

OWN BRAND

Many great composers are decent pianists, but great pianists who write substantially for themselves to perform tend to be taken less seriously as composers.

Benjamin Ivry celebrates the achievements of these pianist-composers, and highlights some works that throw light on their inspiration and artistry at the keyboard

COMPOSERS WHO PLAY THE PIANO FOR PRACTICAL purposes and pianists who write music from inner necessity are different beings: composer-pianists and pianist-composers. If we disqualify pieces by those principally known as composers, glitzy display works, and didactic études, music written by pianist-composers can be compelling and sometimes overlooked, perhaps in part because they are not taken so seriously as those by full-time composers.

Unlike the authors of most compositions performed in concert, pianist-composers are alive and present, adding vivacity to the occasion. Recitals can become uniquely personal statements. In the 19th century, **Clara Schumann** (1819-1896) wrote a Piano Trio, Op 17 (1846) that is an ardent triangular conversation. Quite appropriate for a musician at the centre of one of music's most renowned love triangles: Schumann/Schumann/Brahms. Despite real-life fraught interactions by these parties, the Trio exudes relaxed assurance and easy-going nonchalance. Clara's solo Scherzo No 1 in D minor, Op 10 (1838) follows her husband into the wilder reaches of Romantic imaginings. Like Robert Schumann's song *Der Kontrabandiste* (The Smuggler), memorably arranged for solo piano by Carl Tausig, Clara's *Scherzo* is a *mise-en-scène* marked by dramatic frenzy.

Another acclaimed Victorian grande dame of the keyboard, **Marie Jaëll** (1846-1925), wrote the disarmingly candid *Six petits morceaux pour piano* (1871), a self-avowal of sorts. Jaëll's Schumannesque 'Feuillet d'album' (*Albumblatt*, 1871) likewise has the emotional candour of a passionate song. An even more splashy piano diva, **Teresa Carreño** (1853-1917), delighted audiences with waltzes such as *The Child's Dream* (*El sueño del niño*), gently rocking with maternal affection, and *Wrong Note* (*La falsa nota*) characterising the soloist as an impish slyboots. *My Teresita* is an undisguised self-portrait, confident, assertive and romantic.

WERE MALE PIANISTS IN THE 19TH AND EARLY 20th centuries less personal in their compositions? Setting aside Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941), a

recognised composer/orator/statesman as well as pianist, Liszt pupil **Emil von Sauer** (1862-1942) produced the witty miniature *Music Box* (*Boîte à musique*), catnip for such performers as Karol Szymanowski (although rather more po-faced in Sauer's own recording). Sauer's *Aspen Leaf* (*Espenlaub*) is a more earnest assertion of humanity, better suited to the pianist's temperament, like the elegant nostalgia of his *Echo from Vienna* (*Echo aus Wien*) and *Concert Galop*, giving the impression that Sauer had witnessed the can-can being danced in French *estaminets* during the Belle Époque.

Unlike the massive landscape of *Carnaval de Vienne* by **Moriz Rosenthal** (1862-1946), an arrangement of Johann Strauss, Rosenthal's winsome *Papillons* is as evanescent as the butterflies it evokes. While not rivalling Schumann's Op 2, Rosenthal's *Papillons* provided an amuse-bouche for such pianists as Arthur Schnitzler and the composer himself. More worldly experience is audible in the urbane Concerto No 3 (*Concertino*) for piano and small orchestra (1932) by the Belgian **Arthur de Greef** (1862-1940), with the off-kilter exuberance of a big-city boulevardier. There is a touch of Rachmaninov in this *Concertino*, but the writing for piano is direct and heartfelt, as to be expected from a leading interpreter of music by Edvard Grieg.

