

Music of Nicolas Slonimsky

Playlist

Track One – Piccolo Divertimento No. 1 (et al), ensemble version of Studies in Black and White; (Cal Arts Ensemble, William Kraft, conductor); live concert April 27, 1989, 95th birthday tribute, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Track Two – Studies in Black and White (for Piano), Nicolas Slonimsky, piano. Orion Recording 72100, 1972

Track Three – Modinha Russo-Brasileira, Laurindo Almeida, twin guitars. Orion Recording 72100, 1972

Track Four – Silhouettes Iberiennes, Laurindo Almeida, twin guitars; three movements: 1/ Aromas de Leyenda; 2/ Jota; 3/ Danza Festiva. Orion Recording 72100, 1972

Track Five – Variations on a Brazilian Tune (My Toy Balloon), Nicolas Slonimsky, piano. Orion Recording 7145, 1971

Track Six – Minitudes, Nicolas Slonimsky, piano. Orion Recording 72100, 1972 (recording does not exactly match publication titled 51 Minitudes for Piano, G. Schirmer, 1979)

Track Seven – Gravestones in Hancock, New Hampshire, Nicolas Slonimsky, piano; Nancy Bramlage, soprano: 1/ Vain World; 2/ Lydia; 3/ Here peacefully lies the once happy father; 4/ A lovely rose; 5/ In Memphis Tennessee; 6/ Stop, my friend, as you pass by. Orion Recording 7145, 1971

Track Eight – Short acknowledgment by Nicolas Slonimsky, followed by (three of) Five Advertising Songs, Nicolas Slonimsky, piano and vocal: 1/ Children Cry for Castoria; 2/ And Then Her Doctor Told Her; 3/ Make This a Day; live concert April 27, 1989, 95th birthday tribute, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

All rights controlled by Cambria Master Recordings and the Nicolas Slonimsky estate

Music of Nicolas Slonimsky

Most of the compositions here were recreated from the masters of two recordings of Nicolas Slonimsky's music issued by Orion Records in 1971 and 1972, for which Nicolas Slonimsky wrote the notes below. Also included are performances of Piccolo Divertimento and Five Advertising Songs (played and sung by the composer), recorded live at a 95th birthday celebration at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles,. 51 Minitudes is published by G. Schirmer and My Toy Balloon in the orchestral version by Shawnee Press, Inc., Delaware Water Gap, PA. Most of the remaining works are published by Cambria Publishing, Lomita, CA.

When I was six my mother informed me that I was a genius. This revelation haunted me through my adolescence and early maturity, relaxing its tense grip on me only with the advent of the Age of Wisdom. When I went to grade school in St. Petersburg, my native city, my mother addressed the class cautioning my schoolmates against coming into close physical contact with me or indulging in rough games which might be harmful to my delicate pianistic fingers. This speech led to the expected results, but I was not badly maimed. My first and only piano teacher was my aunt, Isabelle Vengerova, famed as a pedagogue both in Russia and in America where she came to live. As I grew I joined her class at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The director Glazunov, a tremendously imposing figure of a man, was impressed by my gift of perfect pitch and by my apparently sympathetic playing of the standard romantic pieces of the curriculum. After my public examination in May 1909, he wrote: "Despite his youthful years, there is felt a certain perfection in his playing, together with an attractive and powerful touch at the keyboard." A year later Glazunov expanded on his appreciation: "An excellent musical virtuoso talent. His playing is full of elegance and taste." To both opinions he appended the highest Russian mark, 5+. Music was not my only talent. I had an uncommon aptitude for numbers and earned the nickname Newtonchick at home. But despite a whole summer of instruction I could never learn to swim.

Also, the outside world was slow in recognizing my certified genius. Other child prodigies of my generation overtook and surpassed me. Came the Revolution, and I was thrown into social turmoil. I had to earn my living by playing undignified music in disreputable places. I left Russia, went to Paris and eventually to the promised land of every early Russian, the United States of America. Safe from revolutionary upheavals and material deprivations, I gradually drifted towards composition, then to orchestral conducting, and, continuing on the downgrade, to musicology and lexicography.

