



CLEMENTI

The Sprig of Shillelah

Rodolfo Leone, Piano



Muzio Clementi (1752–1832)

The Sprig of Shillelah

Muzio Clementi was born in Rome in 1752, the son of a silversmith. By the age of 13 he had become proficient enough as a musician to be employed as an organist at the Church of San Lorenzo in Damaso and to attract the attention of an English visitor, Peter Beckford, cousin of William Beckford, author of the Gothic novel *Vathek* and builder of the remarkable folly, Fonthill Abbey. Peter Beckford, as he himself claimed, bought Clementi from his father for a period of seven years, during which the boy lived at Beckford's estate in Dorset, perfecting his ability as a keyboard player, and, presumably, his general education. In 1774 Clementi moved to London, where he began to take part in professional concert life as a composer and performer, playing his own sonatas, some of which were published at this time, and directing performances from the keyboard at the Italian opera.

Clementi's success as a performer persuaded him to travel. In 1780 he played for Queen Marie Antoinette in France and early in 1782 performed for her brother, the Emperor Joseph II, in Vienna. Mozart met Clementi in January, when they were both summoned to play for the Emperor. Mozart had a poor opinion of Clementi's musical taste, expression and feeling, but grudgingly admitted his technical ability in right-hand playing of passages in thirds, otherwise dismissing him as a 'mere *mechanicus*'. It should be added that Mozart was often disparaging about the abilities of his contemporaries, as he was of Clementi on a later occasion. In a letter to his father in June 1783 he describes Clementi as a *ciarlatano* ('charlatan'), 'like all Italians', accusing him of marking movements as *Presto* or *Prestissimo*, but actually playing them *Allegro*. Clementi was more generous in his assessment of Mozart, and as a publisher was later of service to Beethoven, who had a high regard for Clementi as a composer.

In 1785 Clementi returned to England, winning a reputation for himself there as a performer and teacher, although as a composer he was eclipsed in the 1790s by the presence in London of Haydn. It was in these years that he involved himself in piano manufacture and music publishing in London, first with Longman & Broderip and from 1798, after the firm's bankruptcy, with Longman, and others. In the earlier years of the 19th century he travelled abroad in the interests of the business, accompanied at first by his pupil John Field, who served as a demonstrator of Clementi's wares and later left a somewhat prejudiced account of his experiences after he parted company with Clementi in Russia.

From 1810 Clementi was again in England, where he was much respected, not least for his teaching compositions, his *Introduction to the Art of Playing the Piano Forte* of 1801, revised in 1826, and the famous *Gradus ad Parnassum*, completed and published in the latter year. He retired from business in 1830, settling first in Lichfield and then in Evesham, where he died in 1832, to be buried in Westminster Abbey. His legacy to pianists was a significant one. Through his compositions and his teaching, he introduced a new virtuosity and explored the possibilities of a newly developed instrument in a society that had changed greatly since his own childhood in Italy. Born four years before Mozart, he outlived Beethoven by four years.

Clementi's *Variations on The Sprig of Shillelah* is the 18th piece in a group of 18 works without opus number and is dated 1823–24. In 1777 Clementi had written a set of 21 variations on a theme of some contemporary notoriety, *The Black Joke*. Reflected in Hogarth's *Rake's Progress*, the song proceeds to list a series of clients of a woman of easy virtue, each with interest in 'Her black joke and belly so white.' Clementi acknowledges his identity as the composer by his initials only. The piece was revised 47 years later with a suggestion of soberer allusion. For this Clementi chose to suggest a song with a text by Edward Lysaght:

O love is the soul of a neat Irishman,
He loves all the lovely, loves all that he can,
With his Sprig of Shilale and Shamrock so green.
His heart in good humour, 'tis honest and found,
No malice or hatred is there to be found,
He courts and he marries, he drinks and he fights,
'Tis love all for love for in that he delights,
With his Sprig of Shilale and Shamrock so green.

Who has e'er had the luck to see Denny-brock fair,
An Irishman all in his glory is there,
With his Sprig of Shilale and Shamrock so green.
With clothes spic and spán new without e're a spec,
A neat Barcelona tied round his neat neck,
He goes to a tent and he spends half a Crown,
He meets with his friend and for love knocks him down
With his Sprig of Shilale and Shamrock so green.

At evening returning as homeward he goes,
His heart soft with whisky his head soft with blows,
From a Sprig of Shilale and Shamrock so green.
He meets with his Shila who blushing a smile,
Cries get you gone Pat yet consents all the while,
To a Priest soon they go, and nine months after that
A fine baby cries how d'ye do father Pat,
With your Sprig of Shilale and Shamrock so green.

Bless the country says I, that gave Patrick his birth,
Bless the land of the oak and its neighbouring earth.
Where grows the Sprig of Shilale and Shamrock so green.
May the sons of the Thames the Tweed and the Shannon,
Drub the foes who dare plant in our confines a cannon
United and happy and loyalty shine,
May the Rose and the Thistle long flourish and twine
Round the Sprig of Shilale and Shamrock so green.

The words now will hardly bring a blush to a maiden's cheek.

Keith Anderson

Rodolfo Leone

Photo: Silvano Bacciardi



One of the most insightful pianists of his generation, Italian-born pianist Rodolfo Leone was the First Prize winner of the 2017 International Beethoven Piano Competition Vienna. Described as 'a true sound philosopher' (*Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*), Leone released his debut all-Beethoven album on the Austrian label Gramola in May 2018. He has performed under the baton of conductors such as James Conlon, Michael Francis, Sascha Goetzl, Xian Zhang and Stéphane Denève; and at concert venues including the Musikverein in Vienna, Steinway Hall in London, the music hall of the NCPA in Beijing, the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genoa, and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. An avid chamber musician, he has collaborated with musicians such as Lynn Harrell, Clive Greensmith, Demarre McGill, Oliver Herbert and the Viano String Quartet. Leone is based in Los Angeles where he holds a faculty position at the Colburn Music Academy. He previously studied with Fabio Bidini at the Colburn School of Music, where he was awarded a Master of Music degree and an Artist Diploma. He is a recipient of the Amron-Sutherland Fund for Young Pianists.

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Clementi's influence on pianists has proved enduring, whether through his compositions, books of instruction, or the introduction of new levels of virtuosity on the pianoforte. The variations on *The Sprig of Shillelah* from 1777 is based on the notorious English traditional song *The Black Joke*. Clementi revised the piece 47 years later with the suggestion that it should accompany a text by Edward Lysaght with less salacious subject matter. This digital single complements *Piano Jewels* (8.574233), an album of world premiere recordings of Clementi's piano music.

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1 **The Sprig of Shillelah** (pub. c. 1823–24) **15:58**

WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

Rodolfo Leone, Piano

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