

A BRIEF SURVEY OF MICHAEL GARRETT'S PIANO SONATAS

BY DAVID HACKBRIDGE JOHNSON

PART 1

The 21 piano sonatas of Michael Garrett form one of the most significant contributions to the piano repertoire of recent years. Garrett belongs to a group of composers who seem constantly drawn to the piano sonata genre. In this he can be compared to Harold Truscott and John White although his style is his own. Garrett trained as a pianist, primarily with Frank Merrick. His composition studies with Edmund Rubbra at the Guildhall School of music and drama in the early 1960s provided him with a sound technique. This combination of a thorough training in piano and composition has led to a certain approach to piano writing. Garrett's work is often virtuosic and makes particular demands on pianists who aren't blessed with as wide a hand span as the composer. Nevertheless for the adventurous performer there are ample rewards for the effort of learning a Garrett Sonata.

The sonatas span the period from the early 1970s to the present. In this short survey I will provide an overview of the sonatas and chart developments within Garrett's style. As a result of this it is hoped that pianists may become interested in his music. Garrett has been fortunate enough to have pianist Richard Deering as a frequent performer of his music. Deering's performances of several of the sonatas at the British Music Information Centre in 1997 was something of a turning point for the composer. Garrett is by nature reclusive and dedicated to his work. Like many composers the ability to self promote his work is almost entirely lacking in Garrett's character. His attempts to disseminate the piano sonatas have met with a series of very unfortunate mishaps. Six of the piano sonatas are currently listed in the catalogue as a lost. *Piano Sonata No.1* has been lost for some years. In 2001 the composer played for me such excerpts as he could recall at the time. Sonatas 3,7,9,10 and 11 are all missing but are still believed to be in the possession of a professional pianist to whom they were sent some five years ago. It is the sad nature of things that this pianist has since moved house and that Garrett did not make photocopies before posting the music. Despite this disappointing state of affairs it is still possible to gain an appreciation of Garrett's breadth as a composer through the remaining works. Here is a table giving an 'at a glance' guide;

TITLE	SUBTITLE	OPUS NO.	DATE & NOTES	DURATION
Piano Sonata No.1		10 (vol.X no.5)	1972 1 st movt. lost	-
Piano Sonata No.2	Sursum Animus	11	1977-78	15
Piano Sonata No.3	Petites Images	12	1978-80, Lost	-
Piano Sonata No.4	Sonata Eclectica	14	1981	24
Piano Sonata No.5	An Almanac Gospel	17	1982	19
Piano Sonata No.6	In Nomine	18	1982	23
Piano Sonata No.7	Prolation	44	1985, Lost	-

Piano Sonata No.8	Chiaroscuro	49	1986	7
Piano Sonata No.9	Lied von der Arbeit	52	1986, Lost	-
Piano Sonata No.10	An Ode to the Laconic Idiom	59	1988, Lost	-
Piano Sonata No.11	Sonata da Camera	66	1989, Lost	-
Piano Sonata No.12		113	1997	13
Piano Sonata No.13		115	1997	13
Piano Sonata No.14		117	1997	15
Piano Sonata No.15		120	1997	13
Piano Sonata No.16	Seascapes	122	1998	11
Piano Sonata No.17		133	2000	11
Piano Sonata No.18		138	2001	9
Piano Sonata No.19		147	2002	7
Piano Sonata No.20		150	2003	8
Piano Sonata No.21		153	2004-5	9

The *Piano Sonata No.1* is the last piece in a giant series of piano compositions in 10 volumes comprising 100 separate pieces. Subtitled *The Book of Circe* this piano cycle provides a launch pad for many of the composer's subsequent explorations. The cycle is intentionally eclectic and comprises miniatures, symphonic pieces, neo-classical suites and partitas and a type of world music composition that Garrett terms 'national'. Contained in the set are several compositions which Garrett originally composed for the film *Women In Love*. The Sonata concludes the 10th volume of the series. Without the complete score it is not possible to gauge its relationship to the rest of the series yet the composer has mentioned its populist tone and use of bass and rock percussionist in the finale. This finale has recently been rewritten from memory by the composer.

