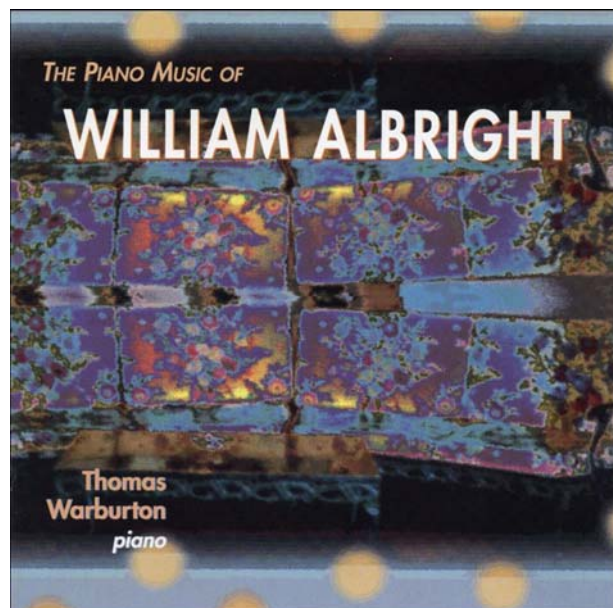


NWCR674

The Piano Music of William Albright

Thomas Warburton, piano



<i>Five Chromatic Dances</i> (1976)	(28:20)
1. Procession and Rounds	(5:04)
2. Masquerade	(2:50)
3. Fantasy-Mazurka	(6:12)
4. Hoedown	(6:08)
5. The Farewell	(8:06)
6. <i>Pianoàgogo</i> (1965–66)*	(6:16)
7. <i>Sphaera</i> for piano and computer-generated sound (1985).....	(17:16)
<i>Grand Sonata in Rag</i> (1968)	(14:16)
8. Scott Joplin's Victory	(8:34)
9. Ragtime Turtledove	(4:24)
10. Behemoth Two-Step	(4:18)

Total playing time: 65:09

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Notes

William Albright completed *Five Chromatic Dances* in August of 1976 in response to a commission by Thomas Warburton. The five movements are: Procession and Rounds, Masquerade, Fantasy-Mazurka, Hoedown, and The Farewell. While each of the moments is distinct and complete, the whole forms a continuous cycle, with the Procession of the first movement functioning as introduction and The Farewell of the last acting as conclusion.

The work is conceived in the grand Romantic piano tradition. Sustained, subtly shifting tremolos of the last movement remind one of Beethoven's use of the same effect, perhaps, as in the middle movement of the "Ghost" Trio. In the Masquerade, one remembers the etudes and preludes of Debussy, and the *tempo di habanera* in Hoedown makes a veiled reference to Debussy's *Soirée dans Grenade*. The intense and colorful harmonies, especially in the first and third movements, suggest the music of Messiaen. One is reminded of Chopin in the Fantasy-Mazurka, especially in the improvisatory opening and the eloquent lyricism of the closing. Despite an allusion to Chopin's Mazurka in A Minor, Op. 17, No. 4, at the conclusion of the third movement, it is as though Albright were coming to the cadence on his own rather than simply quoting.

The music exploits oppositions, either contrast in mood, opposition of registers, or shifting of inflections. Albright portrays the contrasts in mood with evocative tempo indications. In the first movement, the opening *molto misterioso* of the Procession yields to the *delirious, obsessive* Rounds. In the fourth, a *joyous, ecstatic* opening dance is abandoned for *tempo di habanera, with a mysterious spirit*. Likewise, in the second movement, a *dance-like-delicate* interrupts the opening *scherzando; assertive, brassy*. While the Dionysian spirit ultimately prevails in the first and fourth

movements, a more Apollonian cast pervades the closing of the second and third movements and the whole of the fifth movement. Thus, the *misterioso* that opens the Procession returns at last for the *mystically ringing* close of the final moments.

As a counterpoint to the contrasts in mood, the music opposes the various regions in the compass of the piano. For example, the Procession begins in the lowest register, while the Rounds are heard in the very highest. Indeed, the lowest A acts as a pedal in much of the former, while the highest C is a sinister herald in the latter. At the climax of the Masquerade, there is a brilliant sweep from the top to the bottom of the keyboard and the resulting *static, hushed* denouement lies in the middle. In The Farewell, the whole of the piano is embraced in that the tremolando acts as a peaceful accompaniment to the counterpoint of two lines played (bell-like) deep in the bass and high in the treble. The eerie quality of the central section in the Fantasy-Mazurka is derived from the fortissimo cries in the upper register, which disturb the incessant ticking in the middle register, ultimately disappearing. Albright ends the work with a question, a stark melody played simultaneously at extremes of the piano compass.

