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plays



FENNIMORE

CATHAY

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5 ROMANCES



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When asked what a bio should be,

a friend said, “Something that tells me something about you I’d want to know if I picked it up in 25 years.” Born in the year of the dragon in the city that does not sleep, I don’t feel old though cosmetic/surgical assist crosses my mind when mirroring. I’ve been blessed with some great teachers. Having left under a cloud from two conservatories (Eastman and Juilliard) with degrees with honors from both, I’ve had the suspicion I’m not a team player continually reaffirmed. There’s no authority I don’t question, and I’m against whoever is in power. I have won some competitions and grants and even been employed, usually before my subversion is found out. A steady trickle of performances of my work keeps despair at bay and illusions in place. Cecile Genhart, a beloved Eastman piano teacher, in pique, called me a plaster saint. She also forbade me to go to Nadia Boulanger, saying,



“She’ll turn you into a composer!” What’s wrong with composers, I wondered? In upstate NY I was raised and to it I returned in 1980, leaving NYC where I lived after Juilliard for 18 years while bopping around the world when the going was still good. Founding and running a concert series in NYC devoted to American music

I consider my doctoral thesis; I found out what’s wrong with composers. Lifelong questions about what music was, is, should be and might be remain unanswered. Writing music is one attempt to confront those questions; teaching music to the young, old and in between is another.

— Joseph Fennimore



FENNIMORE

5 ROMANCES

Inscribed on the last page of Joseph Fennimore's *Ninth Romance* for piano is an anecdote about Sergei Rachmaninoff, the Russian composer to whom the short piece is dedicated. Rachmaninoff, says Fennimore, wrote a theme in his Fourth Piano Concerto that reminded some listeners of the three descending notes of the nursery song, "Three Blind Mice." Critics pounced on the similarity and "heaped scorn and contumely upon the score, causing R. great pain." Which was unfair. "Being a Russian, R. had never heard or heard of 'Three Blind Mice,'" he writes. "It is said he stopped composing because of this debacle, and the gratuitous malice it provoked."

This anecdote, which perhaps explains the wry appearance of the same theme in the middle section of Fennimore's composition, is a bit of romantic license with the biographical record. Rachmaninoff's Fourth Piano Concerto was heavily criticized for its diffuse and sprawling form, and it no doubt suffered in comparison with his more popular Second and Third concertos. But even after its unsuccessful debut in 1926, Rachmaninoff was not done with the Fourth Concerto, or the piano. And though he was affected by the criticism, it was not to the point of retreating into silence. He produced the magnificent *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* in 1934 and the Third Symphony in 1935, and he substantially revised the Fourth Concerto in 1941.

So Fennimore, one of this country's finest composers and, in his mastery of the piano, an heir to Rachmaninoff, has written a romance about a *Romance*. It is an expression of sympathy from one composer to another across the ages, and in the face of a shared enemy: thoughtless critics. There is, perhaps, a touch of irony in it, too. It's a reminder that while composers are responsible for the notes they place on the page, they can't be held accountable for how those notes will be heard. And finally, it's a clue to the complicated tone and complex play between surface and depth in these short, often melancholy character pieces. They are romances, but what kind? Romance, as anyone fortunate enough to have experienced it knows, is hardly a stable or uniformly happy thing, and so too these pieces.

Another inscription, at the end of the *Fifth Romance*, reminds us that a romance can be anything from a passion between two people to a complicated literary form, such as the romances of Shakespeare. Musically, the form has diverse meanings, and at first glance Fennimore's romances belong to the tradition of short character pieces that occasionally bore the title "romance" in the 19th

century. But they are deliciously unstable pieces—the strange twists and turns of literary romance seem to apply—and they rarely fall into the easy formal patterns one would expect. Even the simple, melancholy opening melody of the *First Romance* refuses to fit the usual eight-bar pattern, but is organized in seven-bar phrases that suggest impatience, or the never-satiated aspect of desire, or perhaps our tendency to move on even while in the midst of lingering love.

