



CYRIL SMITH & PHYLLIS SELICK

Guild
HISTORICAL

MOZART

- Sonata in D major for two pianos K.448

RACHMANINOFF

Suite No. 2 in C major for two pianos Op.17

And works by J S Bach, Arensky, Bax & Milhaud. 4-hand recordings made between 1948 & 1956
Including the very rare recordings made in Moscow in April 1956



Cyril Smith (1909–1974) and Phyllis Sellick (1911–2007) both enjoyed successful careers as soloists for many years before they embarked on their career as a duo. Although they had married in 1937, the idea to perform together came not from them, but from Sir Henry Wood – the founder of the famous Promenade Concerts in London – who invited them to play Saint-Saëns “Carnival of the Animals” on the opening night of the season of 1941. This event marked not only their duo debut, but also the debut of the Proms in the Royal Albert Hall, the Queen’s Hall having been destroyed in May of that year by an

incendiary bomb. Shortly afterwards the BBC invited them to perform Rachmaninoff’s Suite No.2 for two pianos: it was these two engagements which catalysed the thought that they should make their duo partnership the priority, although both for some years afterwards continued to accept separate invitations as soloists.

When Cyril Smith received his call-up papers following the outbreak of the Second World War, he was told “I should not be required for the Forces, but that my national service would be to play the piano, not only in concert halls but also in munition factories, hospitals and Army camps, wherever I might be needed.”* Cyril therefore found himself working for the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA), an organisation which had been set up in 1939 specifically to entertain the British armed forces. Phyllis Sellick was also performing regularly, the result being that very often the couple were apart, travelling in different directions throughout the country fulfilling their respective engagements. However, once the duo had been formed, they were increasingly invited as a team,

and within two years undertook their first foreign engagements, in Portugal. Subsequently, just after the war in Europe had ended, they performed in Brussels and Paris: in September 1945, after the war with Japan had ended, they were engaged for a two-month concert tour which took them to India and Ceylon. Whilst they would continue to be invited to perform abroad, it was Britain which always remained their base, with homes in East Sheen (on the outskirts of London) and in Cornwall, and the country in which - in due course - they would raise their two children.

This issue features some of the recordings which Phyllis and Cyril made between 1948 and 1956: with the exception of the Rachmaninoff Suite, none has previously been reissued on compact disc. Mozart wrote his Sonata for two pianos K.448 in 1781, when he was 25 years old: it was intended for a performance he would give with Josephine von Aurnhammer, a pianist who also partnered Mozart in his Concerto for two pianos K.365. J S Bach's 'Sheep may safely graze' - as it is popularly known - has its origins as an aria for

soprano in Bach's Cantata BWV 208 "Was mir behagt, ist nur die muntre Jagd", (All that I love is the merry hunt): in the Cantata the soprano represents the mythological Pales, Goddess of shepherds and sheep. This piano arrangement for four hands was made by Mary Howe.

Both Phyllis and Cyril had long loved the music of Sergei Rachmaninoff, some of whose works Cyril especially used often to perform. Indeed, Rachmaninoff's admiration for Cyril's playing was such that he ensured that Walter Legge, then music advisor to HMV and Columbia, was well aware of this. In due course, albeit after the composer's death, this would result in recordings by Cyril of Rachmaninoff's Second and Third Piano Concertos, and the 'Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini': this latter recording was made just over a month before he and Phyllis recorded Suite No.2. Rachmaninoff composed the Suite in 1901, following a period of a few years during which he had written very little, having been thoroughly depressed by the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony in 1897. It was the success both of this Suite, which

Rachmaninoff premiered in Moscow in November 1901 with his cousin Alexander Siloti, and of his Second Piano Concerto – (the two works carry consecutive opus numbers) – which finally restored the composer's confidence.

Anton Arensky wrote his Suite No.1 for two pianos in 1888, and although the work as a whole is not as well-known as the two Suites by Rachmaninoff, the Waltz – which forms the middle movement of three – is one of his most popular pieces. Phyllis and Cyril recorded this work in the same session as the Bach: in the mid-1960s they would re-record both works in arrangements for three hands.

