



CHAMPS HILL
RECORDS

A MADNESS MOST DISCREET
LOVE IN PIANO MUSIC

STEPHEN DE PLEDGE

TRACK LISTING

	KINDERSZENEN (SCENES OF CHILDHOOD) Op.15 ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)	
1	Von fremden Ländern und Menschen (Of Foreign Lands and People)	1'42
2	Kuriose Geschichte (A Curious Story)	1'14
3	Hasche-Mann (Blind Man's Buff)	0'37
4	Bittendes Kind (Pleading Child)	0'56
5	Glückes genug (Perfect Happiness)	0'49
6	Wichtige Begebenheit (An Important Event)	0'54
7	Träumerei (Dreaming)	2'52
8	Am Kamin (At the Fireside)	1'02
9	Ritter vom Steckenpferd (Knight of the Hobbyhorse)	0'45
10	Fast zu ernst (Almost Too Serious)	1'36
11	Fürchtenmachen (Frightening)	2'07
12	Kind im Einschlummern (Child Falling Asleep)	2'04
13	Der Dichter spricht (The Poet Speaks)	2'29
14	ISOLDES LIEBESTOD FROM TRISTAN UND ISOLDE S447/R280	7'39
	FRANZ LISZT (1811–1886) / RICHARD WAGNER (1813–1883)	
15	PIANO PRELUDE – A LANDSCAPE WITH TOO FEW LOVERS ROSS HARRIS (b.1945)	4'58
16	GOYESCAS – LOS REQUIEBROS (ENDEARMENTS) ENRIQUE GRANADOS (1867–1916)	10'06
	ROMEO AND JULIET: TEN PIECES FOR PIANO Op.75 SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891–1953)	
17	Folk Dance	4'47
18	Scene: The Street Awakens	1'37
19	Minuet: Arrival of the Guests	3'10
20	Juliet as a Young Girl	4'11
21	Masquers	2'28
22	Montagues and Capulets	4'10
23	Friar Laurence	2'22
24	Mercutio	2'31
25	Dance of the Girls with Lilies	2'24
26	Romeo and Juliet before Parting	7'58
		77'29

Produced, engineered and edited by Matthew Dilley
 Recorded from 13th–15th January 2014 in the Music Room, Champs Hill, West Sussex, UK
 Executive Producer for Champs Hill Records: Alexander Van Ingen
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FOREWORD

For as long as I can remember I have loved the idea of themed concerts, and they have provided some of my most memorable experiences in the concert hall, as performer and audience member. As a young student in London I attended a Schumann evening with Felicity Lott, Graham Johnson and Gabriel Woolf (which included in fact a couple of movements from *Kinderszenen*), and I still vividly recall the heart-stopping effect of the marriage between words and music – that was the beginning of my love affair with the themed recital. It is of course much easier to achieve in the world of song, where poetic ideas and music run hand in hand. Yet from time to time composers have also let us peer into their inspirations for solo piano pieces, and the theme of love seems to lend itself particularly well to being bent into a disparate, yet coordinated, whole. It was the Liszt *Liebestod* that first gave me the idea for this recital: what an extraordinary concept, a transcription of the orchestral part of a vocal work in which the voice part can be imagined at will – choose your own fantasy soprano! *Romeo and Juliet* seemed the obvious love story in piano music, just as Schumann's story is arguably the world's most romantic 'pianist' love tale. Even after years of playing *Kinderszenen* I still feel a frisson when the poet speaks so directly in the final movement, it feels almost like eavesdropping on something so personal. From the sultry streets of Madrid to the bleak grandeur of a loveless New Zealand landscape, the possibilities seemed endless once I started to delve into them.

Stephen De Pledge

*Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs,
Being purged, a fire sparkling in lover's eyes
Being vexed, a sea nourished with lover's tears.
What is it else? A madness most discreet,
A choking gall and a preserving sweet.*

It was Shakespeare, in a speech delivered by Romeo, who described love as “A madness most discreet”, an apparent oxymoron which encapsulates the sense of boundless possibilities those who love, or have loved, will recognise. Certainly love has its own logic to those in its thrall, to whom it appears able to overcome or transcend more mundane considerations. Such is its apparent “madness”.

It was against high odds indeed – specifically, the adamant opposition of Clara’s father, Friedrich Wieck – that the young pianist Clara Wieck and her beloved Robert Schumann, some nine years her senior, persisted in their love for one another. After five years of cruel intriguing by Wieck senior against their relationship, culminating in an ugly court case between himself and Schumann, Clara and Robert were finally married in 1840.

