

# John THOMAS

**COMPLETE DUOS FOR HARP AND PIANO, VOLUME ONE**  
SOUVENIR DU NORD  
WELSH DUETS  
GRAND DUET  
AND TRANSCRIPTIONS OF MUSIC BY  
**BEETHOVEN, BIZET, GOUNOD AND HANDEL**

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

**Duo Praxedis**

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# JOHN THOMAS Complete Duos for Harp and Piano, Volume One

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<b><i>Souvenir du Nord</i> (1854)</b>	<b>7:57</b>
❶ Introduction: <i>Allegro con spirito</i> –	1:21
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❹ Var. 2: <i>Allegro brillante</i> –	0:55
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 ❷ <b>BEETHOVEN Adelaide, Op. 46</b> (c. 1795, transcr. 1875)	 <b>5:47</b>
 <b><i>Welsh Duets*</i></b>	
<b>No. 1, <i>Dyddiau Mebyd</i> ('Scenes of Childhood') (1862)</b>	<b>8:58</b>
❸ I Serch Hudol ('Love's Fascination'): <i>Moderato spiritoso</i>	2:51
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❶ I Dewch i'r Frwydyr: <i>Maestoso</i>	4:16
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## **Duo Praxedis**

Praxedis Hug-Rütli, harp

Praxedis Geneviève Hug, piano

**TT 79:48**

FIRST RECORDINGS

\*FIRST RECORDINGS IN THIS VERSION

# JOHN THOMAS, PENCERDD GWALIA – 'CHIEF MUSICIAN OF WALES'

by Martin Anderson<sup>1</sup>

John Thomas was the pre-eminent British harpist in the second half of the nineteenth century. He was born in Bridgend, Glamorganshire, south Wales, on 1 March 1826, with his name proudly inscribed in the family Bible as having been born on St David's Day. St David is the Patron Saint of Wales, and the propitious coincidence of his date of birth led to Thomas' taking enormous pride in his Welsh heritage, in its traditions, in its music and in its language – 'the language of Heaven', as the Welsh will tell you. He continued to draw inspiration from his Welsh beginnings for the rest of his life. In the event, Thomas left Wales for London at the age of fourteen, and for the next 70 years it was London that was the focus of his distinguished career.<sup>1</sup>

His father, also John Thomas (1807–95), a tailor by profession, belonged to an amateur reed and brass band. He taught his son to play the piccolo at a young age and invited him, 'clad in a pair of white ducks',<sup>2</sup> to march alongside the other musicians when the band was sent to drum up the voters for a local election. It was not long afterwards that John Sr and his wife, Catherine, *née* Jones (1806–63), purchased a Welsh triple harp<sup>3</sup> for their son.

It was as a gifted twelve-year-old that John Thomas first drew the attention of the public, when in October 1838 he was a competitor at the *eisteddfod*<sup>4</sup> held by the

<sup>1</sup> I owe a considerable debt to Ann Griffiths for much of the information in this essay: her knowledge of the harp, its history and repertoire and the careers of its major players, is unrivalled, and she generously made available her own work on John Thomas to guide my writing.

<sup>2</sup> 'John Thomas', *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 40, No. 681 (1899), p. 725. A 'duck' is a boot-like shoe with a rubber sole and a watertight textile upper section.

<sup>3</sup> The triple harp, as the name suggests, had three parallel rows of strings. Introduced into Britain from continental Europe in the early seventeenth century, it became particularly popular among Welsh harpists, so much so that it became known as the 'Welsh harp'.

<sup>4</sup> The *eisteddfod* is an annual festival in which members of the community gather to watch the bards and harpists perform in *penillion* singing, a competitive performance practice where singers are accompanied by the harp. The *eisteddfodau* date from the sixth century, when the competitions were sponsored by the aristocracy.

Cymreigyddion<sup>5</sup> at Abergavenny. He played a triple harp that day, and in the traditional Welsh manner, too, placing the harp on his left shoulder, and playing the treble with his left hand and the bass with his right – the opposite of conventional pedal-harp technique. The set piece was the sixteenth-century Welsh carol, ‘Nos Galan’ (known in English as ‘Deck the Halls’<sup>6</sup>). Thomas won the competition, his prize being a brand-new triple harp, specially commissioned from the Cardiff harp-maker, Bassett Jones. Even in the last year of his life, this harp stood proudly in the front parlour of his new house, ‘Llanddulas’, on Station Road, New Barnet, just outside London, the brass plaque on its neck inscribed: ‘No. 4. Abergavenny Cymreigyddion / To John Thomas aged eleven [sic] for excellence on the harp / October 1838. Bassett Jones, Harpmaker, Cardiff, no. 115’.

