

ELLER Complete Piano Music, Volume Five

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Sten Lassmann, piano

TT 73:40

Heino ELLER

Complete Piano Music Volume Five

Theme and Variations
in E major

13 Pieces on Estonian
Motifs

Preludes, Book II
Miniatures

Sten Lassmann, piano

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

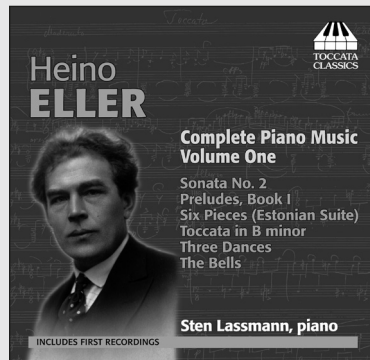


HEINO ELLER: COMPLETE PIANO WORKS, VOLUME FIVE

by Sten Lassmann

The first five works in this programme, all written in the first half of the 1910s, demonstrate Heino Eller's attempts early in his compositional career to emulate the great romantic-virtuoso piano tradition of the nineteenth century. There are dozens of such works from that time, and though they do not demonstrate much originality, they are nevertheless all professionally composed and pianistically delightful. The *Caprice in F sharp minor* (1911) [1] is strongly reminiscent of a Chopin mazurka. The humble, good-natured melody of the *Romanze in F sharp major* (1914) [2] achieves a quasi-orchestral culmination within a framework of a mere 24 bars. The *Molto vivo in F sharp minor* (of uncertain date but from around the same time as the other miniatures here) [3] is an expansion of the idea that Eller had explored in the *Caprice in F sharp minor*: not only are the pieces in the same key but also the kernel of the theme is identical. The sharply articulated *molto vivo* opening theme is soon followed by a virtuosic, whirling *più vivo* with leaps in double thirds. The *più lento* middle section has a quietly seducing, haunting melody on a pedal point. The blithe dreaming that governs the *Nocturne in B major* (1915) [4] is interrupted by a sinister middle section with chromatic semiquaver passages. The *Presto in F sharp major* (from around the same time) [5], a colourful showpiece containing some stunning virtuosic passages, testifies to Eller's youthful fondness of Liszt. It is in a way a study, but exploiting compositional rather than piano technique. The central idea behind the main thematic material is not melodic but harmonic – it consists of piling-up dominant-seventh and -ninth chords in different keys (moving stepwise on the circle of fifths), thus postponing the resolution that is required according to rules of classical harmony. This common device from the latter part of the nineteenth century led to what Schoenberg later called the 'emancipation of the dissonance'.¹ Here Eller is experimenting with it, managing in some sections to stack up six different dominant chords

¹ In his 1926 essay 'Opinion or Insight', in Leonard Stein (ed.), *Style and Idea. Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, Faber & Faber, London, 1984, pp. 258–64.



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in a sequence. Much more daring experiments in modern harmony were to follow in the next decades, but eventually Eller found his original voice in modal harmony where there is no place for a dominant-tonic relationship at all.

Eller wrote altogether eight waltzes; besides the ones on this disc, dating from the 1930s, the rest were all written early in Eller's compositional career, between 1913 and 1916. The early waltzes were all in the style of the *grande valse brillante*, like many piano works from those years under a heavy influence from Chopin. The three waltzes here are unambitious works that do not seek to impress with either brilliant virtuosity or intensity of feeling, but their subdued manner still holds plentiful expressive nuance. One could see them as a muted afterglow of the grand salon tradition of the nineteenth century. The *Lüüriline valss* ('Lyric Waltz') [6] was written in the early 1930s for violin and piano; the piano-solo version is of later date. Although the main theme exudes melancholy, the middle part is artless and slightly rustic. In the original violin version the concluding phrase is written in harmonics, a device hard to replicate on the piano. The *Waltz in B major* (1931) [7] is the most unassuming of the three – even the middle section offers little contrast to the gentle and somewhat detached character of the piece. The *Lüüriline valss* and *Waltz in B major* should not be taken to represent Eller's style in the early 1930s; in fact, these years were the culmination of Eller's modernist attempts in such complex works as the Second String Quartet (1930–31) and *Elegy* for string orchestra and harp (1931). The bright and elegant *Väike valss* ('Little Waltz', 1935) [8] displays a more original range of harmony, and on occasion reveals an affinity with French music. Eller valued the piece high enough to promote it for publication in the 1930s.