Two years earlier, during one of their enforced separations, Robert wrote to the then 18-year-old Clara on 17 March 1838: “I have discovered that nothing lends wings to the imagination so much as suspense and longing for something, as happened again in the last few days when, waiting for your letter, I composed whole volumes – strange, crazy, even cheerful stuff.” This burst of creativity, he confessed, was “perhaps a kind of echo of one of your letters, where you wrote that ‘I sometimes seemed to you to be like a child too’ – at any rate, I felt as though I were in short frocks again, and I knocked off some 30 amusing little pieces, from which I have chosen about 12 and called them ‘Kinderszenen’ (*Scenes from Childhood*). You will enjoy them, but you will have to forget you are a virtuoso.”

Kinderszenen, to which Schumann subsequently added one more piece, is both one of his most limpid yet most challenging suites. Several individual movements may be within the grasp of a talented child pianist, such as the opening ‘Of Foreign Lands and People’, or the well-loved ‘Dreaming’ (*Träumerei*); yet there are others that require considerable technical fleetness, such as ‘Blind Man’s Buff’. Even the final number, ‘The Poet Speaks’, simple as it is, requires a stretch of a tenth on its final chord, beyond the reach of any child pianist (the present note writer recalls the childhood pleasure of playing that number as a duet with his sister). This is surely significant: not only is that piece an epilogue spoken by the adult author, but the suite as a whole – child-like though it is – is really an adult’s recollection of youth, as Schumann made clear when the music critic Ludwig Rellstab annoyed him with the suggestion that he had attempted to portray an actual child in his music.

It was love that prompted Wagner in 1857 to temporarily stop composing his mighty *Ring* cycle, and turn instead to creating his opera *Tristan und Isolde*. Few works have captured the experience of being in love more compellingly, though it is hardly of that delightful falling-in-love experience where anything seems possible. Wagner was more of a pessimist at the time he composed *Tristan*: not only had his hopes of conquering Paris as an opera composer been dashed, but his new opera was inspired by his misfortune of falling heavily in love with an already married woman, Mathilde Wesendonck, wife of one of his most generous patrons. It was her (frankly mediocre) verse which inspired Wagner to write the so-called *Wesendonck Lieder*, yearningly beautiful songs consciously written as preliminary studies to his ‘memorial to this loveliest of all dreams’.

It was Wagner’s future father-in-law, Liszt, who first called *Isolde’s* great final aria in that opera her ‘Liebestod’ (love-death), so titling his transcription made for solo piano in 1868 and revised in 1875. This was one of Liszt’s many piano transcriptions of

operatic excerpts, symphonies and other orchestral works by the various composers he admired, written to propagate their work in an age before either radio or gramophone had been invented. But Liszt was rarely content to merely place the notes at the pianist's fingertips, perhaps least of all his own, without embellishing, rearranging or even in effect recomposing several of these works so they could be heard all the more effectively on his instrument. Though relatively short (certainly in relation to the four-hour opera!), Liszt's transcription, which he titled *Isoldes Liebestod*, is a masterfully handled transfiguration: starting from the baritone end of the keyboard, with a short phrase taken from the lovers' great duet in Act II, the piece is gradually infused with light, Liszt's *tremolandos* not merely sustaining the volume of Wagner's music but in themselves becoming a major part of the music's texture.

Lovers indirectly inspire the Piano Prelude by New Zealand composer Ross Harris (born 1945). Its title, *A landscape with too few lovers*, is taken from the fifth of eight large canvases, *Northland Panels*, a series depicting landscapes from New Zealand's northernmost sub-tropical region painted by the New Zealand artist Colin McCahon. The piece was commissioned specifically for performance by Stephen De Pledge, as part of the 'Landscape Prelude' series staged during the 2008 New Zealand International Arts Festival. As Harris admits, the landscape theme stirred him to make use of the title he had long loved, which then stimulated his imagination to create the piece.

Love, or the promise of love, is more directly conjured by 'Los Requeibros' (*Endearments*), the first piece in the two-part suite *Goyescas* by the Spanish composer Enrique Granados. His inspiration was the old quarter of Madrid, as portrayed by the great 18th-century Spanish painter Francisco Goya, and the elegantly dressed majos and majas who conducted affairs of the heart there. 'Los Requeibros' is by turns flamboyant, seductive and unmistakably virtuosic. Granados himself gave the suite's

premiere in 1911, and was subsequently persuaded – most unusually – to transform the suite into a full-length opera. This was first performed at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1916, a performance which despite wartime conditions Granados and his wife sailed across the Atlantic to attend. Tragically, they subsequently drowned when their ship, en route from England to Spain, was torpedoed by a German U-boat: Granados himself was almost saved, but lost his life when he dived back into the sea intent on rescuing his wife.