Ada, Lady Lovelace, the only legitimate daughter of the poet Byron, was herself a harpist. When she heard the young Thomas play, she was so impressed that she offered to pay three-quarters of his £20.00 annual fee at the Royal Academy of Music, on condition that his father undertook to pay the rest. John Thomas Sr, having been assured of an adequate living in the capital by Lady Lovelace and her husband, and wishing to take advantage of all the opportunities opening up for his eldest son, moved the whole family from Bridgend to live in London.

In September 1840 the fourteen-year-old John Thomas entered the Royal Academy of Music, then based at 4 Tenterden Place, Hanover Square. He studied the harp with John Balsir Chatterton (1805–71), who recalled those early student days in a letter published in the *Caernarvon and Denbighshire Herald* in November 1869:

It was the triple harp which Thomas, as a boy, played when he came to the Royal Academy of Music [...]. I need not say what he has done since then, for his reputation as a harpist is well known all over Europe; and I have no hesitation in saying that if he had not forsaken the triple harp for the pedal harp, he would never have accomplished what he has done.

<sup>5</sup> The Cymreigyddion was a London-based social, cultural and debating society, founded in 1794; it was disbanded in the late 1850s.

<sup>6</sup> The English words sung to the tune of ‘Nos Galan’ are not translations of the Welsh original. In 1862 the first two (of four) volumes of *Welsh Melodies with Welsh and English Poetry* appeared in print, with English texts commissioned by John Thomas from the Scottish writer, artist and musician Thomas Oliphant (1799–1873); ‘Nos Galan’ (it retained its Welsh title) was No. 15 in Vol. 2. Oliphant supplied English lyrics also for Thomas’ third and fourth volumes, in 1870 and 1874 respectively.

Thomas remained a student for six years. He studied harmony and composition, and improved his command of the English language. He learned to play the pedal harp on the ‘correct’ shoulder, and when he went home, he would pass on what he had learnt to his younger brothers, Thomas (who was born in Bridgend in 1829 and died in Ottawa in 1913) and Llewelyn (born in Bridgend in 1831 and dying in Melbourne in 1889). During his time at the Academy, when he also studied piano with C. J. Read and composition with Charles Lucas and Cipriani Potter, he composed not only a harp concerto but also three operas, and opera was to become an important part of his life. Before leaving the institution, he became a sub-professor and an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music (ARAM); thereafter he rose slowly through the ranks of its teachers.

He bought his first new harp (No. 5939) from the Erard company in 1850, and his first professional contract, which ran from the first week of March until 13 July 1851, was as harpist to the Royal Italian Opera at Her Majesty’s Theatre. He earned 15 shillings per performance – a considerable sum in those days – and the Theatre attracted world-famous artists such as Desirée Artôt, Josefa Le Gassier, Jenny Lind, Joseph Tagliafico, Antonio Tamburini and, in 1861, Adelina Patti. Thomas was a member of the company when the Theatre staged the first London performances of Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore* and *Don Carlos*, Meyerbeer’s *Le prophète* and Berlioz’s *Benvenuto Cellini*.

The season ran from March to mid-July, and so the appointment gave him the liberty to tour the continent as a soloist in the winter months. His travels began in 1851, and over the next few years he visited Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Russia. Vienna was his first destination, perhaps because the British ambassador there at the time was the Earl of Westmoreland, who, as Lord Burgersh, had founded the Royal Academy of Music in 1823 and helped run it thereafter.<sup>7</sup> ‘The Earl gladly welcomed one of his old Academy boys, and showed him much kindness in that music-loving

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<sup>7</sup> Burgersh was also a keen amateur composer. Some excerpts from his opera *L’amor timido* were recently recorded by the male soprano Robert Crowe and pianist Joachim Enders on their album *The Romantic Castrato: The Ornamented Songs and Arias of Giambattista Velluti* (Toccata Next TOCN 0008).

