TOCCATA CLASSICS

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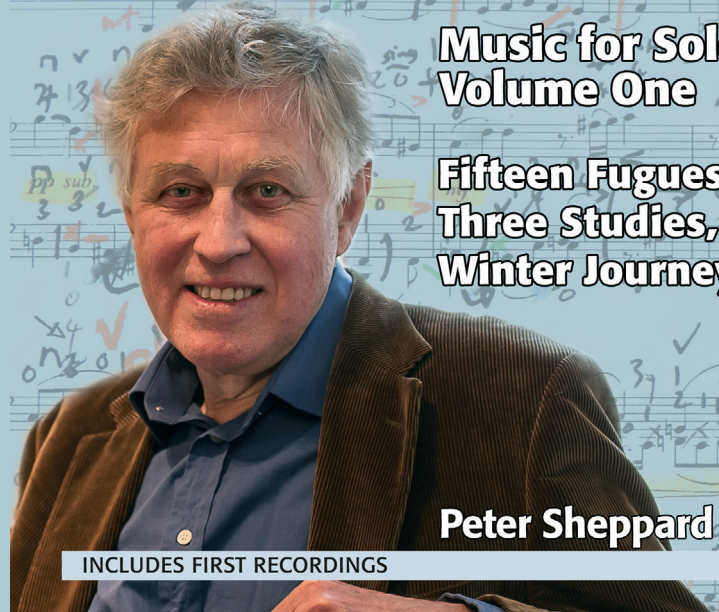
TOCCATA CLASSICS

David MATTHEWS

Music for Solo Violin Volume One

Fifteen Fugues, Op. 88
Three Studies, Op. 39
Winter Journey, Op. 32



Peter Sheppard Skærved

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

THE CHALLENGE OF THE VIOLIN

by David Matthews

Although, to my regret, I don't play the violin, I have written more pieces for it than for any other instrument. At the last count, there are two concertos (plus a double concerto for violin and viola), three concertinos, seven pieces for violin and piano, two sets of violin duos and sixteen pieces for solo violin. Since 1998 I have been writing a succession of solo pieces for Peter Sheppard Skaerved; they have become a regular part of my life, a kind of extension to my journal. Peter is a wonderful collaborator, usually performing each new piece a short time after he has received it (on one occasion, three days after I'd written a piece on the summit of an Italian mountain). Peter also relishes a challenge: when I was writing the Fifteen Fugues I often thought 'he won't be able to play that, surely' – but he always found a way. This disc gives an extraordinary insight into his profound understanding of my violin music.

Three Studies for solo violin, Op. 39

I wrote the Three Studies, Op. 39, in September 1985 as the contemporary set work for Stage 1 of the 1986 Carl Flesch International Violin Competition. The first study, *Andante appassionato* 1, is lyrical and intense, exploring the dramatic possibilities of the higher register of the instrument. The bold opening statement juxtaposes the note A in four different octaves. In the second, a scherzo marked *Vivo e fantastico* 2, the light and whimsical opening theme in constantly changing time-signatures alternates with a chordal idea based on the folksong 'The Two Ravens'. The study reaches its climax in the central section with *fortissimo* chordal writing and arpeggio figuration. A *pianissimo*, mostly *tremolo* bridge-passage leads to a recapitulation of the main themes, presented in reverse order. The slow (*Lento*) introduction of the third study 3 emerges gradually from a barely audible *ppp* with hesitant, crying *glissandi* fragments. The dynamics and melodic contour both steadily intensify. The *Allegro* section is a *moto perpetuo*: the constant semiquaver rhythm is punctuated with *fortepianos* and accents.

Fifteen Fugues for solo violin, Op. 88

The idea for this series of fugues originated when, at a concert in June 1998, I heard Peter Sheppard Skærved play the Bach G minor solo sonata, BWV1001, which contains an elaborate three-part fugue.

Photo: Richard Bram

Peter Sheppard Skærved is the dedicatee of over 300 works for solo violin, by composers including Hans Werner Henze, Judith Weir, George Rochberg and Poul Ruders. His discography stretches from Tartini to many of the works written for him, and he was nominated for a Grammy in 2007. He regularly appears as soloist and lecturer at the Library of Congress, Washington DC, and curated a major exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 2011. He is the leader of the Kreutzer Quartet and Viotti Lecturer at the Royal Academy of Music, London. Further information can be found at www.peter-sheppard-skaerved.com.

