

Since winning first prize in the Sixth Estonian National Piano Competition in 2002, Sten Lassmann has been regularly appearing as soloist and chamber musician. Concerts and competitions have brought him all over the world, to play in some of the most prestigious venues, such as the Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto, Purcell Room in London, the Large and Small Halls of the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in Moscow, the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatoire Concert Hall in Milan and the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing. In 2003 he toured Prokofiev's Second Concerto, and in 2010 Beethoven's Fifth, with the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, and in 2008 gave the Estonian premiere of James Macmillan's Second Concerto.

His solo repertoire includes works from the Baroque to the modern. Since 2008 he has been engaged on a project to make the first-ever recording of the complete piano works of Heino Eller, which was also his PhD project at the Royal Academy of Music in London. He is also a keen chamber musician, with a large repertoire of duo works for violin, cello and clarinet, piano trio and piano quintet.

Sten Lassmann was born in 1982 in Tallinn into a family of musicians. He started his musical education at the Tallinn Central School of Music in 1989, studying piano with Ell Saviauk and Ira Floss, and continued at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (BMus, MMus with Distinction) with Ivare Ilja. He later studied also at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris with Brigitte Engerer and at the Royal Academy of Music in London (MMus, Dip RAM, PhD) with Ian Fountain. Sten has played in master-classes with such musicians as Boris Berman, Konstantin Lifschitz, Victor Merzhanov, Michael Roll, Alexander Satz, Howard Shelley and Maxim Vengerov. An important influence also comes from his father Peep Lassmann, an eminent pianist and professor, who studied with Emil Gilels at the Moscow Conservatoire.



photo: Kaupo Kikkas

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Heino ELLER

Complete Piano Music Volume Four

Piano Sonata No. 1
Six Pieces
Nocturne
Pastorale
Butterfly
Ballade

Sten Lassmann, piano

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

HEINO ELLER: COMPLETE PIANO WORKS, VOLUME FOUR

by Sten Lassmann

Heino Eller¹ (1887–1970) is one of the central figures in Estonian classical music, linking all parts of it into a coherent narrative from the inception of a national culture to the modern day. Born in Tartu, the centre of Estonian national awakening at the time, he spent his childhood surrounded by music, but his professional training began late. From 1907 until 1920 he studied in St Petersburg, a metropolis with a booming musical and artistic life, which made him a witness to one of history's most radical revolutions. From 1920 to 1940 Eller taught composition in his home town, where he instigated the influential 'Tartu School of Composition', and from 1940 until his death in 1970 he was a professor of composition in the Tallinn Conservatoire, now the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre – a pedagogical career of exactly half a century, during which several generations of Estonian composers were educated under his tutelage, among them Eduard Tubin, Arvo Pärt and Lepo Sumera.

Eller was a prolific composer whose works deserve wide attention. His music, distinguished by its austere expression, original use of modal harmony and a mastery of polyphonic texture, is largely lyrical with occasional epic undertones and gentle humour. In the context of Estonian classical music, where there is a strong predilection for vocal music, it is remarkable that Eller's *œuvre* consists almost entirely of instrumental works. His best-known pieces are the symphonic poem *Koit* ('Dawn') and *Kodumaine viis* ('Homeland Tune') for string orchestra, the latter bearing a symbolic status in Estonian culture similar to that of Sibelius' *Finlandia* for the Finns. Though these two works are often used as calling cards by Estonian conductors working abroad, most of Eller's substantial output is barely known even in the composer's homeland. The reception of his music underwent quite a radical change during his lifetime: in the independent Estonian Republic of the 1920s and '30s, he was seen as the country's chief modernist, but in the Soviet Estonia by the end of the 1950s he had acquired the status of a national classic. In the interim he had experienced severe criticism, as the repercussions of the anti-formalism campaign triggered by Zhdanov's famous decree in 1948 reached the Soviet Republics,² and most of his works from the period of Estonian independence (1920–40) were banned. The zenith of Heino Eller's career was at the XVII Estonian Song Festival in 1969, where he conducted his *Homeland Tune* for a public of nearly a hundred thousand.

