



THOMAS ADÈS

Works for Solo Piano



Han Chen

Thomas Adès (b. 1971)

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Composer, conductor and pianist Thomas Adès has been described by *The New York Times* as 'among the most accomplished all-round musicians of his generation'. Born in London in 1971, he studied piano at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, and read music at King's College Cambridge. His music embraces influences from jazz and pop as well as the Western classical tradition. He has contributed successfully to the major time-honoured genres and his operatic and orchestral works have been particularly well received by both the public and the press. His first opera, *Powder Her Face* (1995) has been performed worldwide and his second, *The Tempest*, commissioned by London's Royal Opera House, was premiered under the baton of the composer to great critical acclaim in 2004. His third opera, after Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*, was first staged at the Salzburg Festival in July 2016. Among his orchestral works, *Asyla* (1997) was programmed by Sir Simon Rattle in his farewell concert as conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and also in the conductor's debut as music director of the Berliner Philharmoniker. Rattle and the Berliner Philharmoniker also gave the first performance of *Tevot* in 2007. In 2011 *Polaris* was premiered by the New World Symphony and Michael Tilson Thomas in Miami. Adès was artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival from 1999 to 2008. In 2000 he became the youngest ever recipient of the Grameweyer Award. He was awarded the CBE in the 2018 Queen's Birthday Honours.

Adès is an accomplished pianist and his skill as an executant informs his writing for the instrument. In addition to the solo piano works featured on this release, he has composed a *Piano Quintet* (2001), *In Seven Days* for piano and orchestra, and most recently, a *Piano Concerto* (2018), which was given its UK premiere by soloist Kirill Gerstein with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by the composer at the Royal Festival Hall, London in October 2019.

Philip Hensher's libretto to *Powder Her Face* was inspired by the life of Margaret, Duchess of Argyll, whose

sexual exploits scandalised Britain in the 1960s. Adès's *Concert Paraphrase on Powder Her Face* (2009) reflects the extravagance, grace and glamour of its subject in a bravura piece in the grand manner of operatic paraphrases of Liszt and Busoni. The composer quotes and extemporises freely on several key scenes, transcribing them as four spontaneous-sounding piano pieces. The first piece is *Scene One* of the opera, Adès's *Ode to Joy* ('Joy' by Jean Patou being the Duchess's perfume). The second is *Scene Five, Is Daddy Squiffy?*. The third encapsulates two operatic arias, *Fancy being Rich!* from *Scene Four* of the opera, and *It is too Late*, from the *Eighth* and final scene, in which the dead Duke appears as the hotel manager to evict the Duchess for considerable rental arrears. The work closes with a sensual tango as the room is being prepared for the next occupant. Departing from the strict chronology of the opera scenes, the piano score creates an authentic and compelling narrative of its own. It was first performed by the composer on 14 March 2010 at the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts, Vancouver, Canada.

Still Sorrowing (1992) was premiered by Adès in London's Purcell Room on 11 January 1993. The piece alludes to the Elizabethan composer and lutenist John Dowland's *Semper Dowland semper dolens*. It unfolds as a series of dark refrains, thus forging a link with other piano works and songs from the Romantic era concerning grief and loss. The middle register strings of the piano are dampened, muting the central range and intensifying the bleak and sombre mood of the piece.

Darknesse Visible (1992) is a rapt re-imagining, or, as the composer describes it at the head of the score, an 'explosion' of John Dowland's lute song, *In Darknesse Let Mee Dwell* (1610). Without adding any notes, Adès alters the loudness, register and texture of the original song to throw new and unexpected light upon the source material. Among the score's most notable features are stark juxtapositions of dynamic extremes and a haunting use of *tremolando* effects. Adès gave the first performance in the Recital Hall of Franz Liszt's House, Budapest in October 1992.

A set of five variants on the Ladino folk tune, 'Lavaba la blanca niña', *Blanca Variations* (2015) was commissioned by the 2016 Clara Haskil International Piano Competition. The music appears in *Act I* of *The Exterminating Angel*, Adès's opera based on the film by Luis Buñuel, where it is performed by famous pianist Blanca Delgado. The wistful, yearning folk tune persists throughout a varied sequence of treatments, some exploiting the full gamut of the keyboard and others close-knit and extravagantly ornamented. The predominant character of the music is lyrical and flowing. The *Blanca Variations* were premiered on 26 August 2015 at the Theatre de Vevey, Switzerland by the competition candidates of the Clara Haskil International Piano Competition.