> I'm staggered by the virtuosity and invention of this cycle, not untypical of the things that my brother gets up to, but on such a scale. Mine is just the kind of shadowy elusive piece that I like, and might have written myself: except that I would have scored it for two violins![11]

No. 14 [17] uses *scordatura*, or re-tuning: the lowest string, the G string, is tuned down as semitone, to F sharp. From a technical point of view, this device offers the composer the opportunity to have F sharp as the lowest 'open string'. But the technique, which subtly alters the stresses within the instrument, also effects changes to the available palette of a violin. This particular tuning seems to increase the delay time of 'closed' chords, as well as imparting a silvery, bell-like quality to the highest *tessiture*. The *scordatura* technique utilised here is not so distant from that used by Kodály in his Solo Cello Sonata (1915), in which the lowest string is also tuned down, to B natural. The technique of 'selective' *scordatura* has been used comparatively infrequently in the last century, and appears rarely in solo works of this nature. One of the reasons is that the notational problems it poses are considerable, whether a 'tablature' solution is used, as by Heinrich Biber or Gustav Mahler (in the Fourth Symphony) or by writing out the notes themselves, leaving the player to solve the concomitant reading problem. The fugue is written on two staves, which offers a particular set of technical challenges.

The last of the Fifteen Fugues [18] is uniquely emotional: it is dedicated to David's wife, Jenifer Wakelyn. The first performance was given in my living room, shortly before the couple married. Jenifer writes:

> In December 2001, when Peter and Malene [my wife] invited us for tea, David presented Peter with the B flat major Fugue. Peter played it for us, dazzlingly, on his beautiful Stradivarius – a memory that will always be associated for me with Malene's exquisite Danish Christmas cookies. In 2003, the whole set came together unforgettably when Peter played the 15 Fugues in St Jude-on-the-Hill in Hampstead Garden Suburb on David's 60th birthday.[12]

I know of no other musical cycle that ends with such an open-hearted declaration of affection, and can think of no other fugue the theme of which is Love itself. That David Matthews has achieved this end is testament to the human universality of his output.

[11] E-mail to the author, 30 January 2012.
[12] E-mail to the author, 1 February 2012.

I wondered if it was possible to write a four-part fugue, and when I got home I wrote a few bars, which I faxed to Peter, thinking that they would probably be impossible to play. To my surprise, he rang me ten minutes later, played what I'd written down the telephone with apparent ease, and suggested that I finish the piece – which I did a few months later during a residency at the MacDowell Colony in the USA.

This fugue, in E minor, was deliberately written in a neo-Bachian style and I had thought of it as a one-off technical exercise. Peter kept urging me to write more and eventually, in October 2001, I wrote another four-part fugue as a birthday present for Carl Davis, which encouraged me to continue the series. I drew the line at 24 fugues in all the keys, but eventually settled on fifteen in the most practical keys. As far as I was able, I arranged them according to the cycle of fifths. Apart from the first one, all the fugues are dedicated to friends – many of them composers – and a number of them were birthday presents.

No. 1: a4, C major, *Maestoso* [4], is based on the four-note theme of the fugal finale of Mozart's G major String Quartet, K387, and is a tribute to all composers who have attempted the rewarding challenge of fugue.
No. 2: a2, C minor, *Scorrevole* [5], has a ten-note theme derived from the keys of the fugues in my series (major and minor are counted as one) and it modulates in turn through all these keys before returning to C minor for the stretto. It is dedicated to Mark Doran.
No. 3: a3, G major, *Moderato con moto* [6], is a pastoral fugue, with cuckoo calls towards its close, based on a Bachian theme. It is dedicated to James Francis Brown.
No. 4: a4, G minor, *Lento* [7], was composed for Roger and Sophie Scruton while I was staying at their Wiltshire farm. Its subject and counter-subject are based respectively on the letters of their first names.
No. 5: a3, D major, *Allegro festivo* [8], was a wedding present for Roxanna Panufnik and Stephen Macklow-Smith.
No. 6: a3, D minor, *Molto moderato* [9], is played *pizzicato* throughout, and is dedicated to my French Mahlerian friend Isabelle Werck.
No. 7: a3, A major, *Con fantasia, come un uccello* [10], is based on the song of a blackbird I heard from my mother's house in Essex, where the fugue was written, and was a 75th-birthday present for Rosamund Strode.
No. 8: a4, A minor, *Allegro sostenuto* [11], terse and highly chromatic, was a 65th-birthday present for Carl Davis.
No. 9: a3, E major, *Allegretto* [12], another pastoral fugue with a coda that makes extensive use of harmonics, was a 50th-birthday present for Judith Bingham and the last to be written, in June 2002.

