



Herbert
HOWELLS

Piano Music • 2

Country Pageant

A Little Book of Dances

Comme le cerf soupire...

Et nunc, et semper

Sonatina

Matthew Schellhorn,
Piano



Herbert HOWELLS

(1892–1983)

1 Comme le cerf soupire... (1963)	6:20	16 IV. Galliard	0:48
2 The Arab's Song (1908)	3:49	17 V. Rigadoon	1:19
3 To a Wild Flower (1908)	3:35	18 VI. Jig	1:23
4 Romance (1908)	4:48	19 A Sailor Tune (1930)	1:08
5 Melody (1909)	2:33	Three Tunes (1932)	3:01
6 Legend (1909)	4:15	20 I. Walking Tune	0:44
7 The Chosen Tune (1920)	1:44	21 II. Country Tune	1:22
8 A Mersey Tune (1924)	0:42	22 III. Trumpet Tune	0:53
Country Pageant (1928)	5:51	23 Minuet for Ursula (1935)	1:48
9 I. Merry Andrew's Procession	1:01	24 Promenade for Girls (1938)	1:07
10 II. Kings and Queens	1:08	25 Promenade for Boys (1938)	1:20
11 III. There was a most beautiful lady	2:32	26 Et nunc, et semper	
12 IV. The Mummers' Dance	1:03	(Quasi Menuetto) (1967)	2:52
A Little Book of Dances (1928)	8:22	Sonatina (1971)	15:24
13 I. Minuet	1:26	27 I. Vivo: inquieto	5:14
14 II. Gavotte	1:09	28 II. Quasi adagio: serioso ma teneramente	5:34
15 III. Pavane	2:10	29 III. Agile, destro, sempre veloce	4:25

Recorded: 21 **1** **8** **13–15** **19–26**, 22 **2–6** **9–12** **16–18** and 23 **7** **27–29** December 2021
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Herbert Howells (1892–1983)

Piano Music • 2

Herbert Howells claimed that, as a student, his professor at the Royal College of Music in London, Charles Stanford, taught him two things – poetry and music; yet, these passions started earlier, during his childhood in the Gloucestershire town of Lydney. Herbert was the youngest of eight children and soon made a beeline for the family piano with the help of his eldest sister. The interest continued, and alongside singing at the local school and Anglican church, a generous local landowner paid for Herbert to have piano lessons with the cathedral organist in Gloucester, Herbert Brewer. Such was his progress that Howells was able to apply to the Royal Academy of Music and was offered a place to study piano at the age of 16, around the time that *The Arab's Song* was written. Ultimately a lack of money and his growing interest in composition led him to decline the offer. By this point Howells had built up a remarkable piano repertoire (which he played from memory). This included major works by Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Grieg and Rachmaninov, along with popular works that are less common today by composers like Anton Rubinstein, Édouard Wolff and Francis Thomé. The degree to which the young composer-pianist internalised all of this music is more than apparent in his student notebook, in which piano miniatures with poetic titles, *To a Wild Flower* (1908), *Romance* (1908), *Melody* (1909) and *Legend* (1909), are to be found alternating with extracts from Wordsworth, vocal settings of Robert Louis Stevenson (from the 1885 collection *A Child's Garden of Verses*) and Robert Herrick, and formal exercise in harmony and counterpoint.

Upon entering the Royal College of Music in 1912, Howells embarked on an ambitious *Piano Concerto in C minor* (inspired by Rachmaninov's *Second Piano Concerto*), with a virtuoso part for his close friend, Arthur Benjamin. It was followed by the award-winning *Piano Quartet in A minor* in 1916, dedicated 'To the Hill at Chosen and Ivor Gurney who knows it'. Both works demonstrate the degree to which Howells was moving away from his Teutonic 19th-century origins and embracing a style which drew on contemporary French, Russian and English music. The British folk revival which played such an important part in the development of other Stanford pupils, such as Vaughan Williams and Holst, was important to Howells too, but, unlike Vaughan Williams and Holst, as a working-class boy from the countryside, Howells was drawing on the music of his own childhood. Although Howells was not interested in setting the originals, folk tunes and dances became an important stylistic resource as he sought to reconcile the High Art of his conservatoire training with his own musical roots.

