HEINO ELLER Complete Piano Music, Volume Two

1	**Sonatina in F sharp minor** (later 1950s)*		**4:09**
	Eight Pieces (1948)*		**16:21**
2	No. 1	Melody	2:17
3	No. 2	Music Box (1947)	1:14
4	No. 3	Waltz (1913)	1:51
5	No. 4	Intermezzo	3:47
6	No. 5	Rondino (1947)	1:47
7	No. 6	*Allegro ma non troppo*	1:38
8	No. 7	*Allegro*	2:13
9	No. 8	Dance (1947)	1:34
10	***Furioso*** (c. 1914)*		**4:30**
11	***Allegro con fuoco*** (1914)*		**3:19**
12	***Episode from Revolutionary Times*** (1917)**		**10:33**
13	***Sostenuto*** **in G minor** (1909)*		**0:52**
14	***Allegretto moderato*** **in C minor** (1909)*		**1:16**
15	***Chanson triste*** (1910)*		**1:36**
16	***Andante*** **in E major** (1910)*		**2:03**
17	***Larghetto*** **in A major** (1909)*		**2:37**
	Preludes, Book III (1921–32)		**7:53**
18	No. 1	*Largo e con summa espressione* (1921)	2:04
19	No. 2	*Lento, lugubre – Più mosso*	2:23
20	No. 3	*Sostenuto – Più mosso*	2:00
21	No. 4	*Sostenuto* (1932)	1:26
	Moderato assai **(*Theme and Variations*)** (1939)*		**11:04**
22	Theme		0:36
23	Variation I		0:43
24	Variation II		0:35
25	Variation III		0:38
26	Variation IV		1:38
27	Variation V		1:04
28	Variation VI		0:58
29	Variation VII		0:44
30	Variation VIII		0:59
31	Variation IX		0:34
32	Variation X		2:35
33	***Estonian Dance*** (1934)**		**5:26**

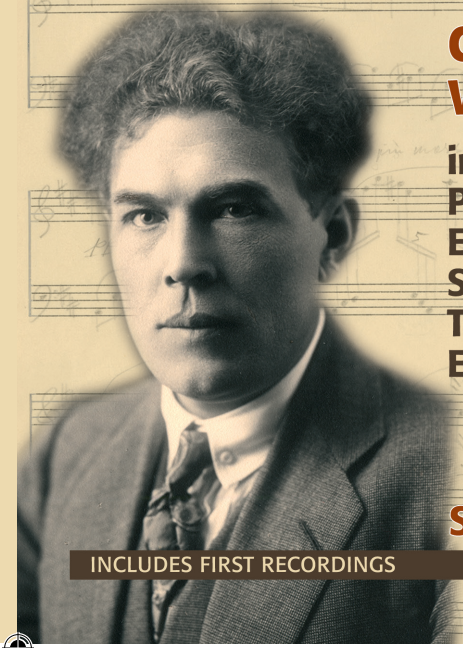
Sten Lassmann, piano

TT 71:38

* FIRST RECORDINGS
** FIRST DIGITAL RECORDINGS

TOCCATA CLASSICS

Heino ELLER



Complete Piano Music Volume Two

including
Preludes, Book III
Eight Pieces
Sonatina in F sharp minor
Theme and Variations
Estonian Dance

Sten Lassmann, piano

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

HEINO ELLER: COMPLETE PIANO WORKS, VOLUME TWO

by Sten Lassmann

Heino Eller[1] (1887–1970) is one of the central figures in Estonian classical music, linking all parts of it into a coherent narrative from the inception of a national culture to the modern day. Born in Tartu, the centre of Estonian national awakening at the time, he spent his childhood surrounded by music, but his professional training began late. From 1907 until 1920 he studied in St Petersburg, a metropolis with a booming musical and artistic life, which made him a witness to one of history's most radical revolutions. From 1920 to 1940 Eller taught composition in his home town, where he instigated the influential 'Tartu School of Composition', and from 1940 until his death in 1970 he was a professor of composition in the Tallinn Conservatory, now the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre – a pedagogical career of exactly half a century, during which several generations of Estonian composers were educated under his tutelage, among them Eduard Tubin, Arvo Pärt and Lepo Sumera.

