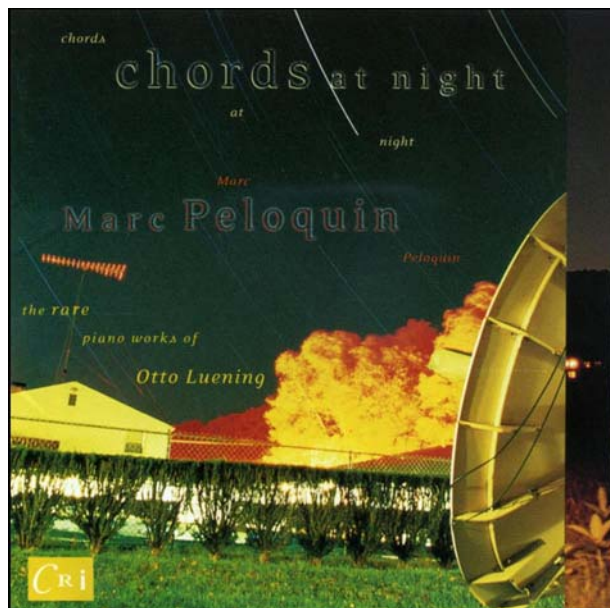


NWCR872

# Marc Peloquin

## Otto Luening Piano Works



Six Preludes (1935–1951) .....	(8:29)
1. Slow .....	(1:53)
2. Moderato .....	(0:39)
3. Andante .....	(1:18)
4. Andante .....	(1:35)
5. Allegro ma non troppo .....	(0:48)
6. Moderato .....	(2:15)

First Short Sonata for Piano (1958) .....	(5:05)
7. I. Allegro giusto .....	(1:58)
8. II. Grave .....	(3:07)
9. III. Vivace .....	(2:06)
10. Tango (1985) .....	(3:24)
11. <i>Song without Words</i> (1987) .....	(2:16)
12. <i>Sonority Forms I</i> for Piano (1983) .....	(11:34)
13. <i>Sonority Forms II</i> for Piano (1984) “The Right Hand Path” .....	(4:01)
14. <i>Sonority Forms III</i> for Piano (1989) .....	(5:57)
15. <i>Image</i> (1989) .....	(2:20)
Fourth Short Sonata for Piano (1967) .....	(7:56)
16. I. Allegro Moderato .....	(1:05)
17. II. Adagio .....	(1:46)
18. III. Allegro .....	(1:59)
19. IV. Allegro moderato–Allegro vivace ....	(3:04)
20. <i>Chords at Night</i> (1989) .....	(3:08)
<i>Fantasia Études</i> for Piano (1994) .....	(8:22)
21. I. Moderato commodo .....	(3:24)
22. II. Allegro moderato .....	(4:56)

Marc Peloquin, piano

Total playing time: 64:42

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## Notes

Marc Peloquin’s disc of piano music by **Otto Luening** (*b* Milwaukee, WI, 15 June 1900; *d* New York City, 2 Sept 1996) comes as a welcome and illuminating surprise. A set of tightly organized keyboard works written over the course of half a century, it is yet another documentation of Luening’s wide-ranging musical powers.

Those who know only Luening’s groundbreaking electronic compositions from the early 1950s—experiments in sound that managed to be both radical and charming—may be startled initially by the structural clarity of these piano pieces. It should not be forgotten that the most important influence on the young Luening was Ferruccio Busoni, among the greatest piano virtuosos in history and a composer of highly cerebral, markedly original music. (His unfinished opera *Doktor Faust* is generally regarded as the most intellectually engaging of the many settings of the old tale.) Although Luening was only a teenager at the time of his studies with Busoni, some of the Master’s brooding sense of mystery remained with him.

Yet the young Luening was also a pianist and composer for silent films—and the vigorously energetic qualities we find in this music have less to do with Faustian ruminations from the Old World than they do with raffish, vibrant America during the period of its greatest growth. “I’ve always tried to be in touch with people who wanted to free this great creative force we have in this country,” he once said. “In American music today there’s a terrific amount of differentiation, a variety of

styles and approaches. And that’s the American story: this enormous, broad thing.”

In short, Luening was a pluralist; he seemed to be interested in everything. Moreover, he was absolutely without dogmatism: during his tenure at Columbia University, he taught composers of radically different stylistic orientations—John Corigliano, Charles Dodge, Charles Wuorinen, Mario Davidovsky, Wendy Carlos, and John Kander (composer of *Cabaret*)—a diverse group of creators indeed.

