

A man with glasses, wearing a black suit jacket over a blue shirt, is leaning forward with his hands clasped on a dark surface. The background is a blurred city street scene with a yellow taxi and pedestrians.

audite

AMERICAN RECITAL

VOL. II

Ulrich Roman Murtfeld, piano



Alexander Reinagle:
Sonata No. 1 in D major 'Philadelphia' 10:33

Edward MacDowell:
• **Woodland Sketches, Op. 51, Nos. 1 + 6 4:05**
• **12 Virtuoso Etudes, Op. 46, Nos. 2 & 10 4:19**
• **New England Idyls, Op. 62 24:22**

George Antheil: Jazz Sonata (1922) 1:47

Charles Edward Ives: Three-Page Sonata 7:11

Roger Sessions: From my Diary (Pages from a Diary) 8:26



American Piano Music from Reinagle to Sessions

In the vast landscape of piano music there probably is no other region promising similar joys of discovery as that of the repertoire written in the USA – and not only for European pianists and audiences, but also for Americans themselves. Of course there are exceptions: Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* is world-famous; and even listeners who are unfamiliar with new music will have come across piano works by Charles Ives (*Concord Sonata*), John Cage (*Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*) or Philip Glass (*Metamorphosis*) in concerts, on disc, on the radio or the internet. And Frederic Rzewski's variations on the Chilean song *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* have, despite their immense virtuosic challenges, reached a form of cult status. The fact that a large proportion of North American piano music remains unknown is perhaps not surprising, given its sheer mass. Since the eighteenth century, thousands of composers have, for the most diverse artistic or commercial reasons, written for the instrument which, from the middle of the nineteenth century, was made and sold in huge quantities by piano makers such as Chickering and Steinway (originally Steinweg of Brunswick). From the turn of the century, there was also fierce competition for three decades in the form of the player piano or pianola. The enormous quantity of ragtimes alone is dizzying; similarly that of "novelty piano" pieces, virtuoso arrangements of popular hits between the two World Wars; not to mention the jazz repertoire for piano. It is therefore all the more astonishing that this lavish abundance of music hardly featured in twentieth century concert programmes of American or US-based pianists, who remained, on the whole, committed to the European-orientated mainstream. This had, on the one hand, to do with the dominance of European teachers at American conservatoires, and on the other hand with the tradition of travelling European virtuosos who, from the end of the American Civil War (1865), increasingly satisfied the desire for prestige of more and more affluent concert audiences in major cities such as New York, Boston, Chicago or Los Angeles. As a result, only relatively few American pianists devoted themselves to the piano music of their own country; those who did included Jeanne Behrend, Bruce Brubaker, Neely Bruce, Donna Coleman, Ivan Davis, the composer-pianist Robert Helps, William Masselos, William Naboré, Ursula Oppens and Roger Shields.

The reasons for this imbalance, which is in evidence until today, are also rooted in an inferiority complex which, given the military and economic world power that is the USA, seems bizarre, but which runs through American music history like a golden thread. For many American composers – whether they were born in the US or settled there later on in life – found themselves confronted by the unsolvable task of trying to develop a universal definition for American music. In contrast to the national music styles in Europe, in the US it has always remained open as to who, what, which place and which cultural context represents the nation's music. A glance at the genesis of the USA shows why this is so: defining



the national territory took from 1776, when thirteen East Coast colonies consolidated as the United States, until 1959, when Alaska and Hawaii became the 49th and 50th states. Today, the US state territory of almost ten million square kilometres accommodates nearly 320 million inhabitants whose ethnic origins and religious beliefs represent a microcosm of humanity. Immigration – around ten million people from Europe in the nineteenth century alone – created a highly complex and dynamic society. A basis for nation-building thus became the common language, English, with a canon of values considered to be universal which originated in the oldest Western democracy – one dominated, of course, by a white middle class coming from Europe, and thus at the cost of a partly latent, partly conspicuous displacement and suppression of other ethnicities until well into the twentieth century and the still unsolved problem of the “colour line”. In music, this development was (and is) represented in a particular manner, since it has always immediately absorbed and mirrored the diversity and abundance of American culture and its constantly changing styles and idioms. In this, the phenomenon of so-called acculturation, i.e. the mutual influence of musical practices, plays a special role: the musical exchange between the Afro-American and the white population was intensive, whilst in the case of the music culture of the Native North Americans there was only unilateral interest from the side of white composers, which culminated before the First World War. Against this backdrop, there were individuals from the early nineteenth century who attended to the question of a national identity for American music – first and foremost Louis Moreau Gottschalk, who toured the American continent, primarily performing his own, then enormously popular virtuoso salon pieces which revealed the potential of American music beyond the European paragons. (Ulrich Roman Murtfeldt recorded some of these works on his first disc of American piano music, audite 92.702). Nevertheless, the question of American identity in music could not be solved merely by integrating ethnic traditions, but demanded more differentiated answers which were to be provided by Edward MacDowell, Charles Ives or Roger Sessions. The piano music recorded here is an invitation to a journey through a musical landscape which could hardly be richer or more colourful, but whose physiognomy is shaped by the search for an identity. This results in a peculiar tension and connection between the works which can be interpreted as an expression of a “hidden choreography” (Berndt Ostendorf) of the American music culture and its contradictions.