By far the rarest recordings on this CD are those made by the duo in Moscow in April 1956, just a matter of days before Cyril Smith suffered the thrombosis which was to deprive him of the use of his left arm for the remainder of his life. These two performances, released on an 8-inch 33rpm vinyl disc on the Aprelevski Plant label, therefore represent the last of their four-hand recordings.



Phyllis and Cyril were part of a small group which had been invited to perform in Russia under the auspices of the British Council, the first British musicians to do so since the end of the Second World War. As Cyril later wrote, “The studio pianos were not good, nor were most of the other pianos on which we played during this tour. Originally they must have been first-class, because most of them were the products of leading manufacturers, but they had all suffered under the extremes of Russian temperatures, and some were simply worn out.”* Arnold Bax's ‘Moy Mell’ (The Happy Plain) is a

particularly valuable addition to the duo's recorded repertoire as they never made a commercial recording of this work in Britain, unlike Darius Milhaud's 'Scaramouche', which they recorded for Columbia in 1948 during the same group of sessions as those of the Rachmaninoff Suite. Just as with the works by Bach and Arensky, the duo would in the 1960s re-record the last movement, 'Brazileira', in a three-hand arrangement.

Arnold Bax, although English by birth, loved Ireland: losing some of his friends during the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 inspired him to write a number of works reflecting that country of which 'Moy Mell', the tone-poem for two pianos, was one. (In Irish mythology 'The Happy Plain' refers to an earthly paradise). The piece was composed in 1916 and dedicated to the pianists Irene Scharrer and Myra Hess, who gave its premiere that same year.

The title 'Scaramouche' refers to the Parisian theatre of the same name, a theatre for which Darius Milhaud contributed music for some of its productions. The pianists Marguerite

Long and Marcelle Meyer required a new duo work for the Paris International Exposition of 1937, but such was the pressure under which Milhaud was working at the time, that he drew upon and revised some of his music for the Théâtre Scaramouche to create this three-movement Suite, rather than compose an entirely new work.

Although Cyril received excellent medical care in Russia, the doctors there were convinced that he would never be able to play again. Cyril, however, was not so convinced, and even whilst in hospital in Moscow said to Phyllis "If we can't play with four hands we shall play with three." Had the tour gone exactly to plan, they were originally scheduled to fly home on 8th May, but given Cyril's illness they were only able to begin their journey – which the medics ordered must be by train, forbidding air travel – exactly one month later. Shortly before so doing they received a cable from Emmie Tillet, their agent in London, which read "Anonymous friend wishes to pay fare for a friend to accompany you", a very generous gesture which deeply touched them both. They

chose the medical officer from the British Embassy in Russia, Dr. Victor Humphreys, who offered invaluable assistance during what was a highly problematical and uncomfortable journey from Moscow to their home in East Sheen, which finally they reached five days later on 13th June. Cyril never knew who was the “anonymous friend”: it was only after his death that Emmie Tillett, who had initially been sworn to secrecy, was allowed to reveal to Phyllis that this was Sir Adrian Boult. Phyllis and Cyril’s ‘three-hand’ career would last until Cyril’s death in August 1974: indeed, their final recordings together were made just the previous month. This new chapter in their lives began with an engagement in July 1957 offered by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra to perform at the Birmingham Promenade Concerts, where they played Mozart’s 2-piano Concerto K.365 in an arrangement for three hands by John White, then a student at the Royal College of Music. Subsequently a number of composers wrote or arranged works especially for them, among them Malcolm Arnold, Arthur Bliss – (who,

as Master of the Queen’s Music, had been the leader of the group which had travelled to Russia) – and Gordon Jacob. One work which Phyllis and Cyril had particularly admired was Vaughan Williams’ Piano Concerto, so they decided to commission a 3-hand arrangement of the piece: the new score arrived in the post on 1st August 1974. Cyril’s last words to Phyllis were “We’ll start on that tomorrow morning”, but it was not to be as, quite unexpectedly, he died during the night. Phyllis would later recall how much it touched her that; until the very end, Cyril was “still looking forward”. Phyllis had suffered the dual blow of losing both her husband and piano-partner, but in due course, in addition to undertaking occasional engagements as a soloist, she decided to join with Terence Beckles to form another four-hand duo, this time with Phyllis as first pianist of the two. When many years ago I asked her why she had chosen him as her duo-partner, she replied that he had been a long-standing friend, and that “he made me laugh at a time when I needed to laugh.” This new undertaking meant that there were

