



LUKAS FOSS

Complete Works for Solo Piano

Scherzo Ricercato
Grotesque Dance
Prelude in D
For Lenny
Fantasy Rondo

Scott Dunn, Piano

Lukas Foss (b. 1922)

Complete Solo Piano Works

In 1937, when Lukas Foss was fifteen (and quite accomplished by that age) he enrolled at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, then a new school, but little could have been new to the adolescent Foss, who had already been composing for almost a decade but had also already experienced the tumult of the mid-century world, as, in 1933, his family had fled the burgeoning threat of Nazism in Germany. This no doubt made for a rather worldly, shockingly precocious teenager. At Curtis he pursued not only composition, but conducting and piano. Graduating at the age of eighteen, he went on to study conducting with Koussevitzky at Tanglewood, and to Yale to study with Paul Hindemith.

Foss went on to become the youngest composer ever to receive a Guggenheim fellowship. He won the Rome Prize, a Fulbright, and all the while continued to produce distinguished, up-to-the-moment pieces, most notably his *Second Piano Concerto* in 1951. When the University of California Los Angeles (or UCLA) appointed Foss professor of music, he replaced Arnold Schoenberg, an auspicious lineage, but right for Foss, who, like his predecessor, wrestled daily with the idea of tradition, how to love it, but also how to leave it behind.

This collection of austere, peripatetic piano works is a way into the mind of one of our most distinguished leading lights. 1953 brought the *Scherzo Ricercato*, a spry, swagger of a piece, with the rigour of Bach working at cross purposes with spiky, jazz-like interjections; for Foss's generation, experimentation with both the dark, after-hours smokiness and rhythmic figuration of jazz was quite common, with Leonard Bernstein being the most vocal proponent. According to Grove's Dictionary, a *Ricercare* is "...a piece of an esoteric nature; a technical exercise either of a practical nature or illustrative of some device of composition". So here we have a chance to *hear* Foss, ever the explorer of new trends, working something out for himself; in this case, it is the flowing, Bachian music pulling against (and eventually being subsumed by) the wilder, frenetic

intrusions that defines this exciting six-minute "exercise".

Written in 1940, Foss's *Passacaglia* (variations on a constantly repeated harmonic structure) is a slow, almost light offering, but not without punch or bite. Again, as in the *Scherzo Ricercato*, Bach lurks behind every bar though the music sounds nothing like him, one fine composer both paying homage and wrestling with his hero simultaneously. Rather than, like Pachelbel's famous *Canon*, rest on a rotating harmonic structure and simply pile figures on top of it, Foss moves deftly within his stated formal design but does not eschew densely contrapuntal sections; he does not wear his strictures on his sleeve. If one were not *told* by the title that this was, in fact, a *Passacaglia*, one might not know (save for the gorgeous return at the end, which almost cheekily lets us in on what the composer was doing all along).

The *Grotesque Dance* was written by Foss in 1938, when the composer was just sixteen, and was, according to legend, one of the many pieces he composed while riding the New York subway. To our ears, there is nothing terribly grotesque about it. It is redolent of Prokofiev, but with a lighter touch, and no doubt those long subway rides had no choice but to remind him of Gershwin, whose style is all but aped in the slow middle section. This charming, quirky little work is, however, quite accomplished by any standards, let alone for a teenager.

In 1947, writing something so *strikingly* tonal and beautiful as the *Prelude in D* was no doubt something at which many would have turned up their nose; even the title alone was probably an act of rebellion. Foss's light touch is in evidence here, as he creates a solid piece which is as beautiful as anything he ever composed, another Bach-inspired work (he was probably thinking of the great *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which couples each fugue with a prelude, both in the same key), as, like any work with this title, the question "prelude to what?" is never answered.

A year earlier Foss composed his *Fantasy Rondo*, which is in and of itself an interesting title: “fantasy” as the freest of all forms, pitted against “rondo,” which is perhaps the most highly structured. Foss allows himself a restricted space in which he can let his imagination run wild, and that he does, with easy, beautiful jazz harmonies floating above (and at times below) Bach-like motoric figures, and wild spastic chordal interjections serving as the constantly returning figure, although there are few exact repeats.

In direct homage to Bach, Foss (again on the subway, again at the age of sixteen) composed a set of four inventions, like little fugues in two parts, but freer, less immediately organized. Like the *Grotesque Dance*, these are not mere juvenilia, but strict, interesting, captivating compositions. The *Introduction* is a moody murk, angular (a little like Bartók) and slightly seething; the *Allegretto* is even more stark, quick and favored by motor rhythms, though, again, more along the lines of a quirky Bartók dance than a Bach invention in terms of character; the *Tranquillo ma mosso* is a calm moment, but is both a bromide and an agitant, soothing and yet somehow unsettling; the final movement, a *molto vivace*, is not the high-speed burn one might expect (though it is quick), and is perhaps the most directly Bach-influenced section of the piece, with sprightly trills and a good-natured humour (which does, sometimes,

take a darker turn) bringing this virtuoso showpiece to a close.