Amongst Eller's *œuvre* there are some two dozen works for symphony orchestra (among them three symphonies), ten scores for string orchestra, five string quartets, and two sonatas and various miniatures for

¹ Christened Heinrich, he used the Estonian version Heino (officially changing to it in 1939); in Russian he was Генрих ('Genrich'). Eller means 'alder' in German.

² Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), a close ally of Stalin, was the enforcer of 'socialist realism', the official cultural policy in the Stalinist Soviet Union. He is known for his attack on Prokofiev, Shostakovich and other composers in 1948, which started a witch-hunt aimed at rooting out 'formalism' in music.

the initial motivation, the folk-like style became an important strand in Eller's late period – to which the *Six Pieces* (1953)¹³ testify. No. 1, 'Linakatkaja' ('Flax-plucker') [10], and No. 3, 'Hällilaul' ('Lullaby') [12] both employ an authentic folksong for their expressive melodies. The perky No. 2, 'Rahvatoonis' ('In folk tone') [11], is the only one from this cycle that has been published.¹⁴ The Fourth (Scherzo) [13] and the Sixth (Dance) [15] pieces are similar: in both the humorous main section is contrasted with a more solemn and impassioned middle section. It makes no difference that the theme of the latter is a well-known folk-dance, whilst the former is from Eller's own imagination. Regardless of the simple harmony and unpretentious themes, both pieces contain intricate polyphonic passages and witty motivic transformations, demonstrating Eller's mastery of his craft. The fifth piece, *Romance* [14], does not conform to the character of the rest of the cycle. With its more wide-ranging emotional content and adventurous harmony, it is more akin to the other important current in Eller's late period – the more psychologically charged, sometimes tragic language most palpable in the *Ten Lyric Pieces* from 1942–43.¹⁵

The most important one-movement work in Eller's later period, the *Ballade in C sharp minor* [16] was presented to the discussion-meeting of the Estonian Soviet Composers' Union on 14 June 1955, performed by Heljo Sepp. (Composers presented their new compositions to the Union at 'working-meetings' for discussion, 'constructive criticism' and approval before public concerts.) After Stalin's death the Soviet society had gradually seen a reversal of censorship and repression, a period which later became known as the Khrushchev Thaw. A little more freedom was tolerated in the arts as well as, and the uninhibited expression of the *Ballade* shows this loosening of restraints. It is a serious work of intense lyricism and masterly dramatic development; the music is sage, yet passionate. In 2012 the work was reviewed thus: 'It represents flowing, singing, rich music that cannot be categorised as impressionist, modernist, formalist or realist. It is simply good music!'¹⁶

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¹³ There is another, earlier set of *Six Pieces* from 1946, published in 1947, recorded on Toccata Classics TOCC 0119.

¹⁴ Included as the tenth of a compilation of fourteen piano pieces titled *Klaverimuusika rahvatoonis* ('Piano Music in Folk Tone'), NSV Liidu Muusikafondi Eesti Vabariiklik Osakond, Tallinn, 1968.

¹⁵ Recorded on Volume Three, Toccata Classics TOCC 0161.

¹⁶ Leelo Kõlar, 'Remembering Heino Eller', *Sirp*, 5 April 2012, Appendix C, p. 179.

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of composition at the Tallinn Conservatoire and a central figure in Estonian musical life; indeed, Kapp and Eller were perhaps the two most influential figures in Estonian musical culture at the time. In Estonia's period of independence between the two World Wars one could speak of different, competing 'schools of composition', around Eller in Tartu, and around Kapp in Tallinn – a luxury for a small nation. Regardless of the inevitable professional rivalry, there was a friendly relationship between the men. Kapp's birthday card for Eller's 50th birthday in 1937 had an elaborate fanfare composed on it;¹⁰ a year later, for Kapp's 60th birthday, Eller replied with this composition.

The brief, idyllic *Pastorale* [6], unknown in the piano version, is more familiar with an added middle section as a piece for flute and piano, 'Jõel' ('On the River'), No. 2 of the *Three Pieces for Flute and Piano* of 1951–52. But the original solo piano composition from 1919, presented here, is a beautiful, dream-like miniature in its own right.

