

# Diary Pieces

Michael Zev Gordon



Joseph Houston piano

Michael Zev Gordon (b.1963)

Diary Pieces

Joseph Houston *piano*

**Diary Pieces 2016**

- |                                  |        |
|----------------------------------|--------|
| 1. Before Playing Bach           | [0:54] |
| 2. A Still Moment                | [0:45] |
| 3. Ferragosto                    | [0:22] |
| 4. A Hoopoe Lands in Front of Me | [0:30] |
| 5. Invention                     | [0:46] |
| 6. Distance                      | [2:23] |
| 7. After Playing Bach            | [0:58] |

**Diary Pieces 2018**

- |                                     |        |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| 8. Summer Waltz No. 2               | [1:00] |
| 9. Butterflies                      | [0:21] |
| 10. Ferragosto in campagna          | [1:28] |
| 11. Folkish                         | [0:30] |
| 12. Gondolalied                     | [2:09] |
| 13. Invention                       | [1:15] |
| 14. Between New Year and Yom Kippur | [1:58] |

**Diary Pieces 2019 Set 1**

- |                      |        |
|----------------------|--------|
| 15. May Day 1        | [1:18] |
| 16. May Day 2        | [2:00] |
| 17. Flower           | [1:18] |
| 18. Dondolo          | [1:00] |
| 19. A Moment of Jazz | [1:01] |
| 20. Always Near      | [1:08] |
| 21. Last Day         | [1:53] |

**Diary Pieces 2019 Set 2**

- |                         |        |
|-------------------------|--------|
| 22. Held Up             | [1:08] |
| 23. Another Epitaph     | [1:38] |
| 24. Invention for Jamie | [1:11] |
| 25. Sfumatore           | [2:13] |
| 26. Simple Song         | [0:33] |
| 27. Judah Halevi        | [2:26] |
| 28. Long, Long Ago      | [2:41] |

**Diary Pieces 2020**

- |  |        |
|--|--------|
| 29. 75th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz (23rd January) | [0:54] |
| 30. Locked-down, Opened up   | [1:49] |
| 31. Wild Raspberries in Queen's Wood                               | [1:07] |
| 32. This One for Jacob   | [2:09] |
| 33. For Mum  | [2:02] |
| 34. Darkening  | [0:32] |
| 35. First day at Castellucia                                       | [2:25] |

**Diary Pieces 2021 Set 1**

- |   |        |
|---|--------|
| 36. Slow Fade   | [0:57] |
| 37. Folksong  | [1:32] |
| 38. Apollo  | [1:41] |
| 39. Slow Waltz  | [1:20] |
| 40. As If Floating  | [0:44] |
| 41. 1564  | [3:02] |
| 42. White Roses, September Morning Sun, My Son Leaving Home | [1:14] |

**Diary Pieces 2021 Set 2**

- |   |        |
|---|--------|
| 43. Oxford Blues for Josh                 | [3:12] |
| 44. Once More Raspberries in Queen's Wood | [0:54] |
| 45. Song for Joe                          | [1:18] |
| 46. Fugato per Ferragosto                 | [1:37] |
| 47. In memoriam Jane and Tony             | [0:42] |
| 48. Remembering Louis                     | [1:39] |
| 49. Into the Distance                     | [1:33] |

**Diary Pieces 2022**

- |                                   |        |
|-----------------------------------|--------|
| 50. Fauré                         | [1:13] |
| 51. Open-Hearted (for Andy)       | [0:38] |
| 52. Mancino                       | [2:01] |
| 53. After Icarus                  | [1:16] |
| 54. Still Settling                | [1:53] |
| 55. Es ist gewisslich an der Zeit | [1:16] |
| 56. Simplicity                    | [2:23] |

Playing time [80:12]



### Writing a Musical Diary

In 2005, I wrote a work for clarinet, violin and piano that I called *Fragments from a Diary*, consisting of seven movements in various musical styles. Ten years later, I took up the idea of diary entries again, and it has spawned this ongoing series of small pieces for solo piano, also grouped in sevens. I've written most in a single day, with only minor subsequent refinements. But that has been the point: to get down quickly into notes a view of one thing – a feeling, a nuance, an image and, as is the nature of a diary, often with personal associations.

Being a contemporary classical composer in the late twentieth century meant, for many, to exclude anything that smacked of the past, in particular tonality – I was caught under that spell for a while. Yet I knew I was excluding music through which I could express myself and my ideas. And so, gradually I started to follow a path of inclusion – not a 'return' to tonality, but a search for ways to elide, juxtapose and reconcile the tonal and the less tonal. My frame of reference in these pieces ranges widely: from Bach to Brazilian jazz, Brahms to Jewish liturgical chant, French salon to folksong. Yet the expressivity comes as much from how the 'original' is transformed,

however subtly. At the same time, I have developed my own personal harmonic spectrum of shades and hues, where past and present, centring and suspension, are woven together and cannot easily be separated.

