MARCO POLO

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# William Sterndale BENNETT

## Piano Works Vol. 3

### 30 Preludes and Lessons • Capriccio
### 3 Romances • 3 Impromptus

Ilona Prunyi, Piano

# William Sterndale Bennett (1816 - 1875)

## Piano Works Vol. 3

"I think him the most promising young musician I know," Mendelssohn wrote in 1836 and added with intriguing prescience, "... I am convinced that if he does not become a very great musician, it is not God's will, but his own." A few months later in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* Schumann declared that if there were many more artists like Bennett, the future of music would be secure. The first edition of *Grove's Dictionary* in 1878 called Bennett the only English composer since Purcell who achieved individuality and produced works that could be considered classics. *The New Grove Dictionary* of 1980 still characterizes him as "the most distinguished English composer of the Romantic school". Why, then, has his music virtually disappeared from the repertoire? Mendelssohn's words echo in our thoughts, and we look to Bennett's life and career for answers.

Bennett was born to a musical family in Sheffield on 13 April 1816. He was named after William Sterndale, a poet and family friend whose verses were set in six songs the year before by Robert Bennett, the composer's father. Orphaned in 1819, young William and his two sisters went to live with their paternal grandparents. John Bennett enrolled his eight year old grandson as a chorister at King's College, Cambridge. The boy was soon pronounced a prodigy and sent to the newly founded Royal Academy of Music in London before his tenth birthday. Because of his beautiful voice, he was chosen to sing at St. Paul's Cathedral.

By the summer of 1831 the piano had replaced the violin as Bennett's principal study. Soon he gained a fine reputation for his brilliant, exciting playing. When Cipriani Potter succeeded William Crotch as his composition teacher in 1832, Bennett made rapid strides. By November of that year he had completed his piano concerto in D minor and had played it at a public concert in Cambridge. The concerto showed astonishing mastery, and the Royal Academy published it at its own expense. Bennett was invited to Windsor Castle to play it for the king and queen, and he performed it again in London in the spring of 1833. Mendelssohn was present at that concert and invited Bennett to visit Germany, not as a pupil but as a friend.

In the three years before that visit took place, Bennett kept up a correspondence with Mendelssohn, continued at the Academy and composed five symphonies, two more piano concertos and the overture *Parisina.* During this time he developed the delicate, placidly beautiful manner that distinguishes his shorter piano pieces. At a Philharmonic Society concert in 1835 he performed his second piano concerto in E-flat major, and its pianistic style leaves no doubt why he came to be regarded as one of the finest pianists in Europe.

In May 1836 he made his first trip to Germany, where he saw Mendelssohn in Düsseldorf. The following October he began an eight-month visit to the continent. Mendelssohn introduced him to Leipzig's musical élite, and soon Bennett and Schumann became fast friends. Schumann's extravagant praise of his new friend in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* brought accusations that he was playing the role of musical prophet. In fact, the twenty-year-old Bennett was then at the height of his powers, and after another three years his flame would never again burn so brightly. In January 1837 his third piano concerto in C minor met with universal acclaim at the Gewandhaus, and his reputation was established abroad. In the winter of 1838-39 he journeyed again to Leipzig and played his masterpiece, the fourth concerto in F minor.

Between the second and third visits to Germany Bennett had begun a teaching career at the Royal Academy of Music, and he resumed his duties there after the second triumph in Leipzig. It was then that, as one observer put it, the "stultifying influence" of academic life caused the onset of his decline as a composer. He supplemented his income by editing classical piano sonatas for publication and had little time left for performing or composing. After a fourth and final visit to the continent in 1842, he assumed the directorship of the Philharmonic Society and organized an annual series of chamber music concerts. Marriage in 1844 and the necessity of supporting a family led him to take on increased academic burdens. In 1849 he founded the Bach Society. As the undisputed leader of the English academic musical world from 1856 onward, he continued to gather honours and responsibilities: as conductor of the Philharmonic from 1856-66, professor of music at Cambridge from 1856 and principal of the Royal Academy of Music from

1866. He was granted a knighthood in 1871. He continued teaching, composing and performing occasionally until his death in London on 1 February 1875.

Of all Bennett's compositions the piano concertos reign supreme. They are acknowledged as among the finest embodiments of the classical spirit between the concertos of Beethoven and those of Brahms. The works for solo piano reveal Bennett as a "pianist's musician", who realized the instrument's natural potential. He used the keyboard's percussive quality to create fabric of nuanced tone colour, and he intended his personal harmonic language less for the public than for the connoisseur. Ferdinand Hiller found Bennett's playing technically perfect, extraordinarily nuanced, yet filled with soul and fire. Except for a few didactic pieces, the writing lies beyond the abilities of all but the truly accomplished pianist.