The *Nocturne in E flat minor* [7] is the second of only two attempts Eller made in this genre. Although the earlier exemplar, from 1915, does not depart from a Chopinesque idiom, this one belongs to the better part of Eller's *œuvre*. The sparse accompaniment and delicate melody are unified by a unique blend of modal harmony – a hallmark of Eller's mature style. The *Più vivo* middle section with a semi-quaver accompaniment has a folk-like tinge to it, a trait that was increasingly emerging in Eller's music in the mid-1930s.

The *Vivace in A flat major* [8] is an unassuming but captivating trifle, lasting only a little over fifty seconds. But it is set apart from other works by the story of its origin. In 1920s Emilie Kuusk studied music theory with Heino Eller and piano with Anna Eller in Tartu. In 1930 Kuusk was teaching piano in Valga, where she was the one to discover the talent of Heljo Sepp, and to direct her to study with the Ellers. Kuusk emigrated in 1944, and lived in Windsor, Canada, until her death in 2003. In the 1970s she sent a manuscript copy of this *Vivace in A flat major* to Eller's widow, Ellu, asking if the work had been printed yet.¹¹ In fact Kuusk's copy is the only one, as such a work had not been found amongst Eller's papers. The date of composition is unknown, but it must have been composed before Kuusk's emigration.

Liblikas ('Butterfly') [9] is one of Eller's most popular works, and has been recorded in many versions. Besides the obvious charm of the music, the success of *Liblikas* was much helped by an early printed edition from the 1930s, and it has made at least five subsequent appearances in various publications (unlike any of the previous four miniatures, which have still not been published). The middle section evokes a Chopin waltz, but with a punchy, acerbic harmony.

In 1940–41 Eller had adopted a new folk-like style with his *Thirteen Pieces on Estonian Motifs*, which for the first time in Eller's career were based on authentic folk material. This simplified style and use of folk sources was probably Eller's response to the demands of the 'socialist realism' required by the occupying Soviet regime.¹² Regardless of

violin and piano. But by far the largest part of his output is piano music: almost two hundred titles, which will require eight CDs in this complete recording. The wealth of the material is astounding: in music spanning over six decades of creativity, it vividly mirrors many of the artistic tendencies of the twentieth century, springing from a late-Romantic style, absorbing the influence of Scriabin and reflecting Grieg's and Sibelius' Nordic flavour. Though Eller had sometimes probed into musical modernism with linear polyphony, saturated harmony and ambiguous tonality, by the middle of 1930s he relinquished any such aspirations.

When he entered the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1907, Eller had harboured ambitions to become a violinist, but he soon injured his hand while practising and was forced to leave the institution. His father had always been adamant that he should study law, and so the next year he enrolled in the jurisprudence classes at St Petersburg University, remaining until 1912. During that time he met his future wife, Anna Kremer, a Warsaw Jewess who was studying piano at the Conservatoire. Concurrently Eller started to compose (his first completed works are dated 1909) and eventually re-entered the Conservatoire to study composition. It was probably Anna who introduced Eller to the piano repertoire and was the first performer and critic of his compositions. But one can only conjecture about the extent of Anna Eller's influence, since very little is known about her playing. She was killed by the Nazis in 1942.

Yet there is living testimony to her professionalism and artistry. Heljo Sepp (b. 1922) studied privately with both Heino and Anna Eller – music theory and piano respectively – from 1933 to 1938. In that year the Ellers sent her to London to take part in a competition organised by the British Council, the first prize in which was a three-year scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music. Amongst the other competitors were Géza Anda and Amadeus Webersinke, but the prize went to the sixteen-year-old Sepp, who hailed from the small town of Valga on the Latvian-Estonian border – a unique example of the combined pedagogical talents of the Ellers. Sepp went on to study piano with Vivian Langrish at the Royal Academy, but her studies were cut short by the outbreak of war in 1939. Sepp collaborated closely with Heino Eller for four decades and was the chief propagator of his music in Estonia throughout the Soviet years. From 1949 to 1952 she studied with Heinrich Neuhaus in the Moscow Conservatoire, where she wrote her thesis on Eller's piano music. She was for years the Head of Keyboard and Vice-Rector at the Tallinn Conservatoire, where my own father was amongst her pupils. Heljo Sepp has been keenly supportive of my current project to record all of Eller's piano works, and has been uninhibited in both her criticism and her praise. The scholarship to study at the Royal Academy that she won in 1938 was left largely unused, and in 2004 the British Council issued the remainder of the funds as a new scholarship for a young Estonian pianist, of which I was the recipient. Thus, in a bizarre twist of fate, it is the actions of Anna and Heino Eller and Heljo Sepp in the 1930s which caused me to be studying at the Royal Academy in London in the 21st century. My hope is that my work on Eller's music will repay this debt, and perhaps help him acquire the international acclaim that is long overdue.

