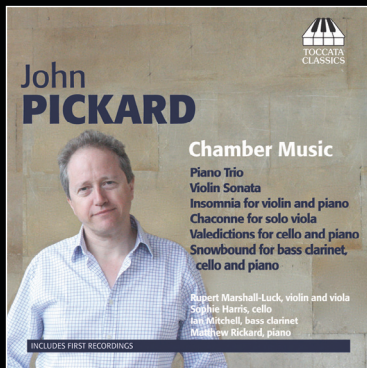


## Contemporary British Composers on Toccata Classics



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## JUDITH BINGHAM ON HERSELF AND HER PIANO MUSIC

My family have lived around the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire area for hundreds of years, but I am not a person who feels any sense of belonging or roots. When my mother (then newly retired to Norfolk) came with me to my audition for the Royal Academy of Music in 1970, she claims that when we got off the train at Liverpool Street, I said 'I'm home!' with some satisfaction, though I have no memory of that. Since then I've lived in different parts of London and still feel as rootless now as I did then. My home is the imagination.

Although I was born in Nottingham, I was brought up in Mansfield where my father was an Inspector of Taxes. He was a keen amateur pianist, so my first lessons were from him, but after we moved to Sheffield I went to a local teacher, where I soon lost interest. I was learning from *Smallwood's Tutor* and, being a painfully shy child, found both the lessons and the teacher frightening. D flat major was the final straw for me and even now I can visualise the page with the scales and an arrangement of *Silver Threads amongst the Gold*. After that I taught myself. Grieg was a favourite, and I still have the *Lyric Pieces* in their pink Peters' covers. Unencouraged both at home and at school, I remember the general astonishment when I played 'Anitra's Dance' to my class, though that was unusual: I was generally too shy to be persuaded.

At the Academy I was friends with Graham Johnson – his erudition and wit were a major influence on me. Through him I discovered the world of lieder and chamber music, with many page-turning outings. I wrote a piano piece for him called *Notes out of Nowhere* (1972), a mysterious piece like a ghostly dance. Through him I met David Roblou, for whom I wrote many works for organ and harpsichord. My twenties were taken up with writing chamber works, often for debut recitals at the Wigmore Hall or the Purcell Room. In 1983 I joined the BBC Singers and many choral and orchestral commissions followed. My singing teacher at that time was David Mason, also a fine solo pianist, and I wrote two pieces for him; *Chopin* (1979) and *Pictured Within* (1982). The latter is dedicated to Hans Keller, who had been my teacher. He believed that piano music had become too percussive in modernist times, but I also perceived



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**David Jones** was born on the Wirral. He graduated from the University of Wales, Bangor, with a First Class Honours Degree in Music, specialising in performance and studying piano with Jana Frenklova. He then graduated from the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester, with a Postgraduate Diploma in Piano Accompaniment, which he studied with John Wilson, and the degree of Master of Music in Performance, for which he also submitted a study of the songs of Albert Roussel. He completed his doctoral thesis, *The Music of Jeffrey Lewis*, in 2011 and was awarded his PhD by the University of Manchester. His discography includes three discs of piano, chamber, vocal and ensemble works by Jeffrey Lewis.



After a year as Junior Fellow in Repetiteur Studies in the RNCM Opera Department, David lectured for three years at University College, Salford. He joined the staff of the School of Keyboard Studies at the RNCM as a Staff Pianist in 1996 and was appointed Accompaniment Co-ordinator in 2001. He also holds the post of Deputy Director and Accompanist for Junior RNCM. David combines a busy performing career in both vocal and instrumental duo work with choral activity: he is pianist for the Hallé Choir and founder and Musical Director of Altèri, the Manchester-based chamber choir, as well as chorus-master of the RNCM Chamber Choir. He also held the post of pianist for Huddersfield Choral Society between 1993 and 2001. For many years he has been a tutor on the summer course 'Art of Song'.

my challenge as getting past the Debussy sound; instead, I favoured Chopin and especially late Liszt as models.

So far I have written nearly 300 pieces, in all genres, but with an emphasis on choral and church music. I enjoy writing chamber music as I like the intimacy of the setting, and the often wordless drama that goes on between the players. I think that, like Berlioz, who was my teenage role-model, a lack of opera commissions in my youth forced me to indulge my actorish leanings in the concert hall. Bringing theatre into the concert setting has been an important facet of my music, where it can be thrilling and unsettling for the drama to bleed into the audience.

To me, the piano is a difficult instrument that poses some problems for the composer. It needs a fine player to produce a range of colour, and that also depends on the instrument. The domestic nature of the piano has produced a huge body of work for piano-and-something, and yet to my mind it often has difficulty blending or even empathising with other instruments and it can easily sound ugly or bland. When I was a young composer, the trend was towards highly aggressive and rhythm-based pieces, or the Cageian world of prepared pianos and experimental techniques. In my attic flat in Acton, I played Pollini's LP of the Chopin *Études* hundreds of times, and the strength, honesty and theatre of the music was a huge influence. I often used common chords back in the '70s to shock, and was criticised for it, but one of my missions was to reinstate the full harmonic palette, without which it is impossible to convey a full range of emotions. It isn't that long ago, and so it is hard for younger people to believe that the reigning music establishment actually frowned upon, if not openly forbade, the use of concords or any harmonies that might evoke a pre-War world. Being a post-War baby, I wanted to rediscover a tradition in a fresh way.

