



AMERICAN CLASSICS



PAUL REALE

Stroke of Midnight

Piano Music

John Jensen, Piano



Paul
REALE
(b. 1943)

Stroke of Midnight

	Piano Sonata No. 5 in A (1988–89/2019)	25:26
❶	... At First Sight	8:18
❷	Touch	6:22
❸	Cannot Be	5:04
❹	Happily Ever...	5:35
❺	Chocolate Soccer Ball (2018)	2:40
	Piano Sonata No. 10 ‘Sonata Piazzollana’ (2010/2019)	15:59
❻	Alberto of Barracas	4:55
❼	Waltz	4:50
❽	Waldorf Astoria	6:04
❾	Concert Étude No. 2 (2008)	5:04
	Piano Sonata No. 12 ‘Stroke of Midnight’ (2019)	19:59
❿	Dusk	6:21
⓫	Nightfall	6:48
⓬	Midnight	6:48
⓭	Beethoven for the Brain Dead (2009)	4:54

Paul Reale (b. 1943)

Stroke of Midnight: Piano Music

Spring, 2019. As I write these notes a dark cloud of impending death hangs over me. The doctors have given me one year to live. Like prisoners on death row, I embrace a possible foolish hope of a reprieve or stay of execution in the guise of experimental treatments. I think of Frank Moses, the Bruce Willis character in *RED 2*, being machine gunned by Han: (Lee Byung-hun) “Are you dead yet? (Moses) “Not yet!” This may be the first time that I interject elements of my personal life into descriptions of what are musical abstractions. It is this state of mind that inspired the *Stroke of Midnight Sonata*, and ultimately the title of this album.

This collection of piano pieces represents the widest possible variety in my repertoire and was assembled with the help of the pianist, John Jensen, the soloist on this recording with whom I have worked most of my life. He was a member of the Mirecourt Trio, for whom I wrote two trios and *Concerto Dies Irae* (available on MSR Classics, MS 1693). Jensen has also recorded three of my earlier piano sonatas on the Music & Arts label. He premiered my *Piano Concerto No. 1* in 1986. Versed in the languages of both the classical and jazz tradition, he is the ideal interpreter of my work.

I have always been fascinated with the observation that one’s life exists in memory as a series of strong images which appear to be independent in importance from real time. In *Citizen Kane*, Bernstein recalls a distant memory of a girl on a ferry that has persisted in his memory into old age. My scenario for *Piano Sonata No. 5 in A* employs a similar but more elaborate program: a lonely piano player becomes infatuated with a strange but extraordinarily beautiful woman who has just entered the bar where the protagonist is employed. His passion is inflamed by her touch on his shoulder, before she slips \$10 into his jacket pocket to play her (and coincidentally his) favorite tune. As he plays, the man who the mysterious woman is about to meet enters the bar, and the two embrace tenderly; the piano player is inwardly crushed, but he continues playing with greater and greater

ardour. In his fantasy he can make love to this woman from his keyboard: his ‘affair’ lasts but a single song.

At this point the listener might ask if the *Sonata* is program music and if the little story above must be known to understand the piece. My answer is: no, with an explanation. I remember seeing a striking photograph in which a small child reaches up, seemingly to touch a narrow vertical shaft of light projected on a wall. How my reaction changed after reading the caption: the child was blind and was feeling for the warmth of the rising sun, the only way that he could perceive the coming of day.

For some time I have felt that almost all music written since World War Two is boring, ugly, and incomprehensible, largely because of a refusal by composers to acknowledge how broad a base the musical experience has. In *Piano Sonata No. 5 in A*, most materials come from popular or jazz roots with distant classical associations, but the heart of the *Sonata* resides in the sometimes violent swings of emotion which often accompany intense infatuation. While the structure of the four movements follows the dramatic scenario outlined above, the recurrence of materials obeys rather more abstract precepts of balance and pacing (such a simultaneity is not unknown in opera). *Chocolate Soccer Ball*, the encore that accompanies the *Sonata*, has a title that comes from my observation of chocolate soccer balls in a candy store, which were on sale during the FIFA World Cup in 2018. Unable to purchase or eat them because of my illness, I fantasized partaking of the candy in extreme gluttony. Both pieces in this group represent unrealized longings for impossible objects of desire.