The *Piano Sonata No.2, Opus11, 'Sursum Animus'* was written between 1977 and 1978. It is the first important work to be written after the completion of *The Book of Circe*. The 2nd *Sonata* is in three movements. The first movement, subtitled *Doxology*, is hymn-like. The composer has written that the music represents a prayer for the end of the day and the setting sun. A chorale like theme alternates with some telling bell effects. Towards the end of the movement the chorale is heard amid a rich Baxian texture. **(Fig.1)**

28

Pno.

cresc.

31

Pno.

p

rit e dim.

The manuscript of the movement concludes with a quote from one of Garrett's favourite authors, H.P. Lovecraft;

*The cloudless day is richer at its close;
 A golden glory settles on the lea;
 Soft, stealing shadows hint of cool repose
 To mellow landscape, and to calming sea.'*

The second movement marked *Non deciso - Fantasia scherzo*, is, as the title suggests a freely constructed movement with rhapsodic and fugato sections as well as scherzo like material. The music is nocturnal and spectral in mood and the composer has spoken of a nymph before a pagan temple as an explicit image in his mind at the time of composition. Here is a transition leading to the beginning of the first fugal episode. **(Fig.2)**

The third movement from which the whole work takes its title is called *Sursum Animus*, which translates as ‘lift up your heart’. Here the composer answers the searching questions of the second movement in an exciting and optimistic finale. The coda introduces a basso ostinato theme that, in the words of the composer, both affirms life and is resigned to fate. These emotional descriptions that the composer has helpfully provided for a number of his sonatas fall short of any technical description of the music yet they provide a clue to the emotional states that drive compositional narrative. Garrett’s music is often quasi programmatic in this way. Whilst the narrative contained in many of the sonatas is non-specific the often pantheistic themes underlying Garrett’s work seem to be important to him. Here is the opening of the finale showing ebullience and virtuosity. (Fig.3)

The *Piano Sonata No.3 Opus 12* was begun almost immediately after the *2nd Sonata* and also has a subtitle; *Petites Images*. There are three movements. The first is subtitled *Petites Images*, the second, *Theme et Varie*. A *Finale* concludes the work. The *3rd Sonata* was not completed until 1980; Garrett was at work on several piano compositions simultaneously. This sonata is lost.

The *Piano Sonata No. 4, 'Sonata Eclectica'* followed quickly in 1981. There are again three movements subtitled *Transmogrifications*, *Elegy Sacrosanct* and *Festin*. The first movement presents a lyrical theme in Eb dorian. The innocent theme undergoes many variations including those of a fantastical mood as well as several fugal episodes. This diffuse structure makes the movement a 'brother' to the *Non deciso* movement of the *2nd Sonata*. Here is the theme at the start: **(Fig 4)**

Piano Sonata No. 4 'Sonata Eclectica'

6th September, 1981 - Michael Garrett no. 14

I. Transmogrifications

Allegretto non troppo
[♩ = 76]

Piano

mp sempre espressivo

mp

5 *accel* -----

dim.

Allegretto *accel.*
[♩ = 76]

mp

The movement bristles with virtuosity yet a very real challenge is also created by the sectional nature of the music. The second movement has a funeral quality with its persistent dotted rhythm and dark key of Bb minor. The finale, in complete contrast, is happy and full of an Arnoldeque energy: **(Fig. 5)**

III. Festin

Allegro vivace e giocoso
♩ = 120-126)

Pno. *f non legato*

Pno. *con pedale*

The bell like left hand ostinato dominates the movement whilst the right hand dances in quartal patterns. In the coda a jig like rhythm creates even more momentum. At the end of the score Garrett adds a quote from Part 1 of Goethe's *Faust*;

*'The chanting sun, as ever, rivals
The chanting of his brother spheres
And marches round his celestial circuit –
A march that thunders in our ears.
His aspect cheers the Host of Heaven
Though what his essence non can say;
These inconceivable creations
Keep the high state of their first day!'*

The unbridled nature of the music amply captures the mood of the words.

The *Piano Sonata No. 5, 'An Almanac Gospel'* was written in 1982 and follows the large-scale *Seven Symphonic Impressions* for piano completed in the same year. This Sonata is in four movements each with subtitles; *Vergissmeinnicht, Rendezvous, Verlangen* and *Eudaimoni (Happiness)*. The first movement translates from the German as Forget-me-not. Garrett presents an improvisatory right hand over mildly dissonant chords. There is a suggestion of patterns derived from popular music and jazz of which Garrett is a fan. The overriding influence, however, is that of Bach, not so much in the use of counterpoint but in the organic nature of the melodic line that shows a constant evolution akin to some of Bach's arias. Although tonal throughout, subtle key changes delay the feeling of key centre. Eventually the movement closes in A minor in a way that prepares the listener for the Aeolian commencement of the second movement. Garrett seems to be writing a scherzo here, yet when a slower trio section begins this proves to be the second section of a binary structure. The way in which the trio theme is prefigured by means of short interruptions during the scherzo section shows Garrett experimenting with an interleaved form. **Fig. 6** shows a typical passage of modal patterns leading to the first interruption.

