



THE DEVIL'S LYRE

PIANO MUSIC OF DAVID HACKBRIDGE JOHNSON

LOWELL LIEBERMANN



STEINWAY & SONS

A man with a surprised expression, wearing a black hat, a grey sweater, and a plaid scarf, stands in a wooded area with autumn foliage. The background shows trees with yellow and orange leaves, and a stream or path is visible on the right. A red banner is overlaid on the left side of the image.

DAVID HACKBRIDGE JOHNSON

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LOWELL LIEBERMANN, PIANO

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDINGS

David Hackbridge Johnson (b. 1963)

- 1 Nocturne No. 1, Op. 166
"Notturmo Spettrale: Hommage à Chopin" 4:19
- 2 Nocturne No. 2, Op. 197 "Notturmo Misterioso:
From an occult notebook" 5:42
- 3 Nocturne No. 3, Op. 230 No. 1 10:37
- 4 Nocturne No. 4, Op. 230 No. 2 3:15
- 5 Nocturne No. 5 in B major, Op. 299 3:15
- 6 Nocturne No. 6, Op. 328 5:33
- 7 Nocturne No. 7, Op. 405 "The Devil's Lyre" 6:09
- 8 Bell-Fanfare, Op. 369 3:39
Barcarolle Elegies, Op. 160
- 9 I. Lento 5:16
- 10 II. Andante con moto 4:01
Calligraphic Poems, Op. 224
- 11 I. Allegretto 2:23
- 12 II. Andante con moto 2:43
- 13 III. Moderato appassionato 3:33
- 14 IV. Allegro 1:45
- 15 V. Lento molto 2:41
- 16 VI. Allegro festivo 3:51

Playing Time: 68:51

The genesis of this recording came about through that now-ubiquitous, quintessentially 21st-century phenomenon known as social media: a composer colleague had one day enthusiastically posted about a new recording of symphonic works by a composer I was unacquainted with named David Hackbridge Johnson. The enthusiasm of my colleague's recommendation and the fact that the opus numbers of these particular works reached well into the 300's piqued my interest and so I ordered the recording. Listening to it, I was immediately taken with Hackbridge Johnson's compositional voice: vigorous, unrepentantly melodic, superbly crafted and orchestrated, and with a refreshing and idiosyncratic harmonic sense. Intrigued and determined to find out more about this composer, I contacted him, and an online friendship ensued. Some months later, David sent me a message saying that he had listened to my first recording for the Steinway & Sons label, *Personal Demons*, and that it had inspired him to write a piano piece which he hoped to send to me shortly. The very next day, the score arrived for his *Nocturne No.7 "The Devil's Lyre," Op. 405*. I eagerly printed the work out, rushed to the piano to try it out, and fell immediately under its spell. I was at that time in the early stages of deciding repertoire for a recording of piano music by living composers, and so I asked David if I could include his Nocturne. He responded that he would be delighted if I did. But then, after reading through the scores of the six previous Nocturnes and some of his other piano works, I changed my plans, and what was initially to be a multi-composer recording became one entirely devoted to his music.

With over four hundred works in his catalogue, one would presume that David Hackbridge Johnson would have little time for anything but composing, and yet his range of activity is nothing short of astonishing. He is a true polymath: not only a composer, but a jazz pianist, drummer, and arranger; a vocalist; an orchestral and solo violinist (both jazz and classical); a published poet; an enthusiastic and prolific blogger; and a dedicated teacher. While the sheer amount of his compositional output is remarkable, its consistent level of imagination makes it extraordinary. Yet, many of these works remain unpublished and

unperformed. It is only since the release of three recordings of his symphonic works on the Toccata Classics label (the only available recordings of his music prior to this one) that Hackbridge Johnson's music has become better known.

His music is difficult to categorize, as it subscribes to no compositional dogmas. It is sometimes tonal, sometimes not; using whatever elements his musical curiosity decides to explore at the moment, and yet always stamped with an individual voice unlike any other. One notable aspect of Hackbridge Johnson's musical output is that, even though he is a jazz musician, there is virtually no jazz influence in his concert music. When I asked him, David responded that he himself was not quite sure why this was: that although there were composers he admired very much – like Kapustin, whose music did incorporate elements from both classical and jazz – it seemed that when he writes in one or the other genres different parts of his brain are activated.

Hackbridge Johnson's immense pianistic output runs to dozens of works, including 19 piano sonatas and an epic 65-minute-long work entitled *Tributes*. In conversation, he modestly dismisses his own abilities as a classical pianist though he at least admits to being a capable jazz pianist. Nonetheless, his piano works show an understanding of pianistic color and effect that begs comparison to the works of the most adept of composer/pianists. I feel that he belongs in the lineage of what I would call the "mystic" tradition of composer/pianists, inspired by Liszt and Chopin and including Busoni, Scriabin, Medtner, Godowsky and from the English branch, Sorabji and Stevenson.