In the programming of each volume of Eller's piano works, I have deliberately avoided a chronological approach. Rather, by including pieces from various periods and in various styles and genres, I have tried with each disc of this series to create a distinctive portrait of Heino Eller. But it is a rather hard task on this occasion, since more than half of the programme of this album is taken up by a single work, the First Sonata. Forty minutes in length, it is by far the

¹⁰ Hedi Rosma (ed.), *Heino Eller in modo mixolydia*, Eesti Teatri- ja Muusikamuuseum, Tallinn, 2008, p. 92.

¹¹ Mart Humal in e-mail correspondence with the author, 21 August 2012.

¹² Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union in June 1940, and all aspects of society were reorganised according to the Soviet model. Eller was the chairman of the organising committee of the Estonian Soviet Union of Composers in 1940–41, and his folk-inspired style could have been necessitated by this position: in the 1920s and '30s he had been the chief musical modernist of the country, a reputation that within the Soviet regime could be very dangerous for one's career – even for one's personal safety.

largest work he wrote for the instrument. The Sonata has a Romantic pathos, and requires considerable stamina from the performer (as well as the listener). The following miniatures are, in contrast, some of Eller's slightest works; but *Liblikas* ('Butterfly') ranks as one of his best known piano works alongside *Kellad* ('The Bells').³ The final track, the *Ballade* from 1955, is one of the first works that speaks with an uninhibited, personal voice after the repressions of the Stalinist years.

The **First Sonata** (1919–20) was written as a graduation work for the Petrograd Conservatoire and was first performed at Eller's final examination there on 30 June 1920 by the Estonian pianist Artur Lemba (1885–1963, a gold-medal graduate and winner of the Anton Rubinstein Prize at the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1908 and by now already a professor of piano). The exam was chaired by the director of the Conservatoire, Alexander Glazunov (1865–1936); the panel included Nikolay Sokolov (1859–1922, composer and member of the influential 'Belyayev circle'), Maximilian Steinberg (1883–1946, composer and son-in-law of Rimsky Korsakov) and Vasily Kalafati (1869–1942, Eller's composition teacher). Besides the examiners, Eller recalled that the audience also included Sergei Lyapunov (1859–1924, composer and pianist), Nikolai Tcherepnin (1873–1945, composer-pianist-conductor), Leonid Nikolayev (1878–1942, piano professor, teacher of Vladimir Sofronitsky, Maria Yudina and Dmitri Shostakovich), and Mikhail Chernov (1879–1938, composer).⁴ Though not a public concert, this was nevertheless one of the most illustrious audiences Eller's music has ever had, and an auspicious start for a compositional career, as Glazunov passed his judgement thus: 'Refined compositional talent, good musician, fresh thoughts, interesting rhythmic contours, more independence in regard to musical form is advisable'.⁵ The Sonata itself did not fare particularly well – it was not performed again during Eller's lifetime.⁶

The sheer scale of the work is astonishing – with playing time approaching forty minutes (seventy pages in print), it ranks as Eller's largest composition along with First (1936) and Third (1955–61) Symphonies. The content is no less daunting – relentlessly dense polyphonic texture and virtuosic piano-writing make this work the biggest challenge amongst Eller's piano music. Eller himself later noted that it is 'a whole big symphony' that has 'too many notes'.⁷ As a student work, the First Sonata might not be the most original in Eller's output, but its significance goes beyond that. His experience with this Sonata was used as a blueprint throughout Eller's pedagogical career of half a century – most of his students were required to write a piano sonata, presumably as a proof that they had acquired enough technical

³ Recorded on Volume One of this survey, Toccata Classics TOCC 0119.