Without ever being strictly polyphonic in a dry, academic sense, the *Romances* are nonetheless filled with a multiplicity of voices. What sounds like a solo cello line in the *Third Romance* becomes a play of two voices, occasionally conjoined as if in an aria, but often chasing each other's tail, gently and tenderly. The *Ninth Romance* honors its dedicatee, Rachmaninoff, not just in musical spirit, but in the way it stretches the hand, a physical homage to the famously large-pawed master. It also develops its melodic material out of what seems to be a repetitive accompaniment line, yet another nod to "polyphony," a discovery of voices within voices characteristic of Chopin's piano writing as well as Rachmaninoff's.

The *Thirteenth Romance*, composed almost two decades after the first of the set, is marked "Somewhat grim, wary, cranky." The accompaniment, in dotted rhythm, is divided between a sinuous, often chromatic lower line that is characteristic of many of the melodic figures throughout these pieces, and intervals placed more than an octave higher. This left-hand device is given an additional and enigmatic marking, "The limp of Oedipus," which may refer to the dotted rhythm, the leaps, the mix of whole- and half-steps in the line, or the very slow tempo marking (the basic pulse is "a little slower than 40"). The limp of Oedipus, caused by the pinioning of his ankles as a baby, stayed with him throughout his lifetime. It was the original wound, before fate felled him more dramatically for incest and parricide, and before he died, outside of Athens, in almost Christian exaltation. So, while "grim, wary, and cranky," the *Thirteenth Romance* is also retrospective, connected musically and spiritually to the others, a reminder perhaps that romantic love often expresses a deep desire to repair something, to correct the past (as in Shakespeare), or to reopen (and thus try to close) primal traumas (as in Freud).



TOURMALINE

Tourmaline: On the Loss of a Jewel (Theme, Variations, and Coda on an Ostinato) is more recent than the *Thirteenth Romance*. It was commissioned by the harpsichordist William Carragan, a longtime friend of the composer, in memory of his wife Julia Carragan. The music paints a vivid picture of a vibrant, compassionate, nature-loving woman. The title obviously refers to something highly prized and lost, but it is also a literal reference to a semiprecious stone noted for its variegated colors and, in some cases, strange electrical properties. Verdelite, indicolite, and schorl are three color phases of tourmaline, which is found throughout the world, and can contain multiple colors within a single stone. "Tourmaline is supposed to be an especially powerful influence on love and friendship, lending them permanence and stability," according to a popular source on gemology.

Verdelite is a green tourmaline, of a rich color, darker and warmer than emerald. Musically, "Verdelite" is also a "green" movement in spirit, verdant and fresh, with the tenth variation marked "a march... to the altar" and the eleventh "giddy joy." The variations are short elaborations on a recurring harmonic line, occasionally split between the registers, or subject to small detours, so that the ear tends to perceive recurring patterns or intervals rather than a monotonous repetition of a single bass line. The composer has written out the ornament figures characteristic of the harpsichord (mordents, turns, and chord arpeggiations), so that the music is charged on the surface (like certain tourmalines when subjected to heat) with percussive brilliance.

The second movement, "Indicolite," begins with the fifteenth variation, marked "The business of life." Indicolite is a transparent blue variation of the stone, and in this movement, while the ostinato line may be more subtly subsumed within the musical texture, the programmatic allusions are more direct and painful. The twenty-fifth variation is marked "hope," but that gives way to the twenty-sixth, marked "The Loss." It is an anguished passage, with the ostinato pattern collapsing on itself so that the tritones implicit in it from the beginning are starkly juxtaposed, while the right hand cries out in sharp, dissonant fragments. The final movement, called "Schorl," refers to the black, opaque variety of tourmaline, "mainly used in engravings and esotericism." It is subtitled "Picking up the Pieces," but it is a return, perhaps, to a more abstract music, with some of the composition's most purely virtuosic demands on the player.



CATHAY

When Fennimore released a recording of his earlier piano works, in 1982, he wrote, "The pieces recorded here spring from the currently out-of-fashion aesthetic which holds that a piano can sound like more than just a percussion instrument and that a pianist can be much more than a producer of prescribed tones at intervals and decibels of specified duration." The pieces on that recording were written in the 1970s, when tonality, allusions to earlier music, overt emotional expression, and reverence for lyricism were, as the composer writes, "out of fashion." Fennimore's insistence on his right to work within a tradition, rather than dance on its grave, was pioneering. But his compositional style has undergone continual metamorphosis, and today the percussive aspects of the piano are more integral to his music.