*The Moon over Westminster Cathedral* (2003) □ plays with that idea. It is a transcription of a choral piece, *The Waning Moon* (1997), which in 2003 was still unperformed; the piano version has proved more popular. It was the second piece in a series called 'No Discord' – I had been intrigued, after a visit to Austria, how all their folk music seemed to be in a major key, and decided to try and write a piece with no dissonances in it, while still keeping tension and release. The first piece was called *No Discord* for alto flute and guitar – written for Giles Swayne's 50th-birthday concert in 1995. *The Waning Moon* was the second in the series. *The Moon over Westminster Cathedral* (expression mark: *Lisztian*) falls into two halves, the first using only minor chords, the second only major, plus an ambiguous coda. It was first performed by Stephen de Pledge at Barge Music, New York, on 31 August 2003.

*Limehouse Nocturne* [2], commissioned by Nicola Eimer and first performed at Stratford-upon-Avon Town Hall in 2004, is also about a London church. St Anne's, Limehouse, a Hawksmoor church in the east end of London built in 1717–24 and consecrated in 1730, is a beacon on the river, and the music was inspired by Whistler paintings of the Thames. The music is in the lilting, limping time-signature of 3/4 + 3/8 which gives the feeling of the ebb and flow of the river; only occasionally does this rhythm halt, for the low tolling of the bells through the early hours.

*Byron, Violent Progress* was commissioned by the City of London Festival and first performed on 23 June 2008 by David Owen Norris. After a trip to the Jungfrau in 2007, I immediately wrote a setting of *She Walks in Beauty as the Night*, and when I started to think about the commission this song kept coming into my head. So the music is a set of thirteen variations on the song, which is quoted at the beginning [3]. The work takes the form of an anxiety dream. Byron is haunted by guilt and anger after his scandalous departure from England. The immense landscapes only seem to exacerbate his feelings. The voices that torment him are condemnatory, fatalistic and unforgiving.

The music is in three movements, with the theme and Variations 1–4 in the first, 5–8 in the second, and 9–13 in the last. After the theme, the first variation [4] is gloomy but becomes more agitated in Variations 2 [5] and 3 [6], dropping back to a limping introspection in Variation 4 [7]. The second movement opens [8] with a bright Alpine landscape, with climbing phrases ended by long-drawn-out inverted common chords. Variation 6 [9] is more vague and listless and Variation 7 [10] develops this idea. Finally, in Variation 8 [11], we hear a *ranz des vaches* – a cowherd's call from the Jungfrau region which brings the movement to an end. In the third movement Variation 9 [12] is nocturnal, 10 developing a limping 5/8 idea [13] that ends in four chimes. An echo of Variation 1 returns in 11 [14], developing into the canonic 12 [15]. Finally, in Variation 13, *jerkily, stumbling* [16], Byron exits the stage.

*Christmas Past, Christmas Present* consists of four little piano pieces, written for Novello's Junior Contemporary Piano series in 1989. It is an adult's fantasy memory of past Christmases: the movements are 'The Christmas Tree' [17], 'Christmas Eve' [18], 'Giving' [19] and 'Christmas Past' [20]. There is a little self-quoting, and 'Here We Come a-Wassailing' appears in the final movement.

*Chopin* [21] was commissioned by David Mason and first performed at Leighton House, London, on 5 December 1979. It is not a pastiche, and does not quote Chopin directly (unless you count the first note) but tries to evoke him, to call up his spirit. In this way it is more of a spiritual portrait, or even a haunting, than a homage. Chopin encapsulates many of the qualities I revere in

a composer. First, he is intensely emotional, his perfect technique and command of form giving those emotions a heightened platform. He was daring and, harmonically, wonderfully shocking at times, but that shocking quality was always balletically graceful, and he never shied from bathing the listener in an all-embracing beauty of sound. Finally, he never self-consciously or pretentiously tried to be part of any musical trend. The music of *Chopin* is continuous and divides into three sections: a slow opening with a nocturne-like character, a fast section, very dissonant with more of a scherzo character, and a long slow ending with an extremely dream-like finish.

A recurrent image or metaphor in my work is that of the Virgin Mary, and pieces about aspects of her are often inspired by paintings. As the title suggests, *Annunciation II* [22] is part of a series: *Annunciation I* (2000) was for organ, *Annunciation III* (2010) for solo timpani, and *Annunciation IV* (2012) another organ piece. Each describes an aspect of the Annunciation: in this case, the music is inspired by descriptions of Santa Casa, the mediaeval house in Loreto on the Adriatic coast of Italy, purportedly that of the Virgin Mary, transported by angels from Palestine. The music 'sets' some of the words of the Magnificat, often to a Lisztian tremolo accompaniment. The work was written for David Jones in 2009 and premiered by him on 27 October 2009.

*Pictured Within* (1981) was the second piece commissioned by David Mason and was premiered by him at the Wigmore Hall, London, in April 1982. Wrapped up in a musical code are the identities of six people, only two of whom were alive when the piece was written, and one of whom is fictional. My life at that time was especially difficult, and all the characters reflect the darker side of humanity. At the head of each movement is a numerical clue. The scheme of the four movements is fast-slow-slower-fast. The first two movements [23] [24] are high-tempered and quite rhapsodic, but in the third [25] a more sombre and isolated tone prevails. The last movement (headed in the manuscript by a piece of Italian plainsong) [26] describes the coronation of a Renaissance pope, with bells chiming, and street violence.