No. 10: a4, E minor, *Largo* [13], was the first fugue to be written and is dedicated to Peter Sheppard Skærved.
No. 11: a3, E flat major, *Andante con moto* [14], is dedicated to William Howard, and was composed while staying with him in April 2002 at the fabulous garden of Ninfa, south of Rome.
No. 12: a4, F sharp minor, *Lento serioso* [15], was also composed at Ninfa as a 50th-birthday present for my Czech composer friend Jaroslav Šťastný.
No. 13: a2, F major, *Allegro* [16], is played tremolo throughout, and its second half is an exact inversion of the first. It was a 56th-birthday present for my brother Colin.
No. 14: a3, B minor, *Andante* [17], was a present for Helen and Anthony Powers after a visit to their house near Hereford in spring 2002. It has a *Vivacissimo* coda based on an inversion of the theme. The G string is tuned down to F sharp throughout.
No. 15: a3, B flat major, *Molto moderato* [18], was a present for my wife Jenifer Wakelyn at Christmas 2001.

***Winter Journey* for solo violin, Op. 32**

Winter Journey was composed in November and December 1982. At the time I wrote it, I was (not to get excessively autobiographical) in a state where I identified rather closely with the protagonist of Schubert's *Winterreise*. It seemed appropriate to base my piece on two quotations from Schubert's great song-cycle: the first song, 'Gute Nacht', in which the lover says farewell to his beloved, and the seventeenth, 'Im Dorfe', about the falseness of dreams, which he spurns. These two quotations preface my score, and may or may not be played, as the performer wishes. The title of my piece is, of course, a translation of *Winterreise*. Both Schubert quotations are in D major, and *Winter Journey* is also grounded in D, mostly D minor, but a pure D major emerges near the end, corresponding to the magical change from D minor to D major in 'Gute Nacht'. The piece is a single movement in eleven sections. The first, marked *freely: quasi fantasia*, is introductory, and presents much of the material of the piece in fragmentary form. In some of the middle sections I had the sound of another D minor/major masterpiece, Bach's Chaconne for solo violin, in mind. The last D major section is written almost entirely in natural harmonics, and based very closely on the phrase from 'Gute Nacht'. The ending vacillates between major and minor, finally choosing the ambiguity of a major second chord on D and E, thus ending on the same notes as it had begun.

Fugue 11 [14] is a complex weave of references, best disentangled by the composer himself:

> In April 2002, William Howard invited me to stay with him at Ninfa, 40 miles SE of Rome, where a fabulous garden was created by three women, the last members of the illustrious Caetani family which had once owned all the surrounding land. The second of these women was married to the composer Don Roffredo Caetani (1871–1961), the third to William's uncle. The garden was created on the ruins of the medieval town of Ninfa which had been abandoned in the 17th century because of malaria in the nearby Pontine marshes. One of the two surviving medieval buildings housed a Bechstein grand piano which was given to Roffredo Caetani by Liszt, who was his godfather. It was on this piano that I composed the E flat fugue for William, based on the theme of Liszt's *Sonetto 123 del Petrarca*. Meanwhile the garden day and night was full of the song of nightingales.[9]

No. 12 [15] is dedicated to the Brno-based composer Jaroslav Šťastný, a.k.a. 'Peter Graham'. David has had a long relationship with the community of composers in the Czech Republic, and I am very proud of having played *Winter Journey* in Leoš Janáček's house there some years back, a concert which 'Jarek' organised. The dedicatee was very moved by the dedication:

> to be one of the dedicatees of the David's Fugues is a great honour for me. David Matthews is surely one of my very closest friends-composers. In his Fugue in F-sharp minor he made so good musical portrait of my personality, that I identified myself with it so much that I used (unconsciously) its first 8 tones in my song *Riveting*.[10]

The third cyclic performance of Fifteen Fugues was given in Brno.