One of Hackbridge Johnson's coloristic trademarks is a penchant for bell sounds, stemming from his enthusiastic exploration of pianistic sonorities. These sounds appear in various guises in nearly every work on this recording, from the deep funeral tolls in *Nocturne No. 1* or *Barcarolle Elegy No. 1*; to the cheerfully chirping temple bells in the fifth movement of the *Calligraphic Poems*; to the clangorous, celebratory peals in the

last piece of that same set. They are the *raison d'être* for an entire piece of their own, *Bell-Fanfare* - a study in sonority and dynamic contrasts; and the inspiration for *Barcarolle-Elegy No. 2* where in its final page, the chiming repeated notes emerge from the watery depths and measuredly ascend, disappearing into the ether.

The death in 2004 of Hackbridge Johnson's first wife Carol Fine had a profound impact on his life and musical output: many of the works written after the 18-month compositional hiatus that followed her death were dedicated to her memory. One is at times reminded of Liszt, of the death-haunted, cryptic late pieces like *La Lugubre Gondola* or *Nuages Gris*, but Hackbridge Johnson's phantasms are more immediate, more human, and for that reason, all the more disturbing. A case in point is *Barcarolle Elegy No.1*, where the musical materials are pared down to a minimum: opening with a shocking fortissimo iteration of a simple chromatic figure, utter rage is contrasted with an eerie numbness - evoking both the senselessness and the banality of death.

Hackbridge Johnson cites Chopin's Nocturnes as a very direct inspiration, but his own Nocturnes traverse a musical landscape that is far removed from Chopin's. There is a tremendous variety between each of these seven works. The first does indeed pay explicit homage to Chopin, with an obsessive ostinato borrowed from Chopin's *Barcarolle* and quotations from three of the Nocturnes (Op. 9 No. 1, Op. 15 No. 3, and Op. 27 No. 2) that float in like distorted, spectral memories. This is a hallucinatory and unsettling work that brings to mind not so much some anodyne romantic fantasy as, perhaps, a nightmarish vision of the death-soaked Venice that can be found in such literary works as *Don't Look Now* or *The Comfort of Strangers*. *Nocturne No. 2 "From an occult notebook"* keeps us in a dark realm, although this darkness seems more metaphysical than earth-bound. Here, there is a kinship with the mysticism of Busoni's *Sonatina Seconda* and *Doktor Faustus*. This work is dedicated to Hackbridge Johnson's close friend, composer Michael Garrett, with whom Hackbridge Johnson admits to sharing a fondness for

literature of the supernatural and weird – writers such as M.R. James, Arthur Machen, and H.P. Lovecraft. By contrast, *Nocturne No. 3* – the longest of the seven – breathes far fresher air, uniting what the composer describes as two lodestones of his style: a lyrical outpouring of melody – perhaps descending from Chopin – with “the idea that it can be elaborated into a quasi-contrapuntal texture as Godowsky does.” The Godowsky influence is fitting here, since the work’s dedicatee, pianist Nicholas Austin, has made a specialty of that composer’s works. *Nocturne No. 4* paints a very human picture of grief: over a simple accompaniment in e minor marked *mesto e lontano* (*sad and distant*), a plangent yet numb melody is spun. It repeats, growing from *più espressivo* to *molto espressivo*, with ever-thickening harmonies which seem to become clotted with the sickness of loss.

Nocturne No. 5 again provides some respite from the darkness: uniquely among these works, Hackbridge Johnson has taken care to indicate a key in its title (that of B major), although the score dispenses with an actual written key signature. Marked *Adagio* and *dolcissimo*, it is salon-music of insouciant simplicity and lush harmonies, conjuring up something of the spirit of Poulenc, yet no one would mistake it for such: Hackbridge Johnson’s harmonies wander off the accustomed path in a manner wholly his own. Of all the Nocturnes, the sixth perhaps best fits a stereotypical idea of what might constitute a “Chopinesque” nocturne, at least outwardly: a lithely ornamented melody leisurely unfolds above a gently rocking accompaniment, with a faster section marked *poco scherzando*. There is little of the angst that pervades many of the other works, though this nocturne, like the others, is not without its pianistic terrors. With *Nocturne No. 7 “The Devil’s Lyre”* we are plunged back into an occult world, one inhabited by a thoroughly modern spirit that might have been nurtured in infancy on such Scriabin late works as the *Black Mass* and *White Mass* Sonatas and carrying with it the faintest perfume of Sorabji’s polyphonic complexities. This work is full of stunning coloristic moments: in

one truly eerie passage, low triadic chords threateningly ascend, marked in the score *festering* and *murky*.