My first Gradus ad Parnassum in America was the publication in 1929 of my anti-pianistic *Studies in Black and White* in *New Music*, a quarterly founded by that formidable champion of modern devices, Henry Cowell. True to my spirit of contrariness, I went against the mainstream. While composers vied with each other in piling up dissonance upon dissonance, I decided to write a piano suite employing only literal concords. Furthermore, I decreed that the right hand should play on the white keys only, and the left hand on the black keys. Consequently, there is no need of accidentals. No key signature was required in the right hand as the flats in the left hand were arrayed like a ladder. I described this procedure as consonant counterpoint in mutually exclusive diatonic and pentatonic systems, for I have always been addicted to polysyllabic self-expression. I wrote the studies in the summer of 1928, and both the whimsical idiom and the titles of individual movements reflect the simple sophistication of the period: *Jazzelette*, *A Penny for Your Thoughts*, *Happy Farmer*, *Quasi Fugato*, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, *March*, *The Sax Dreaming of a Flute*, $\sin^2 x + \cos^2 x = 1$ (this trigonometrical piece ends on a unison to symbolize figure 1), and *Typographical Errors*. There is also a *Prelude* in which euphonious dissonances are discreetly employed, while the harmonies betray my early adoration of Scriabin whose family I intimately knew in Russia. Henry Cowell reported to me in mock horror that the sales of my opus were almost commercial in numbers, which threw a dark shadow of suspicion on my modernism, for it was a dogma that real modern music did not sell.

In 1941 I went to South America to gather materials for a book on Latin American music. A product of this trip was a sweet melody which I called *Modinha Russo-Brazileira*. This symbiotic conceit was prompted by a remarkable melorhythmic kinship between Brazilian and Russian popular songs. When I played my *Modinha* to Brazilians, they claimed it as their own, but Russians who heard it thought that it was an old Russian gypsy song. I arranged it for piano, and also as a wordless vocalise.

Everyone who composes music falls at one time or another under the spell of Spanish rhythms. In the bloom of my retarded maturity, I produced a Hispanic piano suite, entitled *Silhouettes Iberiennes* (the most popular composers of Spanish music being French, I wanted to pay them titular lip service). It is in three movements. In the first, *Aromas de Leyenda*, I did my best to convey the "scent of a legend" of the title in lush sonorities, replete with authenticated Phrygian cadences peculiar to Spanish songs. In the second movement, *Jota*, I modernized its rhythm to an asymmetric 5/8 meter. In the last, *Festive Dance*, I indulged myself in a sumptuous display of obsolescent virtuosity.

Another by-product of my Latin American trip was a set of variations on a Brazilian tune, which I published in two versions, one for piano and one for orchestra, under the title *My Toy Balloon*. The orchestral score actually includes a fleet of colored balloons to be popped in a series of sforzandi. The piece contains the theme and six variations: *Music Box*, *All Over the Keyboard*, *In a Minor Mode*, *Like the Xylophone*, *With Apologies to Brahms*, and *Circus Parade*. In the second variation, the theme, which descends from C to A through B flat, hits the lowest and the highest keys on the piano keyboard. In the xylophonic variation, the vertical intervals are consonant, but the environment is polytonal. The barcarolle-like variation that follows bears a whimsical acknowledgement to Brahms, because of its obvious adumbration to his famous lullaby. The finale is a raucous circus march.

In 1947, I published an ambitious compendium, *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns*, a sort of pandect of all potential progressions of tones and plausible musical phrases in all styles and idioms. (When I sent a copy to Schoenberg, he wrote me back - and I cherish his letter, written in English - "You have certainly accomplished a feat of tonal gymnastics and apparently exhausted all possible combinations of tones. But I am a composer, and I must follow my inspiration.") Among various modern techniques in the *Thesaurus* I included examples of Pandiatonicism, a term I invented to describe free interchangeable use of the seven notes of the diatonic scales in melody and harmony. The *Thesaurus* culminated in the creation of the Grandmother Chord, containing all twelve notes of the chromatic scale and all eleven intervals from a minor second to a major seventh. It came to me in a moment of plenary inspiration, in the afternoon of February 13, 1938.