The mid- and latter part of the 1930s was a golden period in Eller's *œuvre*. He had shrugged off the aspiration to write in a patently modernist style, and found his own path in an original use of modal harmony, epitomised in the First Symphony, *In modo mixolydia* (1934–36) – a successful synthesis of national and personal idioms. The *Méditation* (1936) [9] is a good example of this new-found stylistic purity – the texture here is pared down to the bone, revealing the essentials of the language. The tetratonic kernel of the theme (a fifth and minor third up, fourth down) is identical to the main theme of the First Symphony; it is in the theme of the *Väike valss*, and in direct or inverted forms is the cornerstone of many works of the period. A fundamental technical device that Eller deploys often is the replacement of the third degree of a chord with the second or the fourth. A chord is no more a major or a minor one, and thus with a single move the gravity of the traditional tonal harmony is evaded. This procedure accounts for much of the weightless and enchanted atmosphere in the beginning of the *Méditation*. A kaleidoscopic middle section – *un poco più mosso, lento, animato* – balances the static rumination of the main melody.

Piano preludes were the chief medium in which Eller explored modern compositional techniques

and the expressionist aesthetic, writing 28 preludes between 1914 and 1934, of which those of Book II are the most extensive in length and complicated in texture. Eller promoted these above all his earlier piano works and as a result these Preludes were the first of his compositions to be published, in 1932,² and they remained the only ones published in his lifetime, the other 21 left to slumber in obscurity. There exist three different manuscripts of the Book II Preludes. The first, dedicated to the Estonian pianist and professor at St Peterburg Conservatory, Artur Lemba (1885–1963), is from 1920, when Book II was compiled. Lemba had performed the gigantic First Sonata at Eller's final examination at the Petrograd Conservatory in June 1920, and the dedication of the Preludes might have been a token of gratitude on Eller's part. Lemba performed Preludes No. 2 and No. 6 only,³ the most accessible and romantic of the set, conforming to his conservative taste. When he openly renounced Eller's modernism in a newspaper review, the relationship turned sour, and the dedication was crossed out.

In 1926 Eller visited Vienna, where he met Guido Adler (1855–1941), the founding father of musicology.⁴ This encounter was facilitated by Elmar Arro (1899–1985), a musicologist of Estonian origin who was at the time Adler's student. Eller presented his Sonata for Violin and Piano No. 1 (1921) and some Preludes from Book II. Adler named Eller 'the Estonian Sibelius' and in the Preludes he saw 'a synthesis of Impressionism and Expressionism'.⁵ According to Arro, Adler inspected Eller's works in detail, and stated that they clearly demonstrate an immense talent, and that he would insist that his friend Emil Hertzka, owner of Universal Edition, should publish them⁶ – but since it would be the first publication of an as yet unknown composer, Eller would not be paid. The composer's first wife, Anna, was opposed to releasing the works without a fee, and so the contact with Hertzka was not made.⁷ The second manuscript of the Preludes from the 1920s could have been prompted by this visit to Vienna. The third manuscript is from around 1930, prepared because of the impending publication of the cycle by Eesti Kultuurkapitali Helikunsti Sihtkapital (Music Foundation of the Estonian Cultural Endowment; later EKHS) in Tallinn. The admission of compositions for publication there was decided by a panel, composed mostly of musicians from Tallinn. Eller was stranded in the increasingly provincial Tartu, and was often frustrated

² Two preludes had appeared as supplements in monthly magazines in Estonia during the 1920s.