some works in her repertoire which, over the course of her career, Phyllis had to learn in three different ways: as second pianist to Cyril's first, then in the three-hand arrangement, and finally as first pianist – a phenomenally difficult task for any professional musician, far more arduous than learning new repertoire, as you have first mentally and physically to 'unravel' what you have spent years practising so as to be able to perform seemingly instinctively. Despite this unbelievably daunting hurdle this new duo was also very successful, giving many concerts - one notable occasion being in 1981 when they performed Saint-Saëns 'Variations on a theme of Beethoven' and Rachmaninoff's Suite No.2 before the staff and students of the Royal College of Music, just weeks before Phyllis Sellick's 70th birthday.

Text © Callum Ross, April 2018

Photographs of Cyril Smith & Phyllis Sellick: The Tully Potter Collection

**Extract from 'Duet for Three Hands', Cyril Smith's autobiography as told to Joyce Egginton, first published by Angus & Robertson in November 1958.*

*Another member of the group of musicians on the 1956 tour of Russia was the violinist Alfredo Campoli, who took some colour cine-film during their visit, to which subsequently his wife, Joy, added an audio commentary. This may be viewed in reading rooms at the British Library through videosever please go to:
<http://videosever.bl.uk/record/105664>*

Callum Ross was a student of Phyllis Sellick at the Royal College of Music between 1977 and 1981.

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CYRIL SMITH & PHYLLIS SELICK

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART (1756-1791) Sonata in D major for two pianos K.448

1 *Allegro con spirito* (7:32) – 2 *Andante* (8:08) – 3 *Allegro molto* (5:40)

Recorded London, date unknown, published 1954 (Columbia 33SX 1018 – mono)

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750), arr. Mary Howe

4 “Sheep may safely graze” (from Cantata BWV 208
“Was mir behagt, ist nur die muntre Jagd”) (4:49)

Recorded, London, 2 November 1951

(Originally issued as Columbia DX 1806 (78rpm) – mono, published 1951:
reissued in 1959 on Columbia SCD 2105 (45rpm) – mono, from which this restoration has been made)

Sergei RACHMANINOFF (1873-1943) Suite No.2 in C major for two pianos Op.17

5 *Introduction (Alla Marcia)* (3:47) – 6 *Valse (Presto)* (5:47)

7 *Romance (Andantino)* (6:36) – 8 *Tarantella (Presto)* (5:42)

Recorded, London, 9 & 10 November 1948 (Columbia DX 1675/77 – mono)

Anton ARENSKY (1861-1906)

9 **Waltz (from Suite No.1 for two pianos Op.15)** (4:17)

Recorded, London, 2 November 1951

(Originally issued as Columbia DX 1806 (78rpm) – mono, published 1951:
reissued in 1959 on Columbia SCD 2105 (45rpm) – mono, from which this restoration has been made)

Arnold BAX (1883-1953)

10 “Moy Mell” (The Happy Plain) – **Tone poem for two pianos (1916)** (10:13)

Recorded Moscow, April 1956 (Aprelevski Plant 003150 – mono)

Darius MILHAUD (1892-1974) “Scaramouche” – Suite for two pianos Op.165b

11 *Vif* (2:55) – 12 *Modéré* (4:13) – 13 *Brazileira* (2:21)

Recorded Moscow, April 1956 (Aprelevski Plant 003151 – mono)

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Arnold BAX (1883-1953)

10 “Moy Mell” (The Happy Plain) – **Tone poem for two pianos (1916)**

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“Scaramouche” – Suite for two pianos Op.165b

11 *Vif* – 12 *Modéré* – 13 *Brazileira*

TPL: 72:06

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