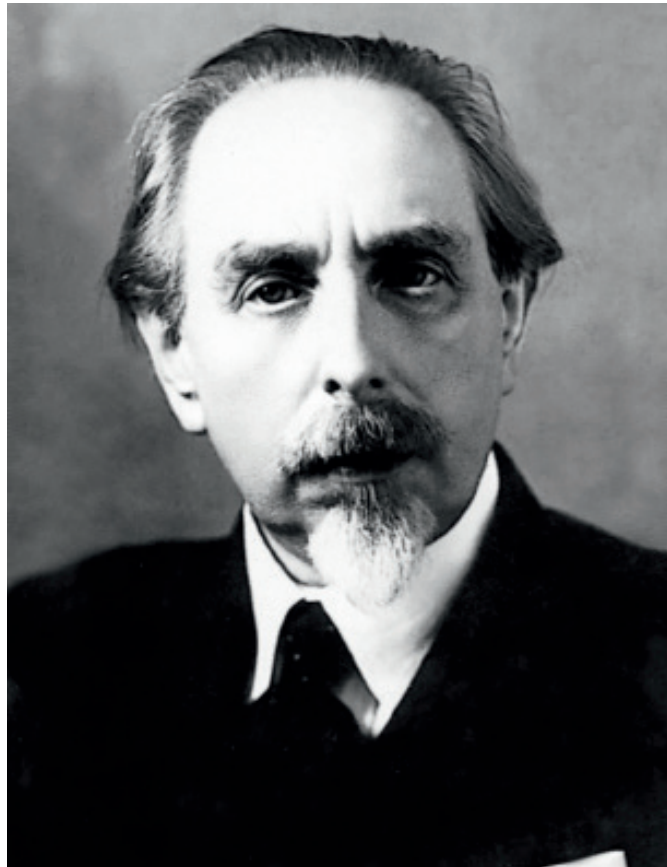
Caprice Orientale by the Polish pedagogue **Sigismond Stojowski** (1870-1946) has alluring seriousness, while his lyrical impulse in his Prelude Op 1 No 2 has attracted champions such as the British pianist Jonathan Plowright. In a movement from the *Java Suite* (1924-1925) of **Leopold Godowsky** (1870-1938) entitled *Gardens of Buitenzorg*, the Dutch name for today's Bogor in Indonesia, a sensuous landscape in sound is constructed from gorgeous piano effects. **Josef Hofmann's** (1876-1957) *Berceuse* Op 20 No 5 has simplicity, and his *Kaleidoscope* from *Character Sketches* Op 40, dedicated to Godowsky, is a dazzler in intent and effect. Quasi-Wagnerian grandeur adds weight, transcending the genre of showy encores. Hofmann's 'Penguins' from *Three Impressions* (1915), is good-humoured and zesty, with an intriguing dash of petulance.

Amiability and vigour were bywords for **Ossip Gabrilowitsch** ►



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Splashy Venezuelan piano diva Teresa Carreño



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Samuil Feinberg: composer-pianist or pianist-composer?

◀ (1878-1936) in *Caprice* Op 3, while his *Mélie* in E minor Op 8 is genuinely haunting. **Ignaz Friedman** (1882-1948) managed to combine nostalgia and ruefulness in waltz-inspired works recalling society dances of eras past. The Eduard Gaertner-Friedman *Viennese Dances* attracted pianists from Grigory Ginzburg to Victor Borge. The warmth of these trifles made Friedman's arrangements deeply personal, just as the violinist Fritz Kreisler put his imprimatur on works he transcribed. Friedman's charmingly titled *She Dances* (*Elle Danse*) Op 10 No 5 is wistfully disarming, with some of the innocence of childhood. His *Music Box* Op 33 No 3 possesses even more magic than Sauer's effort, with tintinnabulation like a glockenspiel.

Capturing the pianist at an early bon vivant stage, **Artur Schnabel's** (1882-1951) Rondo from his Piano Concerto (1901) is unusually melodious for a Schnabel work, especially when played by his daughter-in-law Helen Schnabel (Town Hall Records THCD-65). Most of Schnabel's works are oppressively harsh and stern, even one deceptively entitled *Foxtrot*. By contrast, the delight emanating from the Russian **Samuil Feinberg's** (1890-1962) oeuvre may inspire posterity to rebrand him as a composer-pianist rather than just a pianist-composer. Feinberg's Suite No 1, Op 11 (1922) transfigures the étude in pellucid style. With movements marked *cantando* and *cantabile*, the importance of song is evident, a lyricism likely deriving from mid 19th-century Russian opera. Feinberg's Suite No 2, Op 25 (1936) is no less enticing, with a

lacemaker's delicacy that was a trademark of his pianism. Bolder, Feinberg's Second Piano Concerto (1946) is feisty, even martial, with Tchaikovsky-like panache.