The first composer to be heard on this album was not a native American: Alexander Reinagle (1756-1809) was born in Portsmouth as the son of an Austrian trumpeter. Together with his brother Joseph (who went on to become a renowned cellist), he studied with the organist Raynor Taylor in Edinburgh and joined the Edinburgh Music Society, who championed the cultivation of baroque and early classical music, as well as Scottish folk music. Reinagle was particularly fascinated by the music of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, whom he was to meet in person: following his move to Glasgow, Reinagle made a career as a com-



poser, pianist and concert promoter. In 1786 he relocated to the American colonies, first of all living in New York, and eventually settling in Philadelphia where he actively took part in, and left his mark on, the city's musical life until 1803 in various ways – most notably as founder of the “New Music Theatre” which saw over 500 performances between 1794 and 1800. Reinagle is said to have composed fifty operas himself which he directed from the keyboard; unfortunately, his library fell victim to a fire at the theatre in 1820, destroying all this music. Happily, however, four piano sonatas of c. 1790 survive, showing Reinagle to be a distinguished, elegant composer who holds his own when compared with the works in the *empfindsamer Stil* [sensitive style] by CPE Bach or Joseph Haydn.

Edward MacDowell (1860-1908), a New Yorker who had studied composition at the Frankfurt Hoch Conservatory with Joachim Raff and who had also received significant support from Franz Liszt, was not only a remarkable pianist but also one of the first American composers consistently to champion the emancipation of their country's music. His numerous works for piano – including two concertos, four sonatas and the brilliant Studies Op. 46 – were very successful, for he managed to combine a “Europeanised”, i.e. international, musical language with themes and idioms of the American experience of nature. Including “local colour”, in this case the music of the Native North Americans as discovered around 1890, was of particular importance to MacDowell as he hoped to ignite a countermovement to the Afro-American gospels and spirituals which had entered into the concert repertoire via Dvořák's Symphony “From the New World”. This “Indianism” remained an episode in American modernism, but resonated with Ferruccio Busoni. However, MacDowell's collections of lyrical piano works such as his Op. 51 *Woodland Sketches* of 1896 (originally intended as ballet music) and his Op. 62 *New England Sketches* of 1902 entered the collective memory of American music. Even if nowadays they tend to be associated with Edvard Grieg's idioms, they nonetheless represent an autonomous point of departure in American modernism.

Charles Ives (1874-1954) has been identified as the “father” of American modernism, at least since the celebrations on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth. This late honorary title appears to be a retrospective reparation of an artistic existence which proceeded in anything but a straight line. Although the highly talented son of the Connecticut army bandleader George Ives studied composition with Horatio W. Parker (who had trained in Munich) at Yale University, he realised soon after taking his academic degree that his radical idiom would preclude a career as a composer or indeed church musician. In 1902, Ives therefore decided to become a partner in a New York insurance company which soon afterwards became one of the most successful insurance firms of the East Coast, making its co-founder a rich man. Ives thus literally became a “Sunday composer” who wrote, without any prospects of publication, for his drawer. These works no longer corresponded to the cliché of smart concert or salon music, but developed a rigorous sense of moder-



nity, though without dogmatic reservations towards, or refusal of, traditional tonality. His *Three-Page Sonata*, composed in September 1905 but not premiered until 1949 (by William Masselos), was named after the format of the manuscript paper that the composer used: the piece, which has a duration of just under seven minutes, is noted down on only three pages which nonetheless pack a powerful musical punch. Ives' almost improvisatory writing not only demands great virtuosity from the pianist (including the courage to play wrong notes), but also to shed any fears of new sounds. It is thus a piece of live aesthetic democracy, representing Ives' artistic and also political ideals. The composer's comment regarding the work's intention is inimitable: "Mostly made as a joke to knock the mollycoddles out of their boxes!"