And so we find passages in *Cathay*, a large six-movement work commissioned in 2005 by the American pianist Larry Graham, marked "like a xylophone" and "like timpani" and "tinkly." From the very opening gesture, the seven notes of the Lydian mode broken up over all seven octaves of the piano's range, the instrument is used both lyrically and percussively, with the composer reveling in a jangling, almost mystical play of overtones. Five of the movements include poems, sometimes, as in the three-part "The Lost Flute," with the text embedded programmatically in the score. The fourth movement, titled simply "Yin-Yang," is explained only with the yin-yang sign, with its two-sided but interdependently linked portions of a circle, a reference to a wide range of philosophical ideas about balance, harmony, transformation, and the passage of time. It is the piece's most enigmatic movement, borrowing techniques from serialism but rechristened for different purposes, and it sits in the middle rather like Schumann's Sphinxes, embedded in *Carnaval*.

"Cathay," as the composer notes, is an "ancient name for China," and was "popularized in Europe by Marco Polo." It is a sly reference for this music as well, which constantly plays around with musical gestures that have, over the years, become clichéd in lesser hands. Five-note scales, whole-tone passages, and parallel fourths and fifths abound throughout the score, but are constantly transformed from their movie-house associations into music that seems genuinely Chinese, even if it is self-consciously refracted through the old-fashioned label, "Cathay."

It is a catalogue of delights, and densely woven musically. In the space of just a few bars, the stentorian scale figure announced at the beginning of "The Soft Influence of Spring" becomes an open,

tender, spacious chordal figure, and then a flowing, pianistic passage filled with gentle turns, as if to suggest the pure generative power of both the season and a fecund bit of musical DNA. The second movement, “Two Swallows,” is a fleet, scampering elaboration of a simple Chinese-sounding melody, and though very different from the *Romances*, it has much in common with them too: a sentimental pretext, elaborated in a poem by Li Po, and an almost corporeal sense of two voices joining in a game. The composer has included the poem at the end of the score, the first lines (“Two swallows, and two swallows... one never perches there without the other”) printed large, the rest of the poem, which deals with loss and death, printed in smaller type, a poetic memento mori, not to be dwelled on at too much length.

It is hard not to hear autumnal music here, in the poetic references, in the haunting melodic figures, in the sense of resignation and peace in the last movement. But this is some of the finest music Fennimore has ever written, immensely sophisticated, expressive, and elegant. The directness of the *Romances* from the 1980s and the exuberant virtuosity of his music from the 1970s are reborn in a new, elaborate, and intricate sensibility. If it is autumnal music, it is not music that betrays any flagging of powers. More than a quarter of a century ago, Fennimore told his romance about a *Romance*, the story of Rachmaninoff, the critics, and a lapse into silence. It was (take your pick) an ironic, or theatrical, or lighthearted expression of the toll of isolation, the cost (and rewards) of making deeply refined music in an age that worshipped different ideals. But Rachmaninoff’s fate, real or imagined, was not to be his. Fennimore’s own romance with music is a very different story, and it remains a fertile one.

— Philip L. Kennicott

Culture Critic, *Washington Post*

The First Romance is dedicated to Marthanne Dorminy; the Third to Stanley Hummel; and the Ninth to the memory of Sergei Rachmaninoff.



The Performer

Pianist Jeffrey Middleton graduated from the Juilliard School and received his Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the Yale School of Music. His career has included chamber music, vocal coaching and accompanying, solo performances, and teaching. Mr. Middleton was presented by Artists International, Inc., in a Weill Hall debut recital at Carnegie Hall in 1995. His recording of Book Two of J. S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* was released in 2004 on One Soul Records. “It all sounds so simple, so right and so beautiful,” wrote Jerry Dubins in *Fanfare*.

Since meeting Joseph Fennimore in the mid 1980s, Mr. Middleton has been studying and performing his music. In addition to the works on this recording, he has recorded thirteen *Romances*, and performed the piano trio *Molinos de Viento*, based on Hispanic themes, and many other solo works. He also directed a production of Fennimore’s *Eventide*, a three-character opera adapted from a text by James Purdy, at the Harlem School of the Arts. Mr. Middleton appears regularly with modern dancer Jody Sperling and her company Time Lapse Dance, and has been on the faculty of the School of American Ballet for more than 20 years, teaching music for dancers.

