



CONTIVIVUM
RECORDS

JOHN WHITE
PIANO
SONATAS

JONATHAN POWELL
PIANO

VOLUME II
LATER SONATAS

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 ('outring') 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' Leonardo Music Journal Vol. 11 2001**

LATER SONATAS *Piano Sonatas Volume II*

If any composer from the last hundred 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 180 piano sonatas cover a more or less continuous period from *No.1* (1956) to the present day, but with gaps, and no less than thirty-four date from 1973.

An overall view would inevitably attempt to divide them into groups, successfully to a degree, although this is less easy in recent years as they have become more varied and relatively sporadic. More often than not, they have been composed without either request or any specific performance in mind, as is indicated in his introduction (left). As such, 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.

White's own notes and comments on his sonatas have often encouraged the listener to make connections with other music for reasons beyond what musicologists would regard as conventional 'influence'. Any list of those connections would be necessarily wide, but composers (unsurprisingly, mostly pianist-composers) who feature prominently would certainly include those referred to in a programme-note from 1974: Alkan, Schumann, Busoni, Satie, Reger, Scriabin, Medtner and Bruckner. Some would regard this list as a curious mixture ranging from the conservative to the experimental. Other 'friends' of long standing would include Poulenc, Fauré, Godowsky, Liszt, Frank Martin, Rachmaninoff, Sorabji and Szymanowski – an apparently disparate collection of composers from the world of 'alternative' music history. White

has pointed to various common denominators: an economic and concentrated way of viewing musical material, but also;

'a practically physical predilection for a particular kind of sound and the extension and development of that sound.'

Subversion and contradiction, especially through the unfamiliar use of apparently traditional language and procedures, are features of those such as Alkan, Busoni and Satie who, in turn, inform his own music.

The earlier sonatas (up to No. 22) include several substantial multi-movement works, but since the mid-1960s they have tended to be single movements of a few minutes duration. 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. Back in 1971, the composer Brian Dennis suggested that these sonatas

'revealed a gradual withdrawal from the world of accepted innovation... 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.'

In recent years, it is largely thanks to the efforts of the pianist and composer Jonathan Powell that many have been edited, performed and recorded, most notably on a double CD for Convivium Records*

The constructivist sonatas Nos. 37–52 (mainly from 1969) explore a quite different direction. Most are slow, dissonantly atonal works, bereft of the type of historical reference and narrative elements that are present, and many are based closely on material from the (potentially) enormously

long *Cello and Tuba Machine* of 1968, written for performance with Cornelius Cardew. The period of collaboration with Cardew provided the catalyst not only for 'experimental' works such as these from the mid-1960s onwards, but also—less obviously—for the more radical assessment initiated by the sonatas that immediately followed.

Sonatas Nos. 53 to 90 (all composed between April 1972 and November 1973) represent a return to creating tonality-orientated narrative compositions. These are brief works displaying a fresh approach (*'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. The last three of the set (and the relatively few in the years immediately following) are less brief, allowing more *'development of the situation if not an actual argument.'*

The sonatas on the present recording date from 1980 to 2008. The earliest of these, Nos. 105, 106 and 107, are aesthetically similar to Nos. 88–90.

Those from No. 116 onwards are less exclusive and on occasion fit less comfortably with the notion of what is conventionally expected of a concert work. In other words, the composer's approach has diversified to the extent that, since 1987, one can have had few preconceptions about a new John White sonata beyond a probable duration of a few minutes and a safe bet that there will be surprises in store. By this time, for the composer they became more linked with the example of Scarlatti *'from whom comes the idea of numerous one-movement pieces, and all called "sonatas."*

A parallel could also be said to exist across the centuries in that Scarlatti and White sonatas refer (with gentle irony) to the styles and instrumentation of popular music: Scarlatti with his mistuned guitars and hunting horns, White with his sidelong glances at the wonderful world of 'Friday Night is Music Night.' †

The variety of style and approach is most clearly exemplified by sonatas Nos. 127–138 (six of which feature on this CD). These cover a period of four years and include the five from *Les Enfants*

du Paradis, three very different birthday tributes (one lasting about 40 seconds) and a 23-minute barcarolle (no. 135), the longest sonata since 1969.

