
CONVIVIUM RECORDS
JOHN WHITE
ADVENTURES AT THE KEYBOARD
THE EARLY SONATAS | 2 DISC
JONATHAN POWELL | PIANO

I write a lot for piano for two main reasons: Being a pianist allows me to be in touch with a rich and exciting repertoire, which gives me a great variety of role models in terms of vocabulary and gesture with which to formulate and 'clothe' the ideas which come to me and seem to need expression. Being an idealistic rather than a 'career' composer, I find the piano a handy vehicle for the uttering ('outering') of compositional thought, in that the inspiration goes directly into a performable medium without the salesmanship required for getting ensemble pieces played.

John White, in conversation with Sarah Walker.
The New English Keyboard School: A Second 'Golden Age'
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JOHN WHITE

ADVENTURES AT THE KEYBOARD

Born in Berlin in 1936, John White studied piano with Arthur Alexander and Eric Harrison, and composition with Bernard Stevens at the Royal College of Music.

Since that time, he has been continually active as a composer, performer and teacher, with a career involving varied activities including composing and directing music for the theatre and ballet, taking part in concerts of experimental music and in electronic ensembles, heading the music department at the Drama Centre, London, and performing as a solo pianist and accompanist.

His vast compositional output includes 3 operas, 26 symphonies (none for traditional orchestra), 29 ballets or 'dance-works,' a number of large-scale works involving brass, 'the longest work ever written for cello and tuba,' 173 piano sonatas and hundreds of pieces for ensembles he has initiated. These have included the Promenade Theatre Orchestra, Hobbs-White Duo, Garden Furniture Music Ensemble, Farewell Symphony Orchestra, Nordic Reverie Trio, Instant Dismissal Symphony Orchestra, Lower Edmonton Latin Lovers' Choral Society and Live Batts, in which unusual, even bizarre combinations of instruments and, or other sound sources have often featured. In the 1960s and 1970s he was closely associated with English experimental composers and invented the early British form of minimalism known as 'systems music.'

As a performer he has also played bass trombone with the Royal Ballet Touring Orchestra, tuba in the London Gabrieli Brass Ensemble and has toured widely as a piano recitalist specialising in late Romantic music in addition to his own and, in particular, that of Erik Satie. His activities in the world of theatre music have included composing the scores for the Royal Shakespeare Company productions of The Merry Wives of Windsor and Les Enfants du Paradis, many productions for the Royal National Theatre and various regional theatres as well as musical direction of the Western Theatre Ballet and numerous musicals in London's West End.

John has held a succession of teaching posts at the Royal College of Music, the Royal Academy of Music, the Yehudi Menuhin School, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Leicester Polytechnic (now De Montfort University) and the Drama Centre, London as well as fulfilling visiting lectureships in various foreign institutions and conducting workshops with CoMA (Contemporary music-making for amateurs) who have commissioned two works for large ensemble.

THE EARLY SONATAS
JONATHAN POWELL | PIANO

Jonathan Powell is a pianist and composer based in London. Over recent years he has played in international festivals such as Helsinki Musica Nova, Festival Radio France et Montpellier, Raritaeten des Klaviermusik (Husum, Germany), Festival Space (Bratislava), Reggello (Italy), Eisler Mensch und Massen (Vienna), Setkávání nové hudby Plus (Brno) and Levocskie Babieleto (Slovakia) among others.

His numerous appearances in Russia include solo concerts in the Moscow Conservatoire, Gnesins' Academy of Music, Sheremetyev Palace and the Rimsky-Korsakov Museum (St Petersburg). Forthcoming concerts take him to Kiev (for Field and Chopin concertos) and Lithuania (the Ciurlionis museum-house).

Jonathan has made typeset editions of more than 50 of John White's sonatas and has given first performances of many, several of which were written for him. He has played White's music in Russia, Ukraine, Slovakia and the Czech Republic as well as in many venues in the UK.