³ Mart Humal (ed.), *Heino Eller oma aja peeglis* ('Heino Eller in the Mirror of his Time'), Eesti Raamat, Tallinn, 1987, p. 165.

⁴ Adler's *Umfang, Methode und Ziel der Musikwissenschaft* ('The Scope, Method and Aim of Musicology', 1885) set the principles for the emerging discipline and was widely influential throughout the twentieth century.

⁵ Elmar Arro, 'Erinnerungen an Heino Ellers Aufenthalt in Wien 1925', manuscript (M39:1/108) in the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum, Tallinn.

⁶ Emil Hertzka (1869–1932), director of Universal Edition since 1909, was a tireless promoter of new music.

⁷ Letter from Elmar Arro to Ellu Eller (Eller's second wife), from September 1978, quoted in Hedi Rosma (ed.), *Heino Eller in modo mixolydia*, Eesti Teatri- ja Muusikamuuseum, Tallinn, 2008, p. 69.

it is as if an Estonian folk-tune were cast in the form of a Scarlatti sonata. No. 13, *Moderato assai* [35], is the longest and has the most elaborate texture. The simple tune (notated without words) gets a hymnal character in a broad chordal setting. After a long quasi-folk fugato section (*con moto ma rigoroso*), the recapitulation is marked *maestoso* and played out with even wider arpeggiated chords. This simple yet grandly optimistic ending is indeed compatible with the ideology of Socialist Realism.

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Since winning first prize in the Sixth Estonian National Piano Competition in 2002, **Sten Lassmann** has been regularly appearing as soloist and chamber musician. Concerts and competitions have taken him all over the world, to play in some of the most prestigious venues, such as the Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto, Purcell Room in London, the Large 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. In 2010 he toured Beethoven's Fifth Concerto, and in 2003 Prokofiev's Second Concerto, with the Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, and in 2008 played the Estonian premiere of James Macmillan's Second Concerto.



photo: Karmo Kikkas

His solo repertoire includes works from the Baroque to the modern. Since 2008 he has been engaged on a project to make the first-ever recording of the complete piano works of Heino Eller, which was also his PhD project at the Royal Academy of Music in London. He is also a keen chamber musician, with a large repertoire of duo works for violin, cello and clarinet, piano trio and piano quintet.

Sten Lassmann was born 1982 in Tallinn in a family of musicians. He started his musical education at the Tallinn Central School of Music in 1989, studying piano with Ell Saviak and Ira Floss, and continued at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (BMus, MMus with Distinction) with Ivari Ilja. He later studied also at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris with Brigitte Engerer and at the Royal Academy of Music in London (MMus, Dip RAM) with Ian Fountain. Sten has played in master-classes with such musicians as Boris Berman, Konstantin Lifschitz, Victor Merzhanov, Michael Roll, Alexander Satz, Howard Shelley and Maxim Vengerov. An important influence also comes from his father Peep Lassmann, an eminent pianist and professor, who studied with Emil Gilels at the Moscow Conservatoire.

