

An abstract painting with a complex, layered composition. The background is a mix of cool blues and greens, suggesting a sky or a distant landscape. Overlaid on this are vibrant, swirling strokes of pink, orange, and red, which seem to represent a central figure or a dynamic energy. Darker, more somber tones of brown and black are interspersed throughout, adding depth and contrast. The overall style is expressive and gestural, with visible brushstrokes and a sense of movement.

ROBIN STEVENS

A QUESTING SOUL

MUSIC FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO

CHRISTINE TOWNSEND, VIOLIN
STEPHEN ROBBINGS, PIANO

 divine art

Disc 1

- | | | |
|----|--|-------|
| 1. | Fantasy Sonata (in one movement)
<i>Christine Townsend, violin; Stephen Robbins, piano</i> | 15:49 |
| 2. | Toccata
<i>Stephen Robbins, piano</i> | 2:08 |
| 3. | Cri de Coeur
<i>Christine Townsend, violin; Stephen Robbins, piano</i> | 2:51 |
| 4. | Stratospheric!
<i>Christine Townsend, violin</i> | 4:19 |
| 5. | Scherzo in Blue
<i>Christine Townsend, violin; Stephen Robbins, piano</i> | 1:27 |
| 6. | Reconciliation?
<i>Stephen Robbins, piano</i> | 6:02 |

Total playing time 33:17

Disc 2

Sonata Tempesta

Christine Townsend, violin; Stephen Robbins, piano

- | | | | |
|----|------|---|-------|
| 1. | I. | <i>Adagio con moto – Moderato, energico ed appassionato</i> | 10:35 |
| 2. | II. | <i>Scherzo: Allegro vivo</i> | 4:42 |
| 3. | III. | <i>Andante tranquillo (ma non lento)</i> | 10:13 |
| 4. | IV | <i>Finale: Allegro con spirito</i> | 7:17 |

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|----|------------------------|--|------|
| 5. | A Questing Soul | | 3:53 |
|----|------------------------|--|------|

Stephen Robbins, piano

- | | | | |
|----|----------------------|--|------|
| 6. | Tom and Jerry | | 2:16 |
|----|----------------------|--|------|

Christine Townsend, violin

Three Vingettes

Stephen Robbins, piano

- | | | | |
|----|------|-------------------------------------|------|
| 7. | I. | Beethoven through the Looking Glass | 0:32 |
| 8. | II. | Summertime Langour | 1:19 |
| 9. | III. | Master of the Rocking Horse | 0:44 |

- | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|--|------|
| 10. | An Interrupted Waltz | | 3:43 |
|-----|-----------------------------|--|------|

Christine Townsend, violin; Stephen Robbins, piano

Three Bagatelles

Stephen Robbins, piano

- | | | | |
|-----|------|---------------------------|------|
| 11. | I. | <i>Tempo di Valse</i> | 1:29 |
| 12. | II. | <i>Allegro non troppo</i> | 1:00 |
| 13. | III. | <i>Allegro fuoco</i> | 2:03 |

- | | | | |
|-----|------------------------|--|------|
| 14. | Say Yes To Life | | 5:18 |
|-----|------------------------|--|------|

Christine Townsend, violin; Stephen Robbins, piano

- | | | | |
|-----|------------------|--|------|
| 15. | Soliloquy | | 2:32 |
|-----|------------------|--|------|

Stephen Robbins, piano

Total playing time 58:36

A Questing Soul

A certain type of music lover takes unalloyed pleasure in tracking the stylistic development of individual composers throughout the course of their creative careers. With some composers – Beethoven, or Mahler, for example – the gradual maturation of their personal musical language is obvious to behold: it is hard to mistake early Beethoven for late Beethoven, for instance. But with other composers – for example Bach or Purcell – the sense of a chronological stylistic evolution is much less clear.

