

## Program Notes

### Three Adventures for Piano and Narrator

As a young child, my favorite record was *Sparky and the Magic Piano* for piano and narrator. *Sparky* is the story of a beginning piano student who dreams of playing as well as his teacher. *Sparky* gets his wish (and a brief concert career) when his piano comes to life. *Sparky* and his piano performed classics by Chopin and Rachmaninoff, and motivated me to practice so I could play these pieces too.

These three adventures for piano and narrator represent very different approaches to the form, yet each contain some of *Sparky's* magic.

### Soulima Stravinsky (1910-1994): The Sleeping Beauty from Three Fairy Tales (1976)

Sviatoslav Soulima Stravinsky was a well-known piano teacher (and the son of famous composer Igor). Many of his compositions for piano are written with children in mind. These include Six Sonatinas for Young Pianists, The Musical Alphabet, Chantefables and the Three Fairy Tales.

Since the Fairy Tales are well known stories, Stravinsky decided to have the narrator provide a barest outline and let the piano tell the story. The musical language that he uses in the *Fairy Tales* is quite sparse but the harmonies and counterpoint are often unexpected.

### Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953): The Adventures of Tom Thumb (1925)

Ruth Crawford Seeger was an American composer and ethnomusicologist. She was the first American woman to write in an atonal style and the first woman to win a Guggenheim Fellowship. She was a member of a prominent musical family that included her husband Charles, step-son Peter and daughter Peggy.

*The Adventures of Tom Thumb* was unpublished during the composer's lifetime. The manuscript was in the Library of Congress under the name Ruth Porter (Crawford) Seeger and was published for the first time in 2004.

The composer chose the text in the first five sections of the piece. She surrounded the text with an imaginative musical landscape consisting of unusual harmonies and dissonances. Her daughter Peggy Seeger completed the work in 2002 by choosing words for the last section. She writes of her choice of language, "In Section 6, I did not stay in keeping with the style of the earlier prose. I used storytelling techniques and word choices that folk singers and folk storytellers use. I've told it the way a child would tell it, whereas the earlier telling is in adult language and with adult logic."

I asked Peggy about her choice of language, since the original contained some arcane words from the 19th century. She told me that she did not want to change the text in the first five sections out of respect for her mother's choices. Jack and I have also respected the composer's choice of text, but in some cases have substituted modern language where the original would sound odd or confusing.

### **John M. Tarrh (1947- ): Lyle, Lyle Crocodile (2009)**

John Tarrh is a composer who lives in Lexington MA with his wife and three children. Originally trained as an electrical engineer, John earned his B.S. from Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 1970 and his M.S. from MIT in 1972 and worked for a number of years at MIT. He later was a co-founder and CFO of Applied Science and Technology (ASTeX). Following the sale of ASTeX in 2001 to MKS Instruments Inc., John began to pursue a lifetime dream of studying and writing, and earned Masters of Music and Masters of Composition degrees from the New England Conservatory.

John has written music for a variety of ensembles, including solo piano, solo voice and piano, chorus and piano, string quartet, clarinet quintet, wind quintet, brass ensemble, concert band, chamber orchestra, and full orchestra. I have known John for many years, having worked together at MIT and at ASTeX. In 2008 I asked John if he might consider writing a piece for piano and narrator. This piece is the result.

#### **Notes by the composer:**

Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile (2009) is a musical setting of one of my favorite books by Bernard Weber (Copyright 1965. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Co., all rights reserved. ) I read the book many times to my three sons when they were very young, It is a terrific story that deals with the issue of prejudice, among other things. Lyle, a big green crocodile, is not wanted in the neighborhood. He frightens a neighbor's cat because of his size and unusual appearance, which immediately sets the cat's owner, Mr. Grumps against Lyle. It becomes apparent that the only way Lyle can succeed with Mr. Grumps is through an act of heroism or some such

extraordinary display. Fortunately Lyle triumphs, but only after a series of serendipitous circumstances and harrowing adventures.

Every manor character has a musical theme prompted by their personality. Lyle the crocodile is friendly, helpful, athletic, and talented. Loretta the cat is nervous, distrustful, excitable and easily frightened. Her owner Mr. Gumps is a department store executive who is excitable, snappy and irritable. Lyle's old friend Hector P. Valenti, star of stage and screen is a show off. Even the house on East 88th St, where Lyle lives, has a musical theme. The house is one of a symmetrical row of brownstones, much like those in Boston's South End neighborhood.

Lyle, Lyle Crocodile is also available in a version for full orchestra and narrator. The New Philharmonia Orchestra will present the premier of the orchestral version next month in Newton, MA.

#### **Improvisations on Themes Suggested by the Audience**

The Theme and Variations is a form as old as music itself. Originally, it was an improvisation – someone took a tune and created a piece of music in an impromptu performance, just as many jazz artists still do today. Eventually, composers began to write down their variations, grouping them to form a satisfying whole. True to its improvised beginnings, there are no real rules in writing this type of piece; you can play the tune backwards, upside down, borrow its rhythms and harmonies to make new tunes – just about anything goes.

### **William Bolcom (1938- ): California Porcupine Rag (1968)**

National Medal of Arts, Pulitzer Prize, and Grammy Award-winner William Bolcom is an American composer of chamber, operatic, vocal, choral, cabaret, ragtime, and symphonic music. Bolcom recently retired from the faculty of the University of Michigan's School of Music after 35 years of distinguished composing and teaching, but continues to write and perform new works.

In the mid-1960's Bolcom and his composer friend William Albright became interested in the music of Scott Joplin, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century master of the piano rag. They each composed several sets of modern piano rags. with the bouncy 2/4 beat and organizational structure of the classic rag but with modern harmonies and sly humor.

*The California Porcupine Rag*, was originally titled *Al Right, Albright* as an answer for one of Albright's more outrageous and challenging rags. Bolcom renamed it after seeing a porcupine in the the Siskiyou Mountains of Northwestern California.

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### **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to the memory of my good friend Roberta Lukes, whose enjoyment of modern music preceded my own.