

ONDINE

RONALD STEVENSON

PIANO WORKS

PETER JABLONSKI



RONALD STEVENSON

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Piano Works

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| 16 | Little jazz variations on Purcell's <i>New Scotch Tune</i> (1964/75) | 5:10 |
| 17 | Piccolo Niccolò Paganinesco (1986)* | 4:53 |
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| 19 | Tauberiana, transcription of Richard Tauber's song <i>My Heart and I</i> (1980) | 4:02 |

* *World première recordings*

PETER JABLONSKI, piano

There is probably no better way to introduce Ronald Stevenson than by quoting the opening lines of Malcolm MacDonald's book *Ronald Stevenson: A Musical Biography* (Edinburgh, 1989):

Nature abhors a vacuum, and a straight line. She seems to have created Ronald Stevenson to fill the former, and made it impossible for anyone seeking to understand him to follow the latter. His music is full of independent lines, as befits a master contrapuntist, but their progress is intricately woven, mirroring or responding to one another, criss-crossing and intertwined. His life-work is as completely patterned and irregular as the knotwork of the Celtic brooches and crosses he so admires: restless, dynamic, doubling back on itself, 'plaited [...] like the generations of men'.

Indeed, many of Stevenson's musical compositions are examples of intertwining complexities of his musical thought, melody, counterpoint, and harmony; he weaves his musical fabrics that preserve the wide gamut of his creative thinking. Impossible to distil in an album essay, all we can do is zoom onto a small part of Stevenson's legacy, all the while realising that we are touching but a corner of a rich and enormous tapestry.

A pianist, composer, thinker, writer, and educator, Ronald Stevenson (1928–2015) had a profound thirst for knowledge and never stopped to learn, explore, and innovate, creating wonderful works that are a testament to his musical genius. He had a magnetic personality, fierce intellect, sharp wit, poise and elegance, and was a great communicator.

Born into a working-class family, he was Scottish on his father's side and Welsh on his mother's. His father was a gifted singer, and Ronald was exposed to songs and singing from an early age, first by listening, then by accompanying his father. In fact, this connection to voice and melody is strongly present in his own work, from his earliest compositions – songs – to his transcriptions from such operatic masterpieces as Britten's *Peter Grimes* and Paderewski's *Manru*. His musical gifts were prodigious, and when he turned seventeen, he won a scholarship to study at the Royal Northern College of Music, from which he graduated with distinction in 1947.

Stevenson was a committed pacifist, hugely influenced in his thinking by the writings of William Blake and Albert Schweitzer, and when he was called for National Service in 1947, he chose to go to prison instead. He was considered to be too young to vote, but deemed

old enough to be trained to kill – something he found abhorrent. Even in prison, in harsh conditions, he composed and read voraciously.

Already in his teens he became fascinated with the music of Busoni, sharing his views on the art of transcription: that it is, in fact, an art of composition in itself. Having written his literary *magnum opus* on Busoni in the 1950s and 60s (still unpublished), he became an authority on Busoni in the English-speaking world. So great was his interest in this towering musical figure, that he even sold most of his books and records, and organised a piano recital to raise money for his trip to meet Busoni's widow in Stockholm. Their friendship and correspondence lasted until Gerda Busoni's death in 1956. He transmitted his enthusiasm for Busoni's music to one of his close friends, pianist John Ogdon, who gave the UK premiere of Stevenson's *magnum opus* for piano *Passacaglia on DSCH* in 1966 at the Aldeburgh Festival.

Stevenson's musical interests were wide-ranging: since his college days, intensely studied counterpoint, and was interested in the music of Purcell and the early masters. He also admired the grand virtuoso tradition of Chopin and Liszt, Medtner and Rachmaninoff, Paderewski, Godowski, Sorabji, and others. Not only did Stevenson study them all and played their works on the piano, but each of these figures found an honoured place in his musical temple. He also belongs to a distinguished line of masters of transcription, which goes as far back as the early 1600s, and culminates in Liszt, whom Stevenson called a 'prolific transcriber' who, by virtue of his transcriptions, preserved the best of the nineteenth-century musical tradition. Stevenson has been credited with reviving the art of piano transcription, a tradition which died out with the advent of recordings, and approximately a quarter of his output is made up of piano transcriptions.

Stevenson left a huge corpus of work, writing almost in every major and minor genre, which includes chamber music, orchestral works, two piano concerti, a violin, and cello concerto, works for solo instruments, choral music, songs, transcriptions, arrangements, miniatures, cadenzas, and two unfinished operas. His Celtic heritage was an integral part of his musical thinking, preserved in many musical works for piano and other instruments, and over 230 songs. A book on Stevenson published in 2005 by Toccata Press contains 78 pages listing his compositions, which took the editor Martin Anderson three years to compile. Many compositions remain unpublished, existing only in Ronald's exquisite handwriting.