The works featured on this release encompass a time-span of almost thirty years, from 1985 to 2014. They, and indeed my entire creative output, could be regarded as a combination of the contrasting stylistic journeys described above. True, there is an overarching sense of progression from the Late Romanticism of my *String Quintet* (1980-1981) to the dissonant Modernism of my *String Quartet No.1* (2008), but since writing the latter work I have combined contemporary, experimental elements with unabashed lyricism, humour, and frequent reversions to tonal harmony. My compositional direction of travel has contained twists and turns, byways as well as highways: creativity is a messy business, after all, and few artists' growth to maturity follows an entirely straight course.

The two most substantial pieces on this album – the **Fantasy Sonata** and the **Sonata Tempesta** – are also the earliest. Both are products of my late-twenties, and both were written for Christine Townsend and Stephen Robbins: together with my *Sonata for Unaccompanied Cello* (1987) they mark the culmination of my early years as a composer. The **Fantasy Sonata** (CD1 T1) inhabits a very individual sound world, being based unswervingly upon the octatonic scale B-C-D-E flat-F-F sharp-G sharp-A-B: the pitches C sharp, E, G and B flat are thus completely absent from the score. The single-movement structure of the piece is straightforward: a slow introduction is followed by faster material (briefly interrupted by a violin cadenza); then the second half of the piece (beginning at 8'35") is a varied restatement of the first, the sequence of ideas being unchanged except that the violin cadenza is replaced by one for the piano. The Fantasy Sonata is unremittingly intense, from the soulful lament of the opening, through the turbulence of most of the faster music, to its joyful peroration; an exhausting, but, I trust, exhilarating experience for performers and listeners alike.

Writing miniatures gives a composer the opportunity to branch out and to do things differently: if unfamiliar or unorthodox pathways prove unfruitful, little time has been lost, whereas serious risk-taking in a large-scale composition potentially jeopardises several months of concentrated endeavour. Some of the miniatures on this album are complete 'one-offs', without parallel in my output: they have not led on to bigger pieces, but are nevertheless worth preserving for their own sake. **Toccata** for solo piano (CD1 T2) is a case in point. Insistent *staccato* semiquavers in a single-line texture predominate, with variety being provided by slightly slower *legato* passages in which the subtle use of the sustaining

pedal creates a blurry harmonic mist. Near the end the frantic activity collapses into an impassioned recitative, before the semiquavers return, now as a two-voice texture, for the helter-skelter coda. **Cri de Coeur** (CD1 T3) is equally distinctive: a sustained melodic line in the extreme upper register of the violin is supported by dissonant broken chords (and, at the climax, tonal clusters) in the piano. There is no sense of pulse; rather, the illusion of time standing still, as it can in times of grief and distress. **Stratospheric!** (CD1 T4) is effectively a virtuoso toccata for unaccompanied violin, and shares with the piano toccata above both rapid passage-work and the use of declamatory recitative. There is, however, a wider range of tempos in the violin composition, and an emphasis (as the title suggests) on very high-pitched notes. **Stratospheric!** portrays a hyperactive society desperately scrabbling about for direction and purpose...a piece for our times, perhaps?

Jazz influences often feature in my vocal music, but rarely in my instrumental output. **Scherzo in Blue** (CD1 T5) is exceptional, therefore, in the preponderance of 'blue' notes and slides in the violin; the abundance of jazzy chords in the piano; and the adaptation of a standard blues progression as the structural basis of the composition. In contrast, **Reconciliation?** for solo piano (CD1 T6) is neither jazz-influenced nor a true miniature, but rather a compact, contemporary tone-poem. It centres on the conflict between the consonant lyricism of the opening, and two more dissonant, angular ideas: fast figuration in contrary motion (0'46''); and a quirky, bitonal march (0'52''). The intertwining of these three strands forms the substance of the first half of the piece, whose culmination is a turbulent cadenza, rounded off by a dramatic tonal cluster in the lower reaches of the piano (2'21''). Then a complete change of direction, straight into the heart of the piece - a mysterious, harmonically-dense chorale, which is immediately restated. After an upward flourish and a brief pause, a rippling accompaniment undergirds fragmented shards of the bitonal march. The piece climaxes as the rippling accompaniment moves to the upper reaches of the piano and, simultaneously, the lyrical opening melody heroically reappears in the bass. However, in the coda,

fast contrary-motion figuration returns, an apparent challenge to the hopefulness of the immediately preceding music. By the end the vehemence of the contrary-motion outbursts has been subdued, but are the conflicting forces within the piece truly reconciled? Let the listener decide...