Fugue 13 [16] is the only two-part fugue in the cycle, and the only one that uses *tremolo*. This technical device became a bone of contention between musicians in the twentieth century. Many asserted that its use was inappropriate in all but orchestral writing; indeed, Hans Keller waxed lyrical on the subject! But its use here, in a work dedicated to David's brother, the composer Colin Matthews, points back to their collaborative work with Benjamin Britten at the end of his life. If any work in the cycle evokes Britten's sound-world, it is this one. There is a fantastic, 'unison-fugue' in Britten's *Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge* – David's fugue explores a related musical landscape. From a technical point of view, this is one of the hardest fugues to perform, as most of the answering material is in contrary motion, inverting the subject material, and surprisingly difficult to bring off on the violin. Colin Matthews writes:

[9] E-mail to the author, 30 January 2012.
[10] E-mail to the author, 25 January 2012.

violin part is constructed almost entirely from birdsong (appropriately enough, this little-known piece was commissioned by the naturalist Gerald Durrell).

Fugue 8 [11] seems to me to evoke something of the expressive brand of lyrical rhetoric of its dedicatee, the composer Judith Bingham. I am fascinated by the transformation my perception of the fugue theme undergoes as it is 'worked'. The initial statements might be seen as being *posato* or even *poco esitando*. But by the end this 'gestural pausing' has metamorphosed, into an almost-lullaby/barcarolle, an original, but natural rocking motion, which loses itself in bells and birdsong over the water. Judith writes:

> I was very touched to be included in the dedicatees of these fugues. Listening to mine is like seeing yourself in one of those fragmented cubist paintings, and imagining what each change of colour and mood means. I like to think that David has referred to birdsong in mine, a shared passion. Of course, my idea of how he was imagining me and his may be poles apart, but in all the fugues I like the way he has made the most formal structures deeply personal.[8]

Fugue 9 [12] is most definitely a portrait of its dedicatee, the composer and conductor Carl Davis, but also points up the fact that any act of portraiture is an act of reduction, of selection. David has clearly determined to focus on the forceful energy of Davis' character, the vigour of his conducting, his decisiveness. Interestingly, this is the only one of the Fifteen Fugues which relates to the muscular quality of the *Fuga* from Bartók's epochal Sonata, which re-established the solo-violin work as an accepted concert form. The recording session provided evidence of how the presence of the composer liberates the interpretative process. David was keen to encourage the gruff, almost irascible side of my playing, to a degree which I would otherwise not have permitted myself.

No. 10 [13], the first of the set to be written, is the one most closely linked to my own lifelong obsession with Bach's *Sei Solo*, his title for the Sonatas and Partitas. It was interesting that David wrote a fugue of such stately nature, immediately upon hearing my performance of the G minor Fugue, BWV1001, which is the sprightliest of Bach's set. His fax to me that night began: 'Inspired by Bach, I began writing a 4-part fugue for violin'. David's E minor/E major fugue seems, to me, related to the sunrise-like *Adagio* that begins Bach's C Major Sonata, BWV1005. I also suspect that, yet again, Ysaÿe's own E minor Sonata (No. 4) may have more than a little to do with the elegant lyricism of David's fugue (it is the only one of the Ysaÿe Sonatas which he has heard me play). Here the web of references gets more complex: Ysaÿe himself, wittingly or not, quoted a study by the first great Bach violinist of the modern age, Joseph Joachim, and this CD was recorded on Joachim's 1698 Stradivari.

8 E-mail to the author, 18 February 2012.

DAVID MATTHEWS AND THE VIOLIN: ONE OF TWO FOR ONE

by Peter Sheppard Skærved

In the winter of 1993 I was preparing a series of Bach concerts for Taiwan and Japan. The rehearsals took place in a dark and cold church in North London. My friend Arajit Chakravarty, who was playing in the group, came up to me at some point during the rehearsal week. He pushed a large envelope into my hands: 'Peter, these pieces are for you. Some publisher sent them to me, and I just can't bring myself to play them. They're both pretty strange, so I am sure that you will like them'. Little did I realise that the two pieces in the package would change my musical outlook for good. They were *Winter Journey* by David Matthews and Peter Sculthorpe's *Alone*. I knew neither work, but they both showed me new and unsuspected musical vistas.

