

Charles O'BRIEN

COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME TWO

THREE GRANDCHILDREN WALTZES
TWO RHAPSODIES, OP. 22
FOUR WALTZES, OP. 26
BARCAROLLE, OP. 8B
ARABESQUE, OP. 11
DAFFODILS, OP. 13

Warren Mailley-Smith

FIRST RECORDINGS

CHARLES O'BRIEN: A SCOTTISH ROMANTIC REDISCOVERED

Piano Music, Volume Two

by John Purser

Charles O'Brien was born on 6 October 1882, in Eastbourne, where his father, Frederick Edward Fitzgerald O'Brien, had worked as a trombonist in Eastbourne's first orchestra, and where, in 1881, he had met and married Elise Ware. They would return there now and again, perhaps to visit her family. Their 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', as 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. Charles himself graduated BMus from Pembroke College, Oxford, in 1907, and DMus from Trinity

¹ Sir Frederick O'Brien (1917–2012) was a leading QC who 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*.

College, Dublin, in 1926. During this time he took lessons in composition from Hamish MacCunn,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 his student'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, but after MacCunn's death of in 1916 it was moved to Glasgow and linked to the Glasgow Athenaeum, subsequently the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now The Royal Scottish Conservatoire).

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

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 preserved compositions do not include a set of variations; this one must have been either 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.

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.

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 Musical Society, 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 on 27 June 1968.

It was this writer’s pleasure to meet the composer’s son, Sir Frederick O’Brien. He loved his father’s music, played it with feeling, and possessed that same modesty and gift of gentle lyrical conversation which one senses from his father’s music. Nothing was too overt, but there were underlying certainties, not readily susceptible to convenient compromise, and yet always warm-hearted and generous.

¹² Information from Sir Frederick O’Brien

¹³ Letter in the possession of the O’Brien family.

¹⁴ Two generations before, in Edinburgh, the father of the composer Alexander MacKenzie’s 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.

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. The concert overture, *Ellangowan*, composed in 1910, received several performances and inhabits the Borders, and more recently his gentle Clarinet Sonata was revived and published by the Hardie Press. But these gentler hills are not to be taken lightly. In his music there is also subtle as well as overt drama. The Symphony in F Minor, which was performed and broadcast in 1929 as well as given a later performance in the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, is a powerful, even commanding work, with a slow movement of profound beauty.¹⁶

As with O'Brien's fellow Scottish composer and contemporary, Cecil Coles, it would be easy to brush aside their less ambitious pieces, but they are subtle, and though they may often belong in the withdrawing-room, the windows are open and breathe fresh air from the hills, and are not without their social undercurrents. This second CD of O'Brien's piano music is framed by two of his finest works for solo piano – the *Rhapsodies*, Op. 22. This is refined music, and persuasive.

Two Rhapsodies, Op. 22 (1917–18)

The first rhapsody, in E flat major [1], is one of those pieces with the lovely knack of starting after it has already begun in some other sunnier world. Here the conversational tone of Schumann gives a lightness to the mood. It was completed on 18 July 1917 – hardly a time of rejoicing in any part of Europe, but the interchanges in this work are both playful and thoughtful.

O'Brien's facility is a delight, both in the flow of his ideas and in his writing for piano. He is never heavy-handed, and the changes of pace come completely naturally. The listener is not imposed upon but led from one mood to another with skill and frequent harmonic subtleties. It is a work of magical loveliness.

Altogether a much darker work than its companion, the second of the Op. 22 rhapsodies [12] is in a decided G minor and has passages which reach beyond such indications as 'Sombre' and *Con fuoco* into a world occasionally sinister and even aggressive. These are characteristics not commonly found in O'Brien, as though he were searching a world of restlessness and doubt. The work was completed on 6 February 1918, but it would be a mistake to attempt to relate its character or that of its companion to

¹⁶ The Symphony in F minor and the fuller version of the *Ellangowan* Overture, Op. 12 (O'Brien's Op. 10 is a shorter version of the work), can be heard on Toccata Classics TOCC 0262, Volume One (of three) of the complete O'Brien orchestral music, in performances by the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra conducted by Paul Mann.

the events of the Great War. Rather, one senses in O'Brien a growing assurance and daring, especially in the harmonic implications of his passage-work which now become more enigmatic.

Four Waltzes, Op. 26 (1928)

'Tendresse' [2], the first of the *Four Waltzes*, Op. 26, consists of an introduction, waltz, trio, waltz and coda which flow seamlessly into one another, following the standard ballroom format in which 'flow' is the vital element – something that propels the dancers smoothly round the floor, in this case, with tenderness rather than excitement. If O'Brien had a partner in mind when he penned this music, she was surely very pretty. Its title notwithstanding, the second waltz, 'Joie de Vivre' [3], starts modestly enough and even the tripping rhythms of the Trio section stay well within the bounds of propriety. The engaging tune of No. 3, 'Jeunesse' [4], perhaps describes a particularly graceful youth, though the Trio section occasionally has a touch of moodiness, with a harmonic twist or two that gives these waltzes an occasional edge. By modern standards the fourth waltz, 'Extase' [5], suggests a decidedly modest ecstasy, but perhaps one should not take these titles too seriously, for they are all of a piece. Their gentle subtleties make for easy listening, easy dancing; charming and undemanding.