The **Sonata Tempesta** (CD2 TT1-4) is an expansive four-movement work. Like the Fantasy Sonata it begins with a slow introduction, the violin's reflective opening line punctuated by ascending piano phrases which anticipate the striving, straining violin theme of the ensuing *Allegro molto moderato* (1'00''). This tumultuous music is succeeded by more mellifluous, lyrical violin material heard over sweeping arpeggios in the piano (2'32''), building to a dissonant climax. Then a brief piano recitative leads to a consolatory slow transformation, on the violin, of the main theme of the *Allegro molto moderato* (3'44''). A development section ensues, before the violin's more lyrical material is restated



The composer with his dear friend, Iain Andrews, whose paintings have provided covers for Robin's last four albums



Christine Townsend, Robin Stevens & Stephen Robbins

in a passage of relentlessly increasing tension, which finally breaks as the movement climaxes, joyfully, in a triumphant transformation of the reflective opening idea (6'50"). This joy is short-lived, however: following recitative-like interplay between the instruments and a reprise of the consolatory violin melody, the *Allegro molto moderato* returns (marked *like a cataclysm*) bringing the movement to a brutal, defiant conclusion.

After the complexities of the first movement, the scherzo (placed second, as in all my four-movement compositions), is more straightforward. There are three main ideas: the chordal piano theme, accompanied by flickering violin *tremolandi*, with which the movement begins; another, more *staccato*, chordal idea on the piano, answered by rapid figuration on the violin (0'35"); and a striding, dance-like violin melody set against sprightly quaver patterns in the piano (0'53"). The movement might be seen as depicting a dormant volcano, with simmering forces just beneath the surface which occasionally erupt into view. The scherzo concludes with a final, strident reminder of the opening chordal theme, after which the music dissolves into the ether.

The start of the slow, third movement sustains the aura of mystery created at the very end of the scherzo. A modal piano melody emerges quietly out of sparse, bare fifths harmony, and the entry of the violin is similarly self-effacing. An *agitato* section follows, piano *tremolandi* providing a shimmering backcloth to the violin's urgent lyricism (1'14"). Then, after a brief piano recitative, the violin introduces the second of the movement's two main themes, a hypnotic idea fixated on jagged dotted rhythms, which is accompanied by block chords on the piano (2'03"). This second theme is developed at some length before the violin returns to the modal material and the subdued mood of the opening. However, the essentially static character of the modal melody is soon transformed by a more flowing piano accompaniment, over which the movement builds towards a tremendous climax in which animated violin figuration bravely battles for survival against fragmented piano derivatives of the modal theme (5'21"). The music unhurriedly subsides into bitter-sweet major/minor ambiguity, before varied reprises of both the earlier *agitato* section and the dotted rhythm theme. In the coda, the modal melody returns, delicately intoned by the violin in its upper register, accompanied, as at the start, by static piano chords: now, however, a certain dissonant piquancy is added as the piano imitates each phrase of the violin melody, before all hint of disturbance is dispelled in the serene B major harmony of the closing bars.

As if loathe to abandon the deep inwardness of the end of the slow movement, the Finale shows itself shyly to begin with, but soon launches into the prancing insouciance of its main rondo theme – though 'tune' might be a more accurate label for one of the most cheerful ideas in all my music. Predictably, given the strains and stresses of the first three movements, storm clouds soon start to gather. Nevertheless, the second subject proper, when it appears, is again optimistic, a driving violin

melody heard against a relentless piano rhythm in 7/8 time (=2+2+3 quavers; 1'27"). The first reprise of the rondo theme sees the violin tune supported by sparkling piano semiquavers, but then an unexpected turn; we enter a shadowy, mystical realm, in which first the violin and then the piano intone a probing, strangely insubstantial melody, against animated, subdued figuration in the bass (2'23"). There follow a rapid violin cadenza, and then a second reprise of the rondo theme, this time in jazz idiom. Again we pass through the storm clouds, before another surprise; a false reprise of the second subject in which the violin plays the melody in a foreign key on unearthly-sounding false harmonics. The earlier shadowy theme reappears, now transformed into loud defiance, before the 7/8 second subject is restated in its original guise. A last reprise of the rondo theme sees mischievous imitative interplay between violin and piano, before the coda combines elements of both the Finale's main ideas, propelling the work irresistibly towards an avowedly life-affirming conclusion.

