Programme note

**Hapsburg Burlesques – Fantasy-Transcriptions on Rosenkavalier, Mahagonny and Other Elegies, For Two Pianos (2016)**

**By Douglas Finch**

1 Love and Dreams

2 Little Waltz-Labyrinth

3 Where Can We Go?

In 2014, for Michael Corby’s birthday celebration at the Reform Club in London, I performed a solo piano improvisation on a number of different themes he gave to me the night before. There were too many to list here, but they included waltzes from Strauss’ opera *Der Rosenkavalier* and Beethoven’s *Grosse Fugue*. Following this, Michael commissioned me to compose a piece in a similar vein. By the time of its première, by Bobby Chen and myself at the Reform Club on June 29th, 2016, it had become a very different piece, with its various references and quotations serving a more unified dramatic purpose. In the later stages of writing it, I was heavily influenced by the cultural and political questions and uncertainties raised by the European Referendum in the UK.

The ‘elegies’ referred to in the title appear with varying degrees of explicitness, but are connected by their associations with European history and the Hapsburg Empire. The first movement, *Love and Dreams*, begins with a direct quotation (or transcription) of the beginning of Strauss’ overture to *Der Rosenkavalier*, which famously depicts in sound the lovemaking (behind the curtain) of Octavian and the Marschallin. This subsides into a fantasy of dream-like references from a number of musical sources including the iconic Disney theme-tune *When you wish upon a star* (Harline/Washington), depicting, in my mind, the fairy castle modelled on Schloss Neuschwanstein, built in the 19th century by Ludwig II of Bavaria; the grand love theme from *Der Rosenkavalier*; Brecht/Weill’s *Alabama Song* from *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, and the ‘Jewish Theme’ from Shostakovich’s Eighth String Quartet.

The second movement, *Little Waltz-Labyrinth*, weaves together a waltz from *Der Rosenkavalier* with Beethoven’s two main subjects in the *Grosse Fugue*, the original, and fiercely complex finale to his String Quartet op. 130. According to Alex Ross (The New Yorker, Feb 6, 2006), “Arnold Schoenberg heard it as a premonition of atonality, a call for freedom from convention. (“Your cradle was Beethoven’s Grosse Fugue,” Oskar Kokoschka once said to Schoenberg.)” So this piece is a kind of reconciliation of opposites - Strauss’ ironically soothing bourgeois waltz (*Mit Mir*, sung by the buffoon, Baron Ochs) and Beethoven’s ‘modernist’ call to arms.

The third movement’s title, *Where Can We Go?*, is a line, set to a simple four-note theme, from the end of the *Benares Song* in *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, where the characters bemoan the loss of their idealised place of refuge, Benares, which has been destroyed by an earthquake. A succession of other musical references follow: the Grosse Fugue, *When you wish upon a star*, *Alabama Song* again, Strauss’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, *Lara’s Theme* (Maurice Jarre) from the film Dr. Zhivago, and Britain’s National Anthem, placed in the context of Strauss’ (and the Hapsburgs’) voluptuous decadence.

Some of the ideas in this piece were inspired by my performances in Canada, USA, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and Japan between 1986 and 2000 with the great interpreter of Bertolt Brecht songs, Dagmar Krause, in a show entitled: *Fallen City, Mahagonny and other Elegies*. *Hapsburg Burlesques* is dedicated to her.

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