

Musical suites are made up of a variety of dances or character pieces, often preceded by an Overture or Prelude. While my *Circus Suite* and *The Old Composer Remembers* consist of character pieces, the *Suite for Solo Violin* is cast in a more traditional baroque style, using different dance forms.

The whole CD is a kind of kaleidoscopic suite featuring a variety of idiom and instrumentation, and made up of music I composed over several decades. The *Flute Sonata* is the earliest (1965) and of course *The Old Composer Remembers* (2002) for solo lute, is among the most recent. Recent, too, are the tributes to Hirini Melbourne, whose untimely death was such a loss, in particular to Maori musicians, and for whom I composed the poem and flute solo featured here. The last piece is my *Cello Sonata*. Composition, voice and cello were my main studies as a student and, in a sense, this piece combines all three as the cello covers the range of the human voice, male and female, and always speaks from the heart.

Of the three CDs of my music, this one covers the widest time-span and is perhaps the most classically orientated. I studied composition at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama with Dr. Frank Spedding, and with the help of a Caird scholarship, went on to study with Sir Michael Tippett and Dr. Hans Gál. Spedding was a fine composer of technical brilliance, but who generously gave me my head as a student. His was a liberating influence. Tippett was composing his *Concerto for Orchestra* when I was studying with him. It remains one of the most structurally radical and inventive pieces of the twentieth century, and his ability to blend lyricism with intellectual vigour continues to inspire me. It was with Gál that I studied the longest. He embodied and sustained the traditions of European classical music, making me feel I had a right to be part of that great community of composers, however humble my own offerings. His music is now enjoying a revival, a just reward for his unswerving adherence to truth. I trust their ghosts will not be too troubled by the musical gratitude of their student.

In my childhood we had no radio or television. We did have a wind-up gramophone, but most of our music was made in the home, or heard live in the concert hall. My mother played the piano, my sister became a professional flautist, and my brother played the trombone and the piano. I played the cello and sang. I sang as a boy soprano and then as a baritone, and singing was my first subject at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, though cello and composition became increasingly important. My father, a poet, philosopher and lecturer in English Literature, loved to listen.

We often made music together: even so, starting out as a composer in my mid 'teens seemed a very daring thing, especially as, in those days, the family taste in music did not venture far beyond Debussy. Fortunately, my music teachers at Fettes College – Michael Lester-Cribb and David Gwilt – propelled me into the twentieth-century and I soon became a devotee of Bartók, Shostakovitch, Stravinsky, Frank Martin, Carl Orff and many another. In those days both Tchaikovsky and Carl Orff were looked down upon as too light and popular. As for

Brahms, he was derided for being too serious! But I never succumbed to musical fashion, perhaps inspired by my mother who would explode with passion in defence of Shelley – also out of fashion at the time. It meant nothing to her that she was addressing professors and lecturers of English Literature. She knew her Shelley and nobody was going to tell her what to think.

In the 70s and 80s, many composers followed the modernist movements of serialism and atonalism. As a child brought up singing Irish and Scottish traditional music and Brahms and Schubert lieder, I simply could not abandon tonality and melody – not for any imagined intellectual or formal gain. But with a philosopher for a father, and Bach, Beethoven and Brahms as daily fodder, I was and remain very conscious of the need for formal control and intellectual rigour, and much of my music uses strict forms and formal devices. They are there, however, as the servants of a higher purpose, to try and reach out to something finer than ourselves.

*Musicians:*

Lynda Green - Piano  
Jean Hutchison - Piano  
Jack Keaney - Piano  
Ronn McFarlane - Lute  
Philip Norris - Cello  
Rachel Barton Pine - Violin  
Robert Shannon - Piano  
Alexa Still – Flute

Total running time: 67'34"

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*Sleeve Notes:*

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*Photographs and Design:*

Seán Purser

*Producer:*

John Purser

Circus Suite

My grateful thanks to all the musicians who have given so much of themselves, and in particular to those who have commissioned or accepted pieces from me. I am honoured by their outstanding performances.

Above all, I thank my family and especially my son Seán and my wife Barbara who have done so much to make this project a reality. Seán is responsible for design, photography and many other aspects of production: Bar has brought her own musical sensitivities to bear and given constant support in every way. She has been a cello teacher for many years and the final track, the *Cello Sonata*, is dedicated to her.