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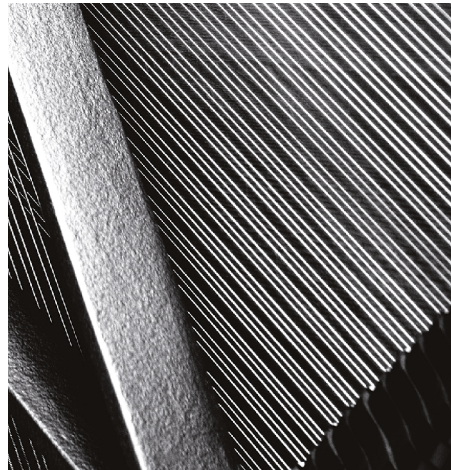

If any composer from the last 100 years can be said to have redefined the piano sonata, that composer is John White. A unique figure in British music, his vast compositional output documents a long involvement with the worlds of dance, theatre, experimentalism and electronica as well as with that of the concert hall.

His 173 piano sonatas cover a fifty-five-year period from *No. 1* (1956) to the present day and since *No. 21*, have tended to be single movement works of a few minutes duration.

In contrast to other areas of his output, they can be regarded as 'semi-private' pieces – entries in a diary rather than public statements perhaps. If in later years they became more linked with the example of Scarlatti, White's early approach to the sonata was to seek alternatives to, or subversions of, the multi-movement genre with all its structural implications before abandoning the principle altogether. And to find ways of musical continuity without reliance on most of the traditional, particularly developmental formal devices whilst employing a musical vocabulary which, on the surface, often seemed familiar. Nevertheless, beneath the surface is a world of subversion, steeped in historical reference and this has tended to be present in most of the sonatas (apart from those of 1969), whatever the date of composition. Within these notes there are extensive quotations from White's own comments on individual sonatas and it will be immediately apparent that whereas most other composers are anxious to cover their traces, White encourages us to make connections with other music for reasons which have little to do with conventional "influence" and nothing to do with pastiche or a retrogressive artistic stance.

Back in 1971, Brian Dennis suggested that "Even as late as 1968, a critic with eccentric tastes might have discovered in John White's music a unique regression, a kind of anti-development. The numerous piano sonatas (thirty-six at the time) would have revealed a gradual withdrawal from the world of accepted innovation.

"Gloomy bass lines, deadpan harmonies would have replaced the richness of early works... White's thinking was, and still remains essentially lateral; which is to say that it is concerned not with direct linear development (historical or personal) but with ideas quite beyond technique." Even so, the same critic would probably not have anticipated an apparent sudden shift to the severe, dissonant constructivism of *Sonatas 37-52*, nor an equally sudden return to the tonality-orientated narrative writing of most of the sonatas since *No. 53* (April 1972 onwards).

It would be fair to conclude that working with Cornelius Cardew provided the catalyst not only for 'experimental' works from the mid-1960s and beyond, but also for a more radical reassessment initiated by *Sonatas 53-90*, most of which appeared in 1973. Almost all of these are brief works – "an immediate communication in which there's minimal development of the situation" – in which the composer was both distancing himself from the notion of composition as 'private research' and applying the experience of working in theatrical productions.

But it is with the earlier sonatas that these recordings are concerned. These works are far less well-known than the later sonatas: indeed, only about half of the *Sonatas Nos 1-36* had been publicly performed before 2000 and many of those only once or twice. Apart from the composer, the only pianist to perform these with any regularity was the late Ian Lake. In recent years it is thanks largely to the efforts of Jonathan Powell that these earlier sonatas have started to receive the attention they deserve.

A performance of Messiaen's *Turangalîla-Symphonie* energised White's compositional ambitions and the rampant octatonicism, jagged rhythms and resolute anti-development of his earliest acknowledged compositions, which include the first two sonatas, offer ample evidence of this. Despite the obvious indebtedness to Messiaen, there is also much which is indicative of a more independent approach, certainly in the *Second Sonata* (1957). The first performance, given by the dedicatee Irene Kohler in 1960, resulted in a interesting comment by an anonymous Times reviewer:

"The 2nd section, called *Bell Music*, was probably the generating idea for what is – for all its harmonic audacity – a romantic sonata, its romanticism being of the kind called Gothick with a k."

