

NWCR869

# James Sellars

## Piano Works



1. Piano Sonata No. 4 ("Sonata Brasileira") (1987) (13:18)  
Fermin Bernetxea, piano
2. Piano Sonata No. 5 ("Sonata Dada") (1985) ..... (7:12)  
Anthony de Mare, piano
3. Sonatina (1988) ..... (10:43)  
Julian Jacobson, piano
4. Piano Sonata No. 3 (1983–1997) ..... (8:35)  
Aki Takahashi, piano
5. Piano Sonata No. 2 (1981) ..... (10:03)  
Scott Dunn, piano
6. Piano Sonata No. 6 ("Patterns on a Field") (1986) (9:58)  
Lisa Moore, piano
7. Piano Sonata No. 1 (1973) ..... (9:34)  
Jean Pierre Dupuy, piano

Total playing time: 68:58

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## Notes

"If you are concerned about preserving your identity, forget music and have yourself cloned." This is James Sellars's answer when asked what he thinks of the idea of "One Composer, One Musical Language." "With all that's out there, how can anyone compose in the same style all the time? It's boring," he quips.

Composer **James Sellars** (*b* Fort Smith, AR, 8 Oct 1943) delights in the stylistic diversity of his works—a diversity that is explored in this survey of his piano writing over the last quarter century. In his music, the piano has always played a central role in working out new compositional ideas and diverse stylistic paths. His take on sonata form runs parallel to his pluralistic view on style: To him, a sonata is a serious piece, abstract or descriptive, in any number of movements. Like the harpsichord sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti, the sonatas here are in one movement. "The word 'sonata,'" says Sellars, "goes back at least as far as Gabrieli, through Pasquini, Marcello, and Kuhnau, to the *Sonatas and Interludes* by John Cage."

Sellars explains the use of seven pianists on this disc: "All the performers here are friends of mine. I know their work well; any of the seven can play anything in any style. But I tried to match the style of each work with the strengths and personality of each pianist." All seven artists performed on the same piano, in the same hall, and all were recorded by Judith Sherman. The result is an extraordinary account of this music.

Sonata No. 4 ("Sonata Brasileira") was written during the winter of 1987. Since at that time Sellars had not yet visited Brazil, the result is an imaginary musical portrait of the expansive Brazilian landscape, dramatic in its expression and filled with long, nostalgic melodic lines, irregular patterns, and an entreating repetition that suggests a longing for ecstasy. This imaginary portrait is charged with an erotic energy that seemingly has no end—instead of a finale, the music fades into a sleep filled with dreams of itself. On a technical level, Sonata

No. 4 is an extension of the keyboard virtuosity of Schumann, Chopin, and Liszt, combined with a repetitive minimalism and a postmodern use of codes from the past. In this mix, we hear echoes of the nineteenth century and fleeting passages of tonality, laid out in large, pianistic gestures. A faint resemblance to sonata form can be heard in the modified repetition of the opening theme, which leads to a closing section and a coda of rapid sixteenths that gradually climb from the bottom to the top register, climaxing in a *sforzando* chord followed by an extended *diminuendo* to the end. Sonata No. 4 was written for the Brazilian-American pianist Luiz de Moura Castro.

Sonata No. 5 is titled "Sonata Dada," and indeed a streak of Dadaism can be heard in the work's irreverent interruptions and persistent self-contradiction. Musical gestures take on an ambitious air only to become an inconsequential phrase or parody. The injection of Dada elements into this piece was the composer's way of relieving the indigestion brought about by musical modernism; the work's spiritual forbearers include the early John Cage (*The Seasons*), the wry Virgil Thomson, and the iconoclastic music of Erik Satie. Sonata No. 5 also emphasizes the Dada spirit at the level of form: passages hang together, then fall apart—the music just goes on until it stops.

Written in 1988, the Sonatina is in three connected movements—the traditional fast, slow, fast. Although it uses diatonic pitch material and progresses through eleven key signatures and several modes, it could scarcely be considered tonal. The outer movements feature an intricate web of cross-accented phrases, and articulation. The central movement presents a long, hesitant line that almost coalesces into a song. The sparkling sonatinas of Clementi and Kuhlau were doubtless an inspiration.