city, where he met Otto Nikolai, Czerny and Staudigl.<sup>8</sup> In Vienna Thomas was greeted as the natural successor to Elias Parish Alvars, who had died there in 1849,<sup>9</sup> and he dedicated his famous solo *Autumn* to his Viennese patron, Jeanette, Countess Esterházy, Parish Alvars' main benefactress. It is while he is in Vienna on the tour that began in September 1851 that the first mention is made of his composing and playing harp duos, with the Countess Esterházy as his partner, and he continued to compose duos and duets both for two harps and for harp and piano throughout his life. In Dresden Thomas performed for the King and Queen of Saxony, and after a performance for the Prussian court in Berlin, the King of Prussia presented him with a diamond ring and a letter of introduction to the King of Hanover. Thomas later recalled an informative conversation with that king:

After having the honour of dining with their majesties the King and Queen, conversing in the most homely manner over a cup of tea about the peculiarities of the Welsh language, and teaching the King to pronounce some of the letters of its alphabet, I played them several solos in the course of the evening. At the conclusion his majesty, after having highly complimented me, said: 'I notice a remarkable peculiarity in your playing, which I have never found in any other performer upon the harp: it is that your execution in both hands is absolutely equal'. Upon which I replied: 'Your majesty, I think I can account for that. As a boy I commenced playing on a Welsh harp, the strings of which, being placed on the right side of the comb,<sup>10</sup> necessitate its being held on the left shoulder and played upon with the left hand in the treble and the right hand in the bass; otherwise the comb would intercept the view of the strings. On entering the Royal Academy of Music as a student,

<sup>8</sup> 'John Thomas', *The Musical Times*, *loc. cit.*, p. 726. The name Staudigl may require some amplification: Josef Staudigl (1807–61) was an Austrian bass, who from 1842 was also a familiar figure on the London operatic stage. Indeed, he sang Bertram, opposite Jenny Lind (in her London debut), in Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* at Her Majesty's Theatre in 1847, four years before Thomas took up his position there.

<sup>9</sup> Elias Parish Alvars was born in Teignmouth, Devon, in 1808, and studied first at the Royal Academy of Music and then abroad; he was appointed first harp of the Vienna Opera in 1836 and remained in Vienna for the rest of his short life. Berlioz called him 'the Liszt of the harp'.

<sup>10</sup> The 'comb' is the neck of the harp.

I had to change the position – to hold the instrument on the right shoulder, to play with the right hand in the treble and the left hand in the bass [...].<sup>11</sup>

Thomas left Hanover with a letter of introduction to Queen Victoria, ‘which secured for me the honour of my first appearance at Buckingham Palace.’<sup>12</sup> Twenty years later, in 1872, his performing career reached a climax when he became harpist to Queen Victoria, in succession to his own teacher, John Chatterton; on the death of the queen in 1901, he became harpist to her successor, Edward VII.

The year 1852 was an important one, with a commission to compose a concerto for the Philharmonic Society; he gave its premiere on 3 May. The manuscript of his *Minstrel’s Adieu* dates from 30 July of that year.

Working at the Italian Opera also gave him a lifelong love of the human voice – in fact, in 1860, he was engaged for a year to the Belgian soprano Desirée Artôt (1835–1907).<sup>13</sup> In the event, Thomas was married twice, in both instances to students of his. In 1878, when he was in his early fifties, he married Alice Ann Keate, but she died two years later, six weeks after the birth of a son, John Llewellyn Thomas, who was later to achieve distinction as a mathematician. Seven years after the death of his first wife, in August 1885, he married Joan Francis Denny, with whom he had three children.<sup>14</sup>

Thomas’ rubbing shoulders with royalty did not attenuate his enthusiasm for Welsh music, and he supported a considerable number of concerts across Wales to promote the cause. The Welsh-music movement duly recognised his efforts. Candidates at the *eisteddfodau* are recognised with three degrees: *Ofydd* (ovate), *Bardd* (bard) or *Pencerdd* (chief musician); in 1861, at the Aberdare Eisteddfod, Thomas was awarded the official title *Pencerdd Gwalia* – ‘Chief of Welsh Musicians’. His efforts on behalf of Welsh music and musicians continued throughout his life. Also in 1861 he published

<sup>11</sup> John Thomas, *The Musical Times*, loc. cit., p. 726.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> In 1868 she was unofficially engaged to Tchaikovsky, who the next autumn was surprised to hear that she had suddenly married the Spanish baritone Mariano Padilla y Ramos (1843–1906).