Track Listing

1-6 Circus Suite (9'38") 7-9 Suite for Unaccompanied Violin (17'23") 10-12 Flute Sonata (15'08") 13-16 The Old Composer Remembers (8'08") 17 A Message to Hirini Melbourne (2'30") 18 In Memoriam Hirini Melbourne (3'36") 19 Cello Sonata (11'11")

1-6 *Circus Suite for Mick* (1975) 1 Overture 2 Mal-de-Mer 3 March 4 Romance 5 Huayno 6 Finale

The *Circus Suite* sets out to entertain with the same fun, sentiment and vulgarity as the circus. Some of the music was intended for a production of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, but as there was not a farthing on offer to pay the musicians, it never happened. However, this explains the French flavour of some of the piece, especially the *Overture* (1). The *Mal-de-Mer* (2) was composed for a queasy episode of sea-sickness in Jarry's play. The *March* (3) is one for the clowns.

When I completed the piece, I was worried that the *Romance* (4) was too simple and sentimental for anyone's good – but romance seems to have won through because people seem to like it.

The *Huayno* (5) is a traditional Andean tune, chosen as my brother spent many years in Peru and Chile, often high up in the Andes visiting remote mines and hearing little bands of musicians descending thousands of feet, playing all the way to a fiesta in some small

mountain town. After letting the tune speak for itself, I broke it up into chords and rebuilt it into a kind of musical image of the Andes themselves.

The *Finale* (6) is roundabout music, with the cross-rhythms almost as complicated as the gearing and rotations and undulations of the gaily-painted horses – but it all evanesces as the whole troupe march off into the distance, vanishing overnight as is the way with circuses.

I composed this piece in 1975 for my brother Michael, as a thank-you for his financial support when I and my family were in Italy. Michael loves the kind of music played at circuses or by small town bands, be they in Germany, Italy or Peru. The pianists are dear friends and fellow-students from long ago, Jean Hutchison and Jack Keaney, and this recording is taken from an LP issued by the Scottish Society of Composers.

Piano duet – Jean Hutchison and Jack Keaney

### *7-9 Suite for Unaccompanied Violin*

This virtuoso piece was commissioned by Leonard Friedman, to whom it was dedicated and who gave it its first performances and broadcast in 1970. It is placed firmly within classical traditions, and makes due homage to Bach and the traditional dance forms he used. I knew a little about virtuoso violin tradition as my aunt Bay Jellett was an orchestral leader and had studied with Adolf Brodsky – the first violinist to play the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto: but this *Suite* employs no pyrotechnics, but is very demanding in its different ways.

#### 7 Prelude and Fugue

The Prelude is entirely in double stops and is followed by a double Fugue, which is hard to achieve on solo violin, but the challenge was irresistible. The first subject, mostly in semi-quavers, is announced simultaneously with its counter melody. There are three entries of the subject before a return to double stops heralds the second subject which moves in quavers as though on uneven stepping stones, the gaps between soon being filled by its counter melody. Again there are three entries, before the music breaks out into fierce chords alternating with little phrases of dance. Finally, the first subject returns in altered form, combines with the second subject, and the whole ends up in celebratory mood.

#### 8 Pavan and Variations

The theme of the Pavan is used for three variations in different dance forms. The idea is to integrate the form of the Suite, so that the succession of dances makes a coherent whole. The Pavan itself is thoughtful and stately. The dance and its name are said to derive from the strut of the peacock. This particular peacock is, however, a sensitive creature and woos with decorum.

The Galliard which follows is entirely pizzicato and, for all that it is a dance, is without measure, its brief silences following the pattern of silences in the Pavan.

The Saraband is composed in thirds and has something of a late Viennese feel to it. Sarabands traditionally emphasise the second beat of the bar, as does this one, but it can also be thought of as an impossibly slow waltz.

The Double is a type of variation which elaborates on its predecessor. Fast as it is, it still retains all the essential elements both of the Sarabande and the initial Pavan, to which it makes a final brief return.

## 9 Saraband and Gavotte

This saraband is to be played freely and is more personal than communal. It leads straight into the final Gavotte which I allowed to get out of hand, the performer being told to accelerate little by little, throughout. The opening tempo must therefore be carefully chosen if it is to remain possible to play the end of it, by which time the dancers should be beyond help.

Violin – Rachel Barton Pine

## 10-12 *Flute Sonata* (1965)

My older sister was a professional flautist, so the flute has been part of my sound world since childhood days. She used to practice slow descending chromatic scales with the end of the flute pointing to the wall between our rooms, so she could hear it better. It sounded unutterably melancholic, but it instilled in me a deep love for the flute – my *Piobaireachd* “*Wai Taheke*” for solo flute is on the CD *Dreaming of Islands*. *Wai Taheke* was composed in 2005, so the two pieces are 40 years apart and it feels almost as though I was another person when I wrote the Sonata, which is in three movements.