And by the time of the *Fourth Sonata* (1959) the traces of Messiaen have been extinguished. Written for and dedicated to Colin Kingsley "who gave the composer his first break by playing the *Sonata No. 1* worldwide," there is a wide spread of mainly 19th century musical styles and although it could be described as being in four continuous movements, the overall perception is subverted by "its episodic structure [which] is informed by both the

composer's and Kingsley's work as accompanists for classical ballet. In Tchaikovsky's ballet scores the element of divertissement is an important feature: various seemingly unrelated sections of music follow each other with the intention of best demonstrating the abilities of the dancers. Thus, after the initial barcarolle-type material, a procession of smaller tableaux is wound up before the reprise of the opening material."

No. 7 (1960) is a considerably smaller-scale work in two movements, "the first inspired by certain obsessive aspects of Schumann (*Kreisleriana, First Piano Sonata* et al.) and the second looking to Janácek's use of ostinati and dangerous mood-swings."

Completed in the same month was *No. 9* which "presents a bleak landscape, fleetingly illuminated by shafts of pale Sibelian sunlight," elements of contradiction being accentuated by an apparently deliberate and purposeful rambling, its seven-minute duration seeming brief and suddenly terminated.

More sonatas appeared in rapid succession and astonishingly, *Nos 11-14* were all completed within the space of a single week in the summer of 1960. *No. 11*, dedicated to David Rowland, is in four brief movements, "the first a torrid nocturne under the influence of Scriabin and the jazz pianist/arranger Claire Fischer, the second an interrupted tarantella, the third a Schumannesque intermezzo, and the fourth a slow march informed by Medtner and Alkan finished off with a deliberately flippant coda."

Unusually, the equally terse *No. 12* and *No. 13* were conceived as a pair – "to be played either separately, together or loudly" according to the score. The first is straightforward and focussed and the second diffuse and obscure, not perhaps a curious pairing considering that the dedicatee, Martin Ball (a fellow composition student at the Royal College of Music), is "another enthusiast for eccentric aspects of musical composition."

However, one of the most impressive of these early sonatas, *No. 14*, is anything but brief, its intriguing single movement running for some twenty-two minutes. Dedicated to Malcolm Binns, its structure was inspired by the mosaic procedures of Satie's Rosicrucian period and the composer mentions Messiaen, Szymanowski and Busoni for its harmonic and melodic gestures.

Rather more noticeable is the wide range of pianistic colour and striking registral contrasts as well as more familiar types of feature such as a particularly wild and repetitive syncopation no doubt purloined from the finale of Schumann's *First Sonata*. That work also cast its shadow over the first movement of *No. 18* which, like *No. 9*, is dedicated to Peter Norris. The bewildering variety of material on display within the three movements of this (and the occasional earlier) sonata may suggest that the composer's polite opposition to prevailing musical fashions resulted at times in the adoption of a deliberately bizarre, apparently discontinuous approach.

Yet *No.19*, dedicated to Lubna Chadirchi, is an accessible and less troubled utterance "revealing interest in Alkan's *Esquisses* and Busoni's *Sixth Sonatina*."

The subsequent sonatas seem less equivocal and more certain of their stance. So *No. 20* (1963) "represents a rejection of what I considered to be a rather neurasthenic tendency in the avant-garde music of the 1950s. It goes through its pace with Brucknerian certitude," White later adding that it "illicited disapproval amongst the composer's avant-garde friends of the time for its shameless harmonic stability. This sonata was first performed by its dedicatee Roger Smalley, a firm protagonist of the so-called Darmstadt school."

The element of 'Brucknerian certitude' is a further addition to the increasingly stubborn tendencies of the mid-1960s sonatas and *No. 23* (1965), dedicated to the Australian pianist Gwenneth Prior, refers in particular to Bruckner's *Scherzi*. At about 11 minutes, this is the longest sonata since *No. 14* and – more than any other of the time – seems to anticipate much later examples of the genre by dint of its considerably brighter and more resonant character.

The dour *No. 24* (1965), dedicated to Niel Immelmann, is perhaps more period-typical, described as "a determinedly anti-romantic statement in which the virtues of long-distance running are represented in a favourable light."