of the theme. In No. 3, *Allegretto pastorale* [25], Eller has at his disposal a fragment of a mere two bars, but with the addition of perfect fifths in the left hand and a delicate inner voice, he coaxes out remarkable expressive qualities. In each subsequent appearance the core phrase undergoes subtle changes, and the middle section is a quiet interlude accompanied by drones. Two horn-tunes serve as the basis for No. 4, *Allegro* [26] – the first (main section) harmonised in Mixolydian, and the second (middle section) in Lydian mode. The folksong used for No. 5, *Andante sostenuto* [27], is the only one in the cycle collected by Karl Leichter himself, in 1931. This piece is the most harmonically adventurous of the collection; in fact, its last five bars, which display chromatic movement in parallel fourths, almost seem like a left-over from the *Elegy* for string orchestra and harp (1931), one of Eller's most impressive works in a modern idiom. The parallel could be drawn in terms of content as well – this piece is elegiac throughout. The alternating time-signatures (3/4, 3/4, 4/4) of No. 6, *Presto scherzando* [28], originate from the folksong, not from Eller's adjustment of it. The words are: 'Father went to sleep with mother, younger brother with his bride' – hence the *scherzando* ('jesting'), I imagine. The piece ends with a *prestissimo* coda, derived from the opening theme. No. 7, *Alla ballata* [29] – 'like a ballad' – is the only item in this cycle which is not based on folk material. In No. 8, *Allegro con brio* [30], the two-bar folksong is merely expanded in texture in its subsequent appearances, by doubling the melody and bass in octaves. This 'pianistic' treatment of material is distinctly different from the more 'compositional' approach in the previous ones, where the initial theme was usually subject to harmonic variation, polyphonic treatment and motivic transformation. The cheery and playful middle section is perhaps the most overtly humorous part of the *Thirteen Pieces*. No. 9, *Lento* [31], is a pensive rumination; its distinguishing feature is a dreamy cadenza-like section before the recapitulation. Two folksongs, both from a particular sub-category, *kiigelaul* ('swing song'), are used for No. 10, *Allegretto grazioso* [32]. In rural communities the swing was where people met for their leisure, away from everyday chores; for younger people it was a place to pursue romantic interests after sunset. Eller's treatment of the material is masterful, especially of the simple iambic tune set in the middle section. No. 11, *Allegro giusto* [33], displays an important characteristic of the *regilaul* tradition.³⁴ The folk-tune goes with the words 'Kes tõi sõjast sõnomita, kaske, kanke' ('Who brought messages from the war, kaske, kanke') – the first four words are for the lead singer, then the rest join in with last two words, 'kaske, kanke', which are the most common (meaningless) refrain words in the *regilaul* tradition. The horn-tune with drone accompaniment of the middle section also concludes the piece as a coda. In No. 12, *Vivace* [34], the more virtuoso handling of folk sources first encountered in No. 8 reaches its peak. With its *staccato* passages in double thirds and metronome marking at the very maximum of 208 beats per minute,

³⁴ For modern Estonians 'kaske, kaske' is a (often humorous) synonym for the older folk traditions or, rather, attempts at their revival.

by the delaying of his works in favour of Tallinn composers, and a reduction of the composer's fee. He wrote to Emil Ruber, a close friend in Tallinn, in May 1931:

Yesterday I got a letter from Raudsepp [secretary at the EKHS], enquiring whether would I not agree to sell my preludes for 500 kroon. Of course I cannot agree to this. [...] I was hoping I will get the money rather soon, but now there is a stoppage again. The most important thing is of course to print these preludes, but in such a case it could again drag on. I do not have luck with these preludes. [...]

It would be very good if you could speak up in my support, and would remark on their importance and originality, and how necessary it would be to print them at the first instance. Not fugues and student-sonatas do we need, but genuine works!

I think that my preludes would pay off over time, and therefore I can not sell them below this price. If these gentlemen do not understand this, then there is nothing else to do: I have to withdraw these preludes and try to print them myself single-handedly.⁸

With the 'fugues and student-sonatas' Eller's resentful irony is aimed at Artur Lemba's *Toccata and Fugue* and the Piano Sonata, Op. 1, by Juhan Aavik (1884–1982), two works already published by the EKHS;⁹ both men were prolific composers and leading figures in Estonian musical culture, but their music is less original than Eller's. Eventually, the Preludes were published in 1932, helping to consolidate Eller's reputation as a modernist – which made him an easy target during the witch-hunts of the late Stalinist years. A telling example is this quote from a main cultural newspaper *Sirp ja Vasar* ('Sickle and Hammer') in December 1950:

In 1920 7 Preludes came out, which show the composer's further sharp turn towards modernism. In a number of Preludes (Nos. 1, 5, 7) the music has completely lost the melody, and instead there emerge some kind of shapeless and rhythmically nondescript passages. The harmony has become unclear, the form fragmentary and brittle. The tempo changes often and the character of the music is determined with such terms, as 'spirituoso' and 'misterioso', which testify to the composer's giving over to decadent 'emotion-haze' and mysticism.¹⁰