I first became aware of Astor Piazzolla’s music in the fall of 2001, when I purchased his 1986 album, *Tango: Zero Hour*. At that time I began an early draft of *Sonata Piazzollana*, the tenth extended piano work in the sonata series. Simultaneously, I came to the realization of the dichotomy in the present state of concert music: the almost total lack of any defined tradition, paired with an embarrassing plethora of source materials. It is under this

aesthetic umbrella that the direction of most of my later piano works was set. In general, they have been a test bed for structural and textural embarkations, which are later developed in other works. Sometimes the materials themselves show up in the new pieces (e.g. the coda of *Movement I* of the *Dance Sonata* forms the primary material for the *Finale* of my *Piano Concerto No. 2*). I know that using triadic tonal materials is risky because of the long tradition of tonality and its associated forms. However, the recent public success of works like Marquez's *Danzón No. 2* and Golijov's *St. Mark Passion* may indicate some thaw in the persistent modernist freeze. In my own work, as in these pieces, the use of accessible music (popular and classical) is not a nod to the past but a broadening of how 'classical music' might be defined today. In this age of stylistic pluralism nothing is really old fashioned.

Many times my piano sonatas themselves will take chips from the workbench or fragments from another composer's work, as in the one-movement *Sonata Rochbergiana* (*Piano Sonata No. 4*), which uses motifs from that composer's *Third String Quartet*. *Sonata Piazzollana* (*Piano Sonata No. 10*) stands somewhere between this kind of treatment and the general stylistic grafting of gestures that I use in *Sonata Brahmsiana* (*Piano Sonata No. 3*). The basic materials of the new *Sonata* use many stylistic calling cards of Astor Piazzolla: such devices as the relentless chromatic descending vamp in pieces like *Tanguedia III* or *Michelangelo '70* with its lush transposing sequences in the B section permeate all three movements of my sonata. *Alberto of Barracas*, the title of the first movement, refers to Alberto Ginastera, one of Piazzolla's major influences. It was from Ginastera that he learned the renewing persistence of rhythm in musical space. The easy sentimentality of the slow section of Piazzolla's *Contrabajasimo*, or the jazzy improvisatory character of the piano solo in the first section of *Mumuki* are suggested in the *Waltz* slow movement of my *Sonata Waldorf Astoria*, movement three, suggests the essence of New York City sophistication, in the years before 1960 when Piazzolla honed his style there.

I have featured jazz elements in many of my pieces, but here the jazz element is filtered through Piazzolla's unique rendering, richly embroidered with tango. I also have come under the spell of Piazzolla's piquant flavoring of harmony with unresolved dissonances and jagged syncopation, something that seems to bring out the best in his accordion sound. While no real quotations of Piazzolla's music are used, my new *Sonata* attempts to summon up the special rhythmic world of this hybrid musician: one foot in the popular milieu and another in classical tradition. In many ways, this synthesis represents for me the most optimistic future for concert music: some connection between popular and classical art so that both are mutually enriched. *Concert Étude No. 2* is really like a full blown sonata movement in the virtuosic Lisztian manner and serves as a stylistic counterpoint to the previous work, which is ironic and often humorous.

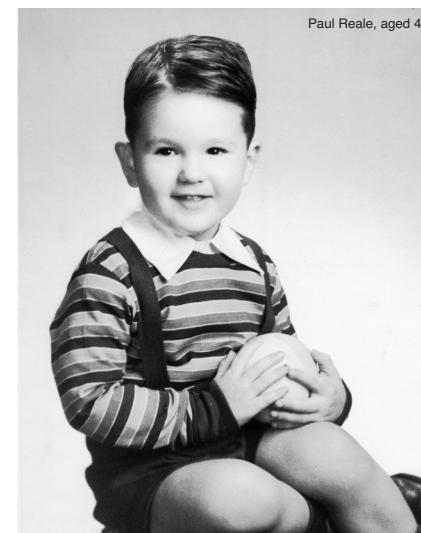
Stroke of Midnight, Piano Sonata No. 12 is a dark and spare sonata which makes constant reference to the chiming of the clock, and perhaps even church bells. This motif pervades all three movements, and it is only in the last few moments of the third movement that there is a glimmer of a heroic redemption. Here, overt virtuosic elements give way to real, hard edge development. The slow movement opening borrows material from the slow movement of *Caldera with Ice Cave* (*Piano Concerto No. 3*), and the secondary material in *Movement I* appears as the counter-material in *Movement III* of *The Cuban Concerto* (*Piano Concerto No. 4*), written around the same time and finished this spring. For me, the elements of the *Sonata* are harsh reality and a confrontation with mortality. I would not characterize the mood of this *Sonata* as sad vs. the happiness of *Sonata Piazzollana*. It is more like when a person takes stock of life and its achievements and failures.