The title track, **A Questing Soul** for solo piano (CD2 T5), is, like **Reconciliation** (see above) a compact tone-poem with a broad expressive range. After a languorous opening section the music stutters forward in an attempt to assert itself, before two more muscular themes are sounded against a brusque backdrop (1'05"). The juxtaposition of aggressive ideas alongside softer, dreamier material, encapsulates the expressive dichotomy at the heart of this piece; a sense enhanced by the frequent pitting of *legato* melodic lines against spiky *staccato* accompaniments. The remainder of the composition continues regularly and abruptly to change course, and at its end one is conscious that this piece has asked more questions than it has supplied answers.

Tom and Jerry for unaccompanied violin (CD2 T6) inhabits a playful, mischievous world, both performer and composer constantly toying with the audience through the ubiquitous use of *rubato* and the rapid changes of register and dynamic. Composer Scott Bradley rarely received the credit he deserved for his wonderfully inventive sound-tracks to Hanna-Barbera's glorious cartoons, and this frothy miniature is my tribute to him.

The first and third of my **Three Vignettes** for solo piano, **Beethoven through the Looking Glass** (CD2 T7) and **Master of the Rocking Horse** (CD2 T9) share something of the minx-like Modernism of the aforementioned **Tom and Jerry**. The middle vignette, **Summertime Languor** (CD2 T8) recalls the harmonic haze of the sleeper sections of **A Questing Soul**: unlike its bedfellows, this vignette is in no hurry.

Several pieces in my *oeuvre* exist in different versions for differing instrumental combinations. **An Interrupted Waltz** (CD2 T10) was originally composed – surprisingly, perhaps – for descant recorder and piano, and I have also written a version of this piece for oboe and piano. I do delight in rearranging my music in this way! The process encourages me to think carefully about the expressive and technical

capabilities of the new melodic instrument, and the rewriting involved often sheds fresh light on the original composition. It is also much less hard work than writing from scratch! An Interrupted Waltz is in a relatively conventional ternary form: the consoling lyricism of the outer sections being ‘interrupted’ by the fragmentary, recitative-like music of the middle section. The reprise of the opening material incorporates bell-like embellishments in the upper register of the piano, and with a last, joyful peal the piece makes a contented exit.

The **Three Bagatelles** for solo piano (CD2 TT11-13) were written just prior to the commencement of my PhD studies in Composition at Manchester University (2007-2013), where my supervisors were Philip Grange and Kevin Malone. The Bagatelles are typical of my music at that time: raw and uncompromising, harmonically dense and dissonant. Unlike the **Three Vignettes** (see above), the Three Bagatelles all have an Expressionistic feel to them – robust and energetic, brash and breathless. Musically they are unified by the preponderance of chords combining perfect fourths and semitones, by an eschewing of *legato* lines, and by pervasive use of the outer reaches of the piano.