According to the Irish Times, “The first movement has the freshness and piquancy of Shostakovich: the slow movement is good modern cantabile: the last includes brilliant building with and use of a striking and simple two-note brick.” (10)

I like the slow movement (11) best. If the last movement (12) is a brick, it might be used to break a few windows. It is a kind of toccata, and there are lots more than two notes. It is marked Presto.

Flute – Alexa Still; Piano – Robert Shannon

13-16 *The Old Composer Remembers* (2002) is dedicated to Mnemosyne – the goddess of Memory and mother of the Muses. The piece imagines the composer reminiscing on his lute. It was premiered by Rob McKillop in 2002.

First the composer recalls *The Day of Fanfares* (13). He no longer has commissions for fanfares, but he no longer needs trumpets to recall the sounds. I have included a fanfare

passage from Robert Carver's Six Part Mass.

Next he remembers *A Day With A Colleague* (14). This is a tribute to my father-in-law, Elliot Forbes, who was professor of music at Harvard University. His initials form the start of the upper line of a strict but affectionate two-part canon on EFBEs - Elliot Forbes = E F Bflat Eflat.

The third movement recalls *A Day Fishing* (15). The river flows by and the day is full of daydreams and nothing is caught. It partly re-surfaced from the first movement of the *Clavier Sonata* (on CD *Dreaming of Islands*).

Finally, the old composer recalls *The Day of the Daft Dance* (16). The idea came from nowhere and composed itself in ten minutes, the way daft dances do.

Lute – Ronn MacFarlane

### 17 *A Message to Hirini Melbourne* (2005)

Hirini Melbourne was a leading Maori musician, singer, song-writer and teacher. I only met him once, but we corresponded and shared many ideas. His early death was a great loss to Maori culture, felt by thousands who came to his funeral. After visiting Hirini's grave with his brother, I also composed the poem *A Message to Hirini Melbourne*. Hirini's name sounded like birdsong to me, so that is the imagery of the poem. The pre-Christian Celtic lament, the *pilililiu*, is like the call of the redshanks who gather in thousands on the sea-shore.

Reader – John Purser

### *A Message To Hirini Melbourne*

Hirini,  
the bird-call of your name  
was too soon cut in stone, your song  
pressed into plastic, and your voice box  
buried there, under a heap of ruffled soil  
beside the family farm: and just beyond,  
the bush, bird-rich and beckoning:-  
it is your voice I hear in every call,  
bell-like or chattering; a brief alarm,  
or dotting chuckle as a saddle-back  
feeds its mate: at night a kiwi,  
stalking grubs; by day the weka  
scavenging to good ends: or is it you,  
the antipodean robin, with soft white breast  
that comes, familiar, to my feet  
to see what I've turned up? -  
or there, a sudden fan-tail flash

in tree-fern tops, with its sweet chattering.

Your voice in all of these,  
how shall I return your call  
two continents away?  
Shall I send terns to scream into your ear  
in protest at your death,  
or owls, old ladies of the night,  
to haunt the spirit world with hoots  
to draw you out of hiding?

I could engage a lark to thrill your mind,  
a chaffinch to endear you to domestic thoughts;  
perhaps a wren with sweet shrill cry  
to tease you into search  
of your competitor in concealment:  
that I might see once more that winning smile,  
or catch the way you brushed the air  
with your pursed mouth, your putorino  
drawing me across oceans of life and death:  
hirini,

    hirini,

        hirini,

I send you my song calling from the shore,  
pilililiu,

    pilililiu,

        pilililiu:

and when I wake into that other world  
where bird-song breathes eternity, we'll sing  
hipiriliu,

    piriniliu,

        ripiniliu.

18 *In Memoriam Hirini Melbourne* (2005) for solo flute follows the poem. It was composed for Alexa Still to play when we were both sharing music with Maori musicians in Rotorua.

Flute – Alexa Still

19 *Cello Sonata* (1987)

Philip Norris commissioned this piece with financial assistance from the Scottish Arts Council. It is dedicated to my wife, Barbara, a cello teacher for many years, and I play the cello myself (see Tracks 1, 2 and 12 on the CD *Dreaming of Islands*), so naturally I love the instrument. Although the sonata is free of display, it is intense and personal.

I think of the cello as nearer to the human voice than are other instruments, and this has resulted in a work of emotional rather than technical bravura. The piano shares in this equally, though the cello is the chief instigator. The sonata is in a single movement, using a free-flowing form, but not without its more intellectual and contrapuntal passages, from which it emerges into a final triumph that evanesces into mystery.

Cello – Philip Norris; Piano – Lynda Green