The *Calligraphic Poems* show an entirely different aspect of the composer's personality: his deep appreciation of and fascination with Asian culture. The score of this work bears the following inscription: *These pieces are inspired by the important artists that were celebrated in an exhibition of 20th century Japanese calligraphy held in 1984 at The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., and documented in the exhibition catalogue 'Words in Motion: Modern Japanese Calligraphy'*. Once more, Hackbridge Johnson's use of pianistic color is masterful: from the bustling cross-rhythms of the opening movement to the imitation of a koto in the third, the cryptic chordal pauses in the fourth (which the composer likens to the calligrapher raising his brush for a moment of thought), and the plaintive cries of a crane flying overhead in the fifth. As this suite of pieces - inspired by an art exhibition - concludes with a movement of festive grandeur replete with bells, I dubbed it in my own mind "*The Great Gate of Kyoto*", and I was pleased to learn that such a gate actually did exist. David assures me that there was no such thought in his mind when he wrote the piece, but that he is delighted by the association.

With this recording, the first of any of these piano works, I have merely scratched the surface of David Hackbridge Johnson's immense pianistic output. It is my hope that it will inspire other musicians and listeners to further explore the vast and rewarding trove that is his music.

— Lowell Liebermann

A PIANISTIC JOURNEY

When I was very young and a struggling beginner on the piano, I was lucky enough to hear how the instrument was supposed to be played. My brother Chris used to practice on a grainy Grotrian-Steinweg grand into the late hours, well after I was sent to bed. Various beguiling sounds drifted upstairs - so stimulating that they kept me awake. When the last notes of a Chopin nocturne or a Debussy prelude died away, I composed extensions in my head until some kind of sleep claimed me. Whatever skills I eventually acquired at the piano were largely channeled into an obsession with jazz - for classical music, if we can stand these distinctions, I looked to others with more staying power and who abjured my own tendency to improvise after a few bars of Schubert or Fauré - usually at the point where a technical challenge seemed too irksome to surmount. I did however carve out a piano sonata at the age of 17 whilst hiding in a schoolroom containing a soft-toned Danemann upright - I should have been playing rugby with the rest of the class. Thanks to a sympathetic master, my mysterious absences every Wednesday afternoon were overlooked and by spring my Berg-tinged piece was finished.

I was broadly dissatisfied with the many other piano pieces that followed. A chance to reassess my pianistic ears came through friendships that began in the early 2000s with three fine pianists: Chisato Kusunoki, Nicholas Austin and Jonathan Powell. Through their advocacy a number of short works achieved performance - I had a chance to get a feel for the resonance of the instrument through its sustaining and colouristic qualities, the very aspects I had hitherto avoided due to a fondness for expressionistic surfeit. At this time listening to Chopin became a voyage of rediscovery. I thought I knew his music, but now I heard it afresh as hitherto-missed textures emerged from contrapuntal webs. Medtner and Godowsky became important. With this new slant to my listening, it seemed right to essay the nocturne form - indeed the first of the seven so far written pays

direct homage to Chopin in that there are several quotations from his piano works given a ghostly treatment through the use of pedal effects and reharmonisation. Most of the nocturnes grow out of some Chopin trope or other even if the specifics of the first in the series led to a less overtly Chopinesque approach in the later ones. Until the present recording, none of these nocturnes had previously admitted hands other than my own - with one exception, that being the 3rd Nocturne which was dedicated to Nicholas Austin and recorded privately by him - it is the nocturne where I attempted to layer contrapuntal sonorities in the manner of Godowsky.

When Lowell Liebermann delighted me by his interest in my music, I felt he should be the recipient of a new nocturne. It seemed appropriate that in response to his marvellous recital of the pianistic macabre, *Personal Demons*, I should come up with an eldritch response. A vivid dream provided me with the gift I needed - a landscape of decayed pastoral, impossibly old, amid whose strewn rocks appeared a horned demon. After fixing me disconcertingly with gimlet eyes the creature commenced a broad strumming upon a lyre whose odd tuning I tried to capture on waking. Lowell's acceptance of the dedication of "*The Devil's Lyre*" started our fruitful collaboration.

Bell-Fanfare is an occasional piece written for the 70th birthday of the wonderful Danish pianist, Jørgen Hald Nielsen - he gave the première in 2018 as part of his birthday concert in Copenhagen. I made the piano into a set of bells such as you might find rung by rope or by hand. There are no specific patterns as used in traditional campanology - rather I have created a resonating space for celebratory overtones.

The two *Barcarolle-Elegies* came out of bereavement for my first wife, Carol Fine. The first is by turns violent and distant and finds no solace - none is sought - the second is another bell piece; this time, perhaps, one that sounds the tune of a musical box or rings

the matins. The mood hardly attains respite but enshrines sadness as a part of life that is perpetually lived, ringing on in its lonely chimes.