Piano Sonata No. 3 was begun in 1983, but not completed until 1997. Sellars writes: "During the intervening fourteen years so much had happened in the classical music world—

postmodernism, post-minimalism, neo-Romanticism, the use of synthesizers and computers—that I found it strange, if not difficult, to pick up the thread of the Sonata’s concentrated modernist style. Back in 1983, repeats of any kind in musical modernism were *verboten*. My decision in 1997 to repeat literally one section of the Sonata was influenced by the repetition in Stravinsky’s late serial works (*Agon*, *Movements* for piano and orchestra). Since I also felt the constant development and variation of the musical ideas was too much for any listeners but specialists, I decided to allude to the traditional sonata form by introducing a recapitulation of the opening. Following this brief, formal repeat (a mere ten measures) is the immediate return to a continuous variation of the opening material. The complicated rhythms that result might be compared to the random ringing of bells. Throughout the work this reiteration of the ringing motive is interrupted by extended episodes that explore various contemporary pianistic techniques.” Sonata No. 3 was written for, and dedicated to, Aki Takahashi.

During the winter of 1980–1981, Sellars composed Sonata No. 2 and dedicated it to his friend, the late Yvar Mikhashoff. The sonata departs from the open, sonorous quality of the modern grand piano, and especially from the use of the damper pedal, to produce widespread harmonic combinations. The word *sonata* is used here for its original meaning as “a sounding,” rather than for its acquired reference to sonata form. The formal plan is quite simple: moving from slow to fast, from soft to loud. The work essentially projects one long line, at times accompanied by dense harmonic material, lending to the musical continuity a relentless momentum from beginning to end. Of interest, en route, are the cadenza-like passages of rapid (digital) pitches that fuse into an (analog) sonic expanse, much like the dots of a newspaper photograph make up a solid image. The final (and longest) cadenza was inspired by the extensive solo harpsichord part in Bach’s Fifth Brandenburg Concerto. This cadenza leads directly to a concluding virtuosic coda.

Sonata No. 6 (“Patterns on a Field”), completed in September 1985, is constructed of various musical patterns, placed and displaced on a field of common time (*alla breve*). From a perspective conditioned by earlier Western music, the patterns may sound like motives, but they do not actually “motivate” the piece. Instead, they merely appear and reappear, relative to the stasis of the field. The overall form is an alternation of verse and refrain. Each of the verses is newly invented, whereas the refrain, though slightly varied with each appearance, always makes clear its identity. This regularity of form, steadiness of beat, and repetition of clear-cut patterns lend to the work a temporal stability and insistence often encountered in certain styles of rock and minimalism. In 1992 Sellars arranged this sonata for ensemble to highlight these figurative variations.

—Finn Byrhard

#### Composer’s Comments:

The pianist Howard Shelley premiered Sonata No. 1 after it had won first prize at the 1976 International Stroud Festival in England. Completed three years earlier, it is in one movement divided into three sections, followed by a coda. Despite a resemblance to the ubiquitous post-serial idiom, the music is infused with distinctly romantic, lyrical lines. There is no precompositional scheme guiding the work: it was composed “by ear,” and by the study of pieces of similar non-tonal complexity. Here again, a wink to the traditional sonata comes eight measures from the end in the form of a mammoth chord, which uses the opening four notes of the work. Hardly an eighteenth-century recapitulation, but the chord makes its point in sheer volume and dissonance.

—James Sellars

**Fermin Bernetxea**’s professional career was launched when he graduated with the Superior Professor degree from the Royal Conservatory in Madrid after studies with Pedro Espinosa, Pilar Estremera, and Luiz de Moura Castro. Since then, his devotion to contemporary music has earned him several prizes, among them the Pablo Sarasate Prize and the “Best Performer of Contemporary Music” award at the Montsalvatge International Piano Competition. In addition to his duties as a professor at the Conservatorio Superior in Pamplona, Spain, he maintains an extensive recital schedule in Europe and the United States. He has appeared at several festivals, including Alicante, where he was featured at an evening of music by James Sellars.