Some of these later sonatas have appeared in small groups (Nos. 99-106, 155-160), perhaps in preparation for a particular concert or celebration (Nos. 111-115, 146-152). Many others have emerged in response to individual requests or have been recycled from incidental music, most notably the five from Simon Callow's adaptation of *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Nos. 127-130, 136), produced at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1996. Amongst the sonatas on this CD are two (Nos. 107 and 139) recalling the composer's ballet class playing days, and one (No. 120), his introduction to electronica. Three (Nos. 123, 138 and 146) are dedicated to his wife. Some on this CD were written for other pianists (e.g., Nos. 132 and 147) and no less than three are dedicated to Jonathan Powell, the pianist on this recording.

—Dave Smith



COMPOSER

John White



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,

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.

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.

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 70s, he was closely associated with English experimental composers and invented the 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 scored for the Royal Shakespeare Company productions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Les Enfants du Paradis*, many products 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.

PIANIST

Jonathan Powell

Having concentrated on composition during the 1990s, Jonathan Powell established an international career as a soloist having studied with Sulamita Aronovsky and Denis Matthews. Over the last decade, solo recitals taken him to the Rachmaninoff Hall of the MGK, on a six-concert US tour, to Musica Sacra in Maastricht, the series Fundación BBVA in Bilbao, Musica Nova in Helsinki, two solo recitals at the Festival Radio France Montpellier, Borealis Festival in Bergen, the Raritäten der Klaviermusik am Schloss vor Husum, Vredenburg Muziekcentrum in Utrecht, and the Jewish Museum and Altes Rathaus in Vienna.

His recent concerto appearances include Brahms' *Piano Concerto No.2* (Slovak Philharmonic), Liszt's *Malédiction* (in Kiev), Finnissy's *Piano Concerto No.2* (Moscow) and Sørensen's *Piano Concerto No.2* (with the Prague Philharmonia), Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No.3* and Chopin's *Piano Concerto No.2* (provincial Ukraine). In recent years, he has broadcast for Radio France, Radio Netherlands, Radio Deutschland Kultur, the

BBC and Czech Radio. He is a passionate advocate of music from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, especially from Russia and eastern Europe, but is also a proponent of contemporary music, having premiered works by Hugues Dufourt, Claudio Ambrosini, Michael Finnissy and others. His repertoire also includes many of the staples of the 19th century (Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Schumann etc). In 2009 he gave the first of many performances of the cycle of Scriabin's *10 sonatas* in single concerts. During 2013 he toured Messiaen's *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* and Albeniz' *Iberia*, while in 2015 he gave numerous performances of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata* and Reger's *Bach Variations*.

Recent activities include a European tour featuring the complete piano works of Xenakis and, in 2017, Liszt's *Sonata*, Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke* and several performances of Sorabji's *Opus clavicembalisticum*. In 2018 he gave six performances of Shostakovich's *24 Preludes and Fugues*. He is a featured artist at the

Jacqueline du Pré hall in Oxford, giving three annual concerts, as well as teaching and leading workshops for students. He has also appeared at the Indian Summer in Levoča Festival (Slovakia) every year since its inception in 2007, as recitalist, chamber musician, and soloist with orchestra. The first three months of the 2019—20 season will see him perform in the Netherlands, Slovakia, Ukraine, Paris, UK, Gdańsk, Prague, and the Elbphilharmonie in Hamburg.

Masterclasses, lecture-recitals and coaching have recently taken Powell to the Janáček Academy (Brno), Oxford University, the Guildhall School and Music and Drama (London), the Royal Academy of Music (London), Akademie für Tonkunst (Darmstadt), Cornish College of Arts (Seattle), and Det Jyske Musikkonserverium (Denmark). His articles on many aspects of Russian music appear in the New Grove Dictionary of Music. His compositions have been performed by the Arditti Quartet, the London Sinfonietta and Nicolas Hodges. He lives in southern Poland.





Many of the following comments on individual sonatas are adapted from brief programme notes supplied by White over the years, together with the dates of completion

PROGRAMME NOTES

On This Record

Sonata No. 105—26.12.80

Comments obliquely but with enthusiasm on Busoni's *Piano Concerto* and certain moments in the work of George Gershwin. Beginning as a dark tarantella, the piece progresses onwards and upwards into exultant peals of bells and a stomping, dancing finale.

Sonata No. 106—28.12.80

The world of the waltz: grossly rollicking in the low register at first, fluently fairy-like in the middle, its high register retained for the return of the opening chorale at the end.