The first pitches of the Procession—B, C, and B-flat—establish the tonal framework of the cycle. The B finds its significance as the initial pedal tone for the lyric portion of the Fantasy-Mazurka and as a dominant to the E-oriented Hoedown. C becomes the center for the opening of Masquerade in addition to furnishing the high notes of the Rounds, and B-flat is then the dominant to the E-flat of the opening of the Fantasy-Mazurka. Through B-flat, the "tonal fundamental" descends to A early in the Procession and ultimately to G-sharp in the Mazurka. With B as the axis, whether explicit or implicit, throughout the work, the ending

of *The Farewell* is left at a distance on the two satellites, B-flat and C, finally coming to rest on C.

Underlying the cycle of moods, register, and tones is a transformation of musical substance that leads from the beginning to the middle and away from the middle to the end. The steadiness of the Procession returns in the middle section of the Fantasy-Mazurka. The rhapsodic, recitative-like music of the Rounds softens somewhat in the Masquerade, and ultimately becomes the lyric, freely flowing melody of the Mazurka. On the other side, tremolos, which are ornamental in the melody of the Mazurka, turn into demonic fiddle passages in the Hoedown but end ultimately as the serene tremolando of *The Farewell*.

Pianoògogo embodies the relatively recently established tradition of the cocktail pianist. In 1965 the work was premiered by Russell Peck as a theater piece, with the performer assisted by a dancer and accompanied by a tape. In the fall of 1966, the piece was lengthened to its present form. Like the *Dances*, *Pianoògogo* is a fantasy, and the climax of this brief work is an outburst by an otherworldly jazz pianist. The work is related in spirit to the composer's *Juba* for organ solo (1965) (from CRI SD 277 and excerpted on CRI CD 670). Appropriate to its more leisurely, improvisatory manner, *Pianoògogo* is notated spatially.

—Thomas Warburton

Sphaera (Latin for "sphere") is, in its marriage of computer-generated tape and acoustic piano, an attempt to extend and magnify the sounds of the live instrument. This is most clearly heard in the third of the five sections that make up the work, the tape here being based on digital recordings of an extra-large Bösendorfer concert grand. The mostly low and loud notes are altered in ways impossible on a normal piano; for example, notes crescendo and glissando, are transformed into their harmonic components, or are flung about in space.

The first section of the work's tape part, by contrast, is purely computer-generated, but is also based on a similar principle. While the live piano is obsessed with reiterations of two striking resonant sounds—the highest F-sharp on the keyboard and its next-to-lowest A, muted—the electronic part extends and prolongs the aureoles produced in the resonance of these polarized pitches. Meanwhile other notes, above and below, are added, like the rings of a planet.

The metaphor of astronomy is not coincidental, as I have tried to capture a bit of the sense of *musica mundi* (music of the spheres), explained by classical and medieval philosophers as the "super-human" music produced by the motion of the heavenly bodies. Synthesized music seems to me to work well when yearning for the ineffable; it is appropriate that it can evoke the Platonic universe of audible but unnoticed planetary songs.

In addition to the spiritual dimensions of the piece, I should mention some of the humanly poetic evocations implanted in the piece: a "Big Ben" bell sound (produced by sampling the sound of a Revereware pan and lowering it several octaves) and a sort of Mid Eastern music, perhaps creeping in because of my domicile above a Turkish restaurant while composing the piece. Lastly, and more significantly, the constant tonal friction between the tonalities of D-major and B-flat minor was perhaps inspired by a late Liszt choral work, *Via Crucis*, which I studied and conducted during the same months.

Sphaera was commissioned by the MIT Experimental Music Studio with a grant from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts. It is dedicated to the pianist David Burge, a faithful and brilliant performer of my music. The tape was realized at MIT with the assistance of Keith Hamel and Miller Puckette.

The *Grand Sonata in Rag* falls in the middle of my period of fascination with America's ragtime, 1967–1970. Ragtime, a beautiful, classical, syncopated music from the turn of the century, has turned out to have a new fascination for composers nurtured in our century's subsequent modernism. Imagination, as well as tonality and rhythmic vitality, could run rampant: Why not have fun and sentimentality? It's very avant-garde.