<sup>14</sup> The youngest of the three, Ivor, born in 1893, had a distinguished career in the army, retiring in 1952 as Quartermaster-General. He died in Rhodesia in 1972.



his *Welsh Melodies* arranged for the harp and, a year later, the first two volumes of his *Welsh Melodies with Welsh and English Poetry*, to resounding success. On 4 July 1862 he began his series of Grand Concerts of Welsh Music at St James's Hall, Piccadilly, with a choir of 400 accompanied by a band of no fewer than twenty harps; these annual concerts continued for 42 years. In 1863, his dramatic cantata *Llewellynn* was premiered at the Swansea Eisteddfod. In 1871 he became the conductor of the Welsh Choral Union. In 1883 he endowed a permanent scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music in London for a Welsh harpist. As Harpist to the Queen, at the time of her Golden Jubilee in 1887 he composed a work entitled *Cambria's Homage to our Empress Queen* for male-voice choir and thirteen harps. And his active membership of a number of Welsh gentlemen's societies reflect his lifetime commitment to preserving the Welsh traditions and language.

It is fitting, then, that the best-known of all John Thomas's harp duos – the indubitable 'classics' of the genre – are *Scenes of Childhood* [8]–[10] and *Cambria* [11]–[13]. It was John Thomas' former teacher, John Balsir Chatterton, who was his duo partner in *Scenes of Childhood* when they played together at the first Grand Concert of Welsh Music. The concert was so successful that it had to be staged again on 26 July and the venue moved to the Crystal Palace. The sensational success of these two concerts led to another scheduled for 'St David's Evening', 28 February 1863, for which John Thomas composed a second duo for himself and Chatterton, originally – according to the manuscript, in the National Library of Wales – giving it the rather insipid title *Scenes of Childhood II*. This title was crossed out, and replaced by the simple, but memorable, rousing and patriotic alternative, *Cambria*, a title which has guaranteed its success and its popularity for almost a century and a half. All three of Thomas' *Welsh Duets*, including the later *Come to Battle* [14]–[16] (1886), treat folksongs and popular melodies that would have been familiar to their first audiences. One of these tunes, 'Y Ferch o'r Scer' ('The Lady of Sker') [12], had associations for Thomas that went back to his childhood: it was composed by a Mr Jones, a blind harper from the village of Nottage, now part of Porthcawl in the county of Bridgend. It was from the widow of this man that Thomas' parents had bought their son his first harp.

Both the *Souvenir du Nord* [1]–[6] and the *Grand Duet* [20]–[22] are dedicated to a Welsh-born patron. ‘Mrs Lucy of Charlecote Park’ was born Mary Elizabeth Williams at Bodelwyddan Castle, in St Asaph, north Wales, in 1803, the fourth daughter of John Williams, Baronet of Bodelwyddan. In 1823 she married George Hammond Lucy, who had recently inherited the imposing estate of Charlecote Park in Warwickshire.<sup>15</sup> Both she and her sister Margaret (known as ‘Miggy’, and later to become Lady Willoughby de Broke) were talented harpists. In her book *Mistress of Charlecote: The Memoirs of Mary Elizabeth Lucy*,<sup>16</sup> she gives an amusing account of the Abergavenny Eisteddfod, which led to her first meeting with John Thomas, at Llanover in 1853, and to her subsequent lessons with him at her home:

Mr Thomas kept me to scales and exercises for the first few weeks, and I did learn his way, and before I was *very* much older, I was able to play many a difficult duet with him. I would get up an hour earlier to have a good practice before breakfast, and I would go to sleep trying to hold my thumb up.<sup>17</sup>

As her harp teacher, ‘Mr Thomas’ became a frequent guest; as an enthusiastic patroness, she attended his concerts over a period of some 35 years.