Sonata No. 107—10.6.81

A piece in the style of a classical ballet 'adage': focused, but with unexpected turnings and twists of fantasy.

Sonata No. 120—4.1.91

Dedicated to Jamie Crofts, this dates from White's early acquaintance with electronic music, in particular his attraction to the rhythmic inflexibility of the "step-time" sequencer.

Sonata No. 123—27/12/92

Written as a kind of musical greeting card to the composer's wife, featuring a strangely rapid reference to the opening of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No.4*.

Sonata No. 127—9/4/97 'On themes from Les enfants du paradis'

Dedicated to Richard Murphy, this refers to two romantic moments from the incidental music from Simon Callow's adaptation of *Les enfants du paradis* for the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Sonata No. 131—16/6/96

An exercise in simultaneous 3's and 4's written for Michael Finnis's 50th birthday concert.

Sonata no. 132—23.6.97

Dedicated to Michael Hyatt, this sonata muses on some introvert aspects of the playing of the jazz pianist Bill Evans.

Sonata no. 133—13.8.97 'Gosh, Howard!'

A vigorous low register piece (duration c.40 seconds) composed for Howard Skempton's 50th birthday.

Sonata no. 136 from 1995/7

Dedicated to Dave Smith, this started out life as a music cue from *Les enfants du paradis* and as a piano duet entitled Scherzo (the street of many murders). Ancestry in the opening section of Busoni's *Carmen Fantasy*.

Sonata No. 138—29.4.00

Dedicated to Margaret Coldiron a concert rondo incorporating contrasting themes from music written for her production of Moliere's *Les fourberies de Scapin*. This involves a musical depiction of an animated village square, two pairs of dreamy and naïve lovers, a pair of grumpy old men and, finally, Scapin himself, a wily but likeable rogue.

Sonata No. 139—27.1.03

A modest waltz tribute to Tchaikovsky that includes para-quotes from the 'Valse des fleurs' from *Casse-Noisette* and the 'Rose Adagio' from *Sleeping Beauty*.

Sonata No. 146—18.11.05

Dedicated to Margaret Coldiron, this offers alternative, often exuberant, thoughts on motifs from the once popular song *Whispering*.

Sonata No. 147—21.12.05

Dedicated to the pianist Mary Dullea, an exploration of alternative intervals that show up in a repetitive phrase structure punctuated by emphatically athletic sideshows.

Sonata No. 152—28.1.06

A miniature concerto for piano solo dedicated to Jonathan Powell, whose magisterial playing has shed a bright light on some pulverisingly complex piano works from the early 20th century repertoire.

Sonata No. 153—1.8.06

Originating as a music cue for a theatre adaptation of Chekhov's short story *The Lady with the Lap Dog*. It paints an evocation of an idyllic Russian holiday resort enlivened by the unfolding of secretive, short-lived amorous encounters.

Sonata No. 156—26.8.07 'Chorale with moving bass'

Dedicated to Jonathan Powell, who, the composer felt, needed more boogie in his life. Built on motifs from pieces for two miniature electronic keyboards composed nine years

ago on the shores of Placid Lake, Montana.

Sonata No. 164—12.4.08

Dedicated to Jonathan Powell, this is a romantic take on a 3 against 4 cross-rhythm, light at first but otherwise shifting effortlessly between the subtly mysterious and darkly brooding.

With Thanks

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

Brian Dennis for excerpts from 'The Music of John White', Musical Times MT 1539 May 1971 (<http://www.jstor.org/pss/955946>)

Dave Smith for excerpts from 'The Piano Sonatas of John White', Contact 21 Autumn 1980. Republished JEMS (Journal of Experimental Music Studies – <http://www.users.waitrose.com/~chobbs/smithwhite.html>)

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

Footnotes

* **Adventures at the Keyboard** (piano sonatas nos. 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 28, 30, 31 and 34), Jonathan Powell, Convivium Records CR 006 (2011), 2 CDs.

[†] JW – programme note for a concert at the British Music Information Centre, London, 7.9.1999.



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Produced by John White and Jonathan Powell. Recording and Engineering by Adaq Khan. Programme Notes by Dave Smith, Jonathan Powell and John White. Artist Photography by Malcolm Crowthers, Salv Scarpa Photography, and Keith Page. Creative Directed by John Bevan. Executive Produced for Convivium Records by Adrian Green. Recorded at Jacqueline du Pre Hall, Oxford

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