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CLASSICS

A HOUSE OF GHOSTS

Francis Pott
Piano Works

Duncan Honeybourne, piano

A HOUSE OF GHOSTS

FRANCIS POTT

1	Primavera	[4.55]
2	Hunt's Bay	[11.47]
3	Le temps qui n'est plus	[5.59]
4	A Toye	[2.40]
5	Drowned Summer	[14.38]
6	1. Pageant	[2.22]
7	2. Minnelied	[2.09]
8	3. Blind Man's Buff	[1.46]
9	4. Blondel	[2.42]
10	5. Swallows	[3.09]
11	6. From another part of the wood	[2.09]
12	7. Sine Nomine	[1.49]
13	8. Never the twain...	[2.17]
14	9. Revenants	[2.29]
15	10. Walsingham	[2.40]
16	11. Yorick	[1.33]
17	12. Requiescat	[2.51]
18	Toccata	[7.10]
19	Farewell to Hirta	[7.52]
	Total timings:	[1.22.58]

DUNCAN HONEYBOURNE PIANO

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A House of Ghosts (1983-1997) is a disparate collection of stray thoughts and modest ideas which accumulated haphazardly, like an intermittent diary, alongside weightier and more ambitious works. With one or two exceptions they seek to offer something approachable, but reasonably thought-provoking, to able amateur pianists. These pieces make no apology for seeing indebtedness to an inherited past as a necessary and flexible proposition within the general spectrum of composition. The decisions and choices involved in writing music evocative of a bygone age differ little from those prompted by determined (but usually, despite itself, pointless) thirsting after independence: in both cases they're likely to define the person making them; and in the former context there's far more room for subjective creativity than the self-conscious modernist may suppose. The movements in *A House of Ghosts* do authentically reflect part of my own musical personality, even if they're still only one corner of it. Conceived essentially for domestic consumption, not the recital hall, they may be played in any order and combination. They've been succeeded in more recent years by two further dozens: *A Room at the End of the Mind* and *Gallimaufry*, with - at the time of writing - a fourth set gradually assembling itself.

1. *Pageant* originated from ensemble music for a school stage adaptation of Chaucer in 1986. It was prompted not by pageantry as such; more by the idea of a large expedition setting out on a fine April day.
2. *Minnelied* re-imagines the character of a mediaeval lute song. An anonymous, timeless inscription in 12th-century German confides that '*you're locked within my heart; the key has been lost: you must stay there for ever*'.
3. *Blind Man's Buff* evokes a mediaeval game: a stop-start affair, with the blindfolded pursuer either pausing in suspense or rushing forward to clutch his prey. Success rewards him at the end.
4. *Blondel* remembers the faithful troubadour who during the Third Crusade located the castle at Dürenstein where King Richard I was held after being taken prisoner at Vienna *en route* back to England. Blondel supposedly alerted him to friendly presence by playing and singing 'their tune' beneath the castle walls. According to legend, they had written it together and it was known only to the two of them, so Blondel had to try every castle before he heard the King respond with the refrain. What Blondel played is unknown, but might have been something in the melancholic vein of the present piece.

5. *Swallows* is a memory of lying on a hill in open country on a fine day, idly watching these graceful birds wheeling high above in a clear sky.
6. *From another part of the wood* imagines music emanating from somewhere in the forest before the singer or whistler comes into view, and watching from a concealed vantage point as he passes by.
7. *Sine Nomine* figures in titles of many 15th- and 16th-century choral or instrumental pieces. When applied to Catholic Mass settings which might have been based on the contours of a secular tune, *sine nomine* was often deployed as a judicious fig leaf concealing unsuitably ribald origins from the Papacy. But in the present case, the title denotes simply (*pace* Shakespeare) ‘*a deed without a name*’, and is innocent enough.
8. *Never the twain...* borrows its title from Kipling, if not from much earlier sources, and is barely a piece at all: merely a recurrent snatch of some archaic tune where either harmony and melody or two imitative strands keep amiably trying, and failing, to coincide in a conclusive cadence. The title’s dots suggest something that may have been going on for some time and may have yet further to run...

9. *Revenants* is a direct response to lines by T.S. Eliot in the second of his *Four Quartets*:
*...if you do not come too close,
 On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
 Of the weak pipe and the little drum
 And see them dancing round the bonfire...
 ...Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
 Mirth of those long since under earth
 Nourishing the corn...*

The following later, retrospective line appears at the end of the music in the score:

The dancers are all gone under the hill.

