



George
WALKER
Complete Piano Works • 1
Alexandre Dossin, Piano



George Walker (1922–2018)

Complete Piano Works • 1

The piano works explored on this album were composed between 1941 and 1979. Together with the second volume, it presents George Walker's complete solo piano works and the piano concerto.

George Walker's piano works encompass more than 60 years of his life. During this period, Walker's style developed and matured to a level that could be easily compared to most contemporary American composers, such as Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, and Leonard Bernstein. Unfortunately, his name does not yet have the recognition that those composers enjoy, and his piano music remains a hidden treasure.

This is music that has unique pianistic colors and creates its own pianistic soundscape. Walker's mostly linear compositional style travels through mountains and valleys, abysses, and cliffs, exploring the entire keyboard. These almost physical, 3-D sonorous architectures combine perfectly with his choices of colors, articulation, and refined use of pedals.

Born in Washington, D.C. in 1922, George Walker was a precocious student who finished high school at age 14. In 1937, he was admitted to Oberlin Conservatory as the youngest student of his class, joining the piano studio of David Moyer. Composition lessons with Norman Lockwood did not start until his senior year, and upon graduation, he was immediately accepted into the Curtis Institute, in the studios of pianist Rudolf Serkin and composer Rosario Scalero. Walker introduced himself as a composer and performer during his debut in New York's Town Hall in 1945. The program included works by Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, and Chopin, in addition to his own compositions.

Prelude and Caprice were initially two separate piano works. *Caprice* (originally titled *Danse Exotique*) was his first piano work, composed in the spring of 1941, at age 18. It was inspired by a short piano work by Vladimir Horowitz, *Danse Excentrique*. *Prelude* was composed for the 1945 Town Hall debut and is probably the most tonal piano work in Walker's catalog. A serene and majestic B major work, it was published in 1975 together with the renamed *Caprice*.

The years following his 1945 successful NY debut were dedicated to building a performance career in the United States and abroad. After two more recitals in New York (1947 and 1953), George Walker signed a contract with National Concert Artists and embarked on a European tour in 1954.

The *Piano Sonata No. 1*, composed during the period when he was teaching at Dillard University in New Orleans in 1953–54, is his longest piano work. This sonata includes the use of folk tunes: *O Bury Me Beneath the Willow* became the theme in the beautiful second movement (*Theme and Six Variations*), and *Lisa* was used as the contrasting theme in the challenging finale. The difficult first movement has a thick and polyphonic texture and follows the traditional sonata form. The second movement, probably due to its more approachable musical language and less demanding technical requirements, was published separately as *Variations on a Kentucky Folk Song*. It was recorded by George Walker with the title *Variations for Piano*.

In 1955, George Walker was admitted to the inaugural doctoral program in piano performance at the Eastman School of Music, where he joined the studio of José Echániz. The *Piano Sonata No. 2* was written as a final examination work, in the fall of 1956. The theme in the first movement is the diminution of the ground bass upon which the short set of variations is composed. It is followed by a rhythmic movement akin to a *scherzo*, leading to a very dramatic and poignant B minor *Adagio*, the emotional center of this dark sonata. The last movement displays a G major/G minor tonal dichotomy, ending with a dramatic section that brings back the original motif from the first movement. The sonata is unified by the use of thirds in thematic materials and in the tonal relationships between movements.

The years following his doctoral studies at Eastman (1957–61) were dedicated to a second European trip, sponsored by prestigious fellowships such as Fulbright and the John Hay Whitney Foundation. During his stay in Paris he studied under Nadia Boulanger, before returning to the US for more performances. During the 1960s George Walker consolidated his position in academia with a decade-long position at Smith College, MA, in addition to guest teaching in other institutions.

Composed in 1961, *Spatials* is a short and athletic twelve-tone piece composed in the form of theme and variations (statement and variants). It utilizes the entire keyboard through leaps and fast passages, with a refined use of contrasting articulations. The brevity of each section requires extreme concentration from the performer and listener.

During almost ten years of teaching at Smith College, George Walker had to endure many obstacles in his career advancement, unrelated to his professional achievements. In 1969, Walker started his longest academic partnership, having accepted a full professorship at the Rutgers University, Newark campus. Rutgers University became his new academic home until retirement in 1992.

Spektra was composed in 1971. The misspelling of the title follows Walker's characteristic passion for writing. A published poet, he enjoyed playing with words and finding alternative ways of expressing himself through language. *Spektra* is a very colorful atonal piano work, translating into music an entire spectrum of colors. It explores the full range of the keyboard, uses a wide range of articulations, and requires a refined use of pedals. It is almost possible to experience colorful rays of light throughout the work.