Say Yes to Life! (CD2 T14) shares with the **Three Bagatelles** both Expressionistic intensity and harmonic complexity. Though barely five minutes long, it is a bold, ambitious work with the expressive sweep usually associated with a large-scale composition. Say Yes to Life! also exists in a version for cello and piano, but the violin version, written for a friend experiencing a difficult pregnancy (hence the title), came first: the piece depicts a personal battle undertaken with courage and fortitude. The soaring, aspirational violin melody of the opening leads into faster music of a restless, scurrying character. The unborn baby is represented by a mocking theme familiar to all children – ‘*naa-naa-na-na-naa-naa*’ – which first appears unobtrusively on the piano (0’55”), and thereafter regularly recurs throughout the piece. The aspirational violin melody itself reappears three times: first in stormy guise (1’29”); then mysteriously, in a passage reminiscent of Charles Ives (3’20”), rapidly followed by a version marked *nobilmente* (3’36”). An unusual feature of the piece is its two miniature violin cadenzas, the first based on the interval of a major 9th, the second on a minor 9th, both punctuated by dramatic piano chords (1’41” and 4’02” respectively). Over the concluding pages the prevailing mood of turbulence and inner conflict is finally vanquished: the violin, with growing confidence, sings out lengthy augmentations of the child’s formerly mocking theme (4’40”) over increasingly consonant piano harmony, bringing this passionate composition to a hugely confident conclusion.

Finally, **Soliloquy** for solo piano (CD2 T15) marks a return to the deep introspection of its close contemporary, *A Questing Soul*. Mercurial changes of tempo, mood and material abound. But alongside the quirkiness is an underlying seriousness of intent; an urgent, passionate desire authentically to connect, to know and be known. And, at the last, a characteristic Robinesque twist..

Robin Stevens, Baguley, March 2024.

The Artists

Christine Townsend studied the violin at the Royal Academy of Music and has since enjoyed a varied and successful career as a chamber musician and principal orchestral player. She was a regular guest principal with the London Philharmonic and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and guest leader of the Hallé. She has given highly acclaimed concerto performances as a soloist at the Edinburgh and Salzburg Festivals, performed in Europe and the USA and has been involved in an eclectic variety of recording projects including work with leading pop artists. Christine has been in demand as a teacher, adjudicator and chamber music coach.

Stephen Robbins studied the piano as an Associated Board scholar at the Royal Academy of Music, where he was awarded almost every prize for performance. He has given concerto and recital performances throughout the UK at venues such as Birmingham Symphony Hall, and the Queen Elizabeth Hall and has appeared on BBC Radio and Television. As a soloist, accompanist and chamber musician he has performed in Europe, the Far East and the USA, with an interest in contemporary music, giving first performances of a number of new pieces by prominent composers.

He has also worked as a vocal accompanist and harpsichordist and is an experienced recording engineer and producer.



Christine and Stephen have a longstanding and highly regarded performing partnership spanning decades. They have cultivated their own musical identity, seeking to bring a diverse repertoire of chamber music to a wide audience through an informative and accessible presentation. Their work has included regular recitals at the South Bank Centre, educational work in schools and concerts at countless music clubs and churches throughout the UK. They enjoy many other interests together, including walking in the Surrey hills with their much-loved Border Collie, Bramble. And making healthy bread.

The Composer

Born in Wales in 1958, Robin grew up in a musical family. His father had a fine baritone voice and was a devoted listener to Classical music, whilst his mother, the pianist Gillian Butterworth, was also a singing coach and music lecturer. Robin began learning the cello aged eight, and the piano aged twelve, and by his early teens was writing pastiche Mendelssohn and Mozart, though his individual creative voice only started to emerge in his early twenties.

At sixteen Robin began two enjoyable years at Dartington College, where he performed the Elgar Cello Concerto with the College orchestra, as well as belonging to a student string quartet. His studies continued in Manchester at both the Royal Northern College of Music (principal study cello) and Manchester University Music Department, and after a Masters Degree at Birmingham University under the supervision of composer John Joubert, Robin worked for five years on the staff of St. Paul's York, prior to three years' teaching in a Yorkshire Comprehensive School. Then a debilitating illness struck, keeping Robin out of paid employment for the next seventeen years.

In 2007, with health fully restored, composition finally took centre stage for Robin. Whilst supporting himself by working as a home tutor, in the next decade and a half Robin wrote many of his most important works, including a Clarinet Quintet; a Fantasy Trio for flute, cello and guitar; *Sonata Romantica* for cello and piano; a Romantic Fantasy for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet; and two string quartets. All these pieces have subsequently been recorded on the Divine Art label. Additionally, Robin has written *Balmoral Suite* for recorder and chamber orchestra; *Mourning into Dancing* for Symphony Orchestra; *Brass Odyssey* for brass band and six percussionists; a *Te Deum* for choir and orchestra; and concertos for bassoon, for cello, and for viola. He has also composed numerous songs, several hymns, and many shorter pieces for his favourite instrument, the cello.