The Sonata links three large-scale rag compositions. The first movement is ragtime in spite of an enlarged structure: the piece retains typical syncopated figurations, ragtime phraseology, and strophic repetitions. But it also has big Romantic contrasts and fantasy-like development. The result is the (perhaps impossible) synthesis of ragtime texture with ambitious architecture: bold, ebullient, and slightly insane. "Scott Joplin's Victory"—that is, at least from the perspective of 1968, the overdue victory of his recognition as one of America's great composers—might even be considered an heroic tone poem about that composer's life.

"Ragtime Turtledove" is, by contrast, more lyrical, and will remind one of the ragtime master Joseph Lamb. The finale, "Behemoth Two-Step," is a virtuoso display piece, again rather far removed from the traditional march-form of ragtime. To emphasize the bogus dramatic qualities, there is, halfway through, a quasi-quote from Wagner (the "Magic Fire Music"). The work closes with a theme that has shapes in common with the final melodies of the first and second movements.

—William Albright

William Albright (b Gary, IN, 20 Oct 1944; d Ann Arbor, MI, 17 Sept 1998), composer and performer, has concertized widely in Europe, Canada, and the United States, specializing in concerts of recent music for organ. While he has premiered over thirty new works written by American and European composers, he is also highly regarded as an interpreter of classic piano ragtime and early jazz styles such as Harlem stride and boogie-woogie.

As a composer he is well known for his keyboard works, though he has produced compositions for every medium, several of which involve electronic, visual, and theatrical elements. He has been the recipient of many commissions and awards, among them the Queen Marie-José Prize, an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, two Fulbright and two Guggenheim Fellowships, the Symphonic Composition Award of Niagara University, two National Endowment for the Arts grants, and two Koussevitzky Composition Awards. He has received commissions from the Koussevitzky Foundation, Chamber Music America, and Meet the Composer/Reader's Digest. In 1979 he held the composer-in-residence post at the American Academy in Rome; in 1993 he was honored with the Composer of the Year Award from the American Guild of Organists, and in 1995 he won the Roger Wagner Center for Choral Studies Competition. His works have been selected for performance at the 1970, 1979, and 1990 International Society for Contemporary Music festivals. Major orchestras that have performed Albright works have included the Detroit Symphony, the Budapest Philharmonic, the Austrian Radio Orchestra, the Buffalo Philharmonic, the Bergen Symphony, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the American Composers Orchestra.

Albright is presently professor of music and chair of the composition department at the University of Michigan. In 1973 he was honored with the Distinguished Service Award from that institution, and in 1990 he received a Faculty Recognition Award. Albright has pursued research in live

electronic music and is associate director of the university's Electronic Music Studio. His organ work commissioning series, started in 1976, has already made substantial contributions to the literature for that instrument.

For the Music Masters/Musical Heritage Society label, he has produced six piano recordings, among them releases devoted to the music of James P. Johnson, to Albright's own rag compositions, and (in 1990–92) to the complete piano music of Scott Joplin. His compositions are published principally by C. F. Peters, though Elkan-Vogel (Presser), Jobert (Presser), Universal, Dorn, Mel Bay, and E. G. Marks each represent several works.

As performer, Albright is represented by Karen McFarlane Management (12429 Cedar Road, Cleveland, Ohio 44106).

Thomas Warburton is a member of the musicology faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he teaches courses in music of the twentieth century and in music theory. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, where he has appeared in numerous Contemporary Directions concerts. He appeared at the American Festival of the National Gallery of Art in 1972, and in the summer of 1980 he received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to study manuscripts in the Ives Collection of the Yale Music Library.

Production Notes

Produced by William Albright

Five Chromatic Dances and *Pianoagogo* recorded by Timothy Warner, engineer, at Hill Hall, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, June 1980. Editing by William Albright.

Sphaera and *Grand Sonata* recorded by Jeff Soo, engineer, at the recording studios of Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, May 1992. Editing by William Albright and Matt Hanson, Brookwood Studios, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Pianos: Steinway Model D.

Publishing:

Five Chromatic Dances and *Sphaera*: Henmar Press (C. F. Peters) (ASCAP).

Pianoagogo and *Grand Sonata in Rag*: Editions Jobert (Theodore Presser) (ASCAP).