The companion piece, *Beethoven for the Brain Dead*, is a comic romp through 20 of the master's works, strung together in a surprising pastiche. Beethoven is the master of the surprise cadence. That is why my collage of works relies on the truncation of expectation of the conclusion of famous Beethoven phrases. One example would be the opening of the piece, where the listener hears the ominous repeated G's, followed by the opening of *Op. 111*, whose

diminished seventh chord is resolved by the opening of the *Seventh Symphony*. I will leave it to the listener to guess the identity of the other works. Given the weighty nature of most of the music on this recording, it is a fitting palette cleanser.

Paul Reale

Paul Reale



Paul Reale, aged 4

Paul Reale has a catalog of compositions both large and diverse. It includes twelve piano sonatas, and the first three are available on the Music & Arts label with John Jensen as the piano soloist. *Sonata No. 6 'The Waste Land'* received a New Ariel Music Competition prize and was recorded by Jeffrey Jacob on the New Ariel label. *Piano Sonatas Nos. 7 and 8* were recently released by MSR Classics (MS 1693) with the composer as soloist on *No. 7* and Walter Ponce featured on *No. 8*. Reale's catalog also contains four piano concertos: *No. 3 'Caldera with Ice Cave'* was released in May 2019 (MS 1703), also on MSR Classics. Other recordings include two for Naxos: *Seven Deadly Sins* (9.70204) for violin and piano, and *Chopin's Ghosts* (8.559820) for cello and piano. In 2017, Reale's clarinet trio *Le Bonheur de Vivre* was chosen by the Pierrot Ensemble for *Volume 1* of their series on Ablaze Records. Reale began his education at Columbia College, where he studied English literature and chemistry. In 1967 he received a degree in composition under the tutelage of Otto Luening and Chou Wen-Chung, with whom he had been studying privately. His decision to enter the teaching profession prompted further study at the University of Pennsylvania, where he came under the influence of George Rochberg and George Crumb. A dedicated educator, Reale received the Charles and Harriet Luckman Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1995, and since 2004 has been professor emeritus at the University of California, Los Angeles.

John Jensen



John Jensen received his musical education in Los Angeles, where he attended Occidental College and the University of Southern California, studying with John Crown, Gwendolyn Koldofsky, Ingolf Dahl and Halsey Stevens. After graduating, he freelanced around Los Angeles, and became an accompanist on several US tours for Columbia Artists Management. He later became the pianist for the Mirecourt Trio and was seen in a number of venues in Southern California. The Mirecourt Trio subsequently became artists-in-residence at Grinnell College, commissioning upward of 30 works and recording several albums for the Music & Arts label. The trio also toured Europe twice and, through the efforts of Paul Reale, China, for a three week, three city tour where they held masterclasses and gave concerts. In 1990, Jensen left Grinnell for the Twin Cities (Minneapolis–St. Paul) where he worked with the Minnesota Orchestra and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and was collaborative pianist at St. Olaf College. He held the position of director of music at the First Universalist Church of Minneapolis for 22 years. Jensen is in demand as a chamber music partner for many musicians in the area. He currently teaches at the University of St. Thomas, including students interested in jazz improvisation. The music of Paul Reale has been a constant in his pianistic life, and Jensen has recorded solo piano music of Reale on the Music & Arts label.

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(b. 1943)

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|--------------|---|--------------|
| 1–4 | Piano Sonata No. 5 in A
(1988–89/2019) | 25:26 |
| 5 | Chocolate Soccer Ball (2018) | 2:40 |
| 6–8 | Piano Sonata No. 10
‘Sonata Piazzollana’
(2010/2019) | 15:59 |
| 9 | Concert Étude No. 2 (2008) | 5:04 |
| 10–12 | Piano Sonata No. 12
‘Stroke of Midnight’ (2019) | 19:59 |
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(2009) | 4:54 |

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDINGS

John Jensen, Piano

A full track list can be found inside the booklet.

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AMERICAN CLASSICS

The music of award-winning composer Paul Reale has a truly authentic American voice: eclectic in its cultural references and having a respect for tradition, but with a knife-sharp edge that keeps listeners alert. This collection of piano pieces represents the widest possible variety in his catalog chosen together with soloist John Jensen, a pianist with whom Reale has worked for most of his life and considers his ideal interpreter. Atmospheres of jazz-infused bar-life, Piazzolla’s tangos and a comic pastiche on Beethoven contrast with the dark and austere *Stroke of Midnight*, the chiming bells of which confront the harsh realities of mortality.

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Playing
Time:
74:28