16 [Allegro]
mf *mp*

19 *cresc.* *p espress.* **Meno mosso**

21

The abrupt modulations in the above example are also typical of this sonata. The second movement gently subsides and the subsequent slow movement and finale are marked to be played without a break. The slow movement is called *Verlangen* which translates from the German as desire or longing. An intimate mood of quiet nostalgia is evoked in a movement of unruffled calm. The central episode presents a serene left hand melody in C major the contour of which can be traced in previous movements: (Fig. 7)

A tempo [Andante, con moto e sostenuto]

The finale is called *Eudaimoni* – Greek for happiness. Garrett presents a 5 note cell – Ab,C,Db,Eb,Bb – and the key of Ab major is established. The mood is relatively calm despite the *Allegro, quasi affretando e ben ritmico* tempo indication. Contrapuntal use of the cell is made until the sonata ends with a wistful *Valse Lente*. This sonata is important in relation to the series; its amiable mood, fluid modality and happy melodic ideas make it very accessible. Garrett also eschews much of the virtuosity required in sonatas 2 and 4; the whole work is beautifully laid out for the instrument and ought to find performances.

The *Piano Sonata No. 6 Opus 18 'In nomine'* was written in 1982 the same year as the 5th Piano Sonata. This is a single-movement work and is much more ambitious than its predecessor. The composer essays a 23 minute structure based around 2 ideas both contained in the first 2 bars. (Fig. 8)

Moderato con moto

The sonata traces the tension between the stern first bar and its lyrical answer. The work achieves an episodic quality despite the extensive derivations made from the 2 ideas. The conclusion is undeniably exciting and the work might come to life with a performance. With the Piano Sonata No.6 Garrett brings to an end the first phase of intensive piano sonata writing with almost a sonata a year having been written from 1978 onwards. In the second part of this article the remaining two phases of Garrett's work in the genre will be charted. Most of the middle period works are lost but the 3rd period will show Garrett combining modes and keys with chromaticism and regions of atonality.

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PART 2

In the works between sonatas No.6 and No.7 Garrett wrote extensively for orchestra; his two earliest symphonies and the first two Concertos for Piano and Orchestra. During this time he also began three of his compositional cycles; *Xystus* for various instrumental combinations and *Aidos* and *Aux Pas* for piano. After three years of intensive composing in these various mediums Garrett returned to the piano sonata for his Opus 44. This is a one-movement work subtitled '*Prolation*'. The 7th Sonata begins another period of intense composition for the instrument. Unfortunately the work is lost.

Piano Sonata No.8 Opus 49, 'Chiaroscuro' followed in 1986. This work is in one movement and is one of the shortest of the sonatas. It is basically in two sections; the first presents a fluid tonal scheme whereas the second puts the work firmly in the key of E major. The first section contains a subtle use of jazz and folk inspired rhythms.

In 1986 Garrett wrote his *Piano Sonata No.9 Opus 52, 'Lied von der Arbeit'*. This follows Garrett's preferred three-movement plan. The first movement is subtitled *Pax Parcus* and the second and third movements are called *Interlude* and *Finale* respectively. This sonata is lost.

In 1988 Garrett wrote his *Piano Sonata No.10 Opus 59, 'An Ode to the Laconic Idiom'*. This fanciful work is in five movements entitled *Promenade, Scherzo – Running and Jumping About, Ich Leben in Arbeitzimmer – Ich Arbeit in Arbeitzimmer, Scherzo II – Frolicsome*, and finally *Walking*. The work is also lost.

