

Geoff Cummings-Knight's 24 Preludes for Piano

By David Jennings

Earlier this year, I [reviewed](#) a new recording of Geoff Cummings-Knight's piano music on the Prima Facie label, entitled "The Road Less Travelled". The CD was, quite frankly, a revelation; I was deeply impressed by the music, as well as by the poetic piano playing of Duncan Honeybourne. I noted that the selection from the "24 Preludes" had particularly impressed me and expressed an interest in hearing the other works in this set. Mr Cummings-Knight duly sent me a privately made CD of the entire opus and I have listened to this music over the last few weeks with growing excitement and admiration.

A number of famous composers have written sets of 24 Preludes covering all the major and minor keys. Chopin's highly influential Opus 28 set (modelled on Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier) was later followed by Scriabin (in his Op. 11), Rachmaninov and by York Bowen in his highly admired set of 24 Preludes of 1950 (dedicated to Sorabji). There are also smaller sets of Piano Preludes by superb composers such as William Baines and Kenneth Leighton.

This brief note about Geoff Cummings-Knight's 24 Preludes for Piano is intended to introduce music lovers to what I believe is yet another significant addition to piano literature. Here we have a substantial and imposing set of beautifully crafted piano works, predominantly (though not exclusively) in late Romantic style. Not all of these works are tiny miniatures; the entire set lasts about 65 minutes, whereas Scriabin's set of 24 Preludes Opus 11 lasts about 35 minutes. One of the principal sources of inspiration for Cummings-Knight's Preludes is undoubtedly Rachmaninov, whom he often equals in melodic fertility and in the richness and brilliance of his piano writing. This is virtuoso music of a very high order, but the bravura preludes are nearly always followed by more inward and searching movements, where Cummings-Knight's melodic gift is given a chance to shine.

The 24 Preludes were originally published in 1985 by Robertson Publications, when the composer was 38. (Goodmusic now publish this version of the score). This is a young man's work, but the early vintage does not mean that these preludes are immature or technically rough around the edges. Michael Jones gave a BBC broadcast in the early 1990s and they have since been revised. It is the Michael Jones recorded performance I have been listening to; remarkably he did the whole set from memory! Most remain the same; No. 13 in G flat major has since been replaced and No. 18 in F minor has been added to No. 9 in E major, the so-called "Mahlerian Adagio". (This revised version is the one Duncan Honeybourne performed on his recent disc). The new versions of Nos. 13 and 18 have not yet been recorded. The revised score of the entire set also needs to be published and it would be excellent if Goodmusic could provide both versions of this music.

These 24 Preludes demonstrate a consistently high level of musical inspiration and demand a complete commercial recording. (Perhaps Duncan Honeybourne could look into this?) As I listened to these pieces, I remembered Hugh Ottaway's description about the music of William Alwyn: "How directly this music communicates. How warm its eloquence. How free from esoteric pretentiousness". This statement equally applies to the work of Geoff Cummings-Knight.

I will not attempt to describe each individual prelude, but will single out the ones that immediately appeal to me; this does not imply, however, that I dislike the others; all are attractive and interesting.

The first Prelude ("The Winter Gondola") in C major makes an arresting start to the set and here the influence of Rachmaninov is at its clearest. The music, nevertheless, has a number of dramatic interjections which cut against the overall romantic mood; these give the prelude considerable character, as well as arming it against any accusation of pastiche.

The second Prelude ("La Sarabanda") in A minor made an appearance on the recent Prima Facie CD and makes a perfect foil to the first; it is more harmonically adventurous and more enigmatic in mood. The third Prelude (amusingly called "Haydn on the Rocks") is a delightful pastiche, but it also has a touch of Percy Grainger as well; the occasional disruptive episodes, where the harmony seems to shift into the styles of later centuries, are extremely effective.

The fourth Prelude ("Medici Court Dance") is one of the most beautiful of all. Rich, melancholy, and highly emotive, this would make a thoughtful recital encore. Rachmaninov returns as a source of inspiration in the fifth Prelude, the "Caccia Interrotta", where the main idea echoes the main finale theme of the elder master's Third Concerto.

The "Mahlerian Adagio" (Prelude No. 9) is clearly a highlight of the set and it is obvious why this movement was chosen for the recording by Duncan Honeybourne. The real surprise, however, is how the revised version has benefited from having what was originally No. 18 grafted onto it. Both sounded lovely individually, but by some strange alchemy they fuse into one piece as if they had always been intended to belong together. No one would guess that they started life as two separate preludes!

The eleventh Prelude ("Auf den Speicher eines Helden") almost equals the beauty of No. 9 and reminds me a little of Kenneth Leighton's Piano Preludes (particularly the Prelude in E Flat Minor) written at the very end of his career; they have the same haunting valedictory quality. It is worth pointing out that Cummings-Knight's eleventh prelude predates this Leighton work. There is a humorous, quirky streak running through this set as well; witness the curiously-entitled "Gnomes in a Moonless Landscape"!

I was surprised to find that the extremely attractive No. 13 in G flat major has been replaced, as this is a truly delightful prelude; perhaps the composer might be persuaded to rethink this musical decision? The delicate No. 16 ("Berceuse Fragment") is influenced by both French and Spanish music; it is simple but very touching. Prelude No. 21 takes the form of a Toccata and Fugue; beginning in a style similar to Rachmaninov, the music then segues into a Fugue highly suggestive of Hindemith. Somehow the fusion of styles works really well and this prelude adds considerably to the richness and variety of the whole set. The opening of the final Prelude ("Andalucian Package-deal") suggests to me the influence of William Alwyn's "Fantasy-Waltzes"; nevertheless, the continuation is utterly characteristic of Cummings-Knight, with its abrupt changes of mood, harmony and rhythm. The throw-away coda, which concludes on just a right-hand trill, is priceless; so unexpected, yet fully in keeping with the quirky nature of many of these preludes.

I sincerely hope that this brief article helps to spur more performances and, better still, encourage complete recordings to be made of this magnificent set of Preludes, which are surely a major addition to the piano repertoire. Adventurous pianists with enquiring minds should seriously consider this music as a fascinating alternative to the more established warhorses. I have no doubt whatsoever that audiences, jaded with incessant renditions of standard repertoire, will take these pieces to their hearts and enjoy their individual blend of virtuoso fireworks and Romantic melancholy.

David Jennings

www.davidjenningscomposer.co.uk