We finally turn to *Romeo and Juliet*, the play from which the title of Stephen De Pledge's recital is taken, and the most celebrated musical treatment of Shakespeare's play from the 20th century. Prokofiev in person was bluff, direct and even sometimes brusque. That this appearance was deceptive is fully borne out by his ballet *Romeo and Juliet* with its ardent yet totally unsentimental love music. Getting this staged in Stalinist Russia, though, was far from straightforward: initially scheduled to be produced at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre during the 1935-36 season, the production was first postponed, then scotched when the theatre's administration was purged, the director Vladimir Mutnikh arrested as "an enemy of the people" and shot. Not knowing that his ballet was eventually to be staged in 1940, Prokofiev, desperate to salvage at least some of its music, made several orchestral suites and an arrangement of *Ten Pieces* for piano solo. The latter, although presenting several numbers out of their dramatic sequence, still manages to present the ballet's emotional trajectory. Certainly it reaches its natural culmination in the final number, 'Romeo and Juliet before Parting': this is the suite's longest and most substantial number, in which all the principal love themes are heard before some of Prokofiev's most bleak music – associated with Juliet taking the sleeping potion (and used again in Prokofiev's anguished Cello Concerto of 1938) – brings the suite to its downbeat end.



I STEPHEN DE PLEDGE

New Zealand pianist Stephen De Pledge performs internationally as a soloist and chamber musician. Following studies in Auckland and London, he was awarded the Gold Medal from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the NFMS Young Concert Artists' Award, which led to debuts in the Wigmore Hall and Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. He has given concerto performances with the BBC Scottish Symphony, Bournemouth Symphony, New London and Philharmonia Orchestras, amongst others. Solo performances in recent seasons have taken him to Tokyo, Cologne, Paris, London and Edinburgh, as well as throughout New Zealand. His extensive discography includes works by Bliss, Barber, Messiaen, Shostakovich and Brahms, and premiere recordings of Pärt, Gorecki and Rorem. Stephen has collaborated with many musicians, including Felicity Lott, Viktoria Mullova and Evelyn Glennie, and is a guest at many international festivals.

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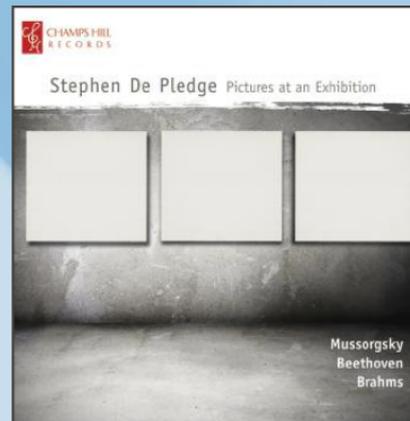
ITALIAN LOVE SONGS
ANNA LEESE *soprano*
STEPHEN DE PLEDGE *piano*

CHRC0050

Anna Leese and Stephen De Pledge perform Italian Love Songs by Bellini, Puccini, Donizetti and Tosti. These elegant pieces for solo voice, some well known, others less so, connect directly with a rich and substantial body of Italian art songs, romanze and *liriche da camera*, composed over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

"a gleaming soprano, like a pure beam of light ... everything here is luminescent, like the sun at its radiant midday height ... Leese sings [the Bellini] with a fine legato and just enough attention to the words ... in her Tosti group she goes further, finding some tender colours in her voice."

Gramophone



**STEPHEN DE PLEDGE:
PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION**

Mussorgsky | Beethoven | Brahms

CHRC0030

Inspired by the collection of artwork within the Champs Hill Concert hall where the recording was made, Stephen De Pledge performs Mussorgsky's vivid *Pictures at an Exhibition* alongside Beethoven's *Pathétique Sonata* in C Minor Op.13 and Brahms's *Two Rhapsodies*, Op.79.

"[De Pledge] brings to this CD his trademark transparency of touch. The sound is bright and firm as he begins the first promenade, and 'Gnomus' emerges with expansive breadth ... And so it goes, each episode vividly characterised ... The Brahms Rhapsodies which round off this impressive CD are a delight: the first is exquisitely nuanced, the second unleashes a mighty performance."

BBC Music Magazine