

 YARLUNG RECORDS  
BOB ATTIYEH, PRODUCER

# THE POWER OF THE KEYBOARD

Nathan Ben-Yehuda

Astral Mixtape

Randy Bellous, executive producer



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1	Sonata in G Major, Hob. XVI, 40	Joseph Haydn	11:33
2	Gaspard de la nuit	Maurice Ravel	24:51
3	Rudepoêma	Heitor Villa-Lobos	19:20
4	Variations, Op. 24	Oliver Knussen	7:11
5	Nocturnal	Peter Sculthorpe	7:33
6	Goddess Gardens	Astral Mixtape	6:30
7	Seven Hellos	Astral Mixtape	7:20



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## PRODUCER'S NOTES

My friend **Gary Hollander** introduced us to **Nathan Ben-Yehuda**. Gary served on the Yarlung Artists board of directors for several years, and he and his wife Marcia loved our mission and supported some of our most important early projects, including our recordings with Finnish violinist Petteri Iivonen. Gary called and told me I should pay close attention to Nathan Ben-Yehuda, a piano virtuoso in his twenties. Nathan grew up in Southern California, but attended the Royal Academy of Music in London before earning his Master's at Juilliard. Nathan's performance in Belgium's Queen Elizabeth Competition in 2021 impressed me. Among the works he performed for the jury, Nathan chose Oliver Knussen's *Variations* Op. 24 for piano, which Knussen wrote for Peter Serkin. Indeed it was Peter who introduced Nathan to the work when Nathan was Peter's student at Bard. I paid special attention because Nathan transformed a fairly hard-edged work, one that in the wrong hands could sound dated at this point in the 21st Century, into a lyrical masterpiece. Rather than waiting eagerly for something more listener-friendly on Nathan's program, I followed each phrase of these variations with rapt attention. I realized that if Nathan could interpret a work like this with unique power and magic, just about anything he played would transport me as a listener. I hope you agree. Nathan and I spoke shortly after Nathan's return from Brussels.



Nathan pursues a fulltime solo concert career but also plays with **Astral Mixtape**, an innovative crossover quartet writing new works and reimagining classics from Monteverdi to Rimsky-Korsakov, and playing with ideas and thematic material from Sigur Ros to Radiohead and Four Tet. Nathan plays piano and synthesizer, Misha Vayman performs on violin and computers, Michael Siess plays violin, and Juan-Salvador Carrasco performs on the cello. Misha and Michael have both studied with Yarlung Special Advisor and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra concertmaster Margaret Batjer. Juan-Salvador studied with my friend Ralph Kirshbaum at the Thornton School at USC and plays often with LACO where he also serves as an orchestra fellow. So it turned out we had musical connections with all four members of the quartet. After Astral Mixtape came to play for Aaron Egigian and me at Segerstrom Center, we invited the quartet to join us for Nathan's recording sessions and share their wonderful sound and creativity with the Yarlung community. We end this album with two tracks by Astral Mixtape. Track 6 offers *Goddess Gardens*, including intoxicating "mixtape" snippets from *Scheherazade* and Vaughan Williams' *Lark Ascending*, as well as more recent fare. *Seven Hellos* closes the album on track 7, an original composition by the four members of the quartet. Astral Mixtape is clearly close to Nathan's heart:

"I am part of this wonderful band of fellow classical musicians who are seeking to reimagine the conventional roles of our instruments, and applying non-classical approaches to arrangement and composition in our works. Astral Mixtape is the collaborative project most personal to me, and I'm so glad to be able to share our music as part of this record."

Before we get to Astral Mixtape, however, Nathan's solo piano repertoire makes a powerful statement. Not only can Nathan handle the thorny Knussen *Variations*, but he plays Haydn beautifully, and he recorded my favorite performances to date of both Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit* and Villa-Lobos' *Rudepoêma*. Nathan kindly agreed to play *Gaspard* for this project, but also Peter Sculthorpe's *Nocturnal*, a work I have long wanted to record at Yarlung in honor of my father, who fell in love with this work many years ago after hearing it on Joel Fan's debut album *World Keys* from Reference Recordings.