SOME MIGHTY INTERPRETERS LEFT CREATIVITY A bit late, such as the Frenchman **Yves Nat** (1890-1956), an impactful performer of the German Romantics who premiered his Piano Concerto only a year before his death. Its lumbering unevenness cannot begin to compare in quality to Nat's majestic renditions of other composer's ideas. A happier fate was destined for **Wilhelm Kempff** (1895-1991). Of Kempff's many transcriptions, perhaps the most memorable was of Bach's *Siciliano* BWV 1031. The recording by Dinu Lipatti has a spooky balletic grace, alongside which even Kempff's own version from 1931 sounds surprisingly turgid. Less-than-superstar status can also keep a pianist's works from finding an audience. Switzerland's long-overlooked **Ernst Lévy** (1895-1981) imbued his Piano Sonata No 4 with lofty Alpine vision, but few heard it. Unjustly neglected as both pianist and composer is the American **Beryl Rubinstein** (1898-1952), whose Suite for Two Pianos (1939) has the crystalline urbanity of a French modernist statement, remarkable from someone whose teaching career was mostly spent in Cleveland. An ideal recording by Rubinstein and his friend and colleague Arthur Loesser has not yet given the *Suite* the prominence it deserves.

No such obscurity dogged the creativity of the Russian **Mischa Levitzki** (1898-1941), whose slinky and seductive waltzes, such as *Valse Amour* Op 2 and *Arabesque Valsante* Op 6 epitomise seduction through sensual memory. More architecturally ambitious works by France's **Robert Casadesus** (1899-1972) include the lucid, bright Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra, Op 17 (1933). Ravel, the pianist's friend, was more of an influence on Casadesus' Op 17 than the latter's closer contemporary, Francis Poulenc. With sobriety and open-heartedness possibly deriving from Casadesus' Catalan family origins, his Concerto occasionally echoes early Aaron Copland. More angular, although no less winning, is Casadesus' Concerto for Three Pianos, Op 65 (1964). His lucid, crystalline *Toccata for Piano*, Op 40 (1946), unlike many toccatas written by pianists, does not sound like a hollow exercise in style. A pianistic wit rivalling any Gallic model, America's **Oscar Levant** (1906-1972) wrote pop hits in the 1920s such as *Loveable and Sweet* and later penned the jazz standard *Blame It on My Youth*. A student of Stojowski and permanent denizen of the psychiatrist's couch, Levant made his disjointed *Piano Concerto* (1936) a relentlessly introspective, convincing self-portrait.

Levant was endlessly plaintive about mother issues; another pianist-composer with every right to feel Oedipal conflicts about composing was **Soulima Stravinsky** (1910-1994). Soulima duly

created the holistic *Piano Music for Children* (*Klaviermusik für Kinder*, 1960), benign and free of looming paternal presences, even in miniatures where they are suggested, such as 'Mama and Papa are Talking' and 'Daddy is Home'. Apparently free of any parental issues, the pedagogue **Pierre Sancan** (1916-2008) from southern France wrote the brisk, sly *Mouvement* and yet another *Music Box* (*Boîte à Musique*), this one too overtly jokey. Indisputably serious, even ominous were some works by the Romanian pianist **Dinu Lipatti** (1917-1950). Lipatti's *Sonatina for the Left Hand*, with its inexorably advancing melody, foreshadows the early demise that would be his fate. Lipatti's Concertino in Classical Style for Piano and Chamber Orchestra, Op 3 (1936) is preternaturally graceful and Mozartian, while his Romanian Dances for Piano and Orchestra (1945) express idiomatic assurance and unadorned naturalness.