The premiere of the Preludes was given by Eller's composition pupil Olav Roots (1910–74) in September 1933 in Tartu. Roots was a tireless promoter of Eller's music, at first as a pianist and later as a conductor. In 1933 he was in Paris and, after a performance in a private circle, handed out Eller's freshly

⁸ Humal, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁰ Serafim Milovski, 'Heino Elleri loomingust' ('Heino Eller's *œuvre*'), *Sirp ja Vasar*, 23 and 30 December 1950, quoted in Humal, *op. cit.*, pp. 219–21.



Preludes, Book II, No. 1 – the manuscript that Eller submitted to the Kultuurkapital (Cultural Endowment) in 1932 for publication: the stamp of approval is visible centre right, and the upper right-hand corner shows the dedication to Artur Lemba crossed out

The discrepancy between the requirements of larger forms and the simple construction of folk tunes has never been solved and cannot be solved. A simple idea must not use the language of profundity, or it can never become popular.³⁰

In this cycle there are plenty of expressive melodies, brilliant thematic transformations and pacy rhythms with real élan.

In the *Thirteen Pieces* Eller employed altogether sixteen different folksongs – belonging to the ancient Estonian *regilaul*³¹ tradition – and instrumental tunes.³² The folk source (often merely two bars in length) is harmonised and extended, and set as the main theme of the piece, set off by a contrasting middle section – derived in most of the pieces, often using inversion of pitch and rhythm, from the original folk material, although in some (Nos. 4, 8, 10 and 11) an altogether new tune is used. Only three of the sixteen folk-tunes are of instrumental origin: the main theme and middle section of No. 4, and the middle section of No. 11. This predominantly vocal origin is surprising: the very fast pace of Nos. 2, 6, 8 and 12 makes it hard to imagine them as songs. Eller's non-vocal approach is the result of his exclusively instrumental orientation – besides a *Vocalise* dating from 1917 and the piano accompaniments for the three folksongs he harmonised for Aino Tamm, he had never written anything for the voice. He would venture into this territory only in 1951–52 with a handful of solo and choral songs as a last resort against pressures from the Soviet regime that had been mounting since 1948. But it would be unfair to blame him for disregarding the original folk idioms, since he tried to amplify the characteristics that he saw in them, not ignore them.

The folksong used for No. 1, *Andantino* [23], is of such length and variety that Eller had only to add a few harmonising chords, and a three-bar response to it. The song then recurs with melodic variation, and Eller's commenting phrase, in a more polyphonic setting, finishes the piece. It is a fitting opening to the cycle, demonstrating Eller's aesthetic stance, and modesty toward the original folk material. The folksong used in No. 2, *Vivo*, [24], is not in fact Estonian but Livonian, the Livonians being a now extinct Balto-Finnic people who inhabited north-west Latvia.³³ The words of the song are: 'Dear mother, let the child indoors, child's feet are freezing, peed in the shoes, feet got frozen.' Eller's take on it is clearly humorous. The middle section, with the melody in the left hand, is actually a remote inverted variation

³⁰ 'Folkloristic Symphonies' (1947), in Stein (ed.), op. cit., pp. 161–66.

³¹ *Regilaul*, or 'runo song', is the alliterative, repetitive song-tradition which accompanied the daily lives of the Estonian and allied Baltic peoples (many now extinct).

³² A methodical catalogue of all the identified original folk sources used by Eller is given in Humal, *loc. cit.*, pp. 101–16.

³³ The same song is used by Veljo Tormis in his *Liivlaste pärandus* ('Livonian Heritage', 1970, the first installment in his monumental six-part choral masterpiece *Unustatud rahvad* ('Forgotten Peoples')), but in a plaintive setting.