I decided to begin with David Matthews' piece. What I saw filled me with horror; I was too scared to play this stuff. I knew that I was not technically or musically up to this music. I took another look at the two scores and put them away, lost in the enormous pile of un-learnt, un-played repertoire, the sins of omission that are the bad conscience of every musician. But gradually *Winter Journey* began to niggle me – as much to do with its title and my egocentric, monomaniacal obsession with Schubert's wandering anti-hero, his alter ego, than initially anything to do with the music. There is a picture taken of me, just before Arajit gave me those two fateful pieces. I am standing in the middle of a snow-covered field, somewhere in Bavaria – a Lowry-esque 'stick-person', lost in the snow, setting out on a walk to nowhere, noticed by no one. It seemed to me to be a powerful image of the solo violinist, and chimed in beautifully with both David's *Winter Journey* and, naturally enough, the whole *Winterreise* narrative. I had to play David's piece. Perhaps I was drawn to the vanity of being Schubert, or at least identified with his state of mind in 1827. Schubert's friend Josef von Spaun recalled:

> For a time, Schubert's mood became gloomier and he seemed upset. When I asked him what the matter was, he merely said to me, 'Come to Schober's today. I will sing you a cycle of awe-inspiring songs.' We were quite dumb-founded by the gloomy mood of these songs, and Schober said that he only liked one song, *Der Lindenbaum*. Schubert replied: 'I like these songs more than all the others, and you will come to like them too'.[1]

1 Quoted in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Schubert: Memoirs by his Friends*, A. & C. Black, London, 1958, p. 138.

Even before I had learnt David's own 'Winterreise', the impulse to build a concert around it proved irresistible. I wanted to avoid the traditional way of programming solo-violin works, as islands of isolation in the middle of 'accompanied' recitals. I had to face-up to two uncomfortable realities. First, I barely knew the solo-violin repertoire. Second, I had neither the technique nor the stamina to play such a concert. I decided on a project. Ringing the promotion departments of every music publisher in Europe, every 'Music Information Centre' (M.I.C.), every composer I could think of, I told them that I was assembling a programme of solo-violin music, and please, could they send me everything in their catalogues, and ... I had no money to pay them, not a brass farthing. Then I waited. Music began to pour through my letterbox, by composers famous and unknown, young and old. Over 300 scores rained onto my doormat; my postman started to complain. I was astonished at the variety, scale and range of the material that I was seeing, for the first time: it was like stumbling into a cave full of diamonds. I decided that the only way that I could deal with this huge pile of music was through organisation. I bought a stack of really cheap blank audio tapes, rigged up a rudimentary studio in my bedroom overlooking the water in Limehouse, and went to work. Each day, for almost two months, I would study, say, five or six works and then make extremely rough recordings of them. Two things became clear to me: that I had discovered a lifetime's worth of new repertoire, in a genre that I had not before taken seriously; and that *Winter Journey* was a masterpiece, one of the most ambitious and successful single-span works ever conceived for the violin. *Winter Journey* curiously continues to fascinate, and I come back to it, again and again, in the way that I return to Bach's Chaconne.

This disc explores about half of David Matthews' output for violin alone, a comparatively generous amount for a composer who is not a string-player. Admittedly, pianist-composers such as John Cage and George Rochberg produced large-scale cycles for the instrument, but very few have achieved the variety of approaches that Matthews achieves. To clarify: there are, put simply, two ways of approaching the issue of writing solo works for an essentially melodic instrument. The simplest way of imagining these two approaches would be to bring to mind the language of Debussy's *Syrinx* on the on hand and Béla Bartók's *Sonata for Solo Violin* on the other. Bartok's epochal work treats the violin as complete unto itself, constantly providing a structure of virtuosic harmonic support and counterpoint. By contrast, in Debussy the instrumentalist is 'unsupported', placed in an imaginary landscape, which the listener, the player, or maybe, even the acoustic must offer to supply the 'missing material'. All solo works since Debussy have chosen either route, or a melange of both approaches.

David Matthews chooses to work with the violin, from all angles, as is made explicit in the works recorded here. *Winter Journey* [19] sets the protagonist in a web of interlaced environments,

transcription of a *solo violin* piece.

As No. 4 [7] is dedicated to the philosopher Roger Scruton, with whom David Matthews has had a fascinating dialogue going back years, it is appropriate that it is *The Thinker* of the set, highly chromatic, the complete inverse of the open language of the previous movements. Curiously enough, this is the first dedication where I find myself thinking about how Scruton would himself like it played. He has been outspoken in the past as to his predilections in Baroque performance, so I am careful to fill it with the expressive warmth and sincerity he values in performances of Bach.