Thomas’ *Souvenir du Nord*, composed in 1854, is based on melodies he had heard on the Russian tour he had undertaken in the autumn of the previous year. Thomas and John Bilson Binfield<sup>18</sup> gave one of the first performances of this work in Paris at the Salle Henri Herz on 30 March 1854. A few weeks earlier that same month, in the same city, no less a critic than Hector Berlioz had enthused about John Thomas in the *Journal des débats*:

<sup>15</sup> Further biographical details about Mary and George Lucy can be found at <https://georgianera.wordpress.com/2017/06/27/mary-elizabeth-williams-marriage-to-george-hammond-lucy-of-charlecote-park-1823/> and <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/charlecote-park/features/mistress-of-charlecote-park>. An outline history of the Lucy family can be read at <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/charlecote-park/features/the-lucy-family-of-charlecote-park>.

<sup>16</sup> In her eighties Mary Lucy filled five notebooks with a chronicle of her life in Charlecote Park. In the 1950s Alice Fairfax-Lucy (1908–93; née Buchan: she was the daughter of the writer John Buchan) came across these notebooks during her research into the Charlecote Park archives – she had married Sir Brian Fairfax-Lucy in 1933 – and found them so interesting that she prepared them for publication; they were finally published by Gollancz, London, in 1983. The book is still in print.

<sup>17</sup> *Mistress of Charlecote*, *op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> Binfield (1805–75) was better-known as a Reading-based organist. His father, Richard Binfield, also an organist, founded and ran the Reading Festival until his death in 1839, whereupon his son took over its management.

As to Mr. Thomas, principal harpist of Her Majesty's Theatre, London, I heard him, not in a concert hall, at a distance, between two romances, amid the noise of conversation, but as the things and artists one loves should be heard, I listened to him in his own house; I was alone with him, and I appreciated quite at my ease the rare and poetic qualities of his talent. That is how the harp should be played. Mr. Thomas is thoroughly the master of his noble instrument, but he does not aim at difficulty for its own sake: his *tours de force* have real charm. His style of playing is nervous, impassioned, feverish, as it were, but his expression is never exaggerated, and he never seeks to draw from the harp those violent, uncouth effects which it grants only by losing that character of supreme elegance which gives it such power over certain organisations. The pieces composed by Mr. Thomas are, besides, of remarkable elevation of style. He charmed, fascinated, magnetised me. If I were rich, how I should enjoy the luxury of having such a virtuoso to soothe my sad hours and make me forget the realities of life!<sup>19</sup>

Thomas wouldn't have had to go to Russia to hear the principal melody he varies in *Souvenir du nord*: it is 'Соловей' ('The Nightingale'), by Alexander Alyabyev (1787–1851), written in 1825<sup>20</sup> to a text by Anton Delvig (1798–1831),<sup>21</sup> and it already enjoyed some currency. In 1833 Glinka wrote a set of piano variations on the song. Ten years later Pauline Viardot introduced it into Rosina's singing lesson in Act 2 of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, a practice followed by Adelina Patti and Marcella Sembrich. Liszt made two transcriptions of it, as *Le rossignol* (s250), the first in 1842 and the second in 1853. And the second of the six *Divertissements amateurs sur des mélodies russes favorites*, Op. 24, composed around 1850 by the Belgian violinist Henri Vieuxtemps (1820–81), takes 'Le rossignol' as its subject.

In *Souvenir du Nord* Thomas presents his material in variation form, after an extended introduction, marked *Allegro con spirito* [1], with the theme, *Andante con*

<sup>19</sup> *Journal des débats*, 2 March 1854.

<sup>20</sup> Alyabyev composed the song in prison, in fact: he had been arrested on an (unsubstantiated) charge of the murder of a gambling partner, and was ordered by Tsar Nicolas I into exile in Alyabyev's home town of Tobolsk in western Siberia, being freed six years later, in 1831.

<sup>21</sup> Delvig's name may be familiar on other grounds: the poem 'O Delvig, Delvig' by his close friend, the poet Wilhelm von Küchelbecker (1797–1846), is set by Shostakovich in the ninth movement of his Fourteenth Symphony.