Arabesque, Op. 11 (1906)

The term 'arabesque' implies a decorative scheme associated with early Islamic art. In O'Brien's exemplar [6] repeated patterns are prevalent, but executed with style and variety. Both sections of this piece meet these expectations with grace. There are parallels with his Piano Sonata in E minor¹⁷ – both the bubbling Scherzo and a tender passage from the Finale.

Daffodils, Op. 13 (1910)

It would be surprising if Wordsworth's famous poem were not at least in the back of O'Brien's mind as his phrases sway to and fro like the daffodils 'fluttering and dancing in the breeze' [7]. In the middle, the breeze picks up a little and the dance suggests a waltz before returning to the opening phrases now imitated in the bass. Sweet, innocent and utterly without pretension, this is music to soothe a troubled mind.

¹⁷ Recorded by Warren Mailley-Smith on this first volume of this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0256.

Three Grandchildren Waltzes (c. 1962–63)

Of the three grandchildren, one of them, David, writes that O'Brien's son Fred

in due course married and had three children, Susan, David and Neil. Charles O'Brien delighted in his grandchildren and composed these three piano waltzes for them. They date from the early 1960s and with two children's songs are the last pieces he wrote. 'Suzanne' [8] has a charming confidence, and David is 'Un Peu Triste, Un Peu Gai' [9], the rapid changes of a child's temper beautifully captured. Neil's 'Sans Souci' [10] is a glorious melody, but by performing 'without a care', it captures the youngest grandchild's serious character and sense of fun.¹⁸

Barcarolle, Op. 8b (c. 1964–65)

O'Brien's gift for melody is as fresh as a new day, even when he is working with a well-established genre such as the barcarolle. The genre is associated with vessels gently rocking on quiet waters and particularly with Venetian gondolas and implications of love. One might compare this piece – a late piano transcription of the orchestral *Barcarolle* of 1904 [11] – with Sir Alexander MacKenzie's decidedly Scottish 'On the Loch' (the second of the three *Scenes in the Scottish Highlands*, Op. 23) and ask whether there might be something Scottish lurking behind O'Brien's work. If so, it is not to be found in the harmonies, but perhaps in the typical drone effects in the left hand, and in the beautiful clarity of the melodic thinking. This work – O'Brien's last – is a transcription of a movement from his orchestral *Suite Humoristique*, Op. 8, of 1904, originally composed while he was studying with MacCunn. This piano version was a present for his son Fred, who arranged for it to be published by the Hardie Press.

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 crafts with his American wife, Barbara.

¹⁸ E-mail from David O'Brien, 12 June 2014.

The award-winning concert pianist **Warren Mailley-Smith** has made his solo debuts at Wigmore Hall, London, and Carnegie Hall, New York, and has performed as soloist with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. In 2015–16 he will perform Chopin's complete works for solo piano over a cycle of eleven concerts at St John's, Smith Square, London.

Warren is in increasing demand as a solo concert artist, having been described recently by *Classic FM* as a 'Huge UK talent' and by *BBC Music Magazine* as 'Rising Star – Great Artist of Tomorrow. His recordings were recently featured as CD of the Week and Video of the Week on Classic FM and Classic

FM TV respectively. He has received over thirty invitations to perform for the British Royal Family at Buckingham Palace, Highgrove House and Sandringham House.

Warren 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 the late Ronald Smith.

Warren's solo career now sees him performing in festivals and concert venues across the UK, with invitations from further afield to perform in Europe and the US. His concerto repertoire includes works by Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Mozart, Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky and he has a number of chamber collaborations.

Warren is in demand as a teacher, both privately and in masterclasses, appearing regularly on the faculties of Pro Corda and Piano Week as well as regular teaching and coaching at Royal College of Music and Trinity Junior Departments.

He has recorded nine CDs – *Silhouettes, Souvenirs* (Chopin), *Moonlight Serenade* (Beethoven), Mozart piano sonatas, *Depictions* (Liszt), *Rhapsody in Blue* (Gershwin), *Romantic Cello* and, for Toccata Classics, the complete piano music of Charles O'Brien on two CDs – and a *Live in Concert* DVD, and plans are underway to record the complete works of Chopin in 2016–17.

His website can be found at www.warrenmailley-smith.com, where you can hear and watch his playing online, buy his recordings and follow his career.



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