Bemused by the contemporary trend of miniaturization, I composed a number of piano pieces, *Minitudes*, i.e. mini-etudes, with just a whiff of a suggestion of minimal infinitudes in this porte-manteau word. The intervallic material of these *Minitudes* is derived chiefly from the *Thesaurus*. Each Minitude lasts from 5 to 45 seconds, thus justifying the title. The number of Minitudes is undetermined, depending on the method of counting individual patterns. The minimum is 34; the maximum is 66. The arithmetical mean of 34 and 66 is 50, which is a good round figure to decide on.

The introductory *Minitude* is named Orion: it is indeed of galactic dimensions, for it takes nearly a full sidereal minute of time to play. Its intervallic structure is that of the Grandmother Chord but despite its atonal consistence, the piece is harmonized along consonant contrapuntal lines. From stars to Leipzig - Orion is followed by two derangements of Bach's C minor fugue from the first book of the Well-Tempered Clavier. In the first, the theme is subjected to constant modulations by semitones; in the second, its intervals are multiplied by two, as a result of which the semitones vanish, and the entire fugue assumes a quasi-Debussyan atmosphere hung over whole-tone scales. Next comes a surgical operation performed on Schoenberg's Klavierstück op. 33a, to which I assigned a jaw-breaking name "Cryptokrebschoenwagnerbergblatt." When decoded, the title denotes a hidden crab progression resulting in a Schoenbergian Tristanesque evocation. There follows a little march, *La Tromperie sourdinee*. The next piece is a broken chromatic scale harmonized by chromatically ascending bass lines. Among miscellaneous dodecaphonic patterns there is a rhythmic Minitude entitled Dodecaphilia. It is followed by Triskaidecaphobia, represented by a chromatic scale spread all over the keyboard in major sevenths and minor ninths. (Charles Ives tells us that his father, a bandmaster who entertained futuristic notions taught young Ives to play the chromatic scale in minor ninths with an admonition: "if you must play a chromatic scale at all, then play it like a man!") Dodecaphonic derangements of *Ach, Du Lieber Augustin* and of *Happy Birthday to You* are the next two numbers. Then comes an exercise in mutually exclusive major and minor triads. Three polyphonic palindromes follow, and then there is a *Stultifying March*. An impressionistic improvisation on the scale of six notes, C, E flat, F, F sharp, A, B, is followed by a Minitude derived from an eight-note scale of alternating whole tones and semitones. Next comes a Minitude in major scales with changing tonics; another Minitude exploits mutually exclusive whole-tone scales; then there is a Polytetra-chord, comprising the twelve consecutive tetrachords of the cycle of major scales. This is followed by a lyric Minitude in a counterpoint of octaves and thirds. A bitonal scale of C major and F sharp major tetrachords is run off with ninth-chord harmonization.

Then there is a dodecaphonic Minitude composed of successive heptatonic and pentatonic scales. Polytonal polyrhythmics is the subject of the following four minitudinal exercises, with the right hand playing in one key, and the left hand in another, in different rhythms. As a diversion, a dodecaphonic pattern consisting of disjointed intervals is romantically harmonized in seventh-chords. There follows a dodecaphonic series of two mutually exclusive hexachords. Examples of combinational harmonies derived from the scale of alternating whole tones and semitones are given in the next group of Minitudes. After a spate of pandiatonic thematic cadences, the musical landscape changes abruptly, descending into the lowest depths of vulgarity. In fact, the opening two pieces of this grouping bear the candid titles *Banality* and *Banal Vulgarity*. The first is a variation on a German teaching piece, with a fragment of an Argentinian tango thrown in; the second is an exercise on the tune of a Russian children's song, *Sparrow, Sparrow, Where Were You?* The last two Minitudes are disarmingly alphabetical: *Cabbage Waltz* and *A Bad Egg Polka*. The titles are spelled in musical notes, forward and backwards, C-A-B-B-A-G-E (E-G-A-B-B-A-C) and A-B-A-D-E-G-G (G-G-E C-A-B A) in unashamed C major.