AS THE 20TH CENTURY WORE ON, SOME PIANISTS were increasingly influenced by popular media. America's **Leonard Pennario** (1924-2008) penned *Midnight on the Cliffs*, quasi-hysterical soundtrack music written for *Julie*, a 1956 Doris Day movie. Its overwrought Hollywoodiana is all in good fun. Highly personalized liveliness, delight and gusto are communicated by the best music by the Austrian **Friedrich Gulda** ▶

French pianist Robert Casadesus wrote lucid, architecturally ambitious works





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Chinese-American Conrad Tao's stunning talents augur well for the future

of the American **Michael Brown** (b 1987), a student of Jerome Lowenthal and Robert McDonald at the Juilliard School. Brown's *Folk Variations* (2013) is an authentic major work, in which close listening, especially to silence, is treasured. In theme-and-variations form, based around the tune *Yankee Doodle*, it has the added complexity of not actually including the melody of *Yankee Doodle* in its thematic section. Instead, Brown explains, *Folk Variations* 'rather uses [the song's] pitches rearranged and stacked vertically to create a more modern "American" sonority.' One of the most refined of all pianist-composers, Brown may, like Samuil Feinberg, eventually be promoted to the status of composer-pianist.

Unsubtle to a fault is China's **Peng-Peng Gong** (b 1992), preoccupied with grandiose heroic posturing. This is so even in Gong's *Hourly Reminiscence for Piano and Orchestra* (2011), inspired by *The Story of an Hour*, a short story by the 19th-century American author Kate Chopin. In it, an ailing woman, feeling relief on hearing the news of her husband's demise, drops dead when he turns out to be alive after all. This poignant theme inspires blustering, loud effects from Gong, who redeems himself with an improvised in-concert transcription (2013) of Puccini's 'Vissi d'arte' from *Tosca*, in which sheer decibel level was not a key element. The Chinese-American **Conrad Tao** (b 1994) created and recorded pieces of astonishing emotional maturity at 12 years old, but has lately been hampered by tiresome influences of minimalism and high-tech, in his *Iridescence, for piano and iPad* (2013). Tao's stunning talents augur well for the future, and this hope is also represented by the American **Andrew Guo** (b 1999), like Tao a student of the late Emilio del Rosario in Illinois. Inspired by del Rosario's emphasis on the playful nature of pianism, Guo's *Seven Images for Solo Piano* (2015) is youthful, jejune even, but precisely reflects its pianist-composer, looking towards the future. ♪

◀ (1930-2000). Harking back to the self-portrait paradigm of Clara Schumann and Marie Jaëll are Gulda's works dedicated to his young sons, *For Paul* and *For Rico*, both from 1974; *Concerto for Myself: Sonata Concertante for Piano and Orchestra* (1988); and the graceful, popular *Aria* (1989). The ever-growing adulation for **Glenn Gould** (1932-1982) has ensured that his solo piano works, including the two-movement *Sonata for Piano* (1948-50) and 2 *Piano Pieces* (c1951-52), have been recorded, although they lack the charm of his *So You Want to Write a Fugue?* for four solo voices and piano or string quartet (1963). British pianist **John Ogdon** (1937-1989) produced a more externalised landscape in his *Sonata No 4: An American Sonata*. Ogdon's view of America is inevitably exotic, from an opening movement evoking the emptiness of the great plains to an elegy for the US composer Samuel Barber, followed by a barn dance like a *moto perpetuo* machine.

Transcriptions and other doughty services to music of the past by **Marc-André Hamelin** (b 1961) are highlighted elsewhere in this issue (see cover feature, from page 16), but his wit without self-seriousness is worth remarking upon. Stephen Hough (b 1961) has a comparable tongue-in-cheek attitude, particularly in his *Radetzky Waltz*, a reappropriation of the *Radetzky March* by Johann Strauss I. High seriousness, on the other hand, is the approach

SUGGESTED LISTENING

10 works you should know by pianist-composers

Clara Schumann Piano Trio Op 17 (1846)

Marie Jaëll *Six petits morceaux pour piano* (1871)

Arthur de Greef Concerto No 3 (Concertino) for piano and small orchestra (1932)

Ossip Gabrilowitsch *Mélodie in E minor* Op 8 (1908)

Ignaz Friedman 'Elle Danse' from 5 *Causeries* Op 10 (1904)

Samuil Feinberg Suite No 1 – 4 pieces in étude form Op 11 (1922)

Beryl Rubinstein Suite for Two Pianos (1939)

Robert Casadesus Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra Op 17 (1933)

Dinu Lipatti Romanian Dances for Piano and Orchestra (1945)

Michael Brown *Folk Variations* (2013)