Eller was a prolific composer whose works deserve wide attention. His music, distinguished by its austere expression, original use of modal harmony and a mastery of polyphonic texture, is largely lyrical with occasional epic undertones and gentle humour. In the context of Estonian classical music, where there is a strong predilection for vocal music, it is remarkable that Eller's *œuvre* consists almost entirely of instrumental works. His best-known pieces are the symphonic poem *Koit* ('Dawn') and *Kodumaine viis* ('Homeland Tune') for string orchestra, the latter bearing a symbolic status in Estonian culture similar to that of Sibelius' *Finlandia* for the Finns. Though these two works are often used as calling cards by Estonian conductors working abroad, most of Eller's substantial output is barely known even in his homeland. The reception of his music underwent quite a radical change during his lifetime: in the independent Estonian Republic of the 1920s and '30s, he was seen as the country's chief modernist, but in the Soviet Estonia by the end of the 1950s he had acquired the status of a national classic. In the interim he had experienced severe criticism, as the repercussions of the anti-formalism campaign triggered by Zhdanov's famous decree in 1948 reached the Soviet Republics,[2] and most of his works from the period of Estonian independence (1920–40) were banned. The zenith of Heino Eller's career was at the XVII Estonian Song Festival in 1969, where he conducted his *Homeland Tune* for a public of nearly a hundred thousand.

[1] Christened Heinrich, he used the Estonian version Heino (officially changing to it in 1939); in Russian he was Генрих ('Genrich'). Eller means 'alder' in German.

[2] Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), a close ally of Stalin, was the enforcer of 'Socialist Realism', the official cultural policy in the Stalinist Soviet Union. He is known for his attack on Prokofiev, Shostakovich and other composers in 1948, which started a witch-hunt aimed at rooting out 'formalism' in music.

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 in 1982 in Tallinn into a family of musicians. He started his musical education at the Tallinn Central School of Music in 1989, studying piano with Ell Saviauk 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.

Recorded 14, 23 and 24 September 2009 at The Old Granary Studio, Beccles, Suffolk
Steinway model D piano tuned and prepared by Andrew Giller
Recorded and mastered by Eric James for Philosophers Barn Mastering
Produced and edited by Sten Lassmann

An important incentive for this recording project was the support of the Alexander Kelly Memorial Award in 2007. The recording and production of this CD were supported by the Cultural Endowment of Estonia and the Estonian Theatre and Music Museum.

Booklet notes: Sten Lassmann
Front cover: Heino Eller c. 1923; background: manuscript of the *Moderato assai* – both from the archives of the Estonian Museum of Theatre and Music
Design and layout: Paul Brooks, Design and Print, Oxford

Executive Producer: Martin Anderson

TOCC 0132

Variations. The reason may be that the score was never published during his lifetime (and remains unpublished to this day), and was first performed only in the 1980s: from Eller's point of view it would have been stating the obvious. The theme 22, a plain, melancholy melody with harmonically inventive passages in the accompaniment, is followed by ten variations. The first variation (*Un poco più mosso*) 23 is a succession of swaying, arpeggiated harmonies; the second variation (*Allegretto*) 24, with its opening resembling a music box, is the shortest, and is followed by a syncopated play of inventive double notes between the hands in the third variation (*Più allegro*) 25. The sombre, funereal fourth variation (*Grave*) 26 ventures harmonically far from the theme. The fifth (*Allegro*) 27, a quick leaping dance, and the sixth (*Allegro giusto*) 28, a lively canon in treacherous triplet passages, are technically tricky. The toccata-like seventh variation (*Presto scherzando*) 29 in *martellato* chords sounds the opening motive of the theme. The nocturnal eighth variation (*Andante sostenuto*) 30 is closely related to the theme, and returns to the original key. The frolicsome ninth variation (*Vivo*) 31 is bursting with energy, and the extensive, perhaps kaleidoscopic, final variation (*Allegro moderato; tempo di marcia*) 32 reaches a dramatic culmination.

The national tinge of the powerful ***Estonian Dance*** (1934) 33 is emphasised by the use of Mixolydian and Dorian modes. The innocent title disguises the structural ambition of the work, which is more of an 'Estonian rhapsody'. But the ambiguity cuts both ways: the earnest pathos of the main theme should perhaps not be taken at face value in light of the clumsy humour of the second theme in the bass. Once that theme has exhausted itself in thundering octave passages, after a silence a more gentle and graceful dance with a flute-like melody can be heard. But it offers only brief respite, as it quickly builds up the volume and energy required for the return of the main theme. The recapitulation achieves immense force by playing the theme in both hands in an intense canon upon a pedal point, and the gradually shortening phrases finally collapse into a screaming downward passage that brings the music to an abrupt halt – as if the dancers had dizzied themselves in endless swirling (or had drunk too much) and now fall down. A short virtuoso coda then draws the piece to a spectacular close.

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 brought 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.