I spent the summer of 1945 in Hancock, New Hampshire, and I used to take nostalgic walks in a beautifully preserved old cemetery there. The inscriptions on the gravestones were epitaphs of young and old lives, spent with spiritual resignation to mortality. I set six of them to music in a vocal suite entitled simply *Gravestones in Hancock, New Hampshire*. The style of each setting is intended to fit the era of the passing of the person reposing underneath the gravestone. The first song marks the grave of Mrs. Dorcas Knight, who died in 1815 at the age of 60, and the music is appropriately Handelian. The next epitaph memorializes "Mrs. Lydia, wife of Captain David Low," who died in 1829 at the age of 31. Naturally, the melody is in the Lydian mode. Next to Lydia's tomb there stand monuments to Captain Low's two subsequent wives, both dead at a childbearing age, presumably of puerperal fever. David Moors, a lumberjack, died in 1841 at the age of 29; he is lamented, with many a baroque fioritura, as "the once happy father, the joy of his beloved wife and daughter." He was crushed to death by a falling tree. The accompaniment here represents a consecutive series of major tetrachords traversing the circle of scales five times. The next tombstone was dedicated to the 15-year-old Rosa Wilson, who died in 1856, and the musical setting is a sentimental ballad. Except for the lumberjack, these deaths were peaceful. Not so that of Edwin Kimball who fell on the battlefield during the Civil War at the age of 21 as a member of the 16th Regiment of New Hampshire Volunteers. The steady drumbeat supplies the proper mood, while the melodic figurations combine elements of Dixie and Yankee Doodle.

The dead of past centuries possessed a grave sense of humor. The last song of the cycle commemorates one Abbot Casset who died in 1837 at the age of 27. His epitaph is a standard piece of mortuary doggerel: "Stop my friends as you pass by. As you are now so once was I. As I am now so you must be. Prepare for death and follow me." The melody closely imitates the macabre nursery rhyme, "The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out..."

When I came to America from darkest Russia in 1923, I instantly succumbed to the unique poetry of commercial advertisements in the gaudy pages of American magazines. Cynicism came much later. I set to music some of the most uninhibited outpourings of the advertising Muse. I can even claim priority as composer of the first advertising songs designed for concert performance. They are: "Make This a Day of Pepsodent!" "Utica Sheets and Pillow Cases," "Pillsbury Bran Muffins," "Vauv Nose Powder" and "Children Cry for Castoria!" The Pepsodent song was on a par with the best fourth-rate Italian operas, full of emotional bel canto. The sheets of Utica were spread with the artiness of a slightly adulterated Schumann. The Bran Muffin ad bore a banner headline, "And Then Her Doctor Told Her . . ." showing a bearded Germanic physician pointing an ominous index finger at a dejected but beautiful female sufferer slumped in an armchair. One could expect the worst, but the doctor in the ad was concerned only with correcting the lady's "faulty elimination." I borrowed the theme from Rachmaninoff's C sharp minor Prelude to depict her condition in suitably dramatic terms. There followed "No More Shiny Nose!" attesting to the durable effect of the powder. In the Castoria song, the climax came with the cry, "Mother, relieve your constipated child!" A parlando recitative against a dissonant tremolo reassured the parents that Castoria did not include harmful drugs or narcotics.

My advertising songs enjoyed a gratifying success at friendly gatherings. Eventually, I decided to publish them. To my surprise, the Pepsodent Company refused to let me use their brand name, so I changed it to Plurodent, and revised the text accordingly. The nose powder went out of existence, so I did not have to bother about the copyright. Amazingly, the Castoria people gave me unqualified permission to use their name.