Concerts and other such bodies) to compose a series of cantatas, and *Jeanie Deans*, the first of his two operas, first produced in 1894, was also very successful.
[6] O'Brien's known compositions do not include a set of variations; this one must either have been lost or destroyed.
[7] Letter dated 12 December 1903. MacCunn's letters to O'Brien are in the possession of the O'Brien family.
[8] It is not clear what 'essays' are being referred to here.
[9] Letter in the possession of the O'Brien family.
[10] Letter in the possession of the O'Brien family.
[11] Letter in the possession of the O'Brien family.
[12] Information from Sir Frederick O'Brien.

> As a teacher of composition, MacCunn, though a Romantic composer, laid considerable stress on a Classical training particularly on the lines of *strict* counterpoint, and while always helpful he could express his opinion bluntly and *forcibly*.

One particularly interesting comment of MacCunn's, from a letter of 24 October 1903, seems to fly in the face of his other recommendations:

> You should give the freest rein to your fancy in conceiving the pattern of the variation and the firmest curb to your intellect in carrying out your design.[13]

In 1914 Charles married Helen MacDonald. Her father was a strict Presbyterian and an elder of the Kirk, and if he was around on a Sunday, there was no playing in or out of doors.[14]

After graduating in 1907, O'Brien earned his living as an organist, conductor, pianist and music-teacher in Edinburgh, where he conducted the Edinburgh Royal Choral Union and the Bach Choir (1911–20), was for many years (until 1964) Director of Music at the Royal Blind School, and later music-master at St Serf's School, Edinburgh. He also became a Director and, in 1943, Honorary Fellow of the London College of Music. He was also a life-long member of the Edinburgh Society of Musicians, proud of the fact that his father had been a founder member, and also that in the midst of war in 1942 'There has been no break in the Meetings of the E.S.M. 52 Meetings annually, and most of them extremely good'.[15] He died in 1968.

Turning to O'Brien's compositions is to enter a landscape which is often Scottish but rarely rugged. His territory is more that of the wide rolling hills of the Borders than the twisted folds and thrusts of the Highlands. But these gentler hills are not to be taken lightly. In his music there is also subtle drama. There is a Symphony in F Minor which was performed and broadcast in 1929 as well as given a later performance in the Usher Hall, Edinburgh. The concert overture, *Ellangowan*, composed in 1910, received several performances, and more recently his Clarinet Sonata was revived and published by the Hardie Press. In all his music, O'Brien's gift of melody is a delight and, though he rarely challenges the listener, he always entertains. His voice is one that deserves to be heard again and this, the first of a series of Toccata Classics recordings of O'Brien's music, is more than welcome and thoroughly rewarding.

[13] Letter in the possession of the O'Brien family.

[14] Two generations before, in Edinburgh, the father of the composer Alexander MacKenzie had to contend with the police at the door to put a stop to their quartet-playing on a Sunday. The matter was resolved with a half-crown, a dram, and the declaration that Haydn quartets were sacred music!

[15] Information from Sir Frederick O'Brien.

Sonata in E minor, Op. 14

O'Brien's Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 14, was completed on 27 July 1910, premiered by Paul della Torre in the Oak Room in Edinburgh on 28 October 1912 and published by Ricordi in 1914.

The *Allegro moderato* 1 has an almost quirky mixture of anxiety and the broader gestures of a composer-pianist accustomed to the world of the grand salon. The composer's grandson, David, also a composer, has suggested[16] this anxiousness may relate to MacDonald family opposition to O'Brien's engagement to their daughter, Helen. Indeed, O'Brien was fearful that the marriage might not take place – he courted Helen for seven years before they were married in 1914.

The opening starts as though it were going to be a two-part invention – orderly and balanced. But the E minor key and a degree of restlessness provide a troubled undercurrent to the music. The second subject steps more lightly in the relative major, and a bucolic passage, skipping over a drone, leads to the close of the exposition. The development makes fine use of rhetorical pianistic gestures, with full chords, passages in octaves and flourishes of arpeggios, and the recapitulation is regular, the second subject greeting one with jocular familiarity. Whatever the inner concerns of the movement, this music is both open-hearted and public.

The Scherzo, marked *Vivace ma non Troppo* 2, in E major bubbles to the surface like water fresh from a spring. Fleet of foot and bright as a new day, this ebullient music suggests that, whatever her family's opinion, Helen MacDonald reciprocated O'Brien's love: its easy fluidity slides into a waltz-like Trio with hints of Spanish languor, soon swept aside by the return of the Scherzo.

The *Lento cantabile* slow movement 3 opens with gentle but ardent declarations followed by a largely pentatonic theme over a drone, very much in Scottish vein. A tender exchange of phrases leads to a return of the opening material and blends with the drone. This is a beautiful and deeply affectionate meditation – perhaps a love-song to Helen MacDonald, but again its privacies are shared openly and allowed to expand into broader statements and rhapsodic gestures.

The Rondo Finale 4 is an energetic Schumannesque fantasy, but with more comfortable and tender contrasting sections, such that when the opening energies develop into a fugue, it is soon dispersed. There is a sense of triumphant fulfilment here, with its celebratory arpeggios and roulades, ending with an assertive tremolo, as much as to say 'we made it!' One wonders whether O'Brien might have played it at the time of his wedding.

[16] Telephone conversation, 10 June 2014.