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 is also his PhD project at

Amongst Eller's output there are some two dozen works for symphony orchestra (among them three symphonies), ten scores for string orchestra, five string quartets, and two sonatas and various miniatures for violin and piano. But by far the largest part of his output is piano music: almost two hundred titles, which will require seven CDs in this complete recording. The wealth of the material is astounding: in music spanning over six decades of creativity, it vividly mirrors many of the artistic tendencies of the twentieth century, springing from a late-Romantic style, absorbing the influence of Scriabin and reflecting Grieg's and Sibelius' Nordic flavour. Though Eller had sometimes probed into musical modernism with linear polyphony, saturated harmony and ambiguous tonality, by the middle of the 1930s he had relinquished any such aspirations.

When he entered the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1907, Eller had harboured ambitions to become a violinist, but he soon injured his hand while practising and was forced to leave the institution. His father had always been adamant that he should study law, and so the next year he enrolled in the jurisprudence classes at St Petersburg University, remaining until 1912. During that time he met his future wife, Anna Kremer, a Warsaw Jewess who was studying piano at the Conservatoire. Concurrently Eller started to compose (his first completed works are dated 1909), and eventually re-entered the Conservatoire to study composition. It was probably Anna who introduced Eller to the piano repertoire and was the first performer and critic of his compositions. But one can only conjecture about the extent of Anna Eller's influence, since very little is known about her playing. She was killed by the Nazis in 1942.

Yet there is living testimony to her professionalism and artistry. Heljo Sepp (b. 1922) studied privately with both Heino and Anna Eller – music theory and piano respectively – from 1933 to 1938. In that year the Ellers sent her to London to take part in a competition organised by the British Council, the first prize in which was a three-year scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music. Amongst the other competitors were Géza Anda and Amadeus Webersinke, but the prize went to the sixteen-year-old Sepp, who hailed from the small town of Valga on the Latvian-Estonian border – a unique example of the combined pedagogical talents of the Ellers. Sepp went on to study piano with Vivian Langrish at the Royal Academy, but her studies were cut short by the outbreak of war in 1939. Sepp collaborated closely with Heino Eller for four decades and was the chief propagator of his music in Estonia throughout the Soviet years. From 1949 to 1952 she studied with Heinrich Neuhaus in the Moscow Conservatoire, where she wrote a thesis on Eller's piano music. She was for years the Head of Keyboard and Vice-Rector at the Tallinn Conservatoire (now the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre), where my own father was amongst her pupils. Heljo Sepp has been keenly supportive of my current project to record all of Eller's piano works, and has been uninhibited in both her criticism and her praise. The scholarship to study at the Royal Academy that she won in 1938 was left largely unused, and in 2004 the British Council issued the remainder of the funds as a new scholarship for a young Estonian pianist, of which I was the recipient. Thus, in a bizarre twist of fate, it is the actions of Anna and Heino Eller and Heljo Sepp in the 1930s which allowed me to study at the Royal Academy in London in the 21st century. My hope is that my work on Eller's music will repay this debt, and

perhaps help him acquire the international acclaim that is long overdue.

In the programming of each volume of Eller's piano works, I have deliberately avoided a chronological approach. Rather, by including pieces from various periods and in various styles and genres, I have tried with each disc of this series to create a distinctive portrait of Heino Eller.

The **Sonatina in F sharp minor** (dating from the latter part of the 1950s) [1] is a compact work in one movement – a sonata-form without a development section but with a long coda. Written late in Eller´s life, it presents the quintessence of his language: it is deeply melodic and lyrical, with a masterly polyphonic fabric and concise thematic material; he is wistfully contemplative but never sententious. Composed in the immediate aftermath of the Stalinist freeze that had paralysed nearly all artistic creativity, the Sonatina flows without constraint and harks back to Eller's music of the latter 1930s, especially the Second Sonata (1939–40).[3] The omission of a development section is the salient feature of the Sonatina. After the second subject is repeated against a background of fluid passages in semiquaver triplets, the music comes to a near halt in the low register. From this void a short rhythmic figure, originating from the first phrase of the main theme, at first almost imperceptibly but then rather swiftly takes up momentum and leads directly to the recapitulation. In Eller's earlier sonata-forms the developement sections sometimes seem to be written more as an obligation to convention, rather than out of artistic necessity. Here Eller avoids this pitfall, making this composition a seamless whole.