Fugue No. 5 [8] is, frankly, insanely difficult. The Danish composer Poul Ruders, whose *Winter's Fugue* (2007) for solo violin was written after seeing the new technical possibilities that Matthews has opened up, told me that he likes to stand the performer 'on the edge of a precipice – and push him off!'[7] This fugue certainly does that. The leaping subject, and the tonality, D major, always brings me back to Anton Reicha, who wrote a piano fugue, one of his epic Op. 36 set, based on the opening of Mozart's 'Haffner' Symphony. There are moments in this movement which seem physically impossible. But David is like Arnold Schoenberg, who when told that his Violin Concerto would need a player with twelve fingers, famously answered: 'I can wait'. He didn't have to wait long; Louis Krasner also cracked that technical nut, with aplomb. David clearly 'can wait', and in rehearsals of his (always) technically challenging solo and chamber music, sits smiling, while the players find their way!

Fugue 6 [9] is played entirely *pizzicato*. Now, of course, there is plenty of chordal music for 'plucked' violin; the imitation of guitars has seen to that (the strummed G major chords in Britten's *Simple Symphony* leap instantly to mind). But *pizzicato counterpoint* is comparatively rare on the violin. The best-known example is the opening of the second movement of the Fourth Solo Sonata which Ysaÿe dedicated to Kreisler – but it eschews the complex voice-leading that David's innocent-sounding fugue demands. Yet from the outset Fugue 6 has to sound utterly easeful. It begins with bells in the countryside, evoked by the simplest of harmonics, which, of course, add another degree of complexity, especially when woven into counterpoint played with a couple of fingers on only four strings.

Fugue 7 [10] has what may be one of the most intricate subjects every attempted: it is a rare example of the transcription of a birdsong as a fugue subject. The blackbird, which provides the material, has been used a number of times by composers in the twentieth century, most famously Olivier Messiaen (his *Merle Noir* for flute and piano of 1957 proved the practicality of sourcing material in this way for the composers of our time). Still, in the last 100 years, birdsong has been used comparatively infrequently as the basis of violin music. There is one notable exception, Priaulx Rainier's *Wildlife Celebration,* in which the solo-

[7] Conversation between Poul Ruders and the author, Denmark, August 2009.

This intersect with the world of portraiture is fascinating. For us violinists this begins with the Brno-born violinist, Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst, who dedicated his equally complex *Études Polyphoniques* (published in 1865) to the violinists Ferdinand Laub, Antonio Bazzini, Henry Vieuxtemps, Joseph Joachim, Prosper Sainton and Joseph Hellmesberger. Earlier, in 1800, the mysterious Michel Woldemar had composed a set of *Sonates Fantômagiques* for the ghosts of Giuseppe Tartini, Antonio Lolli, Gaetano Pugnani and Niccolò Mestrino, but these works have remained shrouded in obscurity. In the twentieth century Eugène Ysaÿe, whose ghost lurks behind some of David's solo writing, continued the tradition. He dedicated his *Six Sonates*, Op. 27 (1923), to his violinist friends Josef Szigeti, Jacques Thibaud, George Enescu, Fritz Kreisler, Matthieu Crickboom and Manuel Quiroga. What these two cycles share with David's Fifteen Fugues, difficulty aside, is that each of the pieces is a portrait. David's portraiture is subtly varied, ranging from the deeply affectionate (the gorgeous *finale* dedicated to his wife, Jenifer) through to the abstract: I have the impression that Fugue 10, the first to be written, is a hopeful portrait, of how David wishes that I might play, in contrast to the less civilised actuality. I may be wrong.

This is, of course, a cycle of fugues without preludes. There is a sense in which the integrity and tightness of the set would be in some way compromised were non-contrapuntal material permitted. Fugue 1 [4], by contrast, stands to one side, an heraldic opening, fanfare, perhaps even prelude for the whole set, climaxing in the triumphant *stretto* of the last line. This style of writing, of an 'alarum-virtuosick' if you will, returns only once, in the mountainous Fifth Fugue.

Fugue No. 2 [5] also dialogues powerfully with the whole sequence of movements. Its craggy theme serves a double purpose: providing material for the movement itself, but also laying out the tonalities of all fifteen movements. At an early stage in performing the Fifteen Fugues, I repeatedly found myself unable to play Nos. 7 and 8 in the correct order. The composer pointed out that I could do this only if I re-ordered all the notes in this theme, retroactively, as well as all the answering material where appropriate.... I play the fugues in the correct order now.

