

NICHOLAS SIMPSON

Fastness

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He Was Despised | Fastness | Bachianas Mancuniensis | Little Suite



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MANCHESTER CAMERATA
HUW WIGGIN

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LEADER: KATIE STILLMAN
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1	He Was Despised (Variations on a Theme of Handel)	1:08
2	Variation I <i>Grandioso</i>	2:14
3	Variation II <i>Andante mesto e rubato</i>	2:33
4	Variation III	1:46
5	Variation IV <i>Siciliana</i>	1:27
6	Variation V	1:22
7	Variation VI	2:09
8	Variation VII	2:04
9	Variation VIII <i>Allegro Corragioso</i>	3:00
10	Fastness Huw Wiggin: Soprano Saxophone	19:17
	Bachianas Mancuniensis	
11	i Prelude	1:44
12	ii Allemande	2:24
13	iii Courante	2:52
14	iv Sarabande	3:19
15	v Gigue	2:44
	Little Suite	
16	i Angelus	3:37
17	ii Sorrow	5:35
18	iii Home	4:11

Total Playing Time: 63:37

About twenty years ago I suffered a professional reverse which caused a normally robust sense of self-esteem to falter. Hopping about in agony was all the more galling since I had discharged both barrels into my own foot. Having little alternative, I chose to laugh at myself, and thus came the idea of a set of variations for strings on Handel's dolorous *Messiah* aria **He Was Despised**. Comparing my sufferings with those of Jesus Christ seemed bleakly humorous, and the nod to Shostakovich's 5th Symphony on the title page ("A Mancunian artist's practical creative reply to just criticism") completed the mordant picture, particularly since my adversaries were not exactly villains in Pontius Pilate or Stalin's class.

A tightly compressed version of the first part of Handel's aria leads on to eight variations, generally elaborating the descending violin figure heard in the opening bars. At first, my misfortunes are outlined. In variation one, *Not a Famous Conductor*, all the arm-waving histrionics of the profession are called forth. Variation two, *Not a Famous Composer*, suggests the poor-me anguish of a Mahlerian lament.

At about this period (I was a youthful 45) the signs of encroaching male-pattern baldness had started to appear, and so amidst the musical comb-over of *A Bit Thin on Top* gleam the harmonics of newly-clearing scalp. After this I had rather run out of things to complain about, and the fourth variation, *Not Much Good At Football* (the programme for the first performance at the Buxton Festival in 2010 showed the composer earnestly attempting a personal best at keepy-uppy in his back garden) reimagines the *Match of the Day* signature tune as a doleful siciliania. The key here, C flat, is one in which even the finest string players sometimes find themselves wrong-footed.

Reflection on the paucity of these sorrows however prompted gratitude for my otherwise startling good fortune, and, true to the TV theme suggested in the previous variation, *Drink In The House, Money In The Bank* shifts up a gear to simple C major, taking its upward leaping arpeggio as a starting point. This fifth variation nods both to Grieg's *Holberg Suite* (one of my favourite pieces for strings) in its fleeting exuberance, and to the central section of Handel's aria, in which Jesus "gave his back to the smiters". Not only was I solvent, with beakers full of the warm south to hand, but I also had a *Lovely Wife and Kids*, a sixth variation which gives passionate utterance to the joys and tribulations of family life. This runs on into the *Little House in the Country*, in which a swooning violin solo swoops and soars.

How to finish off? By reminding myself that I am *Not Dead Yet*. Marked *Allegro Corragioso*, the concluding helter skelter marks something of a return to Handel's own musical language, overflowing as it does with determination and vivacity.

If *He Was Despised* necessarily involves some wearing of other people's compositional clothes, **Fastness** is unmediated in style. Written in 2017, it is a tribute to an old friend, with whom as an adolescent and then young man I spent many happy weeks fishing, climbing and camping in the temperate moonscape of the North West Highlands. Here I learned to love the natural world, a lifelong passion and consolation. Many years later my friend was struck down by a debilitating illness; *Fastness* is my attempt to write a musical analogue for these things. I chose the title because it spoke for the consistency of my gratitude to and regard for him, and because the remote places we traversed constituted not just a physical but a mental sanctuary too, a redoubt of lifelong happiness which cannot be infringed.

Fastness is scored for soprano saxophone and strings. The soloist is at first lyrical and expansive, dominating the opening exchanges with a cadenza. Later in the piece we hear the cadenza material again, accompanied by the orchestra, and increasingly focused on a high pitched repeated note, a suggestion of the golden plovers we occasionally heard in the wilderness, making their plaintive alarm calls from a distant rock. Loquacity now begins to desert the soloist. The strings lament its loss, then repeat their own cadenza accompaniment material without the saxophone, an evocation of both interior and exterior desolation. The soloist is reduced to plover's cries. Finally a version of the opening for solo strings fades into silence.

Graham Greene called some of his books "entertainments", a suggestion of flimsiness that is belied by their quality (novels as good as *Our Man in Havana*, *Stamboul Train* and *The Third Man* were all described in this way). I used the same term for ***Bachianas Mancuniensis***. It seemed to me that if Villa Lobos could write a gloss on Bach for Brazil, there was no reason why I couldn't do the same for Manchester (another football obsessed culture). In doing so I imagined that the piece would be heard by people who had gone out (like all Mancs) intent on having a good time, and performed by people who liked to enjoy what they were doing. People like, for example, my friends in the Athenean Ensemble and the Amaretti Chamber Orchestra, for whom all the pieces on this record were written.