In their assessments of Estonian music, some music personages often refer to the fact that many works of Estonian composers are built on the basis of folk music, and make the incorrect assumption that therefore these works are not formalist. Especially often one can hear such opinions on the composer Eller's *œuvre*. On top of this conclusion being wrong, it is in itself utterly formalist as well, since to analyse a composition merely on point of its form, without at the same time taking into consideration its content, constitutes a formalist approach to the issue.

Using a folk tune to some extent or other does not yet determine in itself the content or the tendency of the composition. Folksongs were used in their works by composers with completely different styles [...]. In Estonian music, too, the folk tune has been used differently: it appears enriched and full of ideas in E. Kapp's opera *Tasuleegid*,²⁵ sounding dull and diseased in L. Auster's song *Emade laul*.²⁶ In H. Eller's piano pieces from 1940 [the *Thirteen Pieces*] the folk tune in some cases completely loses its expression, becoming the dead, meaningless theme of a completely abstract work.²⁷

Regardless of the extent to which the *Thirteen Pieces* might be a product of its time, Eller's compositional mastery ensures that the music has a lasting value. Indeed, the cycle is often praised as the highest in the adaptation of Estonian folksong as instrumental music, and after being published in 1945 it became an example for the younger generation. The composer Veljo Tormis (b. 1930), the foremost authority in using folksong in art music, has said that the *Thirteen Pieces* straightaway became his favourite in Estonian instrumental music. In 1951, when Tormis went to study in the Moscow Conservatoire, he took Eller's *Thirteen Pieces* with him as a reference model, even proposing them as material for orchestration classes.²⁸ In Heljo Sepp's words, 'in the *Thirteen Pieces* Eller shows himself as a mature master, whose output is governed by a classical balance of content and form.'²⁹ Marking the beginning of the third period in Eller's output, the *Thirteen Pieces* initiated the numerous folk-inspired works that followed in his three remaining decades.

The harmonic language of the *Thirteen Pieces on Estonian Motifs* is radically simpler than in the works of the two previous decades. The predominantly diatonic and triadic harmony is made more interesting by the unorthodox chord-progressions based on modal harmony – modal and plagal harmony prevail over the traditional dominant-tonic relationship. The texture is sparse, and all the pieces are in a simple ternary form. Eller seems to share Schoenberg's thought from 1947:

²⁵ The three-act opera *Tasuleegid* ('Fires of Revenge') by Eugen Kapp (1908–96) was premiered in Tallinn in July 1945.

²⁶ *Emade laul* ('Mothers' Song') for mezzo soprano and piano by Lydia Auster (1912–93) was composed in 1943.

²⁷ Quoted in Humal, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

²⁸ In an e-mail to the author dated 18 April 2011.

²⁹ Sepp, *Heino Elleri klaverilooming*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

printed Preludes to such French composers as Albert Roussel (1869–1937), Florent Schmitt (1870–1958) and Pierre-Octave Ferroud (1900–36).¹¹ Two of the Preludes were broadcast by the BBC on 20 August 1937, played by Henry Bronkhurst.¹² Two were also played by Heljo Sepp in her programme for the 1938 British Council Music Competition at the Royal Academy of Music, which she won.¹³

With its mere fourteen bars, the **Prelude No. 1, *Lento pensieroso*** [10], is the shortest of all Eller's preludes. The oppressive silence of the beginning and end finds an outlet in a short, desperate outcry in the middle. **Prelude No. 2, *Andante con espressione*** [11], had its inspiration in 1913 in Sevastopol, Crimea:

One summer, playing in Sevastopol, I opened the window in the morning. A sunray came into the room, the sea was blue and quiet. There was a slight breeze. I tried to convey this with the beginning of the Prelude [...].¹⁴

