

Four Hands: Music for Two Pianists

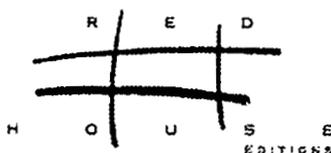
Duos Ser. 3. Footscray: Red House Editions, 1997

ISBN 0 646 23580 X, pp. 68 AUD\$34

Four Hands is the third book in Red House Editions *Duos Series*, which presents Australian works with music from other countries. This volume has works by Australian composers Elena Kats-Chernin, Ross Hazeldine and Chris Dench together with four works by composers based in the Netherlands. All works require four hands at either one or two pianos and each is preceded by performance and biographical notes. There is plenty of contrast between the seven works in this volume, with a wide range of skills required of the pianists.

Reductions I, II and V (1983) by Elena Kats-Chernin is one of the older works in the volume. The first piece is frenetic and short with whole-tone scales clashing between the pianos at the interval of a semitone. Dynamic contrasts between *ppp* and *fff* provide plenty of drama and cross-rhythms between the pianos create a fleeting pointillistic texture built on thirds. The second piece explores the interval of the major third from C to E. Rapidly pulsing chromatic clusters, over this interval, high in the treble are the foundation for aggressive foreground attacks. The unfilled-in interval, C-E, makes fleeting appearances and dominates at the end, this time in the bass register. Fast tempo and the high tessitura create an urgent mood and the use of arpeggiation and of the sustaining pedal create timbral interest in the pulsing cluster texture. *Reductions V* explores the interval of the minor 7th/major 2nd by rapidly disassembling a chord note by note, by super-exaggerated phrasing gestures and by a motoric semiquaver texture which starts to break up and reduce towards the end. These are strong pieces which create an austere sound-world far removed from the lush nostalgia of Kats-Chernin's *Russian Rag*, currently doing the rounds as a set work in one Melbourne music school. They demonstrate the composer's fertile but strongly controlled creativity and provide a rewarding challenge for a duo piano team. Red House's presentation is vastly superior to the facsimile of the composer's manuscript available from the Australian Music Centre, though the manuscript does contain *Reductions III and IV* from the original set. Nos I, II and V are the most strongly delineated pieces from the original set of five so their choice for this edition is judicious.

tema (1996) by American-born music-box fan Ron Ford, who moved to Amsterdam in 1983, is, on paper, one of the most approachable pieces in the volume. In performance it makes a bold statement with hammered single notes in unison between both pianos. The tempo is fast, the phrases irregular in length, each with an accented high point. At one point the work feints towards the hypnotic effect of minimalist music, but I found the jagged energy of the piece to be slightly reminiscent of that great study in unison and octave writing 'Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes' from Messiaen's *Quatuor pour le Fin du Temps*. There is effective use of silence and driving repeated chords, as well as a sudden change of pulse to break up the texture. *tema* will not be to everyone's taste, some may find it banal, but it is a good starting point for less experienced players who delve into this volume. It would also make a good coupling with Richard Ayres' *Private Collection* (1996), a musical deconstruction of Satie's *Trois Morceaux en Forme de Poire* which explores the cusp between sound and silence, in the tradition of John Cage. Fragments from the Satie pieces are worked between the two pianos, each fragment held in the pedal till the sound has ceased. It would be a hard piece to bring off in concert for a conventional audience because it relies on the gestural energy of each fragment to sustain the long silences. Cage fans, however, will revel in this. Robust kicks to the sustaining pedal which resonate the whole piano add to the theatre of the piece and may give the pianists some extra enjoyment especially if their instruments are substandard.



Australian Piano Miniatures

42 Australian pieces for solo piano **

Four Hands

Australian & Dutch scores for 2 pianists

Piano Plus One

Australian & Korean duets for piano and another instrument

The Gifford Collection

Piano works of Helen Gifford

Guitar Plus One

Australian & German duets for guitar with another instrument

Australian Guitar Miniatures

30 Australian pieces for solo & duet guitars

Cello

Australian works for solo cello **

Reeds

Flexible woodwind scores for duet to large ensemble (Australian)

Micros (UPCOMING 1999 RELEASE)

String quartets from Australia & Norway

** These books also available packaged with commercially released compact disks.

RED HOUSE EDITIONS

BOX 2123 FOOTSCRAY VIC 3011 AUSTRALIA

CATALOG & ORDERS FAX +61 3 96877785

<http://www.redhouse.com.au>

EUROPEAN DISTRIBUTOR: UNITED MUSIC PUBLISHERS (UMP)

The score of *Tom & Jerry, Number Made Audible* (1996) by Paul Panhuysen will have traditional pianists running a mile when they see stemless black note heads swarming like locusts over eight pages without a break! It could also be the footprints of the cartoon characters Tom and Jerry, on speed and with very muddy shoes, or a computer readout tape from an early Star Trek episode! In actual fact the Tom and Jerry of the title are friends of the composer and the score looks mathematical because it is derived from a Fibonacci sequence, which the composer intends to be audible in the pitch sequence and pitch density. It looks silly but it sounds fantastic, once the difficulties of constant 3 against 4 against 5 are overcome. The result is cascading waves of sound which the performers will want to shape with dynamics. It's a little like some of the stochastic music of Xenakis. It may be easier to program a couple of MIDI Diskklaviers rather than rehearse it, especially as the composer demands exact pitch precision, but some judicious cutting and pasting of the score once the four staves are allocated between the two players, and a modest tempo will make it less intimidating. This would be lots of fun to play, though I would hate to be the pageturner.