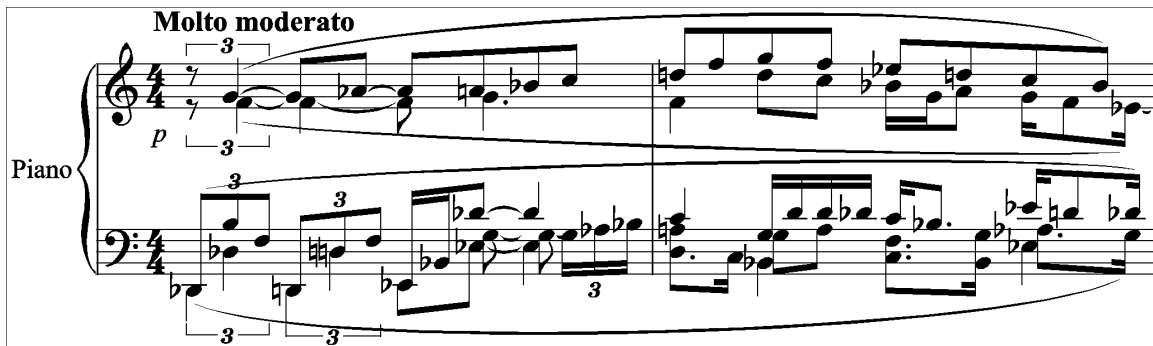
The *Piano Sonata No.11 Opus 66, 'Sonata da Camera'* is in six movements in the manner of a baroque suite. The movements are subtitled *Rapture, Pavan, Mood, Delight, Mignon*, and *Fuga*. The 11th Sonata completed in 1989 marks the end of the second period of intensive Sonata composition. Like its immediate predecessors the work is lost. Garrett did not return to the Piano Sonata until 1997.

The *Sonata No.12 Opus 113* is in four movements and unusually for Garrett there are no subtitles to the movements. In fact of the remaining sonatas only No.17 has a subtitle. 1997 was a productive year for Garrett as it produced 4 Piano Sonatas, 24 Preludes, Two Nocturnes, Suite No.2 and most of his 8th Symphony. The work begins with a simple theme; (Fig.9)



As a foil to this lyrical theme the second subject is presented against a pulsing dotted rhythm in the left hand. The second movement has been described by the composer as a Jazz-Blues inspired Nocturne. A short scherzo movement leads straight into the finale where repeated chords recall the opening of the *Waldstein Sonata* of Beethoven.

The *Piano Sonata No.13* dates from the same year and this one-movement work contains no programmatic clues. The opening shows the increasing complexity of Garrett's harmonies. (Fig. 10)

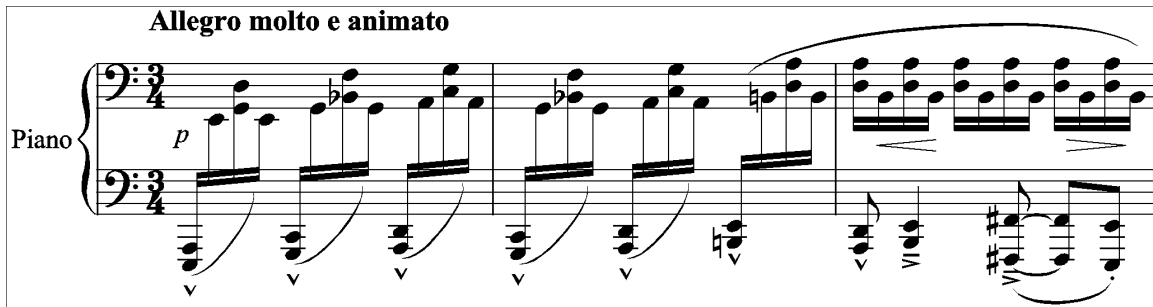


The passage is also typical of many in the later sonatas that show dense contrapuntal writing in 4 or 5 parts. The second subject is an austere fugue and the third subject is in parallel 5ths in the manner of organum. The climax of the work consists of a barbaric rendition of the fugue subject. However the end is quietly resigned.

1997 also saw the completion of the two-movement *Piano Sonata No.14* Opus 117 as well as *Piano Sonata No.15* Opus 120. The 14th opens with a beautiful and quite lengthy *Allegretto*. There then follows a more aggressive movement characterised by rapid chords in dotted rhythm. The 15th is in 3 movements; the two outer movements framing a magically evocative *Adagio con moto* where right hand arabesques play over a trance like set of shifting left hand chords. In these four sonatas from 1997 there can be discerned an enrichment of Garrett's harmonic language that now frequently borders on atonality. The exception is the 15th Piano Sonata whose bold tonal gestures and general good nature are an exception within the group.