The beginning of **Prelude No. 3, *Allegro agitato***, [12] is archetypically 'Ellerian' – the very opening is identical to that of the third movement of the Second Sonata from 1939–1940,¹⁵ a bright pastoral-lyrical work that marks the pinnacle of Eller's original style. But the distraught character and the dissonant, high-voltage culminations that follow are consistent with the pursuit of the expressionist aesthetic that dominates the cycle. **Prelude No. 4, *Sostenuto*** [13], the most melodious of the Book II, is best characterised by the performance indications in the score: *con intimo sentimento* at the beginning, and *con tenerezza* ('with tenderness') at the *subito pianissimo* near the end. In her candidate's thesis written at the Moscow Conservatory in the early 1950s, later published in Estonian, Heljo Sepp says the Fourth Prelude

is an utterly realistic work: with a firm intrinsic line of development, clear functionality in harmony, and expressive melody which has vocal motifs. Scriabin's influence is clearly felt.¹⁶

She then juxtaposes these characteristics with that of **Prelude No. 5, *Allegretto capriccioso*** [14], where

we can observe diametrically opposite tendencies: the relief of the musical images, and their clear formal and inner concentrated development, disappear; the melodic line is nervously erratic, leaping and disjunct, the signs of atonality are evident. [...] In this Prelude the bright and optimistic nature of Eller's music has vanished. It is

¹¹ *Uudiseid Pariisi muusikaelust* ('News from the Parisian music scene'), *Postimees*, 7 February 1934, quoted in Heljo Sepp (ed.) *Heino Eller sõnas ja pildis* ('Heino Eller in Word and Picture'), Eesti Raamat, Tallinn, 1967, p. 126.

¹² Humal, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

¹³ Mare Põldmäe, 'Vastab Heljo Sepp' ('Heljo Sepp answers'), *Teater. Muusika. Kino*, March 1987.

¹⁴ Interview in daily paper *Noorte Häääl* ('Young Peoples' Voice'), 14 March 1969; quoted in Humal, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

¹⁵ Recorded on the first CD in this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0119.

¹⁶ Heljo Sepp, *Heino Elleri klaverilooming* ('Heino Eller's Piano Works'), Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, Tallinn, 1958, pp. 41–43.

displaced by elegiac meditation, gloom and sometimes even a modern technicism that suffocates any kind of mood.¹⁷

Though Sepp's condemnation of Eller's ventures into modernism are eerily similar to Soviet critique of the time (exemplified by the quotation from *Sirp ja Vasar* above), her intention was to defend Eller as a realist who had merely wandered errantly into foreign currents of fashion before reaching the zenith of his career in the folk-based *Kolmteist klaveripala eesti motiividel* ('Thirteen Piano Pieces on Estonian Motifs') in 1940–41. The early 1950s saw the worst official pressure on Eller, with newspaper headlines such as 'Crooked working style at the Union of Composers: there is still no judgement on the works of the foundation beam of formalism in Estonian music, Heino Eller'.¹⁸ The year 1949 saw the biggest mass deportation of Estonians into Siberia – more than twenty thousand people. In 1950 three organisers of the Song Festival were arrested, and the threat of deportation was hanging over both Eller and Heljo Sepp.¹⁹ Her thesis should be understood in that context – which naturally included the compulsory quotation of Lenin. **Prelude No. 6, *Spiritoso*** [15], is the only one in this set with a straightforward and succinct character; it is also the only one demonstrating a notably pianistic texture, in the idiom of the Russian pianistic tradition. In the last, **Prelude No. 7, *Grave*** [16], the first half of the piece is one single accumulative *crescendo* that reaches a culmination of breathtaking tension and destructive force. The latter part, in response, is a long *diminuendo* on a dominant organ point, vanishing into a barely audible *pppp*.

The **Theme and Variations in E major** (1912) is the only large-scale work among Eller's early compositions. It follows Classical-Romantic formulae in all aspects; there is no searching for modern or national idioms, nor is there anything particularly original about them – here is a fledgling composer learning his craft. The arpeggiation of the underlying harmonic scheme in Variation I [18] and the melodic elaboration of Variation II [19] reflect the serene character of the Theme [17]. Variation III [20] is a robust canon in double octaves; it is followed by the mirror image of the theme in E minor in Variation IV [21]. Variation V [22] adds the hitherto missing virtuoso element to the cycle and leads to a vigorous conclusion.