Dating from 2015, *Bach Manc* has five movements - *Prelude*, *Sarabande*, *Courante*, *Allemande* and *Gigue* - in the manner of a Baroque suite. It's scored for the sort of small orchestra (with flute, oboes, bassoons and horns added to strings) which might have been familiar to one of Bach's sons, if not to the great man himself. All the movements take as their starting point the characteristic chord progression which opens the *Prelude*, and open out into other rhythmic and harmonic areas which the Bach family would have found less familiar, if not actually rather odd.

I arranged the ***Little Suite*** for strings from *Angelus*, a three movement choral piece setting words by Kathleen Raine, commissioned in 2014 by the vocal group Accord. Arranging music, even your own, can be a snare. It is seductive because it lacks the boring and painful bits inherent in creating something from scratch, but unfortunately it also lacks composition's most satisfying aspects, and at the end of the process you have not really written anything new. But I liked the generous harmony that the six part choral set-up of the original permitted, and thought it would work well for strings. Moreover, one of my favourite Sibelius pieces is the wonderful *Rakastava*, itself a transcription for strings of a choral work; if it was good enough for him, it should be good enough for me. Writing for choir, one is tied to the words. An arrangement for instruments can cast these bonds aside, and so the second and last of the three movements have been expanded slightly.

Finally, the title is a nod to Carl Nielsens's *Little Suite*, another of the greatest works for string orchestra, and one with nothing little about it.

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Nicholas Simpson

Nicholas Simpson was born in Manchester. He read law at Nottingham University, and played guitar in rock bands before studying for four years with John Tavener at Trinity College of Music in London, where he won the Chappell Prize for composition and the Ricordi Prize for conducting (twice). In the 1990s Simpson practised as a criminal lawyer in London, but quit to be a professional musician on moving back to Manchester in 1998. His music has been widely played in Europe and the USA. His output includes three symphonies, a piano concerto, chamber music, an oratorio and *Quarantine*, an opera based on Jim Crace's 1995 Booker-shortlisted novel of the same name. Recent projects include *Remembered Music*, a CD with the Zelkova Quartet and the soprano Charlotte Trepess.

Nick Simpson is Music Director of the Halifax Symphony Orchestra in West Yorkshire, the Athenean Ensemble in Manchester and Associate Conductor of the Huddersfield Philharmonic. His second album as a singer/songwriter, *Ladder to the Stars*, will be out on Subtopia Records in Autumn 2022.

Thanks to Sally Hatfield, and to the Greater Fools of the FTSE 100.





Photo: Matthew Johnson

Huw Wiggin

Since winning First Prize and Gold Medal and being named 'Commonwealth Musician of the Year' at the Royal Over-Seas League Annual Music Competition in 2014, Huw Wiggin has become one of the most popular saxophonists of his generation.

He has performed in venues as far afield as the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing as well as those closer to home such as London's Wigmore Hall. Other past highlights include appearances at Brighton, Ryedale, Newbury, Ripon and Edinburgh Fringe Festivals, as well as a recent concerto on the main stage at Henley Festival. His performance of Milton Babbitt's *Accompanied Recitative* was broadcast by BBC Radio 3 on 'Hear and Now' to celebrate the composer's centenary.

Huw is Professor of Saxophone at the Royal Academy of Music in London and has given worldwide masterclasses. He

has also been a member of the judging panel for major competitions including the Royal Over-Seas League Annual Music Competition.


In March 2018 Huw featured on *BLAKE, The Anniversary Album*, conducted and orchestrated by James Sherlock. Other collaborations include working with singer Laura Wright, harpist Oliver Wass and pianist John Lenehan.

Reflections - Huw's debut disc (with John Lenehan and Oliver Wass) - was released on Orchid Classics in June 2018 to great acclaim in the press, reaching no. 2 in the UK Specialist Classical Chart and no. 6 in the iTunes Classical Chart.

As someone who is passionate about travelling, Huw has given concerts on Cunard ships all over the world. He is a regular performer on Cunard's flagship ocean liners: Queen Elizabeth, Queen Victoria and the Queen Mary II.

Having studied at Chetham's School of Music, the Royal Northern College of Music and Hochschule für Musik, Cologne, Huw gained a Master's Degree with Distinction from the Royal College of Music in 2012, also winning the RCM Concerto Prize.

Huw is a member of the prize-winning Ferio Saxophone Quartet and regularly performs with them in the UK and abroad. The quartet signed with Chandos Records in 2016 and has released four highly successful discs for the label: *Flux* in July 2017, *Revive* in November 2018, *Evoke* in October 2021 with pianist Timothy End, and *Revoiced* in July 2022 in collaboration with vocal ensemble the Corvus Consort.



MPR115 Fastness

All tracks Nicholas Simpson: Composer

Artists: Manchester Camerata (Leader Katie Stillman), Nicholas Simpson (Conductor), Huw Wiggin (Solo Soprano Saxophone)

Venue: The Stoller Hall, Chetham's School of Music, Manchester

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