The *Präludien und Studien für Pianoforte componirt zum Gebrauch am Queen's College London,* thankfully, are not an assemblage of academic pieces. The students for whom they are ostensibly intended are advanced, and the cycle amounts to a musical smörgåsbord, setting out various technical challenges as a delectable feast. There are 30 paired preludes and etudes, some only a few bars long, which manage to cover all the keys and a number of stylistic and technical issues. Several of the etudes are outstanding, and two in particular (No. 5, *The Butterfly,* and No. 25, *Zephyr*) are positioned to balance the cycle's overall scheme:

No. 1. *Allegro brillante / Moderato semplice*
No. 2. *Espressivo / Allegro*
No. 3. *Legato espressivo / Molto tranquillo*
No. 4. *Piano ed agitato / Moderato*
No. 5. *Pianissimo / Der Schmetterling. Allegro scherzando*
No. 6. *Moderato / Minuetto - Quasi andante*
No. 7. *Soave e gentile / 9/8*
No. 8. *Agitato / Moderato con punto*
No. 9. *Soave e gentile / Moderato con grazia*

No. 10. *Lento e grave / Lento sostenuto*
No. 11. *Moderato / —*
No. 12. *Lento / Allegretto*
No. 13. *— / Allegretto amabile*
No. 14. *Lento maestoso / Gemuthsbewegung. Presto agitato*
No. 15. *Riposatamente / Sostenuto armonioso*
No. 16. *Adagio sostenuto / Alla marcia*
No. 17. *— / 2/4* [a study in 64th notes]
No. 18. *— / Agitato*
No. 19. *Tempo giusto / Aria. Assai moderato*
No. 20. *Allegro deciso / Caprice*
No. 21. *— / Moderato*
No. 22. *— / Lamentevole*
No. 23. *Andante amabile / Armonioso amabile*
No. 24. *— / Plaintivo*
No. 25. *— / Der Zephyr*
No. 26. *— / Il penseroso. Moderato con sentimento*
No. 27. *— / Andantino*
No. 28. *Cantando / Presto*
No. 29. *Leggierissimo / Scherzetto*
No. 30. *— / 6/8*

Clearly Bennett's failure to rise to greatness as a composer cannot be blamed entirely on an overburdened academic and professional life. The music itself provides further insights. On the surface his piano music, particularly such pieces as the *Capriccio in D Minor*, composed around 1834, resembles Mendelssohn's, but on closer inspection it reveals its true kinship with Mozart. Bennett subscribed to the London Piano School of Clementi and Cramer, which followed the "old masters" and decried the perceived frivolity and shallowness of the contemporary

Viennese and Parisian styles. Refined, sensitive and inward by nature, he steadfastly resisted commercialism and vulgarity, which in his view included the virtuosic flashiness of Thalberg and Liszt and even the romantic utterances of Chopin and Schumann. While straddling the classical and early romantic esthetics, the *Three Impromptus* of 1836, the *Three Romances* of 1837 and the rest of his solo piano works were eclipsed by the richer romanticism of his contemporaries. His resistance to the spirit of the times was deliberate, and therein lies a possible interpretation of Mendelssohn's remark that Bennett's potential for greatness lay entirely within himself.

Returning one last time to the question of promise unfulfilled, the psychological evidence suggests that on a basic emotional level Bennett, once the child prodigy and fêted virtuoso, needed the continuing admiration of his public and colleagues, a stimulus that was denied to him particularly in England. Gradually his self-confidence eroded along with his creative powers. It is true that between 1858 and 1873 he experienced something of a creative resurgence, but his admittedly accomplished late works lack the fresh inspiration of his youth. Still, Bennett's contributions to English music cannot be dismissed lightly. The early music, fresh with promise, remains a legacy to be rediscovered and cherished. Finally, his endeavours in the academic and public arenas set the course of British musical life in the romantic age and laid the groundwork for the true renaissance that was to flower in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

**David Nelson**

**Ilona Prunyi**

Ilona Prunyi was born in Debrecen in 1941 and studied at the Liszt Academy in Budapest, distinguishing herself in the Liszt-Bartók Competition while still a student. Her career as a concert performer was interrupted by a period of ill-health, and for personal reasons she spent ten years as a teacher at the Academy before making her début in 1974. Since then she has appeared frequently in solo and chamber music recitals and as a soloist with the principal Hungarian orchestras.

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STEREO

Playing Time: 64'43"

# William Sterndale BENNETT
(1816 - 1875)

## Piano Works Vol. 3

Ilona Prunyi, Piano

A co-production with Records International

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Capriccio in D Minor, Op. 2** | (3:37) |
| | **3 Romances, Op. 14** | |
| 2 | No. 1 Agitato in B Flat Minor | (4:16) |
| 3 | No. 2 Moderato grazioso in E Flat Major | (4:15) |
| 4 | No. 3 Agitato in G Minor | (6:07) |
| | **3 Impromptus, Op. 12** | |
| 5 | No. 1 Andante espressivo in B Minor | (3:04) |
| 6 | No. 2 Grazioso in E Major | (3:15) |
| 7 | No. 3 Presto in F Sharp Minor | (3:23) |
| 8 - 37 | **30 Preludes and Lessons, Op. 33** | (36:46) |

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Music Director: Jenoe Simon
Music Notes: David Nelson
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