*moto* [2], reappearing, rondo-like, at the end of Variation 1, *Moderato* [3], Variation 2, *Allegro brillante* [4] and Variation 3, *Andante cantabile* [5], although not after the fourth and last variation, marked *Allegro scherzando* [6]. The casual listener might well be forgiven for hearing some Spanish elements in Thomas' basic material, and, indeed, one of Thomas' student operas had been on a Spanish subject. Thomas treats the theme as he might *penillion* singing, changing rhythms and accompaniments. *Souvenir du Nord* also exemplifies the technical requirements of his writing for harp. In the opening section, he incorporates arpeggiated sections with fast, two-handed runs alternately showing off the virtuosity of both players. In the final presentation of the theme, he includes extensive triplet figures in the first harp, while the second harp (here the piano) plays duplets in a slow, romantic melody.

The *Grand Duet* is Thomas' only original composition for two harps (all his harp duos come with an *ossia* of harp and piano) and was dedicated to Mary Elizabeth Lucy in 1865. Its stylistic origins in the music of such composers as Mendelssohn and Weber can readily be heard, as can Thomas' day-to-day engagement with opera. The opening *Allegro con brio* [20] is cast in sonata form but also acts as a kind of concerto, with the second harp/piano supporting the first harp as soloist. The slow movement, an *Adagio* in A flat minor [21], is a gentle barcarolle, where Thomas restores the honour of the second harp/piano by allowing it to state the melodic material while the first harp weaves arabesques around it. The rondo-finale is marked *Allegro con spirito* [22] – a favoured Thomas tempo indication: he uses it in his *Souvenir du Nord* as well; the musical language of the *Grand Duet*, too, is close to that of the earlier work, allowing more of Thomas' own personality to shine through.

The vocal quality of his writing was also reflected in his choice of music for transcription: a large part of Thomas' output consists of transcriptions for solo harp or harp duet/harp and piano, and much of that was of the vocal music popular in his day. Beethoven's *Adelaide*, Op. 46, was composed in Vienna in the mid-1790s, shortly after he had finished his studies with Haydn. The first edition, published in 1797, describes it as 'A Cantata for Voice with Keyboard Accompaniment'; Beethoven dedicated it to the poet whose text he set, Friedrich von Matthisson (1761–1831). *Adelaide* sets out in B flat

major, but in the first three stanzas wanders, *Larghetto* and *dolce*, through a number of flat keys as it mirrors the wandering of the protagonist; the final stanza, *Allegro molto*, imagines his passion surviving even death.

Einsam wandelt dein Freund im  
Frühlingsgarten,  
Mild vom lieblichen Zauberlicht umflossen,  
Das durch wankende Blütenzweige zittert,  
Adelaide!

In der spiegelnden Flut, im Schnee der Alpen,  
In des sinkenden Tages Goldgewölke,  
In Gefilde der Sterne strahlt dein Bildnis,  
Adelaide!

Abendlüftchen im zarten Laube flüstern,  
Silberglöckchen des Mais im Grase säuseln,  
Wellen rauschen und Nachtigallen flöten,  
Adelaide!

Einst, o Wunder! entblüht auf meinem Grabe,  
Eine Blume der Asche meines Herzens  
Deutlich schimmert auf jedem  
Purpurbättchen:  
Adelaide!

*Your friend wanders alone in the garden of spring,  
Gently bathed in lovely magical light,  
Which shimmers through the swaying branches  
of flowers:  
Adelaide!*

*In the reflection of the river, in the snows of the  
Alps,  
In the golden clouds of sinking day,  
In the fields of stars thy face beams forth,  
Adelaide!*

*Evening breezes whisper through the tender  
leaves  
The silver bells at Maytime rustle in the grass,  
Waves roar and nightingales sing,  
Adelaide!*

*Some day, o miracle! a flower will blossom,  
Upon my grave from the ashes of my heart;  
And clearly on every violet petal will shine:  
Adelaide!*

*Adelaide* was soon the target of arrangements by Beethoven's contemporaries. His pupil Carl Czerny produced a version for piano, four hands, and the oboist Johann Peter Heuschkel (Weber's teacher) added an obbligato part for horn (or basset horn, bassoon,

cello or piano). In the next generation Liszt and Thalberg made versions for solo piano, and the Munich-born harpist Charles (Carl) Oberthür (1814–95), who settled in London in 1844 (becoming first professor of harp at the Royal Academy of Music), transcribed it for solo harp in around 1850, with a dedication to John Thomas' teacher, John Balsir Chatterton. Thomas' own transcription, for harp and piano [7], dates from 1875 and was published in London by Lamborn Cock.

