

Heino ELLER

COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME SEVEN

TWELVE BAGATELLES

ELEGIAC DANCE

FIVE PRELUDES

INTERMEZZO

MINIATURES

ROMANZE

Sten Lassmann

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

HEINO ELLER Complete Piano Music, Volume Seven

[1] <i>Moderato</i> in A minor (1912)	3:25
[2] <i>Allegretto – poco moderato</i> in F sharp minor (1913)	2:11
[3] <i>Allegretto</i> in F sharp minor (1913)	2:01
[4] <i>Andantino</i> in B minor (1913)	2:31
[5] <i>Tempo di marcia</i> in F sharp minor (1939)	5:22
Five Preludes (1932–34)*	10:12
[6] No. 1 <i>Moderato</i> , B minor (1934)	1:59
[7] No. 2 <i>Lento assai</i> , A major (1934)	2:26
[8] No. 3 <i>Sostenuto, espressivo</i> , C sharp minor (1934)	1:59
[9] No. 4 <i>Allegretto capriccioso</i> , B major (1932)	1:31
[10] No. 5 <i>Sostenuto</i> , C sharp minor (1932)	2:37
[11] <i>Andante sostenuto</i> in G major (1910s)	2:18
[12] <i>Intermezzo</i> in G minor (1943)	1:08
[13] <i>Allegro animato</i> in F minor (1960s)	2:53
[14] <i>Romanze</i> in B flat major (1950–60)	1:11
[15] <i>Allegro animato</i> in D sharp minor (1939)	3:16
[16] <i>Elegiac Dance</i> (1921)	5:52

Twelve Bagatelles (1961)****18:58**

17	No. 1	Kurb laul ('Sad Song')	1:34
18	No. 2	Hommikul ('In the Morning')	1:45
19	No. 3	Tantsuhoos ('Dancing')	1:55
20	No. 4	Rahvaviis ('Folk Tune')	1:43
21	No. 5	Mängurõõm ('Joy of Playing')	0:46
22	No. 6	Igatsus ('Yearning')	2:34
23	No. 7	Lastelaul ('Childrens' Song')	0:59
24	No. 8	Karjamaal ('On the Pasture')	1:31
25	No. 9	Unelm ('Dream')	1:23
26	No. 10	Tantsulugu ('Dancing Piece')	1:33
27	No. 11	Meenutus ('Recollection')	1:29
28	No. 12	Kapriis ('Caprice')	1:46

Sten Lassmann, piano**TT 61:08**

ALL EXCEPT * FIRST RECORDINGS

**FIRST DIGITAL RECORDING

HEINO ELLER: COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME SEVEN

by Sten Lassmann

Heino Eller (1887–1970) is the central figure behind the development and flourishing of Estonian classical instrumental music. His compositional idiom is underpinned by an almost graphic sense of polyphony that nevertheless retains its grace, and a successful fusion of Scandinavian, Russian and European musical influences presented through a sometimes almost imperceptible but ever-present Estonian lens. Some of his compositions have acquired a symbolic status in Estonian culture, though his contribution as a legendary teacher of composition during half a century – with such master-composers as Eduard Tubin, Arvo Pärt and Lepo Sumera hailing from his class – is of no less importance.

But the sheer mass of Eller's piano works – 206 of them, spanning a period from 1909 to the late 1960s – is not easy to come to terms with. The matter is made more abstruse by the fact that a large portion of these pieces are untitled works with only a generic *moderato* or *allegretto* for a heading. Eller had an aversion to using words to describe musical content or meaning; indeed, his preferred domain of expression besides music was graphic art. (He had been noticeably talented as an artist since boyhood: while sitting in on exams in the Tallinn Conservatoire during the Soviet era, he sometimes drew portraits of the students on the examination sheets instead of writing reports.) The title of Eller's symphonic poem *Koit* ('Dawn'; 1918), considered emblematic of his love for Estonian nature and pantheistic worldview, was in fact suggested by a lady in a musical gathering in St Petersburg (then called Petrograd) as Eller was presenting some of his musical ideas on the piano. And his best-loved work, *Kodumaine viis* ('Homeland Tune'; 1918/1940s), was also a nameless *Andantino* until the pianist Heljo Sepp (1922–2015), Eller's pupil and devotee,

rediscovered and christened the work during her research into his piano music when she was a student of Heinrich Neuhaus at the Moscow Conservatoire in the early 1950s.