A brilliant pianist himself, he is perhaps best known for his monumental 80-minute-long *Passacaglia on DSCH*, a tribute to Shostakovich composed in 1962, and for his *Peter Grimes Fantasy*, both works for solo piano. His second piano concerto *The Continents* was premiered at the Proms in 1972, and described by Tom Service as 'a hugely ambitious attempt to create a journey around the world's musical traditions with the piano the voyager at the heart of this 35-minute odyssey' in his obituary of the composer published in *The Guardian* on 5 May 2015.

'Choreography of the keyboard'

In our conversation about Ronald in late 2023, Stevenson's widow Marjorie told me that he strongly believed pianists must know how to compose, because it is a perfect way to get familiar with the 'choreography of the keyboard'. It is impossible not to think about Ronald's own graceful and agile choreography of this instrument when studying his piano works. From such magnificent, inventive and powerful compositions as the *Peter Grimes Fantasy* to the short but devilishly difficult *Etudette d'après Korsakov et Chopin*, Stevenson shows us the full spectrum of pianistic and musical possibilities. Style, grace, and beauty were important to him, as he expressed in writing:

There is no grace in the style of playing, no elegance, no charm. Pianists no longer 'sing' with their fingers... I feel much the same about a great deal of the music that's being written today... There's a lack of grace, a lack of poetry, a lack of beauty. (Printed in *Scotland on Sunday*, 26 February 1989)

In his piano transcriptions we find an emphasis on the singing qualities of the piano, an aspect of contemporary performance and composition he felt was being underappreciated.

Reading through a list of titles of Stevenson's works for piano gives us an insight into how his creative thinking worked. From tiny fragments written on postcards (such as *Suitette: Homage à Guex-Joris*), to the formidable *Passacaglia*, from Scottish folk songs to reworkings of themes from major operas, from *Sneaky on Sixths*, *Rag-Blues* and *Piccolo Niccolò Paganinesco* to *Le Festin d'Alkan* and *A Twentieth-Century Music Diary*, Stevenson's mind was always searching, learning, and looking for new ways to present what is already familiar. An insatiable reader of poetry in many languages, he left a huge volume of vocal works reflecting his deep

understanding of different cultures and their ways of thinking. He was as inspired by Indian *raga* and an African Bantu drummer he heard in Cape Town, as he was dedicated to study of Western counterpoint. With everything else in between, what we get in Stevenson's creative output is a genuine love of music, in all its forms and origins and styles. What he gives us is a composer's kaleidoscope where the best, the wildest, the most daring of human musical experience is preserved in all its brilliance and beauty.

His instructions to a performer shed yet more light: *con un senso di quasi gagarinesco* (as though with Gagarin's perception of space; *Passacaglia on DSCH*), or *come borbottamenti maliziosi* (like malicious mutterings), *come rumore propagante* (like spreading rumours), and *martellato come grandine* (like hail) in the *Peter Grimes Fantasy*. There are frequent appearances of *rubato*, detailed directions on pedaling (he often wants the performer to use all three piano pedals), and very precise indications of tempi and dynamics.

Peter Grimes Fantasy on themes from Benjamin Britten's opera for piano solo was commissioned by the BBC in 1971, and premiered by Stevenson himself in the programme 'Music Now' on BBC 2. Dedicated to Graham Johnson, the fantasy is centered on the main idea of Britten's opera: social alienation of the main character, the fisherman Peter Grimes. Set in a small fishing village, the opera tells the story of Grimes, who stands accused of killing a young boy. Although the court finds him innocent, the mob condemns him, with only a solitary voice of Ellen Orford believing in his innocence. The fantasy is a concise work, into which Stevenson distills the essence of the tragedy: the rise of the mob and the fall of Grimes. He uses the following musical themes from the opera:

- The opening motif (later the Swallow's 'Tell the court the story in your own words')
- 'Now the Great Bear and Pleiades where earth moves are drawing up the clouds of human grief, from Act I, scene ii.
- 'What harbour shelters peace', from Act I, scene i.
- 'We strained into the wind' Act I, scene i.
- 'Storm music' from the Second Interlude.
- 'Dawn music' from the First Interlude.