Amongst Thomas' most famous harp duets are three operatic fantasias based, successively, on themes from Bellini's *Norma* (1884), Rossini's *Mose in Egitto* (1884)<sup>22</sup> and Bizet's *Carmen*, this last composed in 1885, after he had heard Adelina Patti sing *Carmen* at Covent Garden earlier that year. *La tragédie de Carmen* – to a libretto by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy based on a short story by Prosper Mérimée – was premiered at the Opéra-Comique in Paris on 3 March 1875, startling its first audiences with its disregard of operatic convention, not least the overt sexuality of its main characters. When Bizet died suddenly, on 3 June, *Carmen* had had only 33 performances; its young composer had no idea that within ten years his creation would go on to be perhaps the most popular of all operas. Indeed, John Thomas' *Duet on Subjects from Bizet's Carmen* [17] dates from the end of that first decade and demonstrates that the melodies that everyone knows today had already become familiar then. Thomas more or less follows the course of the action, beginning with the Prelude to Act 1 (based on the March of the Toreadors), followed by Carmen's Habanera 'L'amour est un oiseau rebelle' and the duet 'Parle-moi de ma mère' between José and Micaëla (the seventh number of Act 1), treated *in extenso*. He closes with the Toreador Song, the third number in Act 2 of the opera.

The figure of George Frideric Handel loomed large for any Victorian musician, and John Thomas may have been the first<sup>23</sup> in modern times to edit and publish both Handel's

<sup>22</sup> Both recorded by Duo Praxedis for release later in this series.

<sup>23</sup> In 1869–70 the Carmarthen-born Brinley Richards (1819–85) edited and published Handel's 'Concerto for the Welsh Harp', having discovered the manuscript in the British Library. This version was performed at a Musical Entertainment in Lady Llanover's London home in July 1870, with the Swedish harp virtuoso Adolf Sjöden (1843–93) playing the triple harp, learned specially for the occasion (information from Helen Davies Mikkelsenborg).

Harp Concerto and Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp. The Third Suite drawn from Handel's *Water Music*, first performed in 1736, ends with two gígues, the first in G minor, the second in G major. Thomas' transcription of the latter [18] dates from 1882.

The published score of Thomas' transcription of Gounod's *Marche solennelle* [19] bears no date, but it must have appeared in 1890 or later. The *pédalier*, or pedal piano, has origins which stretch back to the fifteenth century: organists found a pedal harpsichord or clavichord useful for domestic practice. Bach had one, and Mozart had a pedal fortepiano built specially for him. But the heyday of the *pédalier* came with the Romantic era, with Alkan, Boëly, Boëllmann, Liszt and Schumann all writing for it. Gounod was an enthusiastic proponent of the pedal piano, composing no fewer than four *concertante* works for it: a concerto proper (1889) as well as a *Fantasie sur l'hymne national russe* (1885), a *Suite concertante* (1886) and a *Danse roumaine* (1888).<sup>24</sup> All were written for and premiered by Lucie Palicot, who had studied organ with Alexandre Guilmant and piano with Élie Delaborde (Alkan's natural son). Alkan had given recitals on the *pédalier* before withdrawing from public performances, and it may have been Delaborde who directed Palicot's attention to the instrument, and for a decade or so (until her second marriage) Palicot's pedal-piano concerts turned heads in Paris and further afield. The manuscript of Gounod's *Marche solennelle*, or *Marche solennelle de procession*, CG627, is dated 22 May 1889 and it, too, was dedicated to Palicot. Organists soon claimed the work as their own, and Thomas may have got to know the work through an arrangement for organ by the organist, theoretician and composer Ebenezer Prout (1835–1909), who for five years (1879–84) had been a colleague of his at the Royal Academy of Music: Gounod's original score is in C major, but both Prout's and Thomas' transcriptions are in E flat major.

In 1882 Thomas again followed in Chatterton's footsteps when he was named professor of harp at the Royal Academy of Music. Appointments at the Royal College of Music and the Guildhall School of Music soon followed. His students included some of the most prominent harpists of the next generation, among them John Cockerill,

<sup>24</sup> In 2013 all four works were released by Hyperion (CDA67975) in performances by Roberto Prosseda, with the Orchestra della Svizzera Italiana conducted by Howard Shelley.