The cycle of ***Eight Pieces*** was compiled in 1948, but at least half of the pieces had been composed earlier: the Waltz [4] even dates from 1913, 'Music Box' [3], 'Rondino' [6] and 'Dance' [9] from 1947; the dates for the remainder of the pieces are not known. This 'cycle' in fact results from the conflation of two separate sets of pieces (the manuscript front page says '5+3 pieces for piano'), and the difference is discernible: the last three are in the folk-like style that Eller had adapted in the beginning of 1940s, probably because of pressures of the Soviet ideology. The sixth piece is based on a genuine folk-tune. All the pieces, except the sombre 'Intermezzo' (No. 4) [5], are bright and lively. This general character may well be attributed to the vigorous enforcement of 'Socialist Realism' and the 'anti-formalist' campaign of the same year. The hallmark of the Soviet musical style was simplified rhythm and harmony supporting endlessly optimistic melodies – a profile that the last piece of the set, 'Dance', might well be thought to fit. I find it easy to visualise the recapitulation of the opening piece, 'Melody' [2], as 'the broad swaying of Soviet peoples, singing in unison' – kept in perspective by Eller's characteristic tongue-in-cheek humour.

The ***Furioso*** (about 1914) [10] and ***Allegro con fuoco*** (1914) [11] belong to a line of early bravura pieces, where Eller was trying to emulate the Romantic piano idiom from Chopin and Liszt to Scriabin and Rachmaninov. Though not strikingly original, they are neatly crafted and offer interesting pianistic challenges. The tumultuous and gloomy *Furioso* has a fascinating middle section with relentless passages in the left hand and angrily accentuated hemiolas in the right. The piece ends in a truly Lisztian manner with *martellato* chords and sweeping

[3] Recorded on Volume One of this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0119.

passages. In the *Allegro con fuoco* the right hand declaims a melody in octaves, full of despair and pathos, whilst the left hand arduously works at the continuous, stretching semiquaver passages.

The ***Episode from Revolutionary Times*** (1917) [12] was inspired by the funeral march of the victims of the February Revolution, which Eller witnessed in St Petersburg. The piece was later orchestrated (around 1930), but neither version was ever played much – though by title and content it could have enjoyed at least some use during the Soviet years. But Eller was a thoroughly apolitical person: he will have had no political motives when composing the work, nor did he drag it out later during the Soviet years (although he was coming under severe criticism from the Party) to prove that he had been on the right side since the beginning. The *basso ostinato* variations on a descending tetrachord, which begin almost imperceptibly, gradually evolve into a tragic culmination of cataclysmic force. After an abrupt halt, a *molto tranquillo, dolce, pensioroso* section produces a breathtaking contrast. The following section, which is confused and disorderly (it is marked *animato, energico*), may suggest a genuine episode of revolutionary action. Eventually the funeral march returns and, by playing the initial variations in the opposite order, fades away.

The ***Sostenuto*** **in G minor** (1909) [13], ***Allegretto moderato*** **in C minor** (1909) [14], ***Chanson triste*** (1910) [15], ***Andante*** **in E major** (1910) [16] and ***Larghetto*** **in A major** (1909) [17] are some of Eller's first attempts in composition. These charming, melodic miniatures were written when he was a student of law at St Petersburg University, some four to five years before he began formally to study composition.

Between 1913 and 1934 Eller wrote 28 preludes for the piano and then no more until the latter 1960s. This apparent loss of interest is because he used the piano prelude as a laboratory to test more modern compositional techniques. In the middle of the 1930s he developed a lyrical style which was less expressionist and chromatic but made original use of modal harmony and allowed him to adopt a tone that was both more national and more personal. Having achieved it, the necessity of seeking-out novelty seems to have gone, and the prelude as a genre was discarded. The expressionist and enigmatic **Preludes, Book III** (1921–32),[4] are the best examples of Eller's search for a progressively modern style. The prevailing mood in these four preludes, with the exception of the more lenient third one [20], is of oppression and morbidity. The first prelude [18], titled *Largo e con summa espressione*, has an amazing array of emotions crammed into a mere 27 bars – from tragic cries and angry outbursts to sad resignation and tender hope. The second [19], *Lento, lugubre*, employs the interval of a major seventh for its gloomy atmosphere. After the vexed harmonies and chromatic saturation of the fourth prelude (*Sostenuto*) [21], dating from autumn 1932, Eller dispensed with overtly modernist tendencies forever.

Eller's largest set of variations, the ***Moderato assai***, from 1939, belongs with the best of his piano music. In spite of the weight of this piece Eller seems to have forgotten to give the piece its obvious title: *Theme and*

[4] Book I (1914–17) – also recorded on Volume One, Toccata Classics TOCC 0119 – and Book II (compiled in 1920) each contain seven preludes. In the 1920s and '30s Eller wrote another fourteen preludes, but he was rather cavalier about dating them, and he may have intended Book III to contain more than the four pieces that his manuscripts seem to suggest.