For Lenny, written in 1988, is another sort of tribute, this time to his dear friend from their Curtis days, Leonard Bernstein. Here he plays with *New York, New York*, a tune Bernstein composed for his Broadway musical *On The Town*, about sailors on a 24 hour shore leave in New York City. This song, the opening, is their paean to the great city into whose depths they are about to dive. Foss is loving and careful with his treatment, avoiding vulgarity or navel gazing and offering instead a calm (yet not un-bouncy) treatment of this famous tune.

The recorded programme closes with *Solo*, a more recent work (this from 1981) and a true *tour de force*, both for pianist and composer. Here Foss wrestles directly with the major musical force of the time it was written: minimalism. His piece, though a repetitive thirteen or so minutes, manages to do it in his own way, that is to say, favouring the motoric notions of Bach over the motoric notions of, say, Reich or Glass. *Solo*, though, is more than a stretched out fugato; it is a true piece of minimalism, which develops (or does not) in the same way, but yet does it with the Bartók-cum-Bach Foss has always favoured.

Daniel Felsenfeld

Scott Dunn

www.scott-dunn.com

Scott Dunn is an acclaimed conductor and pianist who, since his 1999 Carnegie Hall début, has appeared repeatedly in major venues throughout the United States and Europe. He has a long and close relationship with his friend and mentor, Lukas Foss and from 1999 to 2001 served as Foss's associate music director for the Music Festival of the Hamptons, a post in which Dunn earned considerable critical acclaim.

Scott Dunn's first European orchestral conducting engagements followed in 2000-2001 and in 2002 Maestro John Mauceri appointed him conducting assistant for the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra in Los Angeles. Also a sought-after vocal collaborator, Dunn makes frequent recital and concert appearances with such distinguished singers as Joyce Castle, Kurt Ollmann and Angelina Reaux. In 2003, Dunn made his first European opera conducting appearances leading multiple performances in Tuscany of Puccini's *La bohème*, Weill's *Kleine Mahagonny* and other works.

As a piano soloist, Dunn made his first Carnegie Hall solo appearance in 1999 with Dennis Russell Davies and the American Composers Orchestra playing the world première of his own orchestration of Vernon Duke's 'lost' 1923 *Piano Concerto in C*. Of Dunn's work as a solo recitalist and advocate for American piano music critic Alan Rich recently wrote...“In a time when we are best with young emergent performers of limited repertory delivered with unlimited flamboyance, the splendid young pianist Scott Dunn's varied and visionary program was remarkable.” Dunn resides in New York and Los Angeles.

Special thanks to Cornelia Foss, Robert Moray, Judith Sherman and Howard Stokar



Photo: Steve J. Sherman

Playing
Time:
54:43

Lukas
FOSS
(b.1922)

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| 1 | Scherzo Ricercato (1954) | 6:16 |
| 2 | Passacaglia (1940) | 6:22 |
| 3 | Grotesque Dance (1938) | 4:29 |
| 4 | Prelude in D (1951) | 3:22 |
| 5 | Fantasy Rondo (1944) | 9:24 |
| | Four Two-Part Inventions (1938) | 9:02 |
| 6 | Introduction: Andante | 2:29 |
| 7 | Allegretto | 2:46 |
| 8 | Tranquillo ma mosso | 1:35 |
| 9 | Molto vivace | 2:12 |
| 10 | For Lenny, Variation on
'New York, New York' (1987) | 2:31 |
| 11 | Solo (1981) | 13:17 |

Scott Dunn, Piano

Recorded at the American Academy of Arts and Letters,
New York, USA, on 22nd and 23rd March, 2003

Producer and Engineer: Judith Sherman

Engineering and Editing Assistant: Jeanne Velonis

Booklet Notes: Daniel Felsenfeld

Cover Painting: Portrait of Lukas Foss (2002),

by Cornelia Foss (by kind permission)

American flag, folk artist, 1880s.



AMERICAN CLASSICS

Berlin-born Lukas Foss has figured prominently in American music as a distinguished composer, conductor and pianist. His career encompasses the breadth of 20th century techniques, well represented in this recording of his complete output for solo piano performed by his close associate, American pianist and conductor, Scott Dunn. The earliest work on the recording, *Grotesque Dance*, is characteristically light-hearted. Foss's subsequent neo-classical tendencies are evident in *Four Two-Part Inventions*, *Passacaglia* and *Scherzo Ricercato*. The virtuosic *Fantasy Rondo* and the tender *Prelude in D* are infused with the influence of jazz, and of the composer's mentor, Aaron Copland. Later experimental tendencies are heard in *Solo*, in which he deftly combines minimalist, serial, and tonal techniques. The coy *For Lenny* was written in honor of Leonard Bernstein's 70th birthday and premièred by Foss himself at Tanglewood.



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