No. 3 [6], like No. 10, which began all the trouble, is a four-part fugue, the first in the set on two staves. It is written to be played with smooth slurred phrasing. I don't mind saying that this is a particular challenge in David's solo writing, and calls to mind the slow contrapuntal passages in Berg's Violin Concerto. I have treasured memories of my teacher, Louis Krasner, who commissioned and premiered Berg's masterpiece, demonstrating how such material should and could be played, elegantly and smoothly, the bow 'wrapping' around the strings, with no bumps or lunges. He could not understand the aggressive style of Bach that was dominating modern-instrument performance at the time. And this fugue doffs the cap to Bach, or rather to 'maybe-Bach', the D minor Toccata and Fugue, now widely agreed to be a

almost a 'multiverse'. It is apparent, even before a note is played, that the performer is 'standing' in a 'Mitteleuropean' winter landscape. For some, this landscape is already humming with Schubert, for others, the poetry of Wilhelm Müller. There is really no way of knowing which. This situation is complicated, or enriched, with the first gesture that the audience hears/sees, a flurry of harmonics on the notes D and E, to which the piece will return to close. These function like a Shakespearean 'alarum', a reveille. But, bearing in mind the title, and the implicit landscape, *mimesis* is inescapable: I hear/see ice – falling from the brush of Caspar David Friedrich, perhaps. For me, the Friedrich comparison is useful. Like Schubert, Friedrich had a complex, ambivalent relationship with the winter landscape, talking of 'the great white cloth, the embodiment of Nature prepared for new life'.[2] In *Die Schöne Müllerin*, the poem 'Trockne Blumen' enshrines a similarly frozen optimism:

> Und Lenz wird kommen,
> Und Winter wird gehn,
> Und Blümlein werden
> Im Grase stehn.

It has always seemed to me that David's own 'reading' of *Winterreise*, is filled with similar hopefulness; it offers a frame within which his tale of travel can be told. A letter[3] to me gave the background to the programme note quoted above:

> I was talking with Judith Bingham. We agreed that all our pieces were connected with incidents in our lives, though sometimes we didn't realize this at the time. In the case of *Winter Journey*, however, I did realize the connection, as I had done with my previous piece, which was the First Violin Concerto. That piece was derived from a Dostoyevsky story[4] about a man who meets a woman who has been abandoned by her lover; he consoles and befriends her, and inevitably falls in love with her; whereupon her old lover returns and she goes back to him. The man is left alone, but he is strengthened by the experience and we are to understand, turns it into art. In the Robert Bresson film based on the Dostoyevsky,[5] which I saw and which sparked off the piece, the artist is a painter and the last shots, as I remember, are of him painting furiously. Well, the events of the story happened to me as I was composing this piece, more or less exactly like that, which was uncanny. My next piece was for solo violin; as winter was approaching, I felt rather like the hero of Schubert's *Winterreise*. So I decided to base the piece on this.

[2] Françoise Forster-Hahn, *Spirit of an Age: Nineteenth-Century paintings from the Nationalgalerie*, Nationalgalerie, Berlin, 2001, p. 74.
[3] Dated 20 November 2009.
[4] *White Nights*, 1848.
[5] *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur*, 1971.

The Three Studies were written as a test piece for the Carl Flesch Competition and constitute, technically, the most straightforward work recorded here. I have spoken with a number of composers about writing test pieces for such competitions. Almost without exception, they talk about the problem of trying to construct a work that will fit all varieties of hands, and most importantly, writing a work which will not need much explanation, since there is no opportunity for the composer to work with the performers. That is not to say that the Three Studies are unsophisticated; indeed, I feel that their riches are unlikely to be discovered by a violinist studying them in the short term. Having now performed these pieces for a decade-and-a-half, I can say that they continue to reveal unsuspected possibilities, new vistas; the harder that I look at them, the deeper they bed itself into my musical consciousness.

From the listener's point of view, it might seem a little strange that this work is named Three Studies. All the movements are marked to be played *attacca*, which means that it is difficult to distinguish between the actual movement breaks, thus marked, and the *Luftpause* between the Britten-esque first section of the third movement, and its concluding *Presto*. Naturally, this doesn't really matter, but it does point up that listening to, being part of, a musical landscape such as this one is very different from how it appears on the page.