Gwendolyn Mason, Nansi Richards-Jones and Miriam Timothy. His *History of the Harp: From the Earliest Period Down to the Present Day* remains in print today.<sup>25</sup>

Continuing to compose, edit and publish, John Thomas lived on into the twentieth century. He performed his last concert on 7 January 1905, and died on 19 March 1913, at the age of 87, at home in 'Llanddulas'.<sup>26</sup> He was buried in Hampstead Cemetery.

*Martin Anderson founded Toccata Classics in 2005 and publishes books on classical music as Toccata Press; he also writes on music for various publications in Britain and abroad. His degree (from the University of St Andrews, in 1977) was in mediaeval French and German, and thereafter he worked in economics for twenty years, in London and Paris.*

Since 2010 **Duo Praxedis**, comprising the harpist Praxedis Hug-Rütli and the pianist Praxedis Geneviève Hug, has been reanimating the unjustly forgotten tradition of works for harp and piano. These two Swiss musicians – mother and daughter – have been working on a unique long-term project designed to create an extensive catalogue of works that is still expanding. To date they have released ten recordings, including two double CDs, and given numerous world premieres, of works by composers who include Xavier Dayer, Richard Dubugnon, Hans-Eugen Frischknecht, Daniel Fueter, Rudolf Lutz and Rolf Urs Ringger. Other composers whose works they have recorded include Bach, Beethoven, Dvořák, Elgar, Handel, Offenbach, Anton Rubinstein, Saint-Saëns and Johann Strauss II, as well as some less familiar figures, among them the Romantic German harpist-composer Charles Oberthür, the twentieth-century French harpist-composer Henriette Renié and the contemporary Swiss Gotthard Odermatt. From 2020 an exclusive streaming service has made their recordings available through Idagio.

Duo Praxedis has been extending its repertory by means not only of arrangements for harp and piano but also commissions from contemporary composers. With the support of the UBS Culture Foundation, among others, they have given the world premieres of double concertos for harp and piano by the Swiss composers Carl Rütli and Oliver Waespi. Their unique repertoire

<sup>25</sup> Hutchings & Romer, London, 1901.

<sup>26</sup> From 1852 to 1862 Thomas had lived at various addresses in Great Portland Street and then, for 49 years, at 53 Welbeck Street – all conveniently close to the Royal Academy of Music.

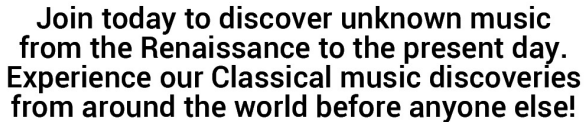




ranges widely from Bach, Vivaldi and Mozart via Bernstein and Piazzolla to the present day. The two musicians have also conducted a good deal of scholarly research in various archives and in that way unearthed a number of veritable treasures, including pieces by Debussy and Ravel, all from the golden age of the medium.

Duets for harp and piano were particularly popular not only in the aristocratic and bourgeois salons of the nineteenth century but also in public concert halls, where leading virtuosos appeared together to introduce new works. Among those involved were the pianist Jan Ladislav Dussek (1760–1812) and harpist Jean-Baptiste Krumpholz (1742–90); the pianist Frédéric Kalkbrenner (1785–1849) and harpist François-Joseph Dizi (1780–1847); and the pianist Carl Czerny (1791–1857) and harpist Elias Parish Alvars (1808–49), whom Berlioz described as the ‘Liszt of the harp’.

Duo Praxedis has given a new lease of life to this genre, which for a century fell into neglect as a result of developments in instrument building. Through their performances they have shown that the modern concert harp is once again in a position to maintain its own in conjunction with a grand piano. Even more importantly, this combination of instruments reveals markedly subtle sonorities and has brought an added richness to the concert life of Europe, notably at the Menuhin Festival in Gstaad, the Engadin Festival, the Esterházy Festival in Eisenstadt and the Janáček Festival in Brno, as well as to the Berlin Philharmonie, the Golden Hall of the Vienna Musikverein, the Laieszhalle in Hamburg and the Tonhalle in Zurich.



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