On May 24, 2000, Peloquin played several of these pieces at an Otto Luening centennial concert in Columbia’s Miller Theater (the same place where the pioneering electronic pieces had received their premiere forty-eight years earlier). Paul Griffiths, covering the concert for the *New York Times*, wrote an accurate and poetic summary of Luening’s aesthetic: “A typical Luening movement will start with some small musical point and fluently extend from it under the shadow of the masters, often with a dance rhythm gently in the background, though also, less conventionally, with a mysteriously wobbly sense of harmony. In a musical world where the old major and minor keys were losing their grip, Luening found ways to go on taking random walks, serene and sunlit, never minding that his chord progressions would have to slip in almost every measure.”

It is well worth taking Luening’s “walks”—and Peloquin is a splendid and authoritative guide.

—Tim Page

Pianist Marc Peloquin's journey into the universe of Otto Luening started with Henry Cowell. A dedicated champion of modern music and an appreciator of its historical aspects, Peloquin developed an interest in pieces originally published in Henry Cowell's quarterly *New Music*, which the composer founded and ran from 1927 to 1958 to promote new composers. Some peers Cowell published were Charles Ives, Edgard Varèse, and John Cage—but the music that caught Peloquin by surprise was that of century-spanning composer Otto Luening.

Luening the “tape music” pioneer, Luening the cofounder of the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, Luening the composer of works with titles like *Fantasy in Space* and *Low Speed*—these aspects of the man did not prepare Peloquin for Luening the writer of lyrical, Satie-like piano preludes.

“Those preludes and études go back to Chopin,” says Peloquin, whose main attraction to and criteria for learning a piano piece is the piece's lyricism. “Did Luening's electronic creations have any influence on his instrumental music? I'd have to say no. You would never know from listening to this piano music that he was in a lab at Columbia with Babbitt and Ussachevsky.” Throughout a life that began when Puccini was still alive and ended after John Cage died, and in spite of all the comings and goings of musical trends, Luening composed piano music that “maintains an integrity, a sincerity of expression,” says Peloquin.

In 1997 the pianist performed a three-concert series focusing on piano pieces published in *New Music*, Luening's Eight Preludes among them. Luening's widow, Catherine Luening, attended one of the concerts, and a year later, Peloquin, along with other artists who had a connection to Luening's music, received a letter from Mrs. Luening and the Otto Luening Trust inviting the recipients to be involved in the upcoming Luening centennial in 2000. Scores would be available for perusal. That caught Peloquin's eye. “I was very happy to get the letter,” says Peloquin, “and I was eager to respond.”

The first step, Peloquin decided, was to visit Mrs. Luening and take her up on her offer to review her husband's compositions. Entering the Riverside Drive apartment the Luenings occupied for more than a quarter century “brought me into Otto's world,” says Peloquin. In the tidy living room were music stands at which Luening had practiced flute, an exhaustive library of his books—and a large stack of the late composer's piano music, thoughtfully pulled out by Catherine Luening. Peloquin suggested sifting through them at the piano, which his host readily agreed to.

“I started playing through the music and I was really taken,” recalls Peloquin. “The music fired my imagination. There were pieces in there that I didn't know existed and the ones that I did know I had never seen or heard. I had this feeling of discovering a treasure.”

He had. All of the pieces on this recording have at some point been published, but knowledge of their existence was scant. Performances were rare and recordings even rarer.

“About an hour into playing Luening's pieces,” says Peloquin, “I was convinced that I should record them. I decided to extend my stay that afternoon. Mrs. Luening said ‘stay as long as you would like.’ I took that opportunity to show her on the piano what the possibilities are.”

When Peloquin had played through the stack of music, he and Mrs. Luening sat and talked, looking out over the Hudson River. “I want to do something with this piano music,” he told her. “These pieces should be recorded.”

Thrilled with Peloquin's playing and especially impressed at his instant rapport with her late husband's music, Catherine Luening directed Peloquin to CRI, the record label Luening

himself founded in 1954. Peloquin's Luening piano project officially began.

With enough rarely heard Luening piano music to fill up almost three CDs, Peloquin's first enjoyable task was to winnow the lot down to one album's worth of material. “There are certain piano pieces that are great works, but your fingers don't have a physical connection to them. They seem very foreign. I took the time to select pieces that I knew I could communicate. I wanted the pieces I picked to spark my imagination.”

As it was, the works chosen for this disc—pieces from the Preludes of the 1930s to the Études of the 1990s—span Luening's entire writing life. “I hear connections between them,” says Peloquin. “As academic as he was, his music is very unacademic. He didn't adhere to specific compositional methods, such as serialism or chance music.”