Nonetheless, acting from a practical perspective, Eller always gave titles to those of his works which went to print; all the nameless works are thus the ones that remained in manuscript during his lifetime. This lack of verbal denomination of altogether autonomous and significant musical material can present occasional problems, as with the second and third items on this programme: both are marked *Allegretto*, written in F sharp minor and composed in 1913. How should one then distinguish between them? Luckily, the first one has a middle section marked *Poco moderato*, which, if indicated, will be clear enough to make a distinction.

Moreover, it is wholly possible to view Eller's piano compositions as belonging to different groups according to their underlying purpose. For instance, the first four tracks on this album belong to the formative period of the 1910s when his main goal was clearly that of acquiring the professional skills for composition by emulating the Classical-Romantic tradition. The striving for a more modern idiom can be sensed in his *œuvre* from around 1920 until the early 1930s, and in his piano music it manifested itself almost exclusively in the preludes. The **Five Preludes** (1932–34) [6]–[10] are Eller's last attempts in the genre, and correspondingly, mark the end of his search for an ostensibly modern compositional language. Yet another different stylistic strand evolved during the Soviet occupation of Estonia starting from 1940, with the necessity of conforming with the official Soviet cultural doctrine of 'Socialist Realism'. With Eller's reputation as the chief modernist of the country in the inter-war decades and a near-total aversion to writing songs or choral music, he (and countless other composers under the Communist yoke) had to adopt an instrumental style that would be both radically simplified and notably folkish. This stylistic path was inaugurated with the *Thirteen Pieces on Estonian Motifs*¹ in 1941. The **Twelve Bagatelles** from 1961 [17]–[28] belong to the same line.

Relating to the thicket of Eller's piano music as a performing musician, especially when dealing with the numerous single and often untitled miniatures, I have found

¹ Recorded on Heino Eller: Complete Piano Music, Volume Five, Toccata Classics TOCC 0225.

myself constantly trying to create small cycles of pieces – loosely connected by tonalities, style and time of composition – somewhat akin in my mind to a Baroque suite. The group of the first five works in the programme of this volume is exactly such a creation, one which, I hope, has not only helped me in my work as an interpreter but might also facilitate the reception of this music. All five pieces are from 1912–13, with the exception of the ***Tempo di marcia in F sharp minor*** [5], an angular and rustic piece which is, in fact, a piano version of one of the movements of Eller's symphonic suite *Valge öö* ('White Night') from 1939. The almost saccharine melancholy of the ***Moderato in A minor*** [1] is contrasted by the unpretentiously gentle and neatly flourished passages of the *Più mosso* middle section (1:10). The two allegrettos in F sharp minor mentioned above – ***Allegretto – poco moderato*** [2] and ***Allegretto*** [3] – are in fact more dissimilar than one might expect. The former, with its rather more agitated middle section, does not stray away from a general Romantic tone and texture, whereas the latter is more idiomatic and has a whiff of Ellerman Nordic colour to it. The ***Andantino in B minor*** [4] evokes an atmosphere of deeply felt poignancy, to which the initially secretive and carefully treated folkish dance of the *Poco più mosso* episode (0:45) gives a more tragic perspective upon reiteration.

Eller's tendency to use piano preludes as a sort of a laboratory for the testing and incorporating of modern idioms – above all, the elements of musical Expressionism – into his own compositional technique is manifested most clearly in the Preludes of Book II (1920)² and Book III (1921–32)³. The years 1932–34 then marked a crisis and a turning point in his aesthetic outlook and aspirations, with his new ideal – the reconciliation of national and contemporary elements – displayed with the most confidence and force of expression in the First Symphony (1934–36), subtitled *In modo mixolydio*. The **Five Preludes** on this album coincide exactly with this compositional crisis: the first three are dated 1934, and the last two were written two years earlier, in 1932. No. 1, ***Moderato*** [6], features an intensely vexed lyricism, with the culmination of the piece in *poco largamente* (1:12) showing the vestiges of Expressionism in its

² Also recorded on TOCC 0225.