10. *Walsingham*: the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, in the eponymous Norfolk village, is a place of pilgrimage for members of the Roman Catholic Church. This musical evocation begins in the manner of a 16th-century fantasia for viols or virginals, but later makes a sidelong transition from ancient to modern, without losing the sovereignty of the humble triad as a harmonic building block.
11. *Yorick* is not recalled here in the melancholic tones of Hamlet, but brought back to life – although his madcap antics are tempered by nervousness. Halfway through writing this

frenetic piece, the unscheduled arrival of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* in distorted form arose from an involuntary memory of the Mad Hatter in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*:

*‘Twinkle, twinkle, little bat!
 How I wonder what you’re at!
 Up above the world you fly,
 Like a tea tray in the sky.’*

12. In extreme contrast, *Requiescat* is a leave-taking and farewell to my father, written (the manuscript score informs me) just a day after his death from pancreatic cancer on 19th October 1983. The manuscript also bears an inscription from the poetry of Jorge Luis Borges: ‘*The voices of the dead will speak to me for ever*’. Since permission to reproduce it has proven elusive, the line in its original Spanish is omitted here and from the published score.

Suitable not only for the above sequence of pieces but also for this release as a whole, the title *A House of Ghosts* is borrowed from a poem by Humbert Wolfe (1885-1940). The first and last of its four quatrains appear in the published score:

*First to describe the house. Who has not seen it
 Once at the end of an evening’s walk – the leaves
 That suddenly open, and as sudden screen it
 With the first flickering hint of shadowy eaves?*

*...Who has not seen the house? Who has
 not started
 towards the gate half-seen, and paused,
 half-fearing,
 and half beyond all fear – and the leaves parted
 again, and there was nothing in the clearing?*

Primavera (1988) is headed by six lines from the Italian poet Matteo Boiardo (c. 1440-1494), which conjure a vision of a girl picking roses at sunrise and eclipsing in beauty the spring through which she walks. A chordal theme leads to an escalating series of brief climaxes which eventually dissipate, before the theme returns beneath dewdrop-like filigree patterns.

Hunt’s Bay (1994) takes as its title an area on the Gower Peninsula in South Wales, as evoked in a poem by Vernon Watkins (1906-1967). A peremptory spread chord launches a headlong torrent of notes, rising at times to declamatory but short-lived climaxes. This elemental violence alternates with fitfully eerie moments of introspection which persist through a quieter

central passage. A return to the opening music is heralded by a jagged series of cross-currents welling up from the bass regions of the keyboard, and eventually a ferocious climax abates towards a valedictory coda or epilogue. The music ends by flickering abruptly into nothingness.

Le Temps qui n'est plus and **A Toye** both appear in *A Room at the End of the Mind*, the sequel to *A House of Ghosts*. The principal theme of *Le Temps...* originated as the slow movement of a piano concerto written in 1975 and long since withdrawn. It was re-purposed to form the basis of a piano solo in 2007. The title in French acknowledges a haunting miniature (in the same key, B flat minor) by the reclusive French composer-pianist, Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888). The score of my own take on those words is inscribed with a complete four-line poem by the Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967):

*The birds sang in the wet trees
And as I listened to them it was a hundred
years from now
And I was dead and someone else was
listening to them.
But I was glad I had recorded for him
the melancholy.*

In former times a 'toye' meant simply an amusement or diversion of any kind. Beneath the Englishness of the present **Toye** (2007) lurks some hint of my attachment to the music of Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), detectable perhaps through fluidity of texture and pianistic dress.

Drowned Summer

Almost everything about this piece is elusive. Uniquely amongst my compositions, it has undergone three revisions, having been first attempted in 1984 and then rewritten in 1987, 2006 and 2018; so the struggle towards definitive form and content has been a lengthy one. Then there is the title: aptly, *Drowned Summer* is a phrase which I believe I encountered in a poem somewhere many years ago, but which I can no longer locate and am beginning to believe I may have dreamt. This music seeks to evoke indistinct echoes of successive summer seasons, all coalescing in a single haze of partial recollection. This is encapsulated by the following fragment from a poem by Dame Edith Sitwell:

*We are the summer's children, the breath of
evening, the days
When all may be hoped for, - we are
the unreturning*

*Smile of the lost one, seen through the
summer leaves...*

The music extends its subtext by being, in part, a response to Henri Alain-Fournier's haunting novel about love, memory and coming of age, *Le Grand Meaulnes*. Lost deep in the French countryside, its eponymous hero becomes accidental interloper at a nocturnal carnival party taking place within an ancient château, falling fatefully in love after a chance encounter. The elusive '*domaine mystérieuse*' later proves impossible to find again, its dream-like memory becoming in a sense more real than the original experience. It was this order of shadowy, half-invented, half-remembered experience that provided the catalyst for *Drowned Summer*; which is why both the music's enigmatic, untraceable title and the obstinately provisional content of its first three drafts now seem part and parcel of the creative idea itself. With the fourth version I feel I have finally laid something to rest, yet I hope that this music may still communicate to the listener a kind of sonic *domaine mystérieuse*: something forever eluding capture.

Farewell to Hirta (1985)

Hirta is not a person, but an island. The archipelago of St Kilda (Hirta in Gaelic) lies

some fifty miles west of the Outer Hebrides. On its largest island lived for centuries a uniquely self-supporting community of seldom more than two hundred. St Kilda boasts the highest sea cliffs in Britain, its summit rising fourteen hundred feet sheer out of the Atlantic.