⁴ Mart Humal (ed.), *Heino Eller oma aja peeglis* ('Heino Eller in the mirror of his time'), Eesti Raamat, Tallinn, 1987, pp. 14–15.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ The first movement alone was performed in a public concert at the Petrograd Conservatoire in August 1920, but the whole work was played again – by Mart Humal at the Estonian Museum of Theatre and Music in Tallinn – only on 16 December 1978. It was recorded in 2000–1 by Aleksandra Juozapėnaitė-Eesmaa, produced by Estonian Record Productions, and released by Bella Musica/Antes Edition in 2001 (BM-CD 31.9136).

⁷ Endel Roosimäe, *Heino Elleri klaverisonaate vormi ja struktuuri analüüs*. ('Heino Eller's piano sonatas – an analysis of form and structure'), graduate thesis, Tallinn Conservatory, 1968, p. 21 (manuscript in the library of the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Ü 316).

mastery to sustain a large form in instrumental music. The manuscripts of most of these numerous student works rest in quiet oblivion in the archives of the Estonian Museum of Theatre and Music, but those by Eduard Tubin (1905–82) and Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) have been published and recorded.⁸ After his First Sonata Eller himself would wait twenty years, before returning to the genre as a mature composer.⁹

The first movement, *Allegro assai* [1], launches instantly into the high drama and unwavering drive of the first subject, very much in the style of Rachmaninov. The standstill of the second subject, with a gently swinging accompaniment, brings a breathtaking contrast to the explosive tension of the main theme. The suspense is masterfully achieved by subtle syncopation: in the first bar of the second theme both the melody and the accompaniment are off-beat. This lull is remarkably upheld for more than three minutes, offering passages of exquisite delicacy and harmonic invention. Eventually it becomes disquieting, as the expectation for the inevitable return of the initial tumultuous drama deepens. After a pause the development section starts with the main theme stated a third higher. A long build-up leads to a violent culmination with chromatic sequences of shrieking tritones on a dominant pedal point, ushering in the recapitulation. But the real culmination of the movement comes in the coda – this one expressing despair, rather than anger – which then gradually fades away into a simple A minor chord. This first movement, the most appealing and dramatically coherent part of the Sonata, could be a successful concert-piece on its own.

The second movement, *Larghetto* [2], is an expanded ternary form with a long coda on a tonic pedal point. The main theme has few original characteristics, but a tactful and affectionate rumination emerges from it. Higher emotional tension is achieved in the polyphonically saturated middle section. The two transitional sections (the second one leading back to the main section) – with descending sequences of gentle, twisting passages in the treble, over a long pedal point – are the most attractive bars in this movement. The frolicsome, toccata-like third movement, a Scherzo marked *Presto* [3], is a pianistic challenge, and the shimmering passages in the treble have a playful charm. The more melodious and serious middle section has a powerful culmination, employing whole-tone scales to achieve its peculiar colouring. In the main theme of the Finale, *Allegro moderato* [4] – a festive, almost pompous dance – Eller might have striven for the character of a polonaise. But, amplified by the form, a rondo, it becomes repetitive, and the massive chordal texture feels slightly overblown. The two beautiful lyrical episodes provide a welcome relief to the incessant roaring of the main theme. The first is of a Scriabinesque sensitivity, with intricate harmonic progressions, and the second has an expressive melody in the left hand accompanied by rippling ascending passages in the right. The monumental conclusion of the Sonata, following a *fugato* build-up, achieves quasi-orchestral proportions as the bass octaves imitate timpani to a background of *tutti* chords.

Intiimne hetk ('Intimate moment') [5] is dedicated to Artur Kapp (1878–1952) for his 60th birthday. Kapp graduated from the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1900, having studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov, and his large body of instrumental and vocal works contains, amongst much else, five symphonies, the oratorio *Hiob* ('Job'), cantatas, organ concertos and sonatas, and numerous solo and choral songs. In the 1920s and '30s he was a professor

⁸ Tubin's Sonata No. 1 (1928) and Pärt's Two Sonatas (1958–59, his first year with Eller at the Tallinn Conservatory).

⁹ With the Piano Sonata No. 2 (1939–40), recorded on Toccata Classics TOCC 0119.