

# Windows

BRUCE LEVINGSTON

PIANO

**The Shadow of the Blackbird David Bruce**

- 1 Movement 1 (The Shadow of the Blackbird) 5:34
- 2 Movement 2 (The Shadow of the Blackbird) 6:43

**Kinderszenen, Op. 15 Robert Schumann**

- 3 Von fremden Ländern und Menschen (Of Foreign Lands and Peoples) 2:04
- 4 Kuriose Geschichte (A Curious Story) 1:16
- 5 Hasche-Mann (Blind Man's Bluff) 0:42
- 6 Bittendes Kind (Pleading Child) 1:16
- 7 Glückes genug (Perfect Happiness) 0:57
- 8 Wichtige Begebenheit (An Important Event) 0:58
- 9 Träumerei (Dreaming) 3:36
- 10 Am Kamin (At the Fireside) 1:15
- 11 Ritter vom Steckenpferd (Knight of the Hobby-Horse) 0:53
- 12 Fast zu ernst (Almost too Serious) 2:19
- 13 Fürchtenmachen (Frightening) 1:59
- 14 Kind im Einschlummern (Child Falling Asleep) 2:51
- 15 Der Dichter spricht (The Poet Speaks) 3:12

**16 Arabeske, Op. 18 Robert Schumann 8:44**

**Windows James Matheson**

- 17 Jeremiah 2:40
- 18 Isaiah 2:42
- 19 Crucifixion 5:57
- 20 The Good Samaritan 5:22
- 21 The Rose 7:26

# Preface

The title of this new album, *Windows*, is taken from the entrancing suite by the gifted American composer James Matheson, heard here in its world premiere recording. This evocative, richly-colored work depicts the exquisite stained glass windows of Marc Chagall and Henri Matisse inspired by ancient imagery and scripture. These works, which reflect a myriad of overlapping artistic influences, led me to seek out other composers who have been inspired by multiple art forms. Schumann, who was deeply influenced by poetry and literature, was an immediate choice. His intimate *Kinderszenen*, a series of distilled little jewels that offer fleeting glimpses of childhood, is paired with the urbane, elegant *Arabeske*. The distinguished British-American composer David Bruce is also heard here in the premiere recording of his touching work, *The Shadow of the Blackbird*, notably inspired by the music of Schumann as well as the haunting poetry of Wallace Stevens. It somehow seemed fitting to program these three inspired composers together. Their works, old and new, represent aural windows through which their extraordinary visions may be heard, sensed and felt.

—Bruce Levingston



# Windows

# The Shadow of the Blackbird

*Note by the composer*

## DAVID BRUCE (B 1970)

David Bruce, born in the U.S. and raised in England, has been acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic. His works have been performed in such prestigious venues as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the Royal Opera House and Glyndebourne. *The Guardian* named his opera “Nothing” as a “Best of the Year” event and “Push!” was a Critic’s Choice in *The Telegraph* and *Classical Music Magazine*. Bruce’s works have been commissioned and premiered by Dawn Upshaw and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Vox Festival and NYC Opera, and Yo Yo Ma and the Silk Road Ensemble. Bruce’s music has garnered numerous awards and prizes, including the Lili Boulanger Memorial Prize and the Royal Philharmonic Society Composition Competition. He completed his PhD in Composition at King’s College, London, under the supervision of Sir Harrison Birtwistle.

Art can be used to express the joy of living, but also to reflect on the deeper mysteries of existence. For me, Wallace Stevens’ poem *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* is one of the most moving meditations on life’s mystery; moving partly because it circles around the mystery without trying to explain it – the poem seems to have a gaping hole at its center, which is the very mystery, the “indecipherable cause” it reflects upon. I particularly like the image of the “shadow of the blackbird” found in the seventh stanza.

If the blackbird in the poem is a mysterious, mystical bird, which is sometimes real, sometimes symbol – it might be god, life or death – then how much more mysterious is its shadow.

I often draw inspiration from the types of writing found in folk music. As a result, writing for piano has been something of a challenge, partly because it has little music that could be considered ‘roots’ in the folk-sense – other than perhaps boogie and blues. After I started talking with Bruce Levingston about writing a piece for him, I listened to a recording he’d made of Schumann’s *Kreislarian*. The sensitivity of Bruce’s playing moved me and I was struck by the feeling that this was, in a way ‘roots music’ for piano. I borrowed the first few notes of Schumann’s masterpiece and the piece developed from there.