Peter Grimes Fantasy opens with the juxtaposition of light and dark, 'the mob' in the low register of the piano and 'Grimes' in the high treble. Stevenson employs a wide gamut of effects: variety of sonorities, harmonies, dense polyphony, and pianistic devices such as use of three

pedals, plucking of piano strings, and harmonics. Stevenson believed that a transcription has the power to shed new light on familiar music, something he indeed achieved so brilliantly in his *Peter Grimes Fantasy*. For a detailed analysis of this work, see Ateş Orga's excellent chapter on Stevenson's piano music in *Ronald Stevenson: The Man and His Music*, Toccata Press, 2005.

Suite for piano from Paderewski's opera *Manru* was written in November-December 1961. Paderewski's opera tells the (unhappy) love story of a Polish woman Ulana and the gypsy Manru. Now a neglected masterpiece, it was premiered in Dresden on 29 May 1901, its success being so great, that it was given only a year later in New York. Regarded as the first significant Polish music drama, it is a powerful work, masterfully written and orchestrated, with the best traditions of nineteenth-century operatic writing. Stevenson casts his suite in four compact movements: *Introduction and Gypsy March*, a soulful *Gypsy Song*, a lyrical *Lullaby*, and a feisty *Cracovienne*.

Romance from Concerto in D minor, Mozart K466, was realised by Ronald Stevenson in 2002. It is dedicated to Iain Colquhoun, who was instrumental in finding a number of unpublished works for this recording. Mostly faithful to the original, the *Romance* would still surprise those who know the work well, with additions of elegant flourishes, luscious chords, and some typical Stevensonian harmonies.

Paul Wittgenstein and Godowsky made significant contributions to the left hand repertoire, and their spirits loom large in Stevenson's output: the **Quintet from *The Mastersingers*, 'elaborated for left hand alone', Wagner-Wittgenstein** (1980), is a re-working of Wittgenstein's arrangement, which was published in his own *School for the Left Hand*. **Ostinato Macabro on the name Godowsky**, composed in 1980, is a one-minute work for left hand alone, it is an original composition based on Leopold Godowsky's name. **Etudette d'après Korsakov et Chopin (Spectre d'Alkan)**, composed on 6 June 1987, is a short work that poses endless technical challenges. The first three pages are for the left hand alone, based on the figurations from *The Flight of the Bumble-bee* by Rimsky Korsakov. These are often placed in the weak fingers of the hand. To add to the challenge, the last three pages combine the *Bumble-bee* in the left hand with Chopin's *Étude* in A minor, Op. 10 No. 2 (Chromatic) in the right hand.

As well as creating monumental works such as the *Passacaglia on DSCH*, Stevenson delighted in composing miniature works, such as **Preludette on the name George Gershwin**, a one-minute, one-page wonder, written in 1981 as a birthday gift to Stevenson's friend Harry Winstanley.

6 *Pensées sur des Préludes de Chopin* (1959) are dedicated to Stevenson's friend Harold Taylor, a student of Cortot and Kentner. A one-page Programme Note written by the composer himself explains that the title *Pensées* was derived from Pascal, with a brief quotation from his work prefixed to each piece. He explains that Chopin 'sometimes appears to have thought spontaneously of connections between his themes: that is, hidden counterpoints. My exploration of this idea lay behind the compilation of my *Pensées*.' He gives examples:

Pensée 1 (Our nature is in movement) combines Preludes in C minor and C Major, but they are juxtaposed in C minor for clarity.

Pensée 2 (Entire repose is death) combines Preludes 2 and 9 and Étude Op 25 No 11, 'Winter Wind'.

Pensée 3 (Nature diversifies and imitates; artifice imitates and diversifies) combines Preludes 7 and 10.

Pensée 4 (The heart has its reasons of which reason takes no account) combines the three 'Raindrop' preludes in their original keys, as a study in tri-tonality.

Pensée 5 (Intestinal war of man between reason and passions. One has not reason without passion not passion without reason, but having the one and the others, it is not possible to be without war) combines Prelude 22 (transposed to E-flat minor) with Prelude 14, and the finale of the Sonata in B-flat minor with Prelude 14.

Pensée 6 (The last thing one finds in making a work is to know what should be placed first) 'is a more orchestra-like version of *Pensée 1*.'

Little Jazz Variations on Purcell's 'New Scotch Tune' show Stevenson's agility in variation form. Originally written as *Simple Variations on Purcell's 'New Scotch Tune'* in 1964, Stevenson revised the work in 1975, adding three variations in a more virtuosic style, and changing 'Simple' to 'Little Jazz' in the title.

Piccolo Niccolò Paganinesco was composed in 1986, dedicated 'To Lorenzo Guantaio', who was, in fact, pianist Lawrence Glover, Stevenson's fellow student in Manchester. Here, Stevenson follows in the footsteps of Brahms, Liszt, Rachmaninoff and Lutosławski, to name a few, in writing variations on Paganini's Caprice No 24 for solo violin.

