



THE PLEASURE-DOME OF KUBLA KHAN

Piano Works of Charles Tomlinson Griffes

Solungga Fang-Tzu Liu, piano

Charles Tomlinson Griffes (1884-1920) was born in Elmira, a large town in central New York State. He grew up a happy child with access to important music teachers at an early age. At Elmira College, he studied piano with Mary Selena Broughton (born in New Zealand but raised in England) who became his lifelong mentor and patron. She made possible his education in Berlin, not only by securing his family's permission, but also by subsidizing most of his studies. (A meticulous Griffes would pay this sum back over several years.)

Four years in Germany (August 1903-July 1907) proved momentous, musically, culturally and personally. The abiding influence of his lover, Emil Joël, and his own inherent curiosity perhaps contributed even more to his musical growth than his actual studies, although he wrote admiringly of the teachers at the two conservatories he attended. He had several composition and piano teachers during his four years, ending with brief but inspiring studies with Engelbert Humperdink, who took him on for free.

Feeling the need to become a bit of a provider, he returned to the States to work as 'Director of Music' at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, NY, a prep school for sons of the wealthy. Griffes had a love-hate relationship with this job. While it gave him modest financial security, it drained him with its mediocrity. In fact, his students only studied piano on the side. Yet Hackley gave him a quiet place to compose, a good circle of friends, and easy access to New York City, where he was constantly seen attending concerts and promoting his music. All of these efforts eventually paid off. 1919 saw the premieres of the *Poem for Flute and Orchestra* in New York, the orchestral version of the *Roman Sketches* by Stokowski and the Philadelphia

Orchestra, and *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan* reworked for Pierre Monteux and the Boston Symphony. This last work, performed in Boston, and at Carnegie Hall in New York, was his most resounding public and critical success. Griffes died within 5 months of the premiere.

His was a short, vigorous life. At a time where much of the musical landscape was dominated by foreigners and their meek American imitators, Griffes followed his own artistic convictions and created music of great force and integrity. He incorporated many ideas of contemporary European music – tonal ambiguity, bitonality, non-Western scales, and more open forms – but remained very distinctive and diverse in his expression. In addition, he was drawn to literary and visual sources of inspiration. Although texts were sometimes added after pieces were composed, they complemented music that was highly evocative.

While his short life span didn't allow him to leave a significant body of work in each genre, he wrote vocal, chamber, and orchestral music, and music for dance and theater. Solo piano music, however, spanned his entire compositional career and was where he developed and concretized many ideas.

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The Opus 5 **Three Tone-Pictures** were Griffes's first publications in his inimitable personal style. Begun as early as 1910, it took a highly enthusiastic letter by Ferruccio Busoni in 1915 to convince G. Schirmer to publish these works.

Evoking a sense of restless stillness, *The Lake at Evening*

sets a lyrical melodic line in triple meter against a pulsating two-beat pedal point. While the melody remains in the upper and middle registers, Griffes creates a feeling of spaciousness by extending the repeated notes from deep into the bass to the highest reaches of the piano. Although the line from a Yeats poem and the title were added years after he composed it, the epigraph: "for always, I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore..." is fitting.

In *The Vale of Dreams* a pulsing chord sets the stage for the entrance of a chromatically inflected whole tone melody. The melody's tonal ambiguity and angular intervals reflect Griffes's new language. Unsettled, it resounds continuously throughout the piece, transformed over ever-changing accompanimental figures.

More tumultuous, *The Night Winds* concludes the set with whirling Debussy-like figures and a melody in major thirds recalling *The Vale of Dreams*. Characteristically restrained like much of Griffes's music, the winds die down into dark E-flat minor chords. Griffes achieves this masterfully with a subtle disintegration of energy.

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Less tonally ambiguous than the groundbreaking Opus 5 set; the **Fantasy Pieces**, Opus 6 (written in 1912, 1915, and 1913 respectively with texts added just before publication in 1915), nevertheless, display brilliant piano writing and more expansive movements.

For the *Barcarolle*, Griffes introduces a rocking 6/8 theme (as befits a barcarolle) and a falling second theme soon thereafter. Varied, fragmented and transformed, these two

themes form the basis of the musical material. They return vibrantly in reverse order at the end. The running, wave-like arpeggios hinted at in the beginning of the piece delineate major sections and conclude the work.

A dreamy, sensuous contrast to the two outer pieces, this *Notturmo* begins quietly – "murmuring" Griffes indicates – in a cloudy whole tone world. It features elements of the French and Russian avant-garde of the time (Debussy and Stravinsky) in its parallel chords, highly inflected chromaticisms, and sudden shifts to distant keys as in the final E - A flat passage that concludes the work. As in all the movements of Opuses 5, 6 and 7, the structure is fluid, but the opening theme always returns to balance out the form.

The *Scherzo* is a rather rollicking piece for Griffes, reminiscent of a *danse macabre*. Essentially an A-B-A form, a truncated return of the opening section launches into a coda that brings back the more sustained theme of the middle section. It closes with bravura statements of the opening melody.

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Even though the **Sonata** (1917-1918, rev. 1919) is divided into three continuous movements – an almost chant-like, meditative second movement surrounded by two angular, impassioned ones, Griffes thought of it essentially as a one-movement work. This can be easily understood. The opening and closing movements are connected harmonically, metrically (both are in compound time 12/8 and 6/8), and temperamentally (both are muscular and edgy) and the agitated character of the first and third movements perturbs the quietude of the second movement in its contrasting middle section and in the transi-

tion to the third movement. This foreshadowing of the third movement undermines any sense of finality in the second. Furthermore – and this is a truly imaginative coup, music from the second movement, as if unresolved, suddenly materializes out of the agitation of the third.