In terms of mood, there are recurring types, among which the bitter-sweet waltz, unwavering stillness, elegiac simplicity, folk-like dance, fleeting brilliance. Often these appear as if fragmented or cut short. Such fragmentation, combined with the stylistic pluralism, certainly echoes something of postmodernism. But there is nothing here to do with a postmodern sense of 'play'. Indeed, my main point of reference in relation to the fragment is Schumann – how he can so expressively leave harmonies hanging in the air at the end of one piano miniature or song, or start another in the middle of a chain of chords, or drop in references to previous movements to capture feelings of memory and loss. I too wish to evoke the poignant gap between absence and presence, the fleetingness and ache of remembering, the yearning for something that can never be recovered.

The first set of pieces here, from **2016**, is framed by two that recall Bach, not in harmony but in their spirit of balance and order; the sound-world is closer to Poulenc. If the second piece hovers, the third floats away as quickly as it begins. The fourth inhabits an imaginary idyll, with a sort of invented folk-music; the hoopoe, though, did appear in the garden of a family house in the Tuscan countryside, where many of these pieces were composed. The genre 'invention' also connects to Bach and pattern-making. Distance, by contrast, is suspended again, now in modernist, metre-less, terms.

The French-style waltz that begins the **2018** group is familiar in idiom until the 'question mark' of the last chord, which I see as placing it in today's world looking backwards. This separation between present and past grows as the fluttering gestures of the second piece take over. In the stillness of the third, I was as interested in chordal re-voicings as in responding to an Italian national holiday. Both the fourth and fifth pieces imagine their respective sources rather than imitate them, with the gondola song diving deep into memories of Venetian waters. If the sixth is a homage to Stravinskian reinvention of Bach, the final piece has no such distancing: it is an up-close self-examination of my Jewish identity.

The first piece from **2019** turns quickly from gentle innocence to shining dissonance. The second piece, written on the same day, by contrast remains poised throughout. 'Flower' is one of the more elaborated movements of the series – a gradual opening out of florid phrases over a rocking left hand. 'Dondolo', the Italian word for swing, rocks back and forth too, but with a briefer, unaltering gaze, while the fifth piece is even shorter, the tiniest slither of jazz-inflected colour. The sixth piece is one of my excursions into an unchanging scale, as opposed to the last one's weighing up of variously coloured harmonies, dissolving at its close.

**2019** gave rise to two sets of pieces, the first of the second set recalling patterns from the second of the first. 'Another Epitaph' is like a slowed-down memorial chorale, while the next is a present for a friend, and, as all the inventions, in a bright tonality. 'Sfumatore', meaning 'shadings' in Italian, is a short study in changing harmonies over a static bass, while 'Simple Song' is, once more, not an actual folksong but an imaginary one. In 'Judah Halevi', I continue to explore Jewish materials, Halevi a medieval Jewish poet who longed for return to his (and my) ancestral land. The mode is close to the traditional 'Ahavah Rabah' and its

characteristic augmented second interval. But mine changes in the upper octave, making its sound reminiscent of tradition, but from a place of modernity. The final piece is again to do with the distance between past and present. But here the evocation comes from blurring simple diatonic phrases with the pedal, and from tiny fragments of music-box-like melody that drift in and out.

The first **2020** entry, just a single phrase, defines more than any other piece on the album the potential I see in the fragment: how much can be said by what is left unsaid. The second is minimal in a different way – and evokes the feelings I had at the start of the first Covid lock-down. The third piece is another of my fantasy-folk imaginings, though Queen's Wood is local to where I live and the raspberries were real. In the fourth, I fully inhabit Brazilian *bossa nova*, beloved by me and my son Jacob. While the reference is strong too in the next – Brahms – the speed is deliberately just too slow, as if, perhaps, looking at the past through the wrong end of a telescope. A single, darkening gesture is the focus of the sixth piece, while the last is a further version of lockdown intensity, brilliant now under the Tuscan sun.

**2021** again saw two sets; many of the pieces might be heard in relation to previous ones. In the first set, piece one is a mixture of modernism and waltz; the following 'folksong' is not real; 'Apollo' is a curious concoction of diverse colours searching for rest; the next waltz variant is at once Brahms and Poulenc; 'As If Floating' is entirely diatonic yet without a centre; '1564' refers to the largest number of Covid victims who were recorded on a single day in the second lockdown; the last is suspended like the fourth, but its mood is that much more tender, as I contemplated one of my sons going off to university. In set two, the first piece refers to another of my sons suffering the pandemic, the twelve-bar blues form intact throughout, but enveloped in a wave of non-jazz dissonance. Another woodland walk elicited the stillness of number two, while the third revisits the gently nostalgic waltz. Numbers four, five and six are all pieces of remembrance: the fourth elaborates its falling, mourning phrase, in Baroque fugal style with non-Baroque dissonances; Jane Manning and Tony Payne were wonderful musicians and a great support to me – the fragment of tune I use here might have been a surprise to them; Louis Andriessen was one of my composition teachers. Though piece number seven appears

more abstract, its patterns of attack-melisma-decay are also ones of farewell.