Traced Overhead, Op. 15 (1996) was first performed by Imogen Cooper on 20 July 1996 at the Pittville Pump Room, Cheltenham as part of that year's Cheltenham Festival. The piece was partly inspired by images from sacred paintings of angels ascending towards the heavens in shafts of light. Varied in colour and texture, it requires a virtuosic technique as well as a nuanced, sensitive approach to the fastidiously detailed notation. There are three movements of progressively increasing length. *Sursum*, the title of the first piece is taken from the Latin adverb of upward motion (as in '*sursum corda*' – 'lift up your hearts'). Lasting for under a minute, this fleeting miniature is required by the composer to be played very fast and with a weightless, airy quality. *Aetheria* develops the feeling of vertical space established in the previous movement. The middle section features an unplayed melody created by the interaction between the hands, a nod to the technique developed by Schumann in his *Humoreske*. In the closing bars there is a vast slowing down, leading without a break into the last and longest movement, *Chori* ('choruses'), which continues the ascent through the strata. The measured progress of the three-part chords creates a sense of vertical space in which a new and richly harmonised melody unfolds. The work ends with a rapid descent through the previously explored levels.

Written in 2009 to mark the Chopin bicentenary, the three *Mazurkas, Op. 27* (2009) were requested by Emanuel Ax, who premiered them at Carnegie Hall, New York on 10 February 2010. The archetypal rhythms, ornamentation and phrasings of the dance form are evident in each of these tributes to the Polish master, yet Adès refashions such familiar gestures to create something new and deeply personal. Harmonically adventurous and rhythmically intricate, these *Mazurkas* capture the spirit of Polish folk music, while at the same time viewing them at a distance from a remote and transformative perspective. The first piece begins with a quintessential mazurka theme featuring wide intervals, to be played with expressive freedom. Swifter material in strict tempo lies at the heart of the piece, followed by a return of the opening idea in the upper reaches of the keyboard. Crystalline and enigmatic, the second *Mazurka* is very fast and rhythmically complex, generating a sense of feverish unease. A brief, contrasting central episode is more earthbound, anchored by a rowdy, dance-like utterance in the piano's lower register. The final piece has a wistful sadness associated with the genre. An expansive and eloquent theme exploiting the outer realms of the instrument is counterpoised by a hushed passage which evolves from the middle of the keyboard. There is an ornate and varied reprise of the opening material before the piece closes softly with an illimitable, sweeping final chord.

Souvenir (2018) is taken from music for the film *Colette*, released in 2018–19 internationally. In this, his first film score, Adès captures the essence of various French composers, such as Satie, Ravel, Saint-Saëns and Debussy. There is a refinement and simplicity to the music, exemplified by the introspective, harmonically extended slow waltz *Souvenir*, for solo piano, which appears as *End Credits 2*, played by the composer himself.

Paul Conway

Han Chen

Photo: Andrew Kung



Praised by *Gramophone* and *The New York Times*, pianist Han Chen released his debut album, *Liszt Complete Piano Music, Vol. 41* on Naxos, which garnered international acclaim. As a soloist, he has performed with numerous orchestras and worked with conductors such as Vladimir Ashkenazy and Nicholas McGegan. As an advocate of new music, Chen has performed a tremendous amount of contemporary works, and has premiered works by composers such as Unsuk Chin, Molly Joyce, Louis Karchin and Reinaldo Moya. Born in Taichung, Taiwan, Chen now resides in Long Island City, New York. After graduating from The Juilliard School and the New England Conservatory, he is currently pursuing his doctorate degree at The Graduate Center, CUNY (City University of New York) under the guidance of Yoheved Kaplinsky and Ursula Oppens.

hanchenpiano.com

Composer, conductor and pianist Thomas Adès has been described by *The New York Times* as ‘among the most accomplished all-round musicians of his generation’. His *Concert Paraphrase on Powder Her Face* reflects the glamour of the opera’s subject in the grand manner of Liszt or Busoni, while *Still Sorrowing* and *Darknesse Visible* explore John Dowland’s haunting lute works. Heard here in its world premiere recording, competition piece *Blanca Variations* is lyrical and flowing in character, and *Traced Overhead* is a vivid description of ascent and flight. Adès captures and transforms Polish style in his *Mazurkas*, and the spirit of Satie and Ravel in a *Souvenir* from the film *Colette*.

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(b. 1971)

	Concert Paraphrase on Powder Her Face (2009)	17:25
1	I. –	5:32
2	II. –	1:26
3	III. –	8:33
4	IV. –	1:54
5	Still Sorrowing, Op. 7 (1992)	11:00
6	Darknesse Visible (1992)	8:03
7	Blanca Variations (2015)*	5:56
	Traced Overhead, Op. 15 (1996)	10:39
8	Sursum	0:44
9	Aetheria	2:28
10	Chori	7:27
	Mazurkas for Piano, Op. 27 (2009)	8:46
11	First Mazurka	1:53
12	Second Mazurka	2:20
13	Third Mazurka	4:33
14	Souvenir (2018)	7:22

*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

Han Chen, Piano

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