“For someone who wasn't a pianist, he wrote a lot of piano music,” he continues. “And it all works pianistically. Some composers you play and say ‘This was not written for the piano, this is really a string quartet.’ That a flutist and conductor wrote so much piano music is really fascinating. Except for the lengthy piano sonata that Ursula Oppens recorded (*Sonata in Memoriam Ferruccio Busoni*, CRI 716), his piano works are really not played, so this is a rediscovery. Someone who's been around for awhile, someone we know of—but have we experienced this music?”

In keeping with his nature, Peloquin approached the programming of this disc in an archival way. Pieces were chosen for their connection to Luening's life as well as their expressive qualities. “I was interested in programming the Fantasia Études, Luening's last piano works (he was ninety-four when he composed them), because of the process he went through to write them,” explains Peloquin. “He was having trouble with his eyesight—this was before he had eye surgery and his vision improved—and he would write on extra-large staff paper with a huge pencil, almost a crayon, or dictate the notes to his assistant.”

Two of the pieces heard here, the Tango and *Song without Words*, were written for Luening's friend and colleague, the late pianist Yvar Mikhashoff. Peloquin also has a connection to Mikhashoff, with whom he studied in the Tanglewood high school program. “He was a big influence on me,” says Peloquin. “Yvar was a specialist in modern music and we had a month's immersion into Ives, Crumb, Cage, and Stravinsky. My ears were completely stretched after that. I had trouble listening to Mozart for awhile.”

Luening's Tango was commissioned by Mikhashoff for his *Tango Project*, for which he asked composers from John Cage to Lukas Foss to compose a tango. “This is one of the tangos in that collection,” Peloquin says. “It's very straightforward because he's using the tango rhythm in a blatant kind of way, but what he does harmonically and the variety that comes out of it is very interesting. And I like the ending—it's very bizarre, that big chord at the end. It kind of just goes ‘thunk!’ Unpredictability is a wonderful part of Luening's language.”

“*Song without Words* was one of the pieces that I fell completely in love with at Catherine Luening's. It had sentimental meaning for me, too, because it also was written for Yvar. Like Otto, Yvar was interested in the lyric potential of the piano, as I think many great composers were.”

Along with interesting archival pieces, Peloquin picked works from Mrs. Luening's stack of music that spoke to him, music that was expressive, rhythmically energized, unique in some way, or presented an intriguing side of Luening.

At eleven and a half minutes, *Sonority Forms I* is the longest piece on this album and one of Luening's most extensive solo piano works. The piece is also unpredictable—a quality Peloquin holds in high regard. There is a stately march, a form

Luening uses often (perhaps revealing an influence from his teacher Busoni, who liked the march as well). There is an expansive chordal, almost Coplandesque section. And there is a rollicking—and quite unexpected—boogie-woogie. “When you hear it,” says the pianist of the barreling bass line, “you chuckle.” And, finally, there is a “grand Otto ending,” as Peloquin likes to call Luening’s regal reiteration of an ending chord.

*Sonority Forms II*, written for composer and pianist Lionel Nowak, who lost the power of his left hand, is for right hand alone. “It’s Satie-like, very static,” says Peloquin. By contrast, *Sonority Forms III* is, Peloquin observes, “rather pointillistic. You play it twice through, the first time with no dynamics, and then you repeat with the dynamics. It’s very difficult to do the former, especially with some of his figurations that are jumpy in the way Messiaen can be, but you have to keep them static. Only when I heard it in playback in the studio did I understand why he was doing that—it’s effective. First you hear the material in a static way and then it comes back and pops up as if you’ve put the plug in.”

For this recording, Peloquin also selected two Short Sonatas: “The first one really struck me, particularly its second movement. I thought for cohesion it might be good to include another one that’s very different stylistically, and the fourth Sonata fit the bill.”

The suspended feeling of *Chords at Night* conjures images in Peloquin’s mind similar to the photographs by Jill Waterman used on this album’s cover: the night sky, the Midwest. “Maybe it was something he dreamt or thought of during the night,” Peloquin muses. “It has a nostalgic quality.”

Chords are first stated, then rolled, creating a regular, walking rhythm. “I can’t think of any other Luening piece like this,” says the pianist, who found himself most intrigued by the composer’s later works (*Chords at Night* was written in 1989). “Blocks of sound—very sonorous, chordal throughout. This is a good example of what Paul Griffiths (in his *New York Times* review of Luening’s centennial concert) called Luening’s ‘mysteriously wobbly sense of harmony.’”

*Image*, with its basic A-B-A structure and clarity of expression, is less formal, more of a character piece. “I can almost picture him writing this,” says Peloquin, who feels like he has gotten to know Luening through his music. “He doesn’t complicate the music. He contrasts a simple, dreamy tune with some of that ‘wobbly’ harmony.”