*The Shadow of the Blackbird* is in two movements, which – like the Schumann – have something of a fantasia quality to them. The first movement begins with fast-paced gestures that keep converging onto a single fast-repeated note. This is contrasted with a more chordal section. Throughout the rest of the movement the two ideas are gradually interwoven with one another. Throughout the movement there are *accelerandi* and *rallentandi*, as if time is being shifted beneath our feet.

The second movement also plays with our perception of time, as a gently rocking melody and accompaniment are constantly shifting tempo back and too, never quite settling into one tempo or another. The movement, more delicate than the first, becomes more and more fragile, with the melody line fragmenting into multiple overlapping shards. After the final most extreme fragmentation, we arrive suddenly, as if through a worm-hole, back where we started in the first movement, only now with a deepened sense of mystery.

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810–1856)

## Kinderszenen, Op. 15 (Scenes of Childhood)

The *Kinderszenen* was composed in 1838 during one of Schumann's most fertile periods of creativity. At the time, he was unable to see his fiancé, piano virtuoso Clara Wieck, but wrote to her: "I have been composing a whole book of things – wild, wondrous and solemn. Perhaps they are a response to something you wrote me saying that I often seem like a child... I have selected twelve of them and called them *Kinderszenen*." Schumann added a sublime coda-like movement – *The Poet Speaks* – and, from the moment he published it, the suite became one of his most cherished and popular works. This sophisticated, yet unaffected, music had appeal for both dilettantes and connoisseurs. Franz Liszt was a particular admirer of the work. Each piece bears a descriptive title offering a hint of the composer's intent. Though played and enjoyed by people of all ages, this is really music of the adult psyche reflecting on the distant, tender memories of childhood. The pieces are neither musically, nor even technically, facile, and demand a sensitive spiritual and psychological insight to convey their subtle evocations of the wondrous, innocent emotions of early life.

## Arabeske, Op. 18

The *Arabeske*, completed in 1839, is one of Schumann's most beloved works. Its gentle, beguiling tone should not cause one to underestimate its mastery. In form and content, it is one of Schumann's most successful smaller works. It was composed during the same productive but emotionally turbulent period as *Kinderszenen*, and contains some of the composer's most intimate, heartfelt writing. Schumann referred to the *Arabeske* in a letter to Clara as a "rondolette" and it certainly employs the rondo form. The piece takes its formal name from the intricate patterns and ornamentation seen in ancient Arabic architecture. The gentle, undulating opening figuration and delicate grace notes immediately display Schumann's expressive use of ornamentation. The two interludes that appear between the main theme, both in the minor key, each offer darker excursions from the idyllic world heard in the outer sections: the first is a yearning passage utilizing opulent chordal work; the second is a little fantasy-march of the kind beloved and oft-employed by the composer. Following the main theme's touching final appearance, the composer offers an eloquent coda of transcendent beauty and simplicity. Its contemplative tone and subtle ornamentation echo the same consoling, reflective voice heard in *The Poet Speaks*. Yet on a certain level, this work is the emotional opposite of *Kinderszenen*. Its refined outer grace veils an undercurrent of longing and bittersweet complexity that is very much the domain of the adult world.

# Windows

## JAMES MATHESON (B 1970)

American composer James Matheson is widely regarded as one of the most distinctive musical voices of his generation. Among his commissions are works for the New York and Los Angeles Philharmonics, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Carnegie Hall, and the St. Lawrence and Borromeo String Quartets. In 2013, the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded him the Charles Ives Living. From 2009 to 2015 Matheson served as Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic's innovative Composer Fellowship Program. He has received fellowships and awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Bogliasco and Sage Foundations, ASCAP, and the Robbins Prize. From 2005–2007, Matheson was Executive Director of the MATA Festival of New Music in New York. He has held residencies at Yaddo and the Liguria Study Center, and has been a fellow at the Aspen Music Festival and the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival.