³ Recorded on Heino Eller: Complete Piano Music, Volume Two, TOCC 0132.

broodingly chromatic tenor line. The main melody of No. 2, *Lento assai* [7], on the other hand, brings forth the pastoral lyricism and epic undertones of the First Symphony, the kinship enforced by the Mixolydian mode. Although the Third Prelude, *Sostenuto, espressivo* [8], is wholly consumed by gloomy introspection, the Fourth, *Allegretto capriccioso* [9], wittily explores the grotesque and ludic potential within the juxtaposition of the black and white keys. The Fifth, *Sostenuto* [10], seems to be consumed by some kind of a mournful obsession, which is interrupted by the brusque merriments of the *Poco allegro* middle section.

The *Andante sostenuto* [11] is a work of genuine Ellerman lyricism, and seems to date from the latter part of the 1910s. The slight and chant-like *Intermezzo in G minor* [12], dated 1943, is, curiously, Eller's only attempt in this genre. Based on the appearance of the handwriting and manuscript paper, the *Allegro animato in F minor* [13] seems to date from the 1960s, and thus could be among his last piano works. It is Chopinesque almost to the point of stylisation, harking back to Eller's works in the early 1910s, but it nevertheless has a lyrical urgency about it. The *Romanze in B flat major* [14] is an altogether unassuming piece of twenty bars, which, according to the leading Eller scholar Mart Humal, could date from around the 1950s or 1960s.⁴ The *Allegro animato in D sharp minor* [15] from 1939 feels like a Skryabinesque, late-Romantic throwback – hard to comprehend, since around that very time Eller was at the height of his compositional powers, and was creating some of his most idiomatic scores, such as *White Night* or the Second Piano Sonata.⁵ Unlike the last five works, which are somewhat lacklustre and unambitious, the *Elegiac Dance* [16] from 1921 is an original work that was promoted in print as early as the 1930s. The undulating ostinato bass and exquisitely mystical main melody are underpinned by the interchange between Aeolian and Phrygian modes. The declamatory phrases of the *Poco animando* transition (1:29) gradually build up tension, leading to the Expressionist shrieks and sweeping passages of the *Concitato* middle section (2:06).

⁴ Mart Humal (ed.), *Heino Eller oma aja peeglis* ('Heino Eller in the Mirror of his Time'), Eesti Raamat, Tallinn, 1987, p. 252.

⁵ Recorded on Heino Eller: Complete Piano Music, Volume One, TOCC 0119.

One of the characteristic features of Eller's late period in Tallinn, from 1940 to his death in 1970, is the constant revision and recycling of earlier compositions. This activity could be attributed to the ailing creative powers of the composer in his seventies and eighties, in the teeth of the official work-order at the Union of Soviet Composers (of which the Estonian Composers' Union was a branch): that regular artistic work be presented at collective meetings. Since the writing of piano pieces had been almost a form of compositional diary throughout his career, Eller was able to mine a steady flow of hitherto unknown compositions from his desk drawer, and with a little refurbishing, perhaps even orchestration, present them as the necessary annual 'socialist work'. Formed (finally?) in 1961, the **Bagatelles** [17]–[28] are perhaps one of the best examples of this practice. Eight of the works in this cycle (Nos. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 11) had actually been part of 'Fourteen Pieces', a selection compiled in 1943, which had in turn been made by grouping together some even earlier compositions. The last, twelfth Bagatelle, 'Caprice' [28], had been a movement of an orchestral *Suite of Miniatures* from 1940, the manuscript score of which was then lost. Only three of the bagatelles were new(er) compositions – No. 3, 'Tantsuhoos' ('Dancing') [19], No. 4, 'Rahvaviis' ('Folk Tune') [20], and No. 10, 'Tantsulugu' ('Dancing Piece') [26] – incidentally presenting mostly simple, perky and folkish music, fitting the ideal requirements of 'Socialist Realism'. The Bagatelles were printed with Russian titles in Moscow at the official Composers' Union publishing house Sovyetsky Kompozitor in 1963 and distributed throughout the entire Soviet Union as didactic repertoire for the children's music-school network. All things considered, the Bagatelles make up a more coherent and richer cycle than the analogous *Klaverimuusika rahvatoonis* ('Piano Music in Folk Tone')⁶ from 1965: the overall impression is that of a series of spontaneous and vivid character pictures.