George Antheil (1900-1959), born in New Jersey as the son of German immigrants, went even further in provoking his audience. As a "bad boy of music" – according to the title of his autobiography – he represented the conquest of Europe by the American music avant-garde during the 1920s. His *Ballet Mécanique* was an attack on "effeminate" Central European ears via a massive array of pianolas, percussion and aeroplane propellers. With his two jazz-inspired works, the *Jazz Sonata* of 1922 (a single-movement work with a duration of only two minutes) and the *Jazz Symphony* (1925), he showed that he knew how to exploit the irresistible power of jazz as the archetypal American trait in music in order to create unprecedented and outrageous sounds, at the same time primevally powerful and subtly making use of the specific instruments' idioms. Antheil's star waned when he returned to the US after 1933, trying his luck as a film composer in Hollywood. His role within a transatlantic music avant-garde of the twentieth century is yet to be reassessed.

Roger Sessions' (1896-1985) position as one of the most significant American composers of the twentieth century, on the other hand, is certain – even if he is still largely unknown in Europe. Born in Brooklyn, Sessions was, as Ives, a student of Horatio W Parker, and, as Antheil, he travelled to Europe in the 1920s in order to dive into the turbulent "roaring twenties" music scene in Berlin and Italy. During the 1930s, his musical language changed under the impression of political developments, but also as a result of engaging with the music of the Viennese School, Krenek and Hindemith. Now, the focus was on handling musical material responsibly, and it is no coincidence that Sessions himself became a hugely influential teacher who left his mark on the post-war generation of American composers. He combined these heterogeneous European influences into a personal language, although it does not include popular ("American") elements. The four pieces *From my Diary* (*Pages from a Diary*) from 1937-1940 are thoughtful, even gloomy, monologues, forming an imaginary sonata. More importantly, however, they follow the path of introspection, not least in referring to the beginnings of American literature – the seventeenth century diaries of the Puritans.



Ulrich Roman Murtfeld

Ulrich Roman Murtfeld, born in 1970 in Frankfurt/Main, Germany, began his professional piano education in Frankfurt at Dr. Hoch's Conservatory. As a Scholar at Phillips Academy Andover, he continued his piano studies with Veronica Jochum in Boston/USA. The Romanian piano pedagogues Ana Pitiș and Ioana Minei (Bucharest) had a decisive impact on Murtfeld's artistic development as well as Karl-Heinz Kämmerling at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. He found additional artistic inspiration in the Lied class of Hartmut Höll and in master classes with Sergei Dorensky (Salzburg/Moscow) and François-René Duchâble (Paris). In 2003 Murtfeld, who is also a certified Natural Scientist, passed the concert exam at the Musikhochschule in Karlsruhe/Germany with distinction. In the same year he was the „Brahmshaus“-Scholar of the Brahms Society in Baden-Baden.

As a soloist, Murtfeld has performed in numerous European countries, in the United States as well as in Brazil and Venezuela. He has appeared at important festivals such as Auftakt Alte Oper Frankfurt, Kasseler Musiktage, Musikfest Bremen, Thüringer Bachwochen, Festwochen Gmunden, Schloss Elmau and the Festival 2D2N (Odessa). He has given master classes at the University of Brasília and at the National Conservatory in Baku/Azerbaijan. Frequent appearances with chamber music partners round off his artistic activities.

Ulrich Roman Murtfeld's repertoire ranges from Bach to New Music. Characteristic of his concert programs is an innovative and unusual selection of works. Murtfeld has premiered many contemporary works and has co-operated closely with composers such as José Antônio Almeida Prado, Violeta Dinescu, Henri Dutilleux, Moritz Eggert, Ernst-Helmuth Flammer, Bernd Franke, Adriana Hölszky, Mauricio Kagel, Art-Oliver Simon and Jörg Widmann. In lecture recitals and seminars he devotes himself also to the theoretical aspects of contemporary music.

Ulrich Roman Murtfeld's first audite recording American Recital [audite 92.702] featuring works by Gottschalk, Gershwin, Glass, Rzewski, and Barber received numerous positive reviews in the international press. His discography also includes major piano works of the Classical, Romantic, and modern periods. In addition, he has made radio recordings with Radio Bremen, Hessischer Rundfunk, Südwestrundfunk, and Radio Romania Bukarest that are regularly broadcast by international radio stations.

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RME Micstasy

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Dipl.-Tonmeister Bernhard Hanke

executive producer:

Dipl.-Tonmeister Ludger Böckenhoff

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