In 1954, the Rockefeller family asked Henri Matisse to create a stained glass Rose Window for the Union Church of Pocantico Hills, New York as a memorial to Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, the great art patroness and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. It was to be the artist's last work. A few years later, Mrs. Rockefeller's youngest son, David, acting on behalf of the family, commissioned Marc Chagall to create an entire series of stained glass windows to fill the rest of the small church resulting in the large, majestic "Good Samaritan" window and eight sublime smaller windows, each depicting a biblical figure or scene. In 2015, Premiere Commission commissioned James Matheson to compose *Windows* to celebrate the centennial of the Union Church of Pocantico Hills and the 100th birthday of David Rockefeller.

This deeply touching, epic cycle distills into music the intimate, often heart-rending, visions of Chagall as well as the powerful simplicity of Matisse's modern design which utilizes the striking collage forms he employed in his final years. Matheson's work also reflects the influence of Olivier Messiaen's own theologically-inspired music. Like the French master, Matheson utilizes large-scale blocks of harmonies with organ-like sonorities to support and shift the music's kaleidoscopic planes of color and set into relief the work's piercing motifs and intricate patterns. The universal themes of love and sacrifice (Jeremiah and Isaiah), loss and altruism (Crucifixion and The Good Samaritan) and the jubilant celebration of life and nature (The Rose) are memorably portrayed in this poignant tribute to the human spirit.



# Bruce Levingston

Pianist Bruce Levingston is one of today's leading figures in contemporary classical music. He performs in many of the world's most important venues including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Boston Opera House, Royal Opera House of London and concert halls throughout Europe and South America. Many of today's most celebrated composers have written works for him, and his world premiere performances of their works have won notable acclaim. *The New York Times* has praised his "mastery of color and nuance" and *The New Yorker* has called him "a force for new music" with "a gift for innovative and glamorous programming."

Levingston's recordings have also garnered high critical praise. His album *Heavy Sleep* was named one of the "Best Classical Recordings of the Year" by *The New York Times* which called the disc "exquisite." His album *Nightbeak* was named "Record of the Month" by *MusicWeb International* and *Dreaming Awake* was "Album of the Week" on New York City's WQXR.

BRUCE LEVINGSTON (CONTINUED)

Levingston has collaborated with some of the most gifted artists of our era, including painter Chuck Close, composer Philip Glass, authors George Plimpton and Michael Cunningham, actor Ethan Hawke, dancers Alessandra Ferri and Herman Cornejo, Colin and Eric Jacobsen and the Brooklyn Rider, and choreographers Jorma Elo and Russell Maliphant. He has conducted interviews and programs with filmmaker Ken Burns, author Ron Chernow and art historian Robert Storr, and has worked with numerous cultural institutions involving art, dance, film and music including American Ballet Theatre, Boston Ballet, Museum of Modern Art, New York; Whitney Museum of Art; Alliance Française/French Institute; The Aspen Institute and Aspen Music Festival; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Rooftop Films.

Levingston is founder and artistic director of the music foundation Premiere Commission, Inc. which has commissioned and premiered over 50 new works. He is also the author of *Bright Fields: The Mastery of Marie Hull*, a comprehensive biography and survey of the work of the noted painter. Levingston serves as the Chancellor's Honors College Artist in Residence and the Holder of the Lester Glenn Fant Chair at the University of Mississippi and lives in New York City and Oxford, Mississippi.

DSL-92218

Producer: Dan Merceruio  
Recording, Mixing & Mastering Engineer: Daniel Shores  
Editing Engineer: Dan Merceruio  
Piano Technician: John Veitch  
Piano: Steinway Model D #590904 (New York)

Recorded at Sono Luminus Studios, Boyce, Virginia. May 8–13, 2017  
sonoluminusstudios.com

Recorded with Merging Technologies Horus.  
Mastered with Merging Technologies Hapi.  
Recorded in DXD at 24 bit, 352.8kHz in Auro-3D 9.1 Immersive Audio.

Mixed and mastered on Legacy Audio speakers.  
legacyaudio.com



Photography: Tony Notarberardino  
Graphic Design: Ultravirgo

Special thanks to Belperron and Verdura; Katie Ford;  
Justus and Helen Schlichting; and The Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

Notes on Matheson and Schumann works by Bruce Levingston

In memory of David Rockefeller, Sr. (1915–2017)

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