Piano Sonata No. 3 was commissioned in 1975 by the Washington Arts Society, as part of the bicentennial celebrations in 1976. It is the only piano sonata with titles for each movement: *Fantoms*, *Bell*, and *Choral and Fughetta*. This sonata shares characteristics with *Spektra*, composed a few years earlier. Its first movement uses an old spelling for the word 'phantoms' and expresses sonorities that feel bodiless, and translucent. *Bell* is uniquely built as one chord repeated 17 times, in different lengths and dynamics. *Choral and Fughetta* opens with one of Walker's signature pianistic textures: long and short notes played together, creating a *legato* melody (*Choral*) accompanied by short chords. The polyphonic sections (*Fughetta*) reveal Walker's contrapuntal mastery, where the expressiveness of each line creates music that is more than the sum of its parts.

Bauble was composed in 1979 as the required piano work for the University of Maryland International Piano Competition. It is a short, virtuosic work that displays many of Walker's pianistic signatures: extensive use of three pedals, athletic passages that cover the entire keyboard in fast tempo, and intervallic unification of the musical material. This performance of *Bauble* marks its world premiere recording.

After retiring from Rutgers University in 1992, George Walker received the Pulitzer Prize in composition in 1996, for his work *Lilacs* (voice and orchestra). He remained active as a composer and pianist until his death in 2018.

The second volume in this series will complete the solo piano works with two pieces from the 1980s, *Piano Sonata No. 4* and *Guido's Hand*. It will also include Walker's last piano work, the *Piano Sonata No. 5* from 2003, in addition to his *Piano Concerto* (1976) and *Song Without Words*, an arrangement of *Leaving*, for voice and piano (1971).

Alexandre Dossin

Alexandre Dossin



Photo: Erin Zysett

A Steinway Artist, Brazilian-born pianist Alexandre Dossin has already firmly established himself as an internationally acclaimed artist of the first rank. He was awarded both the First Prize and the Special Prize at the Martha Argerich International Piano Competition, with other awards including the Silver Medal at the Maria Callas International Grand Prix and Third Prize and the Special Prize at the Mozart International Piano Competition, among many other international and national accolades. Conductors with whom he has performed include Charles Dutoit, Isaac Karabtchevsky, and Michael Gielen, with orchestras including the Buenos Aires Philharmonic, Brazilian Symphony Orchestra, Mozarteum University Symphony Orchestra, Minas Gerais Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory symphony orchestra. He is a graduate of the Moscow Tchaikovsky

Conservatory, where he studied with Sergei Dorensky, and received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Texas at Austin, where his teachers were William Race and Gregory Allen. Dossin is professor of piano and chair of keyboard at the University of Oregon School of Music and Dance, and the artistic director of the James and Marilyn Murdock Piano Institute. His recordings for Naxos include three acclaimed releases for the Liszt Complete Piano Music series (8.557904, 8.572432, 8.574106) and two albums of Kabalevsky piano music (8.570976, 8.570822) in addition to solo music by Bernstein (8.559756) and Prokofiev (8.573435).

www.dossin.net

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(1922–2018)

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|----|---|--------------|
| 1 | Prelude and Caprice (1945/1941) | 4:19 |
| | Piano Sonata No. 1 (1953, rev. 1991) | 18:02 |
| 2 | I. Allegro energico | 8:48 |
| 3 | II. Theme and Six Variations | 4:45 |
| 4 | III. Allegro con brio | 4:27 |
| | Piano Sonata No. 2 (1956) | 10:03 |
| 5 | I. Theme and Ten Variations | 2:43 |
| 6 | II. Presto | 1:21 |
| 7 | III. Adagio | 3:26 |
| 8 | IV. Allegretto tranquillo | 2:25 |
| 9 | Spatials (1961) | 3:16 |
| 10 | Spektra (1971) | 5:54 |
| | Piano Sonata No. 3 (1975, rev. 1996) | 13:59 |
| 11 | I. Fantoms | 4:28 |
| 12 | II. Bell | 2:12 |
| 13 | III. Choral and Fughetta | 7:13 |
| 14 | Bauble (1979)* | 3:02 |

***WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

Alexandre Dossin, Piano

Recorded: 8–10 January 1-8 11-13 and 2 April 9 10 14 2023
at Moon Mountain Studios, Eugene, Oregon, USA

Producers: Alexandre Dossin, Tung Nguyen

Engineer and editor: Jack Gabel

Booklet notes: Alexandre Dossin

Publisher: Lauren Keiser Music Publishing

Piano: Steinway, Model D

Piano technician: Mike Reiter

Cover photograph: Ian Robin Walker



AMERICAN CLASSICS

George Walker's unique collection of piano music ranges across his long career. The three sonatas heard here, in this the first of two volumes of Walker's complete piano works, offer compelling contrasts. *Sonata No. 1* is his longest and utilizes folk tunes, *No. 2* is darker and unified by tonal relationships, whilst *No. 3* displays contrapuntal mastery and translucent elements. Both *Spatials* and *Spektra* are atonal – the former athletic and compressed, the latter vivid and colorful. The album opens with *Prelude and Caprice* – a serene and majestic early work.

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Playing
Time:
58:50