When I took a master's degree in music education at Trinity College of Music, London, I signed up for all the classes that gave basic instruction in the elements of African and Far-Eastern music. I was particularly taken with Japanese gagaku music and the melodic modes employed therein. This led me to further explorations of Japanese art forms. *Calligraphic Poems* came out of a fascination with Japanese art using brush strokes on silk. The pieces are not musical representations of any particular work of calligraphy, but a way of 'hearing' lines drawn by a brush - the curve of a line as a line of music.

I feel most fortunate to have Lowell Liebermann as the first interpreter of virtually all of these works; his own music - so richly inventive and rich in allusion - bespeaks of a creative spirit after my own heart - one that touches on music of the past as it looks forward, one that sees composing as partly discovery and partly homage. The debt I owe him, and to the composers cited above who continue to cast their spells on me, is great indeed.

— David Hackbridge Johnson

David Hackbridge Johnson

David Hackbridge Johnson was born in Carshalton, England, in 1963. He studied violin with Louis Rutland, piano with Martin Wilson (a Curzon student), singing with Fabian Smith, Arthur Reckless and Mark Wildman, and conducting with George Hurst. After early experience as a theatre violinist, he became a jazz drummer and pianist. Subsequently he combined playing with composing and teaching. Over four decades he has amassed



a body of over 400 hundred works, most of which remain unperformed. A small number of piano works have been performed by Rolf Hind, Chisato Kusunoki, Nicholas Austin, Jonathan Powell, Maiko Mori, and Steven Gutman. In 1997 the Nord Deutsch Rundfunk Chor conducted by Robin Gritton performed *2 Advent Motets* in Hamburg and in the same year cellist Mark Drobinsky with the Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra conducted by Saulius Sondeckis gave three performances in the Grand Salle, Villars of *Aria for Cello and Strings*; a work that was written the day before the first performance as a result of a pub challenge by Drobinsky. This short work was the only orchestral work performed before those appearing on the three volumes of orchestral music recorded by Toccata Classics. Among his work list there are 15 Symphonies, 10 String Quartets, 19 Piano Sonatas, 4 Violin and Piano Sonatas, over 100 hundred songs and many choral works including 2 Masses and a Requiem for choir, 2 Horns and Harp. There are three operas, the second of which, *Madeleine*, was commissioned by Surrey Opera as part of their 50th anniversary celebrations and performed by them under their conductor Jonathan Butcher in 2021. Hackbridge Johnson is also a poet and writer, appearing in this guise in *The Guardian*, *Piano Professional*, *PN Review*, *The High Window*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *Ragged Lion Journal*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *British Music Society News*, and the *Havergal Brian Society Newsletter*. He lives in Tooting, South West London.

Lowell Liebermann

Composer/pianist Lowell Liebermann is the recipient of many awards and honors including the Charles Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Virtuoso Award from Concert Artists Guild, awards from ASCAP and BMI, and a Grammy nomination. He was the first winner of the Van Cliburn Competition's American Composers Invitational, and the inaugural recipient of the Virgil Thomson Award for vocal composition. As one of America's most frequently performed and recorded living



composers, he has written over one hundred thirty works in many genres - several of which have become standard repertoire for their instruments. His works have been performed worldwide by an array of ensembles and instrumentalists, among them the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Beaux Arts Trio, the Emerson Quartet, pianists Yuja Wang and Stephen Hough, and flautist Sir James Galway. Mr. Liebermann has written two full-length operas: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the first American opera commissioned and premiered by l'Opéra de Monte-Carlo; and *Miss Lonelyhearts*, commissioned by the Juilliard School to celebrate its 100th anniversary. The complete score of his ballet *Frankenstein*, co-commissioned by London's Royal Ballet and the San Francisco Ballet, has been released on Reference Recordings with the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra under the baton of Martin West.

Reviewing Mr. Liebermann's debut solo piano album on the Steinway & Sons label, *Personal Demons*, a recital of works by Busoni, Liszt, Kabeláč, Schubert, and himself, *International Piano* magazine said, "This outstanding double album, released to mark Liebermann's 60th birthday, offers an intelligently conceived programme performed with great bravura and interpretative insight." *Whole Note* magazine called it "expertly curated and impressively executed" and *Fanfare* magazine deemed it "all-around excellent playing and a joy to hear." The present recording of music by David Hackbridge Johnson is Liebermann's second album for the Steinway & Sons label.

The Devil's Lyre

Recorded June 6-7, 2021 at Blue Griffin's Studio "The Ballroom", Lansing, Michigan

Producer/Engineer: Sergei Kvitko

Piano Technician: David Kollar

Piano: Steinway Model D # 533611

Executive Producers: Eric Feidner and Jon Feidner

Production Assistant: Renée Oakford

Art Direction: Jackie Fugere

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