For this sonata, Griffes derived his melodic and harmonic vocabulary from a non-tonal scale in which semitones and augmented seconds predominate, (something that probably evolved out of his use of Asian scales and open harmonies in several sets of songs and the ballet *Sho-jo* and his awareness of concurrent European practices). The work, however, concludes with a final D major tonality.

Griffes's tripartite construction allows for great contrast and drama and brings to mind, albeit on a larger scale, the structure of the *Barcarolle* and *Scherzo* – energetic, dramatic outer sections matched by calmer more sustained inner sections. While the first movement follows sonata form – two themes are introduced one after another, developed consecutively and restated in the recapitulation, the second and third movements are far freer. Their open-ended form brings to mind many of the character pieces. Although the Sonata is not explicitly programmatic, it is hard not to hear the modal chants of the second movement as harkening back to passages from *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan*.

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Perhaps the most fully realized of his character pieces, the *Roman Sketches*, Opus 7 (1915-1916), display a widely imaginative musical palette, inventive juxtapositions of themes into highly personal forms and a sublime sense of pacing and expression. Contrary to the other sets, these

works were linked to their texts from the outset, yielding even greater programmatic associations than in pieces written earlier. The music itself speaks with such clarity and conviction, however, that the program never becomes a scaffold on which to affix musical ideas.

The White Peacock is composed of four central ideas: a haunting opening figure reheard only in the closing bars, a playful descending line, the strutting dotted figure that is perhaps the most purely 'thematic' and a lyrical, "languid" theme accompanied by rolling arpeggios. The way Griffes combines these ideas and plays them off one another is enchanting.

Beginning and ending in obscurity, *Nightfall* rises slowly out of dissonant darkness into an impassioned sensuousness that provides the central climax of the movement. Griffes balances bitonal dissonances with moments of tonal clarity expertly, creating a beautiful emotional swell.

The Fountain of the Acqua Paola, like many of the set, reveals a rich harmonic landscape. Griffes constructs several different themes into an elegant fluid design connected by rippling accompaniments. While some themes never return, the overall form – swelling in the middle and falling back to the sumptuous opening idea – suggests a wave.

Clouds, like its cousin Debussy's *Nuages*, is spacious, slow and replete with planar chords. The introduction of his much-loved rolling arpeggios and more impassioned melodies brings the movement to a certain pitch, but this dies back down to a detached calm. Pungent dissonances

accent the final moments. *Clouds* is a reflective close to a work of great subtlety and force.

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The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan has two rather different versions. The first is the piano work (1912, rev. 1915) represented on this recording, which Griffes revised for many years. The second is a re-conception of this work for orchestra (1916-1917), whose performances by Pierre Monteux and the Boston Symphony Orchestra launched Griffes's wide public recognition just before his untimely death. The piano version is a highly evocative work that opens with a low bass ostinato over which parallel chords are layered. A distinct melody eventually emerges, but gives way to moments of quieter sensuality and dance-like passages. The majestic reappearance of the opening melody heralds the work's end. Fragments of the opening bass line eventually predominate, closing the work mysteriously. *The Pleasure-Dome of Kubla Khan* is a fitting conclusion to this recording since it brings about a full circle. The 13th century writings of Marco Polo about the Mongol Emperor Kubla Khan led in the late 18th century to the Coleridge poem that inspired Griffes's composition in the 20th. How meaningful that a pianist of Mongolian heritage, Solungga Fang-Tzu Liu, reinterprets this work for the early 21st century.

– Gregory Mertl



Photo by Craig Caplinger

With a wide-ranging repertoire, pianist **Solungga Fang-Tzu Liu** has enjoyed an active career as a solo and chamber music artist in Asia and North America. A dedicated performer of new music, she has recorded the music of Steve Reich with Alarm Will Sound, and Robert Morris's *Meandering River*, a work that is dedicated to her. Ms. Liu also has numerous premieres to her credit, including Gregory Mertl's *Piano*

Concerto, which was commissioned by the Barlow Endowment for her and the University of Minnesota Symphonic Wind Ensemble.

Ms. Liu's most recent appearances include Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 3*, a concert with Paul Merkelo, Principal Trumpet of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, and recitals at Taiwan's National Concert Hall, the Goethe Center in Bangkok, Thailand, and on tour with Open Gate, culminating at Carnegie Hall. She has performed Ravel's *Piano Concerto* with the Taipei Metropolitan Orchestra, Lutoslawski's *Piano Concerto* with Ossia, and Schumann's *Piano Quintet* at the Music Mountain Chamber Music Festival.

Born in Taipei, Taiwan, Ms. Liu has been Assistant Professor of Piano at Bowling Green State University since September 2008. She holds a doctoral degree in piano performance from the Eastman School of Music and has given master classes in China, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, Canada and the US. In July 2011 she will join the faculty of the Atlantic Music Festival in Waterville, Maine.

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Solungga Fang-Tzu Liu

Three Tone Poems, Op. 5 (1910-12)	(9:52)
1 I The Lake at Evening	3:52
2 II The Vale of Dreams	3:31
3 III The Night Winds	2:28
Fantasy Pieces, Op. 6 (1912-15)	(19:25)
4 I Barcarolle	7:12
5 II Notturmo	7:23
6 III Scherzo	4:48
Sonata (1917-18, revised 1919)	(15:17)
7 I Feroce- Allegretto con moto- Tranquillamente	6:20
8 II Molto tranquillo	4:01
9 III Allegro vivace	4:55
Roman Sketches, Op. 7 (1915-16)	(21:04)
10 I The White Peacock	5:34
11 II Nightfall	7:05
12 III The Fountain of the Acqua Paola	3:39
13 IV Clouds	4:44
14 The Pleasure -Dome of Kubla Khan (1912-15)	9:39

Total Time: 75:18



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