With the encroachment of ocean-going tourism in the late-19th century, the islanders experienced humiliation by visitants as from another world. They succumbed mortally to the newly imported common cold. They discovered the meaning of material wealth and, with it, envy. They lost their dignity and innocence, and their young began to leave for the mainland and beyond. Survival had depended upon an astoundingly perilous harvesting of seabirds from the vertiginous cliffs. As the able-bodied began to set their faces towards the wider world beyond, so gradually died a 'perfect' microcosm society such as our generation may ignore arguably at its peril. In 1930, with infinite sorrow but at their own request, the remaining 36 islanders were evacuated to the Scottish mainland, where, with a pragmatism depressingly typical of remote, centralized government, these people who had never before beheld a tree were given employment in the Forestry Department. The roofless cottages of Hirta's solitary village, kept by the National

Trust for Scotland in defiance of immense elemental odds, stand as a memorial to a time that is gone.

As the islands faded behind the horizon for the last time, one of those departing murmured *“May God forgive those that have taken us from St Kilda”*, and at this point the stoical islanders finally gave way to tears. On such a fine August evening as it then was, the vision of the sun setting at one’s back, away behind Boreray, the precipitous, uninhabitable north island, is such as to imprint itself upon the mind for life.

Despite its chronology of events, this music is an attempt to capture the impressions described above, and to honour the feelings of that small group who had made their final journey away a half-century earlier, one of whom was to recall, *“To me it was peace living in St Kilda and to me it was happiness, dear happiness. It was a far better place”*.

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FRANCIS POTT

Francis Pott retired in 2023 as Professor of Composition at London College of Music, University of West London. He began musical life as a chorister at New College, Oxford, subsequently holding music scholarships at Winchester College and then at Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he studied composition with Robin Holloway and Hugh Wood while also undertaking piano studies privately in London with Hamish Milne. He holds the qualifications MA and MusB from the University of Cambridge, an FLCM, a PhD and a Principal Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy.

Francis’s music has been performed and broadcast in over fifty countries worldwide, published by five major houses and widely recorded. He has received four national and two international composition prizes and in 2021 was recipient of the Medal of the Royal College of Organists, its highest award, for ‘distinguished achievement in the field of sacred choral and organ composition’. His oeuvre includes also three major works for chorus and orchestra, a violin concerto, chamber music and works for piano.

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DUNCAN HONEYBOURNE

Duncan Honeybourne enjoys a diverse profile as a pianist and in music education. Reviews have commended his “gripping performances” (*The Times*), “glittering performances” (*International Piano*), “fine, sensitive playing” (*Gramophone*) and “great technical facility and unflinching imagination” (*Musical Opinion*).

Duncan made his debut as concerto soloist at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, and the National Concert Hall, Dublin, in 1998, and gave recital debuts in London, Dublin, Paris and at

international festivals in Belgium and Switzerland. Since then he has toured extensively in the UK, Ireland and Europe as solo and lecture recitalist, concerto soloist and chamber musician, appearing at many major venues and leading festivals. His solo performances have been frequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and more than twenty networks worldwide, including French, Belgian, Austrian, Swiss and German radio, ABC (Australia) and Radio New Zealand. He has premiered over eighty solo piano works written for him by composers including John Joubert, John Casken, Cecilia McDowall and Sadie Harrison, plus the Andrew Downes Piano Concerto at Birmingham

Town Hall. Duncan has also revived many forgotten scores by composers of earlier generations and was invited by the BBC to give the world premiere of two rediscovered piano preludes by English romantic composer Susan Spain-Dunk in a live Radio 3 recital from St David’s Hall, Cardiff. Duncan’s extensive discography includes premiere recordings of piano music by Baines, Bainton, Pitfield, Greville Cooke, Christopher Edmunds, Armstrong Gibbs, Walford Davies and Imogen Holst, as well as many contemporary works. Duncan Honeybourne teaches at the Royal Academy of Music Junior Academy, the University of Southampton and Sherborne School. He has adjudicated and given masterclasses at conservatoires and universities in the UK and Ireland, and has written and published widely on music and musicians. At home in Dorset he is Founder/Artistic Director of Chamber Music Weymouth.

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Wet Evening in April by Patrick Kavanagh, quoted in full at the head of *Le Temps qui n’est plus*, is reprinted from *Collected Poems*, edited by Antoinette Quinn (Allen Lane, 2004), by kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of the late Katherine B. Kavanagh, through the Jonathan Williams Literary Agency.

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The poetic superscription and postscript to *Revenants* (no. 9 in the sequence *A House of Ghosts*) are taken respectively from sections 1 and 2 of *East Coker*, the second of the *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot. They are reproduced here by kind permission of Faber and Faber Ltd.

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