Throughout the world, **Anthony de Mare** is recognized as an articulate exponent of contemporary music. He has generated great excitement and acclaim through appearances with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York, and performances at the Bergen and Ultima festivals in Norway, the Mardi Gras Festival in Sydney, the Huddersfield and Almeida festivals in England, and the Banff Festival in Canada. He has premiered and commissioned works by a long list of composers, including Frederic Rzewski, Aaron Jay Kernis, David Lang, Chester Biscardi, and Donald Martino. His many recordings include works by John Cage, Meredith Monk, Henry Cowell, and Lou Harrison, issued by CRI, Mode, O.O. Discs, Wergo, Gasparo, XI, and Centaur.

**Scott Dunn** is assuredly establishing himself as a significant musician—in spite of a detour to become an eye surgeon. His performance at a fundraising concert for eye surgery in Guatemala met with such acclaim in the *Los Angeles Times* that he began making regular public appearances as a pianist in the United States and Europe. After winning the prestigious U.S. Artistic Ambassador Competition, he moved to New York, where he has worked with such composers as Elliott Carter, Ned Rorem, Richard Rodney Bennett, and Leonard Rosenman. He has recently recorded music by Irwin Bazelon for the Albany label and by Roger Reynolds for Neuma.

Since the completion of his musical studies in Paris, **Jean Pierre Dupuy** has dedicated his career as pianist and director exclusively to contemporary music. He is artistic director of the Música Studio Ensemble, and the founder and director of the group Solars Vortices, which operates under the auspices of the French Ministry of Culture. He has commissioned and premiered many works by composers such as Tomas Marco, Luis de Pablo, John Cage, Giacinto Scelsi, Bruno Maderna, and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Residing in Spain, he has given worldwide exposure to countless works by Spanish composers in concerts, workshops, and master classes, and as a visiting lecturer at several universities in the United States. The latest of his many recordings is *Sonatas and Interludes* by John Cage on the Stradivarius label.

One of Britain’s most creative and wide-ranging pianists, **Julian Jacobson** performs an immense repertoire that encompasses the great classical and romantic masterworks as well as contemporary music. Since his highly praised London debut in 1974, he has played with the major British orchestras, appeared at the principal British festivals, including Aldeburgh, Bath, Dartington, and Edinburgh, and performed in more than thirty countries on five continents. In 1987 he gave the British premiere of Ligeti’s *Études*, Book One, at Queen Elizabeth Hall. Many composers have written for him, including Stephen Oliver, Simon Bainbridge, and Gareth Davies. Prominent among his many CD releases are recordings of the complete Weber sonatas and a Schumann album, both on the Meridian label, and a recording on Chandos of Martinu’s *Sinfonietta Giocosa*, with the Bournemouth Sinfonietta, conducted by Tamás Vásáry.

Australian pianist **Lisa Moore** is currently the pianist for the Da Capo Chamber Players and the Bang On A Can All-Stars. Since moving to New York in 1985, she has performed with the New York City Ballet, St. Luke's Orchestra, the Steve Reich Ensemble, the Australian Chamber Orchestra, and many others. Appearances throughout the world include performances at the Holland, Lincoln Center, Israel, Warsaw, Aspen, Graz, Huddersfield, Tanglewood, and Adelaide festivals. Her 1993 CD "Wild Russians" won "Best Australian Recording" in the ABC Fine Music Awards, and her recording of Janacek's piano music was recently released on Tall Poppies. Additional recordings are available on Sony, BMG, Deutsche Grammophon, Point, Nonesuch, New Albion, and CRI.

**Aki Takahashi** made her public debut shortly after graduating from the Tokyo University of Arts with a master's degree in 1970. While acknowledged for her classical musicianship, her enthusiasm and acclaim as a new music interpreter have attracted the attention of many composers. John Cage, Morton Feldman, Toru Takemitsu, Isang Yun, Pauline Oliveros, and Poul Ruders have all created works for her. She directed the "New Ears" concert series in Yokohama (1983–1997), was artist-in-residence at SUNY Buffalo (1980–1981), and was guest professor at the California Institute of the Arts in 1984. Her landmark recording of twenty contemporary piano works, "Piano Space," received the Merit Prize at the 1973 Japan Art Festival. She has edited all the piano works of Erik Satie for Zen-On and recorded them for Toshiba-EMI. She has also recorded for Nonesuch, ALM, and Mode.

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## Production Notes

### Publishing:

All works published by Hog River Music (BMI).