We dedicate this album to my friend Jim Hannon, senior writer at *The Absolute Sound*. Jim published this critically important audio magazine for many years until his retirement from this position in 2022. When we told Jim about this dedication he said he was extremely moved. He has been a stalwart supporter of Yarlung's for our first fifteen years, particularly our projects celebrating solo classical piano, new music and jazz. Jim played the piano himself in his earlier life, including annual concerts at Carnegie Hall while a student in New York City. Hannon received the Lincoln Center Student award for piano when he was 17 years old. I am glad Jim continues to write for *TAS*, and we thank him for his dedication to Yarlung and to the wider music world for all of these years.

I'm delighted to report that Yarlung Records has dedicated its new release, *The Power of the Keyboard*, to my dear friend and colleague Jim Hannon. *TAS* readers will already know that, until he retired, Jim was the highly successful Publisher of *The Absolute Sound*. What readers may not know is that Jim also was and is an extremely gifted musician, who, in his youth, trained professionally as a concert pianist and as a vocalist (he was a longtime featured soloist with the San Francisco Orchestra chorus). In honoring him, Yarlung has paid kind and fitting tribute to a wonderful man, who quite literally lives his life for music. Thank you, Yarlung, for this homage.

—Jonathan Valin, Executive Editor *The Absolute Sound*

When I told Yarlung executive producer Randy Bellous that Nathan would be recording some of my favorite repertoire on the planet, he offered to help. Randy and his wonderful wife Linda have underwritten some of Yarlung's most successful releases over the years, and we are incredibly grateful to them for their dedication, generosity and inspiration to keep raising the bar.





Fellow recording engineer and equipment designer **Arian Jansen** and I used SonoruS Holographic Imaging technology in the analog domain to refine the stereo image, Yarlung's SonoruS ATR12 to record analog tape, the Merging Technologies HAPI to record 256fs DSD in stereo and surround sound and the SonoruS ADC to record PCM. We used our friend **Ted Ancona's** AKG C24 microphone previously owned by Frank Sinatra, and vacuum tube microphone amplification by Yarlung executive producer and designer **Elliot Midwood**. I asked Nathan to share his thoughts on his repertoire. I hope you enjoy this album as much as I do.

—Bob Attiyeh, producer

## THOUGHTS ON THE MUSIC

Nathan Ben-Yehuda

The works on this record have played a powerful role in my growth as a musician. Many of these pieces changed how I thought about music and shaped who I am as a pianist. I am grateful to be able to share my inner world with you through this recording. These pieces take inspiration from similar sources, and these composers often drew energy from each other's creative output.

I understand Maurice Ravel's veneration of Joseph Haydn when I play Haydn's Sonata in G Major, Hob XVI:40, where Haydn's simple, elongated melodies provide rich material for variation and ornamentation. Ravel channels Haydn's exquisite eight bar melody at the opening of his *Allegretto Innocente* in Ravel's opening mystical, aquatic melody in *Ondine* from *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Even as you can hear water rippling and undulating with increasing vigor, this opening song finds its way into every new texture in the piece; the water nymph's impassioned sorcery emanates from this power. But just as there is tragedy in Aloysius Bertrand's telling of *Ondine*, where the man she loves prefers the affections of a mortal, there is an encroaching darkness in Haydn's sonata as well: short, interruptive motifs in the parallel minor key which appear between variations, looming clouds which threaten to ruin a lovely afternoon. Fortunately the charm of the movement is not ultimately disturbed, and just as *Ondine* brushes away her grief, giggling and disappearing in a torrent, Haydn's *Allegretto Innocente* movement ends with brash and good natured humor.

Haydn's humor becomes almost slapstick in the brief *Presto* second movement. I was lucky to hear Paul Lewis perform this piece at Tanglewood, and I was thrilled with how he managed to use this sonata as a finale to his program, inciting laughs and elation in the audience even while he was playing. I told him afterward how much I enjoyed that piece particularly, and he said something to the effect of "Oh yes, it's some real Tom and Jerry stuff!" This piece represents essential Haydn for me: the composer successfully portrays naive exuberance with eloquent means.