Completed 10 days later was the quite different *No. 25*, a work of palpable irony "propelled by steady crotchet chords and decorated with syncopated melodic gestures reflecting a certain wry amusement at the neo-Elizabethan style affected by some of my friends and colleagues at the Royal College of Music during the 1960s."

No. 28 (1966) "is a brief little toccata referring on the one hand to Rachmaninoff's transcription of Bach's violin *Prelude in E* (from the *Third Suite*) and, on the other, to Satie's *Embryons desséchés*." More recently, the composer wrote that it was "suggested by a particular type of Russian allegro, such as found in Medtner (the *Sonata op. 22 No. 1* in G minor) and Rachmaninov (the *Etude-tableau op. 39 No.*

6)." Asked which description was correct, he replied "Both!"

No. 30, written a few days later, is a barcarolle which somehow manages to be both gloomy and sprightly.

Nearly a year elapsed before the appearance of *No. 31* which was once mentioned as being 'in ballade form,' thus allowing the wide-ranging, though mostly lyrical narrative to unfold in its own way, without recourse to a preconceived structure.

By contrast, *No. 34* (also 1967) is described as "a sonata allegro treatment of a theme with a stark medieval character underpinned by a throbbing quasi-bass guitar line, and a more flowing subject group with the closing pages of Busoni's *Carmen* fantasy *Sonatina No. 6* in mind. The piece's coda is a quietly undulating Prokofievian berceuse."

Composers such as Alkan, Bruckner, Busoni, Janacek, Satie and Schumann have featured prominently in these notes, above all with reference to elements of obsession, contradiction and, by extension, subversion.

Dave Smith

In an interview with the writer Virginia Anderson conducted back in 1983, White spoke enthusiastically about some of these figures in ways which illuminate some of the features of his own music.

"Schumann... will produce quite a flat passage of music that owes its development to a certain degree of obsession and will definitely not do some things that another composer with equivalent skill would have done... Some pieces of mine that apparently make use of Romantic gestures but don't say what Romantic music says owe this sort of flatness of terrain through an interest in what is obsessive. Obsession needn't necessarily be about something that's evil, mind-blowing or wonderful, but it could be about something nearer to home."

"Satie's a great representative of the quality of independence. He will give one things which either are very graceful or very thorny with an absolute lack of worry about what people will think. Also this quality of obsession... a nice figure to bracket with Schumann!"

"One of the reasons that I'm still absolutely riveted by the music [of Busoni] as though I'd never heard it before, and have been since the age of eighteen when I first discovered him, is because of this quality of internal contradiction that he lives with in a very natural kind of way... Busoni experiences what seems to me to be great contradictions at quite a sort of emotional level and defines them with great clarity, and yet these contradictions are about issues that I'd really hesitate to define.

"[It's] a music very rich in background. That appeals to me enormously, the work of a composer whose vocabulary isn't just about a chord that he's discovered or about a sort of rhythmic formula that he's discovered. It's a music that harks back to Monteverdi, that harks sideways to Wagner, that harks into the middle-previous distance to Alkan, Liszt. I mean there are so many references and they're so integrated and so subtly worked. I admire him very much as a sort of compositional man of the world."

[With Alkan] again [like Busoni] there are enormous contradictions, there's the very attractive exterior of the music which is about the King of Instruments, the grand piano. But what he's saying with the music is full of contradictions. There's a quality of the demonic in Alkan that I relate to very strongly. It's a quality in common with Rachmaninov, that apart from the sensually very wonderful, very attractive appearance of the music there are these streaks of alien light... "

With Thanks To:
Virginia Anderson – excerpts from John White's interview (7/3/83) John White in 'English Experimental Music: Cornelius Cardew and his contemporaries' (1983)

Brian Dennis – The Music of John White – Musical Times MT 1539 May 1971 (http://www.jstor.org/pss/955946);

Dave Smith – The Piano Sonatas of John White – Contact 21 Autumn 1980. Republished JEMS (Journal of Experimental Music Studies - http://www.users.wait-rose.com/~chobbs/smithwhite.html);

Sarah E. Walker – The New English Keyboard School; a Second "Golden Age" – Leonardo Music Journal, Vol 11, 2001 (http://www.jstor.org/pss/1513422);

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