The following year Garrett wrote his *Piano Sonata No.16* in two movements Opus 122. The movements are subtitled *Quasi Una Fantasia* and *Tema con Variazioni e Fughetta*. The theme of the second movement is presented with left hand walking tenths *alla Art Tatum*. The complex variations that follow show the composers affinity with Godowsky and Sorabji in equal measure.

The new millennium saw no let up in the production of Sonatas; Opus 133 is the *Piano Sonata No.17* in three movements. This work has the subtitle *Seascapes* and was inspired by the composer's visit to Beachy Head and other parts of the south coast. The first movement presents a turbulent set of ideas, the second has shifting chords similar to the slow movement of Sonata No.15, whilst the finale is a dark but ultimately affirmative toccata. (Fig. 11)

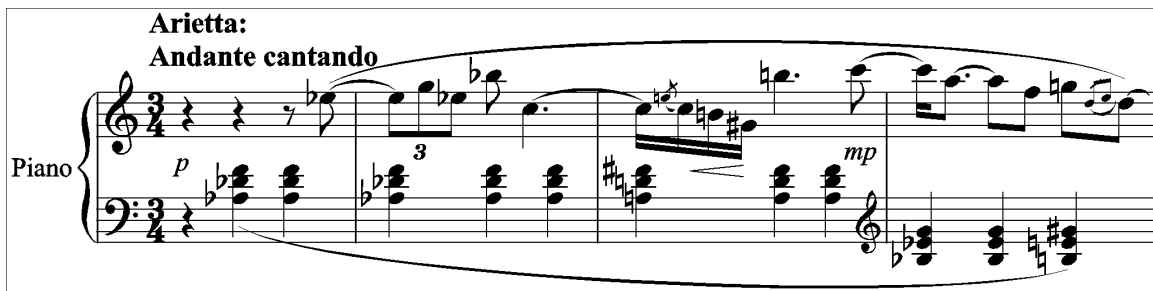


In 2001 Garrett completed his *Piano Sonata No.18* Opus 138. This work is in two movements. The first is rhapsodic in form and the composer has written that it expresses his longing to return to the Scottish landscape. Garrett lived in Edinburgh in the 70's and has now returned there after a lengthy stay in London. The second movement begins with a short *Adagio* before a fugue is established on the following subject: (Fig. 12)



Like a lot of Garrett's fugues, the theme has an accompaniment added to it before the second entry of the theme. This makes it somewhat unorthodox. The work concludes in a triumphant B major.

Garrett returned to the piano sonata for his opus 147, the *Sonata No.19* in three movements. The composer has described the work as austere and certainly it is harmonically one of the most advanced. It also has a gem of a slow movement: (Fig. 13)



The work concludes with an ominous march.

The *Piano Sonata No.20* was the last work Garrett completed before his move back to Scotland in 2003. The opening theme is richly developed in the first movement and serves in the finale as the subject of two fugues the second one using the theme in its inverted form. Here is the theme at the start of the sonata: (Fig. 14)



The second movement begins as a scherzo with a chiming quaver pattern in the left hand. The two fugues follow this and show Garrett's desire to vary the structure of his sonatas in quite an original way.

Finally, *Piano Sonata No. 21* was composed in 2004-2005. It is in 2 movements. The first is a lyrical *Allegretto con moto* which begins as follows: **(Fig. 15)**

Garrett begins with a note row whose intervallic characteristics inform his harmonic thinking in this movement. This gives the piece a tight sense of underlying structure. The movement ends with very widely spaced sonorities; a favourite device of Garrett's. The second movement is a *Tema con Variazione*. The theme is quite elaborate and is followed by 5 variations and a coda. The mood is gentle throughout and the last fortissimo chord comes as a surprise.

The composer has not ruled out further piano sonatas, indeed music seems to be flowing from him at quite a rate. At the time of writing he is nearing the end of his massive *11th Symphony*, a choral work in 10 movements lasting some 90 minutes. He may indeed desire the relative intimacy of the piano sonata by way of a relaxation after such a mammoth undertaking. Whatever he does, I shall be listening.

I am grateful to Michael Garrett for providing me with scores and tapes. He can be contacted at Flat 3, 15 Wardieburn Place East, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH5 1DP. Tel. 0779 338 7567.

The composer has a website; www.michaelgarrett.info

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