The *Kolmteist klaveripala eesti motiividel* ('Thirteen Piano Pieces on Estonian Motifs') is the first work Eller based on authentic folk material.²⁰ In summer 1940 Estonia was annexed into the Soviet Union following the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939. All spheres of Estonian society were re-organised according to the

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ *Sirp ja Vasar*, 13 May 1950, p. 5.

¹⁹ Heljo Sepp, in an interview with the author on 16 April 2011.

²⁰ He had harmonised three folksongs at the request of the renowned Estonian soprano Aino Tamm, published in *Aino Tamme rahvalaulude kava* (Aino Tamm's Folksong Collection), G. Pihlakas, Tallinn (Reval), 1923.

Soviet model. The Higher Music School in Tartu was remodelled as a lower-level school and Eller was invited to the Tallinn Conservatory. He had been languishing in Tartu for years. In his letters from the later 1920s onwards he had repeatedly expressed a wish to move to Tallinn, but he was not given a chance to work at the Conservatory there. It is a painful paradox that the opportunity came only with the Soviet occupation, something that up to this day Estonian national historiography has shrunk from dealing with. At the end of 1940 Eller was chosen as chairman of the Organising Committee of the Estonian Soviet Composers' Union, the local branch of the Soviet Composers' Union. It is in this capacity that he composed the *Thirteen Pieces* in winter 1940–41, perhaps under pressure to conform with the official ideology of Socialist Realism. It might even be fair to assume that without the Soviet occupation Eller might not have turned to using folk material,²¹ although bearing in mind his search for a more national idiom in the 1930s – in piano music exemplified by such works as *Danse-Caprice* (1933)²² and *Eesti tants* ('Estonian Dance', 1934) – one could also argue that the *Thirteen Pieces* was the result of a natural evolution in his style. Sepp makes this point strongly in her book on Eller's piano music.

Most of the folk material used in this cycle comes from a manuscript collection of Karl Leichter (1902–87), Eller's composition student in Tartu before he became one of Estonia's leading musicologists.²³ Leichter worked in the Estonian Folklore Archive in 1929–31 and had collected some folksongs himself. In 1940–41 Leichter and Sepp lived in Eller's apartment in Tallinn.²⁴ In this proximity it is very likely that Leichter and Eller discussed the new demands on art set by Socialist Realism. Given that the use of folk material was indeed required practice, Leichter might have dug out his notebook from the previous decade and suggested Eller have a look at the folk material it contained. In view of Eller's reputation as a modernist in 1920s and '30s Estonia, it might not be entirely arbitrary to suggest that *Thirteen Pieces* were pre-emptive, placatory works. But when the storm struck, there was no escape, even with these harmless pieces as a shield. The biggest Soviet anti-formalist campaign in music began with the Zhdanov Decree of 10 February 1948, denouncing the leading Soviet composers Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Khachaturian and others as 'formalists'. On 26 March 1948 an unsigned editorial in the leading Estonian-language daily newspaper in Tallinn, *Rahva hääl* ('Voice of the People'), dealt an ominous blow:

²¹ It should be said that Eller himself never had any political agenda, nor made any statements to that effect. He had lived through the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, but was not involved in any side; all the evidence suggests that he was thoroughly apolitical.

²² Also recorded on the first CD in this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0119.

²³ Mart Humal, 'Heino Elleri teostes kasutatud rahvaviisid' ('Folksongs used in Heino Eller's *Œuvre*'), in Priit Kuusk (ed.), *Muusikalisi lehekülgi II* ('Musical Pages II'), Eesti Raamat, Tallinn., 1979, pp. 101–16.

²⁴ Heljo Sepp in her interview with the author on 16 April 2011.