*Image* exemplifies Luening’s timelessness. “If you had said this was written in the 1930s or ’40s, I wouldn’t think twice,” says Peloquin. “Just like the Preludes—if they were from the 1980s, I wouldn’t find that unusual. The pieces could have been written at any time during his career.”

The Preludes, now part of Peloquin’s repertoire, are “somewhat Satie, somewhat Chopin—particularly the one in E minor, which evokes Chopin’s E Minor Prelude,” Peloquin says. “These pieces caught me by surprise—an aspect of Otto Luening I didn’t know about.”

While Luening’s use of *sonata*, *prelude*, and *étude* for his pieces’ titles highlights their classical underpinnings, he imbues these traditional forms with “a sense of adventure.” His pieces, explains Peloquin are “not confined to any one system. ... [They are] not necessarily free-form or improvisational, but ... [feel] no need to adhere to a particular system. His harmonic language is basically tonal, but there are times when it’s atonal—yet not twelve-tone. Luening has many different pianistic styles.”

In May 2000 Peloquin performed Luening’s Six Preludes, Tango, and *Song without Words* at the Otto Luening centennial concert at Columbia University’s Miller Theater, garnering praise in the aforementioned *New York Times* review by Paul Griffiths and winning an enthusiastic response from the audience. This response seemed to provide a cosmic stamp of approval for Peloquin’s Luening piano project. He recorded the present works in the summer of 2000, buoyed by the success of the centennial and the newly provoked interest in Luening’s music.

The short, jewel-like works heard on this recording present an Otto Luening most listeners probably have never met: a composer of lyric, playful, and delightful piano pieces. Listening to them, you are more apt to imagine a Chopin-like modern romantic than a man in black horn-rimmed glasses, suit, and skinny tie wrangling music from tape recorders and vacuum-tubed synthesizers—the latter being the usual photographic depiction of Luening or his Columbia-Princeton collaborator Vladimir Ussachevsky. (Interestingly enough, Luening never wrote a piece for piano and electronics.)

Though Peloquin never met Luening, Luening has in a way met Peloquin. Composer David Shohl, the pianist’s friend and Luening’s assistant for many years, played Luening a recording Peloquin had made of Shohl’s piano piece *Dynamophone*. Luening liked Peloquin’s playing very much. One would like to think Luening can still hear Peloquin’s playing, and is listening to these crystalline piano pieces through microwave, infrared, “sonority forms,” “chords at night,” or however else those who have left this reality can experience such transcendent music.

—Mic Holwin

Pianist **Marc Peloquin** has received critical acclaim for his performances of both contemporary and traditional repertoire. He has been a featured performer at the June in Buffalo Festival, in John Cage’s *Rolywholyover, a Circus* at the Guggenheim Soho Museum, and at the Darmstadt Summer Festival in Germany. Peloquin has premiered the works of Jack Beeson, Jonathan Dawe, Nathaniel Drake, Eric Samuelson, David Shohl, and Nils Vigeland.

Peloquin has been a guest artist at the Festival de Musica Religiosa in Colombia, South America, and has appeared in recital at EAFIT University in Medellín. He was also a featured performer at the XX Foro Musica Nueva: Maniel Enriquez Festival in Mexico City. Peloquin has performed at Merkin Concert Hall, Weill Recital Hall, the Phillips Collection (Washington, D.C.), the Gardner Museum (Boston), the American Academy in Rome, and the Chicago Cultural Center. In May 2000, he appeared at the Miller Theatre in New York City as part of the centennial celebration of American composer Otto Luening.

With a long-standing interest in developing thematic concert series, Peloquin has programmed and performed several series at New York’s Bloomingdale School of Music, including a Henry Cowell series, a series devoted to Latin American piano music, and a series featuring works with water as a theme, including his own transcriptions of Mahler lieder and Bizet arias. Peloquin received his bachelor’s degree from Boston University and both his master’s and doctorate degrees from the Manhattan School of Music. His 1995 doctoral thesis focused on the early piano works of John Cage. Born and raised in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, Peloquin resides in Manhattan. This is his first recording.

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## Production Notes

Recorded in June 2000 at Music Designs Masters studio, New York City. The piano used was an 1897 American Steinway concert grand. Recording and mastering engineer: Adrian Carr

Publishing:

Six Preludes for Piano: E. C. Schirmer Music Company (ECS Publishing). *Sonority Forms I–III* for Piano and Fantasia Études: published by the composer (ACA) (BMI). All other works published by the composer.

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