The Chosen Tune (1920) was named after the hill and village of Chosen (also known as Churchdown) in Gloucestershire where Gurney and Howells would walk to admire the panoramic view of the countryside surrounding Gloucester. Howells claimed he could never write without a person or place in mind. Chosen was also the home of Howells' fiancée, Dorothy, and this piano version was written for use at their wedding in August 1920 when the Elgarian hymn was combined with other tunes from friends as part of an improvisation by George Thalben-Ball. Likewise, *A Mersey Tune* was written in August 1924 and inspired by the River Mersey.

Howells had a close friendship with the poet Walter de la Mare (1873–1956), who was particularly impressed by the song *King David*. De la Mare's professional dedication to writing poetic miniatures for children had a profound influence on Howells, and piano sets like *Country Pageant* (1928) and *A Little Book of Dances* (1928) can all be heard as musical equivalents, all belonging to the same de la Mare tradition, committed to bringing high quality music and poetry to young minds. Their simplicity, often combined with a rhythmic and modal quirkiness, looks forward to the music of Poulenc, while the use of older dance forms mirrors Ravel.

In the summer of 1926, the photographer Herbert Lambert lent Howells a homemade clavichord, inspired by the instruments of Arnold Dolmetsch. For Howells, the clavichord represented not only an instrument and compositional tradition (particularly the English Tudor repertoire), but also a philosophy; its expressive and miniature sound providing an antidote to what Howells referred to as 'our crushingly noisy world'. This diminutive form of quiet intensity became an integral part of his musical language, as Howells put it, 'the work of a Tudor straying about this 20th century'. In this sense, Howells' music represents a synthesis of de la Mare's poetic miniatures of 20th-century childhood and the Elizabethan musical miniatures of Byrd and Tallis. The individual pieces presented here inhabit this soundworld too, from the mock sea shanty *A Sailor Tune* (1930), through the folk-inspired *Three Tunes* (1932, written for Diana, from 'Herbert the Uncle'), and the *Minuet* for his daughter Ursula (1935, from 'Father HH'), to the two *Promenades* (1938, written as test pieces for the Enfield Festival).

The programme opens and closes with works in Howells' late style. *Comme le cerf soupire...*, based on an old French chanson, is a transcription of his own improvisation at the piano that the composer made in 1963 for the pianist Margaret Bruce. The final two works were written for the pianist Hilary Macnamara. *Et nunc, et semper* is a short but profound minuet which presents a remarkable contrast to the two earlier dances in this genre, the title (coming from the Latin *Gloria Patri*, 'is now, and ever shall be') expressing its timeless quality.

The *Sonatina* (1971) was written concurrently with the *Partita for Organ*, the former being commissioned for Macnamara's Wigmore Hall debut recital on 24 January 1972, and the latter as a gift for the Prime Minister Edward Heath, whom Howells had known for many years. Both works centre on very intense sarabandes. Within the *Partita* we find the 'Sarabande for the 12th day of any October', which is a reference to the birthday of Ralph Vaughan Williams: Howells considered everything he wrote for 1972 (the centenary of Vaughan Williams' birth) to be linked in some way to his older friend, who first introduced him to the modern compositional possibilities of Tudor music with the premiere of *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* in 1910. In the *Sonatina*, we return to Howells' miniature world, with the overall condensed form and the musical material within a distillation of intense melancholy by the constant, almost obsessional, development of small melodic and rhythmic figures. The title was probably a nod to John Ireland, whose own *Sonatina* for piano (1926–27) Howells admired, though the musical material is based on a scale that Howells identified in Vaughan Williams' *Fourth Symphony*. The major and minor thirds and the sharpened fourth can be heard from the outset in the mysterious whispered opening. The 'restless' first movement makes particular use of two-part imitation with frequent dramatic unison outbursts, rich cluster-chords and offbeat fanfares, all gestures familiar from Howells' celebrated choral music. One reviewer of the *Little Dances* had described Howells' style as 'sad and humorous', and the outer movements of the *Sonatina* both reflect something of that, but the level of anxious tension here far exceeds the earlier music. In the words of Macnamara, beneath the surface Herbert was 'an emotional cauldron', often held back with a peculiarly English form of restraint. The intensity is further increased in the middle movement with a highly intimate sarabande that not only looks back to the delicate clavichord style, but also to the desolation of the middle movement of the *Concerto for String Orchestra* and the 'series of sarabandes' of his *Stabat Mater*. The finale is a reworking of the bitonal *Toccatina* (another miniature form) which ends the *Petrus Suite* recorded on the first volume of this series (8.571382).

