

Pianist Cordelia Williams on the beguiling nature of musical miniatures

Cordelia Williams

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When I play the middle section of Beethoven's Fourth Bagatelle from Op 126, I instantly leave the everyday world for another existence: floating, hazy, waiting. Just as abruptly, this shining life disappears like a burst bubble, leaving only a sense that something magical has flickered by. I'm struck over and over by the contrast between the idea of a 'Bagatelle' – a small trifle, something of little import – and the musical



reality of these pieces. Yes, they are short, but there is such concentration of creativity, focusing each vignette to bright intensity. The depth of transformation and modulation conveys us great distances in each 'trifle' – musical content and emotional weight in inverse relation to length. These pieces were written well after Beethoven's final piano sonata and I sense a whole lifetime of invention condensed into these small forms.

Each of these six miniatures casts a brief spell, seeming to end after a minute or two but nevertheless leaving us subtly changed by the experiencing of it. I've enjoyed playing these Bagatelles for 15 years now but over the last three I've become captivated by this momentary magic in music, by the quality of fleeting beauty. My perception of life seems to become less linear, more a tumbling collection of moments of passing vividness. The ephemerality does not diminish the meaning contained within each of those moments – maybe it even increases their splendour.

'I love the thought that each flower or leaf, each moment in time, and each human interaction is unrepeatable'

Prokofiev wrote his *Visions Fugitives (Fleeting Visions)* between 1915 and 1917 and these 20 tiny musical glimpses have been described by his biographer Israel Nestyev as 'experiments from a laboratory'. As in the Bagatelles, the boldness of expression here is not scaled down to fit the form. The vibrancy with which Prokofiev conjures each atmosphere or texture pushes each experiment to its maximum, even in only a few bars. The effect of this 'composing to the wall' is that we seem to see only fragments of something much larger, some deeper truth. Indeed, the title of the work is taken from *I do not know wisdom*, the 1903 poem by Prokofiev's friend Konstantin Balmont:

'In each fleeting vision I see worlds,

Full of the changing play of rainbows.'

In both these sets of 'miniatures' something of the essence of the world is revealed to us.

I first had the idea to record Beethoven's Op 126 alongside the *Visions Fugitives* nearly four years ago, and during the three years 'mulling over' before recording I began exploring the concept of 'haecceity'. From the Latin 'haec' meaning 'this', haecceity could be translated as 'thisness'. It denotes the irreducible essence of a thing that makes it *this particular* thing – not just one of a genus of thing, such as 'an iris', but one particular unrepeatable instance of an iris, with its unique colouring and arrangement of petals.

I love the thought that each flower or leaf, each moment in time, and each human interaction is unrepeatable. Every time I play a certain bar of music in a slightly different way, or each time my three year old dissolves into world-shattering tears because (for example) he didn't want the duvet straightened – each shard, each trifle, has its own perfect, absolute purpose. It is a treasure.



The title of this recording is taken from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Book of Hours*, my thumbed copy of which has more pages turned down and underlined than not:

'Often when I imagine you, your wholeness cascades into many shapes.'

Rather than a coherent 'whole', this music gives us micro-glimpses into countless worlds – inner worlds, literal worlds, dissolving worlds, worlds of imagination. As in life, these anarchic and many-coloured contradictions point towards something subtle and wondrous and ungraspable. When I really make time to notice those shards, and the beauty wrapped up in small instances of ferocity, anxiety or sunlight on the kitchen table, there's a peculiar feeling of connection which is almost addictive. I think perhaps this is what Jack Underwood pinpoints in his poem *Happiness*:

'Yesterday it appeared to me in the form of two purple elastic bands round

a bunch of asparagus, which was a very small happiness, a garden variety...'

It's also the unique power of the best musical miniatures. I'm excited to explore these ideas – thisness, and the 'un-depth' of the smallest forms – further in a collaboration I'm developing with poet Michael Symmons Roberts for 2024. However, for now I will be enjoying the exhilarating contrast of my recital programmes over the next month, in which I juxtapose the condensed Beethoven Bagatelles with the emotionally monumental joyride of Schumann's *Fantasie*, and Prokofiev's kaleidoscopic *Visions Fugitives* with Schubert's unspooling late A major Sonata (D959). I derive great pleasure from programming. A clever pairing can bring out increased vividness in the music, or some hidden element which I hadn't fully appreciated before, casting a well-

known piece in a slightly different light. These are always insights that I am grateful for in my understanding of a piece. Sometimes, as in the case of *Cascade*, they even somehow let me grow into myself and my own musical 'thisness'.

Cordelia Williams's new album on SOMM Recordings, *Cascade*, featuring music by Beethoven, Schumann and Prokofiev is released today. Listen on Apple Music:



Cascade
Cordelia Williams



- 1 Bagatelle in C Minor, WoO 56
- 2 Visions fugitives, Op...
- 3 Visions fugitives, Op...
- 4 Visions fugitives, Op...
- 5 Visions fugitives, Op...
- 6 Visions fugitives, Op...

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