In *Gaspard's* third movement, *Scarbo*, Ravel reveals this same compositional skill. I see our little goblin as terrifying, but playful, perhaps unaware of just how sinister he can be to those he torments. His scuttling about in the dark, his demonic whispers and fearsome transformations are just games for him. When I play *Gaspard*, I try to keep the lighter side of these games in mind, up to the moment when the horror is so great it envelops the music completely.

While Ravel sought to illustrate poetry through music in *Gaspard de la Nuit*, Heitor Villa-Lobos' *Rudepoêma* is a mammoth poem in itself. Inspired by his friendship with Arthur Rubinstein, Villa-Lobos intended the work to be an intimate portrait of the pianist's temperament. The brutality in this work can be especially shocking to people familiar with the nobility and elegance of Rubinstein's recordings; indeed *Rudepoêma* demonstrates a raw, often violent character. I must have listened to a recording of this work over a thousand times when I was nine years old. I remember how drawn I was to *Rudepoêma's* wildly innovative harmonies. And even at that age, before I had enough keyboard technique to actually play this piece, I spent many hours improvising on the piano trying desperately to capture and reflect *Rudepoêma's* massive sonorities. It was not too much of a good thing, apparently, since this plangency still fills me with intense excitement when I play the piece now. When you listen to our recording, please focus on the lush harmonies underlying fragments of Brazilian folk tunes, the influence of Jazz in the rhythmic language, and the fascinatingly orchestral texture in the piano writing, not just the

piece's violent exterior. Rather than "savage" as the title might suggest, I see this piece as wild, unbridled modernism with no limits; a true masterpiece of 20th Century piano literature.

Oliver Knussen's Op. 24 *Variations* maintains a similar personal significance to me. When I was an undergraduate at the Royal Academy of Music in London, I played the piano part in Knussen's chamber symphony work *Two Organa* with the composer conducting. I had such limited experience with orchestra playing at the time and Knussen's incisive ear could and did pick out the tiniest discrepancies. I was completely intimidated. Even while Knussen was relentless in ensuring we lived up to his standards as much as possible, he was patient with me, and encouraging. In practicing these variations, I always imagine what the composer would say if he heard it: Knussen would want a particular counterpoint to come out just so, for a chord voicing to be carefully balanced to make the theme clear. In other words, the kind of care one must take with a variation by Haydn or Beethoven.

In this piece I hear the influence of so many of my favorite composers, particularly Toru Takemitsu, Anton Webern, Igor Stravinsky and Aaron Copland, and certainly Maurice Ravel. Knussen dedicated the piece to Peter Serkin, with whom I studied at Bard College after earning my graduate degree at Juilliard. When I play Knussen's *Variations*, I always try to capture the vast contrast and dynamism that Peter inspired and encouraged in my playing.



Darkness plays an important role in the solo piano works on this album, darkness in sound, in mood, or in references to text. Peter Sculthorpe offers a particularly unusual and magical take on darkness, as his *Nocturnal* captures spaciousness and darkness while conjuring a fervent growing energy, building ever stronger as the piece progresses, like a primordial or mythical animal awakening under the bright stars of the southern hemisphere. I love *Nocturnal's* contrast with Ravel's middle movement, *Le gibet*, depicting a person hanging dead on a gallows in the middle of the desert. In contrast with *Nocturnal*, *Le gibet* is intended to be pale, listless and lifeless, hopeless and full of despair. Bob told me he particularly liked the evolving tension in my version of this movement, but I tried to remember the perpetual squeaking of the gallows, as a body sways with a morbidly steady rhythm. Whereas I love the persistent bass drum in *Nocturnal*, a sound emerging from deep inside the earth as the vast Australian outback awakens to the night.

—Nathan Ben-Yehuda

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*Breaking the Sound Barrier*

Nathan Ben-Yehuda  
Astral Mixtape

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