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& WILD

JOANNE POLK,
PIANO



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Earl Wild (1915–2010) was a giant in the world of 20th century pianism. He came to prominence as an orchestral pianist, first with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under the famous conductor Otto Klemperer from 1930–35, and then in the same role with the NBC Symphony Orchestra led by the equally renown Arturo Toscanini from 1937–44. Later he held a similar position as the staff pianist and resident composer for ABC TV from 1944–68. All that time, Wild was also active as a soloist, presenting recitals and appearing with major orchestras around the world. Reviews of his performances universally praised the precision of his virtuosic technique and the poetry of his playing. His brilliant pianism was such that it earned him a place in Harold Schonberg's *The Great Pianists from Mozart to the Present* (1963/87). In the late 1970s and early 80s, he also held faculty positions at major music schools such as the Juilliard School and Manhattan School of Music.

In addition to being highly regarded as a pianist, Wild was also active as a composer. Following in the tradition of Franz Liszt, he began very early in his career creating piano transcriptions of Romantic music, including his own version of Liszt's transcription of the famous Rakoczy March from Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust*. Besides a collection of 13 transcriptions of songs by Rachmaninoff, Wild was surely best known for his pianistic reworking of the music of George Gershwin, including two collections of song transcriptions (1954 and 1973) and a "grand fantasy" based on the opera *Porgy and Bess*. The second group of songs, titled *Seven Virtuoso Etudes*, is recorded here, including such classics of the American Song Book as "The Man I Love," and "Embraceable You." The great accomplishment in these transcriptions is the manner in which Wild was able to transform these simple popular songs into

virtuoso etudes that challenge the technical prowess of the best concert pianists, all without losing the underlying style of Gershwin's originals. Cascades of rapid scales, octave passages, and assorted feats of brilliant pianism, all of which defined Wild's own prodigious technique, make these etudes a challenge for every pianist who plays them today.

Especially interesting in terms of the technique of transcription is Wild's *Theme and Three Variations on "Someone to Watch Over Me,"* (1989), which he describes as "improvisations" on this popular Gershwin melody. This work is a free pianistic realization of the tune on which it is based, in much the way that Liszt's operatic "paraphrases" (such as his *Rigoletto Paraphrase*) are free interpretations of vocal music that was popular in the mid-19th century. Each of Wild's three variations is titled separately. The first, a "Barcarole," presents the theme in rapid repeated notes in what the composer describes as an imitation of a mandolin—a passage that would, in fact, be much easier on a mandolin, where this effect is created by a simple strumming technique. In Wild's transcription, this imitation of a tremolo on a mandolin continues for more than two pages, and demands exquisite flexibility on the part of a pianist. In keeping with the Italianate mood of the barcarole, Wild also managed to introduce a bit of "O Sole Mio" in counterpoint against the Gershwin tune. More clever surprises lie in wait in the second variation, titled "Brazilian Dance." In a tour de force of contrapuntal inventiveness, Wild quotes bits of both J. S. Bach's C Minor Partita and the C Minor Fugue from Book I of the *Well Tempered Clavier*, again in counterpoint with Gershwin's tune. Both of these Bach references are also cleverly worked into the final variation, labeled "Tango." One might wonder, of course, why Wild quoted the music of Bach in a set of variations on a Gershwin tune. Could he have been trying to suggest that the worlds of serious classical music and of American popular song were not as far removed from one another as we usually think?

Also included on this recording of Earl Wild's music is an original work—his "Sonata 2000." All three movements—"March," "Adagio," and "Toccata à la Ricky Martin" (a Puerto Rican singer who brought Latin popular music to America in the 1990s)—breathe the same pianistic air as the Gershwin transcriptions, where the influence of jazz and blues is everywhere apparent. Among these three movements, the most interesting, perhaps, is the toccata—a rush of perpetual motion sixteenth notes with constantly shifting

accents—which blends the virtuosity one expects in a toccata of someone like Prokofiev with the more modern sound of American jazz idioms.

— Jeffrey Langford

JOANNE POLK was catapulted into the public eye with her recordings of the complete piano works of American composer Amy Beach (1867-1944) on the Arabesque Recordings label. She celebrated the centennial of Beach's Piano Concerto by giving the work its London premiere with the English Chamber Orchestra at the Barbican Center, under the baton of Paul Goodwin, and subsequently performed it with the Women's Philharmonic in San Francisco, under conductor Apo Hsu, in a performance described as "brilliant" by critic Joshua Kosman of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He further lauded her performance as "an enormously vital, imaginative reading. Her playing was expansive in the opening movement, brittle and keen in the delightful scherzo. She brought a light touch to the foreshortened slow movement and fearless technical panache to the showy conclusion."

As a result of her work to date, promoting the music of women composers, Joanne Polk was named one of Musical America's *Top 30 Professionals of the Year* (2014) in an article titled, "Profiles in Courage." In September 2014, Ms. Polk's CD *The Flatterer*, solo piano music of French Romantic composer Cécile Chaminade, was released on the Steinway & Sons label. The CD was a "Pick of the Week" on New York's classical radio station, WQXR, and debuted at Number 1 on the Classical Billboard Chart.