The idea of things slipping away continues into the **2022** set. In the first piece, I dip my toes into the river of Fauré's wonderfully elusive harmonic flows. Number two begins with sharp-edged dancing phrases, but quickly drifts into a blur. The study for left hand focuses on a single pattern – but for all its regularity, it too starts to move out of reach harmonically. The fourth piece was written shortly after the premiere of my chamber opera *Raising Icarus*: its three phrases recall gestures from the opera, but as disconnected, unexpected memories. The fifth piece is a brief dialogue between stability and disruption, while the sixth conflates the stable and unstable into one stretched-out gesture taken from a Bach chorale; I think of this piece as a kind of musical 'still life'. The title of the last ought perhaps to have a question mark after it. The repetitive left hand could hardly be simpler. But what about the gentle tug of the cross-rhythms in the undulating melody? As in so many of the pieces here, the music teeters between tension and contemplation, emotion and serenity.

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### Joseph Houston (piano)

Joseph Houston is a British pianist based in Berlin. His performance practice encompasses a range of music, including contemporary and experimental music; late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century piano music; music for synthesizers; and his own compositions.

At the University of York and the Royal College of Music, London, he studied the core classical piano repertoire with Ashley Wass, Andrew Ball and Ian Jones. Since his studies, performances have included wide-ranging selections of music from Scarlatti, Ives, and Scriabin, to Rădulescu, Christian Wolff, and Chiyoko Szlavnick. Soon after graduating he performed Messiaen's *Turangalila-Symphonie* with the University of York Symphony Orchestra and gave performances of Brahms' First Piano Concerto, Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto, John Cage's Concert for Piano and Orchestra (with the RCM Contemporary Music Ensemble), as well as giving a solo recital of Beethoven, Debussy, and Thomas Simaku at Wigmore Hall.

Joseph performs as a soloist and with various groups, with recent performances including duos with Rolf Hind (piano), Lore Lixenberg (voice), and Lucy Railton (cello), as well as

larger collaborations with Quatuor Diotima, the Boulez Ensemble, and Ensemble PianoPercussion Berlin. Festival and venue appearances include among others Berlin Biennale; Lille Piano(s) Festival; Donaueschinger Musiktage; BBC Proms; Konzerthaus; Cheltenham Festival; Philharmonie; Southbank Centre; and Wigmore Hall.

Recent highlights include solo performances at Donaueschinger Musiktage; the world premiere of a new violin/piano work by Rebecca Saunders and Enno Poppe at Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik; the performance of new violin and retuned piano works by Cat Lamb in Berlin in 2022; and a portrait CD of composer Mark Barden, released on WERGO.

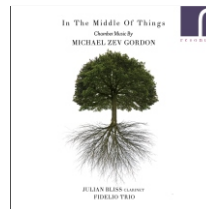
### Michael Zev Gordon (composer)

Michael Zev Gordon's music has been described as 'a clockmaker's craftsmanship [which] somehow coincides with romantic phantasmagoria' (*The Sunday Times*). A broad range of influences – including his teachers Holloway, Goehr, Knussen, Donatoni, Andriessen and Woolrich – have coalesced into an eclectic, individual voice, in which tradition and modernism happily rub shoulders; memory and time have been recurring subjects. Gordon has

written for a wide range of genres, and his works have been performed by many leading performers, including the BBC Symphony Orchestra, London Sinfonietta, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, the choir of King's College Cambridge, Quatuor Bozzini, Huw Watkins, Nicholas Daniel, Alina Ibragimova, Richard Watkins, Toby Spence and James Gilchrist. An important, occasional strand of his work has been to write for amateurs and children. Gordon has won the choral category of the British Composer Awards twice – the second of these for *Allele* on the subject of genes. He has also been awarded a Prix Italia for radiophonic composition for *A Pebble in the Pond*, written in collaboration with Eva Hoffman; while two portrait albums – *On Memory* (NMC, 2009) and *In the Middle of Things* (Resonus Classics, 2019) – were both in *The Times* '100 Best Albums of the Year'. His most major work to date, premiered in 2022, was the evening-length 'Raising Icarus', described in *The Guardian* as a 'high-flying chamber opera that packs a punch'. Gordon has been active as a teacher of composition for many years in the UK and abroad; he is Professor of Composition at the University of Birmingham.



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