⁶ Recorded on Heino Eller: Complete Piano Music Volume Six, TOCC 0475.

Sten Lassmann has been regularly appearing as a soloist and chamber musician since winning first prize in the Sixth Estonian Piano Competition in 2002. He has performed all over the world, and in some of the most prestigious venues, such as the Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto, Purcell Room in London, the Grand 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. He has toured Beethoven's Fifth Concerto and Prokofiev's Second Concerto with the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, and played the Estonian premiere of James MacMillan's Second Concerto with the Tallinn Chamber Orchestra. This season saw him playing Beethoven's Fourth Concerto with the Estonian Sinfonietta at the final concert of the international festival Klaver in Tallinn, and in 2021 he toured a recital programme, 'Non Plus Ultra', that included Bach's Chromatic Fantasy, Beethoven's Diabelli Variations and the Paganini Variations by Brahms.



Photograph: Kaupo Kikas

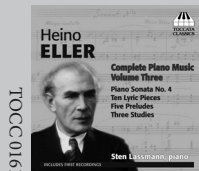
Sten Lassmann started his musical education at the Tallinn Central Music School in 1989 with Ell Saviauk and Ira Floss and continued at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre with Ivari Ilja. He later studied at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris with Brigitte Engerer and at the Royal Academy of Music in London with Ian Fountain. A major musical influence also comes from his father, Peep Lassmann, an esteemed professor of piano at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and a former student of Emil Gilels at the Moscow Conservatoire.

In 2013 Sten Lassmann was awarded a Ph.D. at the Royal Academy of Music in London for his research on Heino Eller. He has also received the Heino Eller Music Prize (2011), the Estonian Cultural Endowment annual music prize (2015), and in 2018 was elected Associate of the Royal Academy of Music (ARAM). Currently he is senior lecturer of piano at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre and since 2017 he has been the artistic director of the biannual international festival Klaver in Tallinn.

Since 2008 he has been engaged in this project to make the first-ever recording of the complete piano works by Heino Eller for Toccata Classics. Volume Two of the series won the ‘Uncommonly Classical’ recommendation by *Expedition Audio* in December 2012, Volume Three was awarded a ‘Choice’ badge in the July-August 2013 issue of *International Piano*, and was given a good review in the *Gramophone* 2013 Awards Issue. The series will cover all of Eller’s 206 piano compositions in nine albums.

Sten Lassmann is also an avid chamber musician and in the last decade has performed recitals with the violinists Pavel Berman, Anna-Liisa Bezrodny, Katariina Maria Kits, Natalia Lomeiko, Mikk Murdvee, Movses Pogossian and Stanislav Pronin, the cellist Valle-Rasmus Roots and the bass Pavlo Balakin.

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‘the music is thoroughly engaging. [...] Lassmann’s playing is confident and expressive’
—*Fanfare* on Volume Five



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Recorded on 16 and 17 March 2015 at The Old Granary Studio, Priory Farm,
Maypole Green, Toft Monks, Beccles, Suffolk, UK
Steinway model D provided and tuned by Andrew Giller, Giller Pianos
Recorded and mastered by Ben Connellan, Giraffe Productions (giraffeproductions.co.uk)
Produced and edited by Sten Lassmann

An important initial incentive for this recording project was the support of the
Alexander Kelly Memorial Award in 2007 at the Royal Academy of Music.

*The recording and mastering of this album was supported by the Estonian Museum of Theatre and
Music, the Estonian Cultural Endowment (Eesti Kultuurkapital) and the Estonian Authors'
Society (Eesti Autorite Ühing).*

Booklet notes: Sten Lassmann
Cover design: David M. Baker (david@notneverknow.com)
Typesetting and lay-out: Kerry Press, St Albans

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

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