Fun is also the best description for Louis Andriessens' *Ittrospezione* (1961). Performed as a piano duet with two players at one instrument, the two players swap seating positions about halfway through. The beginning, middle and end are conventionally notated. In between the score goes graphic, moving from pitch- and rhythm-specific fragments and phrases to outrageous black blobs and some suggestive curly squiggles. The graphic elements suggest different pathways through the material so the interaction between the two players at the one piano is of great interest. Beware! Some tangles may occur! Most of the material is notated deterministically but putting it together and deciding what to do with the blobs and squiggles is great fun and will stretch the performers' imagination and creativity.

Ross Hazeldine's *Soft Tissue* (1997) is an unusual and cunningly conceived approach to the timbral limitations of duo piano music. Two lines of the work are to be played on the piano keyboard/s and the other two lines indicate complete damping, inside the piano, of particular strings with the flesh of the finger. These damped staves quote a love song from 1606. They become audible (as damped piano timbre within and behind the normal piano sound) only when they coincide with notes from the normal keyboard playing, which form melismatic lines entwined around the skeletal outline of the song. As the piece progresses the damped song is brought more to the foreground and sounds closer to its notated rhythm. It's rather like trying to catch a glimpse of something through the slats of a bridge from a speeding car. The melismatic lines sent me scurrying to my score of Berio's *Linea* for two pianos and percussion for comparisons but *Soft Tissue* presents different problems for the players and has quite a different feel. Co-ordinating the cross-rhythms is quite tricky and the melismatic lines should not sound too agitated. A number of options for realisation of the score, ranging from one piano/three players to two pianos/four players, give the players flexibility in finding the best way to proceed.

Chris Dench's *rushes* (*Pas Seul 3*) is actually a Pas de Deux. Composed 1979–80 for Michael Finnissy, it has been revised and transcribed in 1996 for piano duet or two pianos. This is one for those who seek to emulate Finnissy's amazing pianistic keyboard sense and hand/eye coordination or for those who sightread Richard Meale's *Coruscations* in a spare quarter hour before lunch and are looking for further challenges. Unfortunately it has been necessary to reduce the composer's manuscript in size to fit on the page. It is now too small to read, which makes it doubly intimidating! Unless you have amazing vision or a friend who wants to practise their music typesetting skills on the computer, an expanded photocopy will be needed (and for that you will need permission of the publisher; see the note inside the cover). The "rushes" are virtuoso flourishes up and down the keyboard usually in single notes but developing into chords. Through my magnifying glass it all looks terribly exciting, but whenever I sat down to

practise one of the rushes I became annoyed because the notes were too small to read. Co-ordination between the two pianists is difficult. The composer has spelt out some of the leger line notes which is a great help but I would like to see a lot more of this. The footnoted clarification of some of the chords should really not be required but with such tiny-sized notes they are it is a necessary evil. *rushes* is an uncompromisingly complex and difficult work which provides a great challenge. It would be stunning to play it as a piano duet. Till my eyesight improves I'll have to leave it to Michael Finnissy.

The binding and the sturdy cover of *Four Hands*, graced with the image of four disembodied floating hands, should stand up to the stresses of rehearsal, performance and travel. The paper quality is good and, with the exception of the note size in *rushes* and some ghosting on the contents page of one of the review copies, the print is clear and easy to read. Some editorial fingering in the works such as the *Reductions*, *Soft Tissue* and *rushes* would be welcome, and there is no biographical note for Chris Dench.

Red House Editions is to be congratulated for the publication of *Four Hands*, which makes a welcome addition to RedHouse's already impressive catalogue of contemporary music. Two-piano music is often perceived as timbrally limited and colouristically constrained, but by selecting works of such stylistic diversity the publishers show this need not be so. This smorgasbord of contemporary music styles is a must-have for piano duo teams who want to stretch their comfort zone. Bon Appétit!

ROBERT CHAMBERLAIN

Helen Gifford, *The Gifford Collection: Piano Music*

Footscray, Vic.: Red House Editions, 1997

ISBN 0 646 33751 3, pp.56, fwd AUD\$34

In recent years there has been quite a revival in attention given to Australian piano music through performances and compilation recordings of Australian piano works by artists such as Michael Kieran Harvey, Lisa Moore, Roger Smalley, Jeanelle Carrigan and others. There have also been a number of anthologies of piano music scores. But a publication such as this collection of piano works by one Australian composer is relatively rare and thus should be especially welcomed.

The Red House Editions volume consists of the complete solo piano works of Helen Gifford, *Piano Sonata* (1960), *Catalysis* (1963), *Three Pieces* (1966) and *Toccata Attacco* (1990). As a bonus *A Plaint for Lost Worlds*, a small ensemble piece involving piano, is included. Inside the front cover is a statement that the volume has been compiled in 'close association with the composer' and that the publisher 'would like to thank Zoe Sweett and Helen Gifford for their generous assistance.' There is, however, no indication of who the editor of the collection is. Certainly Zoe Sweett, who has written the Foreword, is not given this credit.

In many ways it is an odd package. The bulk of the volume is made up of works composed early in Gifford's career. The one recent solo piece is in wild contrast to these earlier works. Furthermore, it seems eccentric if not inappropriate in a volume of solo piano pieces to include a piece for piano, piccolo and clarinet. The reason given in Sweett's Foreword for its inclusion is that it is more in keeping with Gifford's investigation of timbre and extended techniques, and thus more representative of the composer's work. If this is the case then maybe Red