Tauberiana, transcription of Richard Tauber's song ***My Heart and I*** was written in 1980, bearing the inscription 'For Anne Scott in mutual love of Richard of the singing heart', and immortalising the well-known song re-imagined for solo piano. One of Ronald's life-long passions was for the recordings of Caruso, John McCormack, and Richard Tauber. In his *Tauberiana*, he pays homage to the great singer's own composition, the very popular song *My Heart and I*.

The collection of works presented in this recording is a microcosm of Stevenson's musical universe, which include four world premiere recordings.

Anastasia Belina

Described by the Gramophone as 'a pianist in full flower of his mature, imaginative artistry' in 2022, **Peter Jablonski** is an award-winning internationally acclaimed Swedish artist. He is among the leading pianists of his generation, and during the last thirty years on international stages has performed with over 150 orchestras, given over 2000 concerts, and has been on 25 tours of Japan. Discovered by Abbado and Ashkenazy and signed by Decca in his seventeenth year, he went on to perform, collaborate, and record with many of the world's leading orchestras and conductors, which include the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Kirov (now Mariinsky), La Scala Philharmonic, Tonhalle Zurich, Orchestre Nationale de France, NHK Tokyo, DSO Berlin, Warsaw Philharmonic, Philadelphia, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Cleveland Orchestra, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Valery Gergiev, Andris Nelsons, Daniel Harding, Kurt Sanderling, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Riccardo Chailly, Daniele Gatti, and Myung-Whun Chung.

He has appeared in concert and recitals in famous venues around the world, which include the Royal Festival Hall and the Barbican in London, Philharmonie Berlin, Suntory Hall Tokyo, Hollywood Bowl Los Angeles, Salle Pleyel Paris, Musikverein Vienna, Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, among many others.

He has performed and recorded the complete piano concertos by Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, and Bartók, and all piano sonatas by Prokofiev. During his three-decade-long career he developed a diverse repertoire that includes works by Barber, Gershwin, Szymanowski, Lutosławski, Copland, Stenhammar, with most recent additions of such composers as Alexey Stanchinsky, Ronald Stevenson, and Grażyna Bacewicz.

He worked with composers Witold Lutosławski and Arvo Pärt, and had a number of works composed for, and dedicated to him, including Wojciech Kilar's Piano Concerto, for which he won the Orpheus award for the world premiere performance at the Warsaw Autumn Festival. He remains a supporter of today's composers and regularly gives world premieres of new works.

Jablonski's extensive discography includes recordings he has made for Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Philips, Altara, Octavia, and Ondine labels. He has received numerous awards for his recordings, which include the Edison award for best concerto recording of Shostakovich's First Piano Concerto, Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, and Lutoslawski's Paganini Rhapsody with Ashkenazy and RPO for Decca. He was presented with the Gramophone Classical Music Award for his Deutsche Grammophon recording of works by Cécile Chaminade with Anne Sofie von Otter and Bengt Forsberg.

He maintains a busy recording schedule, and his collaboration with Ondine has produced a number of well-received recordings. His recording of solo piano works by Grażyna Bacewicz was awarded the French Académie Charles Cros Award in December 2022, and it has been listed among best classical music and best solo piano recordings of 2022 in the Gramophone. Peter Jablonski is the recipient of the Litteris et Artibus medal for his services to culture, granted to him by the King of Sweden, Carl XVI Gustaf. He is also the winner of the prestigious prize Årets Svensk i Världen (International Swedish Personality of the Year), receiving it before ABBA and Astrid Lindgren. In May 2022 he was elected into the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. In 2023, Jablonski became the global ambassador for Karol Szymanowski, in a multi-year project run by the Institute of Adam Mickiewicz and music publisher PWM, during which he will perform Szymanowski's piano works around the world, starting with the Wigmore Hall recital in September 2024.

www.peterjablonski.com

ALSO AVAILABLE



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Publishers: Ronald Stevenson Society; Boosey & Hawkes (Peter Grimes Fantasy)

Recording: Palladium, Malmö, Sweden, VII/2024

Executive Producer: Reijo Kiilunen

Recording Producer: Anastasia Belina

Recording Engineer: Tomas Borgström

Editor: Federico Furlanetto

Piano technician: Joacim Eriksson

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Booklet Editor: Joel Valkila

Cover & Photos of Peter Jablonski: Anastasia Belina

Photo of Ronald Stevenson: The Ronald Stevenson Society





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PETER JABLONSKI, piano



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[63:04] • English notes enclosed

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