When not involved in music-making, Robin is a regular at Wythenshawe parkrun, and a recreation cyclist. He loves stimulating conversation and giving dinner-

parties, and takes a keen interest in both history, current affairs, and the interface of spirituality and psychology. His favourite reading materials are biographies, whodunnits, and the Starbridge and St. Benet's novels of Susan Howatch.

In the spring of 2023, during the process of recording this album Robin received the unwelcome news that he was fighting cancer in his colon: in addition, four months later, melanoma was detected in his back. Happily, after two operations and seven bouts of chemotherapy, Robin's scans are all clear, he has resumed running and cycling, and at time of going to press (April 2024), the outlook is good. Into the future, Robin is pondering whether to write a symphony, and in the present he continues to be a regular worshipper at St. Mary Magdalene Church, Sale, where he often heads up the music group, and occasionally preaches. The best is yet to come!

www.robinstevenscomposer.co.uk



More Recordings from Robin Stevens



Robin Stevens: Chasing Shadows

Rosa Campos Fernandez (Clarinet); Amy Yule (flute and piccolo); Nicholas Trygstad (cello); Alexander Jones (double bass); David Jones (piano); Clifford Llantaff (harp); Craig Ogden (classical guitar); Sophie Rosa (violin); Katie Stillman (violin); Rosemary Attree (violin); Christine Anderson (viola); Alistair Vennart (viola)

Divine Art DDA 25236

“There is a sense of laser-like concentration everywhere. This disc of “music for mixed ensemble” by Robin Stevens is cherishable; the performances and recording are beyond criticism.” —Colin Clarke, Fanfare

Robin Stevens: Music for Cello and Piano

Nicholas Trygstad (cello);

David Jones (piano)

Divine Art DDA 25217

“Several items on this CD reveal Robin Stevens to be a very individual and exploratory composer. Stevens makes the instruments sound so different and yet marries them together so well.” – *British Music Society*



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Behn Quartet

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"I can recommend this release. I found much to enjoy. Outstanding performances." – *Fanfare*

"Fascinating...incisive and precise performances." – *British Music Society*

Robin Stevens String Quartets & String Quintet

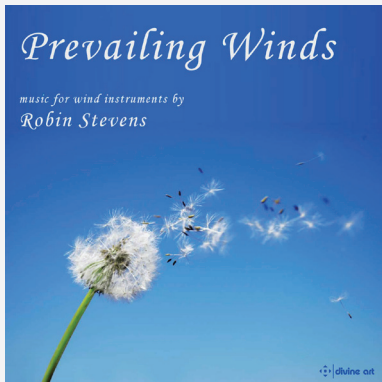


Behn Quartet with Timothée Botbol

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Prevailing Winds

music for wind instruments by
Robin Stevens



divine art

PrevailingWinds

Music for wind instruments by Robin Stevens

John Bradbury (clarinet);

John Turner (recorder);

Richard Simpson (oboe); Sarah Miller (flutes);

Helen Peller (bassoon); Lindsey Stoker (horn);

David Jones & Janet Simpson (piano)3;

Robin Stevens (cello, guitar & piano)

Divine Art DDA 25194

"A high level of musical imagination, combined with skilled and involved performances... very enjoyable ." – *Fanfare*

"I enjoyed this. These miniatures are bursting with ideas." – *American Record Guide*

Recorded at Halle St. Michaels, Ancoats, Manchester, by Phil Hardman:
8th July, 2022; Fantasy Sonata, Say Yes, Scherzo in Blue, Cri de Coeur.
7th October, 2022: Sonata Tempesta.
15th April, 2023: Tom and Jerry, An Interrupted Waltz, Stratospheric!
13th December, 2023: all six piano solos.

Executive producer: Robin Stevens

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