Jonathan Clinch
www.jclinch.com

This volume presents more posthumously published piano music alongside works that Howells allowed to be released during his lifetime. I had expected the interpretative process for the tour-de-force *Sonatina* would be relatively straightforward, but analysis of the manuscript material shows it to belie a complicated and, at times, arduous compositional process. There was never a single version of this piece, some of which dates back to 1921: the ten different versions of the three movements represent decades of accumulated thought rooted in iteration and vacillation. The pianist Hilary Macnamara, to whom the *Sonatina* was dedicated ‘in admiration and affection’, told me that with each private and public run-through Howells would issue a new version. ‘Try this,’ and the composer would adjust yet another corner; indeed, the version at the first (complete) performance at Wigmore Hall on 24 January 1972 was not the same as the one played through to the composer earlier that day. While Hilary and I stood over and discussed the manuscripts in 2021, she remarked, ‘Herbert would still be changing it now if he could.’

I believe Howells’ creative indecision is our gain. A careful selection from among the *Sonatina*’s variants allows for a fresh appreciation of the work’s implicit dynamism: we can continue to calibrate our overall impression of the composer as we hear his music afresh. Listeners who are already acquainted with the work as available from The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music since 1976 will notice, among other things, the introduction – or the reintroduction – of clarified articulation and phrasing, of refined voice-leading and nuanced chromaticism. Wisps of thematic material once preferred, afterwards erased, then re-included emerge with typically fresh thematic eloquence and poetic directness. Of particular note are the playful yet truly ‘*inquieto*’ unresolved first movement and the rhythmic and motivic poise of the middle movement, which was originally termed ‘Sarabande’ yet unaccountably lost its epithet on publication. It felt inappropriate to rewind the composer’s instinctive drive towards a more and more concise form for the finale – early performances saw a more repetitious, drawn-out movement – but I have opted for the composer’s early mind towards the central section. It is hoped that this version, compiled from Howells’ own varied preferences, will further help in mediating a composer’s artistic impulses hitherto little known and obscured.

Matthew Schellhorn

Matthew Schellhorn



Photo: Laura Pannack

Pianist Matthew Schellhorn has a distinctive profile displaying consistent artistic integrity and a commitment to bringing new music to a wider audience. A prominent performer of new music, he has given over 140 premieres and has commissioned many solo and chamber works. He has recorded numerous critically acclaimed albums, including his previous release on Naxos, *Howells: Piano Music, Vol. 1* (8.571382). In addition to his work on the concert platform, Schellhorn is a passionate educator and communicator, giving regular masterclasses and workshops in the UK and abroad. He is a member of the faculty of music at the University of Cambridge, and is currently undertaking research at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Schellhorn enjoys lending his professional profile to several charitable causes and is patron of two UK charities – The Sand House Charity, which supports educational, artistic and heritage projects linked with South Yorkshire, and the National Youth Arts Trust, which helps to support talented young people aged 12–25 from non-privileged backgrounds.

www.matthewschellhorn.com



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In addition the Society produces a Journal, *British Music*, packed full of scholarly articles and reviews, as well as a regular e-newsletter for members. Our website lists forthcoming BMS events as well as performances of British music, and also provides a forum for discussion and debate.

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In the first volume of this series (Naxos 8.571382), Matthew Schellhorn surveyed six decades of Herbert Howells' compositions for the piano. This second volume reprises the journey, tracing the composer's stylistic development from the charming poetic miniatures of his youth through to the resonant modal quirkiness of his later dances. The survey includes a centrally important work, the *Sonatina* of 1971, performed here in Schellhorn's own edition compiled from the manuscript sources, which includes variants not heard for half a century.

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9–12 Country Pageant (1928)*	5:51		

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Matthew Schellhorn, Piano



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