It is in this work that I feel most surrounded by the nature that David loves. He grew up, as I did, on the edge of Epping Forest. The sense of being right on the edge of nature, just able to escape from 'The Wen', which I recall, inhabits, indeed, *possesses* much of his instrumental music. He has the East Londoner's love of water, of the sharp stench of the Thames at low tide, and the city-dweller's passion for birds, especially rare ones. The third study 3 begins with what seems to me, to be a 'song' at dawn, a very human rhapsody framed by curlews and sandpipers, before the sun, indeed, Turner's sun, bursts over the horizon (with more than a hint of Britten's *Young Apollo*).

The times of day and night dominate these works. The opening movement 1 is typical of David's 'midday' music – high, unsupported 'solar' lines such as these are to be found the first of his *Four Australian Birds* for solo violin (2004) or his solo-violin response to Giovanni Battista Viotti, *Monte Maggio* (2007). The second movement 2 is clearly a nocturne, but a nocturne of tiptoe-ing, of swiftly closed doors, *Capriccio*, *Il Matrimonio Segreto*, all, for the first half anyways, in the dark, 'under the covers', the violin muted, everything undiscovered. Suddenly, with the most dramatic mute-removal that I know – it comes off on a tremendous crescendo – all is revealed, and the *peccadilloes* continue, all the lights on in the house, with joyous and reckless abandon!

The Fifteen Fugues mostly inhabits the 'opposite space' from *Winter Journey*. Like the three Bach fugues which inspired them, they build an entire world in the four-string limits of a violin and bow. The clearest manifestation of this Bachian quality is the total integrity on which Matthews insists on for these

works. To illustrate this point: the two-part fugues never have more than two notes per chord, the three-parts three, and the four-parts four. This approach might seem obvious, but though Bach's violin fugues are in three parts, fourth lines offer material derived from the convention of the 'redundant entry', where the countersubject of the last entry is given a final statement of the fugue them to play with. Matthews' approach to fugue is not 'purer' than Bach's, but he sets himself extraordinary standards, especially as Matthews allows himself no discursive material, whereas Bach separates his contrapuntal *Stoff* with fantasia-like explorations of the secondary melodic material.

Matthews' fugues are made of stern stuff. Even when they are descriptive, evoking birdsong or church bells, there is no slackening of the 'contrapuntal imperative'. A few of the movements do toy with freedom, no more, in their codas: No. 14 ends with a few seconds of glittering 'bagpiping' that whisks me away to the world of Judith Weir's *Bagpiper's String Trio*, and No. 12 permits a moment of repetition, highlighting the harmonics which illuminate the close. But such moments are rare. These are works of phenomenal discipline, and most importantly, 'closed systems'. Like Isambard Kingdom Brunel's last bridge over the Tamar, they 'tension' themselves, requiring no context or external support. Like all great counterpoint, these works can be appreciated, on the page, in silent reading.

The origin of the Fifteen Fugues is, not surprisingly, Bach. As David's note above explains, in 1998 he and I talked in the dressing room at the Purcell Room, after I had given a concert of Bach and Henze solo works. He muttered something about Bach only writing three-voiced fugues for violin, which I did not register properly in my post-concert euphoria. But all came into sharp focus back at my apartment later the same night: The fax machine began to whirr, and a piece of music scrolled out. It was the beginning of a four-part fugue in E minor, with 'this is as far as I have got, is it playable?' scrawled under it. Never one to take a challenge lying down, I picked up the phone, put my violin under my chin, rang David's number, and roughly played it into his answering machine, adding, a little glibly: 'Now you'll have to write the rest of it'. The result was an extraordinary fugue, written on two staves, which looked far more like piano music than solo violin music, but which is actually very playable, a return to the violinistic values of the middle Baroque. I loved performing that 'first' fugue so much, that I begged for more. The result was this first true cycle of fugues for my instrument.

David Matthews' Fifteen Fugues are unique not only in being the only major set of fugues for solo violin, but in that he also succeeds, triumphantly, in balancing this with portraiture. One of his 'subjects', Judith Bingham, observes her delight in this extraordinary balancing act: 'in all the fugues I like the way he has made the most formal structures deeply personal.'[6]

6 E-mail to the author, 18 February 2012.