Her first recording in the Amy Beach series, *by the still waters*, received the 1998 INDIE award for best solo recording. *Empress of Night*, the fifth volume of Ms. Polk's survey of Beach's piano works, includes

the Piano Concerto with the English Chamber Orchestra, Paul Goodwin conducting, and Beach's renowned Piano Quintet with the Lark Quartet. The sixth volume, *Morning Glories*, partners Ms. Polk again with the Lark Quartet in three of Amy Beach's chamber music works. Two all-Beach performances at Merkin Concert Hall, also with the Lark Quartet, were applauded by the *New York Times*, as they deemed Polk's performances "polished and assured." The *American Record Guide* reported, "Polk and the Larks played their hearts out. We in the audience shouted ourselves hoarse with gratitude." Her 2007 CD titled *Songs of Amy Beach*, recorded with baritone Patrick Mason for Bridge Records, was nominated for a 2007 Grammy Award.

In 2010, Ms. Polk's two-CD set of solo piano music by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, *Songs for Pianoforte*, was released on the Newport Classic label. Her solo piano CD, titled *Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn*, was released in 2012 on the Bridge Records label. Other recordings include *Completely Clara: Lieder by Clara Wieck Schumann*, her debut CD for Arabesque Recording, featuring Metropolitan Opera soprano Korliss Uecker. This CD was selected as a "Best of the Year" recording by *The Seattle Times* and was featured on New York Public Radio's *Performance Today*. Ms. Polk's CD for Albany Records, *Callisto*, features the solo piano music of Judith Lang Zaimont.

Joanne Polk received her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music degrees from The Juilliard School, and her Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Manhattan School of Music. She has given master classes and recitals at many summer festivals and universities across the globe, including Summit Music Festival, New York Summer Music Festival, Montclair

JOANNE POLK PIANO

CREDITS

State University, Kutztown University, International Academy of Music in Italy, and at the University of Minnesota. Ms. Polk is one of three directors of *Manhattan in the Mountains Summer Music Festival*, a three-week summer music festival in the Catskill Mountains, devoted to chamber music, solo performing, and community engagement. Ms. Polk's recent concert engagements, both as a soloist and a chamber musician, have taken her from concert halls in Castelnuovo di Garfagnana, Italy, to Smith College in Massachusetts to, in 2018, Guangzhou, China.

Ms. Polk is a member of the piano faculty of Manhattan School of Music, and is a Steinway Artist.

Gershwin & Wild was recorded November 21–23, 2016 at the Concert Hall of the Performing Arts Center, Purchase College, State University of New York

Produced and Engineered by Steven Epstein

Equipment: Recorded at 24bit/96khz resolution utilizing the Sequoia Digital Audio Workstation

Associated Equipment: 2 DPA Omnidirectional 4006 TL Microphones fed through the John Hardy M-2 Stereo Mic Preamp

Executive Producer: Jon Feidner

Cover image: *George Gershwin, 1969* (Al Hirschfeld) ©The Al Hirschfeld Foundation.

www.AlHirschfeldFoundation.org

Art Direction: Jackie Fugere

Piano Technician: Rick Prokop

Photos of Joanne Polk: Jeffrey Langford

As always, my gratitude to the loves of my life, Dr. Jeffrey Langford and soon-to-be Dr. Julian Langford, for their indefatigable support. The brilliance and mastery of my producer Steven Epstein is invaluable to my recordings. So many thanks as well to Jon Feidner and the entire staff at the Steinway & Sons label, and to Rick Prokop, who tuned to perfection the superb Steinway piano housed at SUNY Purchase. I am grateful to Dan Sedgwick at SUNY Purchase for his continued hospitality to all my recordings in Theater C at SUNY Purchase. I also send much gratitude to Michael Rolland Davis, for his guidance on and accessibility to the extraordinary music of Earl Wild. And finally, I want to thank my students, past, present and future, who enrich my life enormously: thank you for allowing me to join you on your journey through that exhilarating and challenging land, called music.

Music from the Great American Songbook has enhanced my life for many decades. The opportunity to combine my classical training with my love for Gershwin was realized in Earl Wild's clever and luminous transcriptions. This CD is a dream come true for me, and I am deeply grateful to all who made this recording possible.

– Joanne Polk

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JOANNE POLK,
PIANO

VIRTUOSO ETUDES AFTER GERSHWIN

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| 1 | i. Liza | 4:07 |
| 2 | ii. Somebody Loves Me | 3:28 |
| 3 | iii. The Man I Love | 2:58 |
| 4 | iv. Embraceable You | 3:52 |
| 5 | v. Oh, Lady Be Good! | 4:35 |
| 6 | vi. I Got Rhythm | 2:40 |
| 7 | vii. Fascinatin' Rhythm | 2:05 |
| 8 | Theme & Variations on Gershwin's
"Someone to Watch Over Me" | 15:15 |

SONATA 2000

- | | | |
|---------------|----------------------------------|-------|
| 9 | i. March: Allegro | 7:29 |
| 10 | ii. Adagio | 8:08 |
| 11 | iii. Toccata (à la Ricky Martin) | 5:19 |
| Playing time: | | 60:04 |

Earl Wild's *Seven Virtuoso Etudes* transform Gershwin's simple popular songs into works that challenge the technical prowess of the best concert pianists without losing the underlying style of the originals. His *Variations on "Someone to Watch Over Me"* is a free pianistic realization of the tune, much the way that Liszt's operatic "paraphrases" are free interpretations of vocal music popular in the mid-19th century, perhaps suggesting that the worlds of classical music and American popular song are not as far removed as we think. Wild's *Piano Sonata* breathes the same pianistic air as the Gershwin transcriptions, where the influence of jazz and blues is everywhere apparent.



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