

Charles O'BRIEN

COMPLETE CHAMBER MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

SONATA FOR PIANO TRIO NO. 1 IN B FLAT MAJOR, OP. 27

SONATA FOR PIANO TRIO NO. 2 IN C MINOR

DEUX VALSES, OP. 28

Yuri Kalnits, violin
Alexander Volpov, cello
Oleg Poliansky, piano

SOMETHING TO SAY: THE CHAMBER MUSIC OF CHARLES O'BRIEN, VOLUME ONE

by Paul Mann

If you have nothing to say, you cannot do better, until you decide to give up composing for good, than say again what has already been well said. If you have something to say, that something will never emerge more distinctly than when you are being unwittingly unfaithful to your model.

Maurice Ravel¹

Following the Toccata Classics surveys of Charles O'Brien's complete works for orchestra² and for solo piano,³ this recording is the first of two exploring his chamber music. The two piano trios heard here – both designated, most unusually, as *Sonatas for Pianoforte, Violin and 'Cello* – take their place among O'Brien's finest works, and are among his last major compositions, forming a triptych with the Sonata for Clarinet and Piano (to be included in Volume Two of this series). The exact dates of their composition are unknown, although both were first performed at a concert of the Edinburgh Society of Musicians on 13 January 1940, with subsequent BBC broadcasts of the first Sonata on 24 June 1948, and the second on 17 February 1952.

¹ Quoted in Arbie Orenstein (ed.), *A Ravel Reader, Correspondence, Articles, Interviews*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p. 19.

² Volume One (rocc 0262) presented the *Ellangowan Overture*, Op. 12 (c. 1909) and the *Symphony in F minor*, Op. 23 (1922), Volume Two (rocc 0263) the overtures *To Spring* and *The Minstrel's Curse*, Opp. 4 and 7 (1905–6 and 1904–5 respectively), the *Scottish Scenes*, Op. 17 (1914–15, orch. 1929), *Mazurka* and *Berceuse* (both 1898), and Volume Three (rocc 0299) the *Suite Humoristique*, Op. 8 (1904), the original (Op. 10) version of the *Ellangowan Overture* (1909) and the *Waltz Suite*, Op. 26 (1928), all in performances by the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra, with myself conducting.

³ On Volume One (rocc 0256) Warren Mailley-Smith performed the Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 14 (1910), *Deux Valses*, Op. 25 (1928) and the two sets of *Scottish Scenes*, Opp. 17 and 21 (1915 and 1917 respectively); and on Volume Two (rocc 0257) the *Barcarolle*, Op. 8b (1904, transcr. 1964–65), *Arabesque*, Op. 11 (1906), *Daffodils*, Op. 13 (1910), *Two Rhapsodies*, Op. 22, *Four Waltzes*, Op. 26 (1928) and *Three Grandchildren Waltzes* (c. 1962–63).

On all three occasions, the composer played the hugely demanding piano parts, which gives a clear indication of his abilities as a pianist.

The advice Ravel in his later years gave to a young composer which I quote at the head of this essay fits Charles O'Brien's case perfectly, because although Brahms frequently hovers like a benevolent ghost over these pieces, especially in the First Sonata, it is only when O'Brien diverges from that example that the music takes on a truly distinctive voice – as especially keenly evident in the opening movement of the **First Sonata** (*Allegro assai* [1]). The first subject is dark-hued and quietly impassioned, heard in the lower register of both piano and cello. As the violin enters, the piano appropriates that most Brahmsian of fingerprints, hemiolic rhythms, and the first-subject group ends with a passage of metrical ambiguity that would surely have impressed the older composer. It is, however, far less easy to guess what he might have made of the second subject, for which the scene shifts to a drawing room in Scotland, and the music becomes infused with dance-like dotted rhythms, together with a charming chromatic playfulness which serves deliberately to undermine the serious-minded mood, while still retaining a certain mercurial quality. A darkly mysterious passage closes the second group, and seems to dramatise the composer's dilemma, as if caught between the two worlds.

The start of the development effortlessly sideslips back into the world of Brahms, and the music is driven forward by impetuous triplet piano figurations, with diminished sevenths very much in evidence. A climax is reached *con fuoco*, with a unison exchange of the first-subject material between the piano and the two stringed instruments.

The contrasting second-subject material encroaches once again, but is this time broken up by questioning *legato* phrases in the violin and cello, and there is even a brief and playful two-bar flirtation with a whole-tone scale, which would undoubtedly have horrified Brahms.

The recapitulation is carefully crafted, and far from a mere carbon copy of the exposition. The cello and right hand of the piano exchange their original roles, and the responsibilities are now more evenly divided between the instruments, giving the impression of continued development. The entrance of the violin introduces a new

syncopated accompaniment in the piano, and the recapitulation of the 'Scottish' music seems more high-spirited than ever, with an added *pizzicato* commentary from the cello.

The lengthy coda is based entirely on the first-subject material, and is driven forward by the unstoppable momentum of what has by now established itself as a thoroughly virtuosic piano part. The final reference to the first theme is heard as if in bright sunlight, with widely spaced broken chords in the piano, liberated from the shadows in which the movement began.

The brief, hushed, Scherzo and Trio (*Allegro molto* [2]) is rather a clandestine joke, with sparse octaves in the bass of the piano against a continuous *pizzicato* in the violin and cello. The prevailing $\frac{6}{8}$ metre is unsettled by a more lyrical secondary $\frac{2}{4}$ idea in the piano, and although the whole thing sounds in some respects like a spectral reminiscence of the opening of the Scherzo of Brahms' Horn Trio, the harmonically unstable musical language is all O'Brien.

The slower Trio section (*Poco meno mosso*) begins with four descending bell-like strokes in the piano, followed by a briefly sighing *legato* phrase, and seems a wistfully sad commentary on the Scherzo. Although an impassioned climax is developed, it ultimately leads nowhere, and is abruptly silenced. A recapitulation of the Trio is, in its turn, broken up by hesitations, and the repeat of the Scherzo, although exact, somehow appears even more subdued than before. There is no coda, and the music simply stops.

The spirit of Brahms is once again strongly present at the beginning of the tripartite slow movement (*Andantino, quasi Allegretto* [3]), with an impassioned theme shared in parallel sixths between the violin and cello. Once again, though, O'Brien's own voice reasserts itself in the more rhetorical central section, an eclogue-like passage reminiscent of the dramatic central panel of his Op. 17 *Scottish Scenes* triptych. After an entirely regular recapitulation, a brief evocation of the middle section is heard in the coda, which calmly, but firmly and decisively, brings the movement to a close in O'Brien's own distinctive soundworld.

The Rondino finale (*Allegro giocoso* [4]) seems to look beyond Brahms, with more than a touch of Elgar about its decisive, metrically ambiguous opening bars and dominant-inflected main theme. The second subject is, in common with its counterparts

elsewhere in the work, more individual, with a dance-like snap in its rhythms, and a charming naivety about its folkloric harmonies. After the turbulence and passion of this movement, O'Brien clearly knew that a forceful ending would unbalance the whole work, and so the music begins instead to wind down gently, with a few fleeting echoes of the first movement, returning to the twilight in which it began.

The opening movement of the **Sonata No. 2** (*Con moto moderato* [5]) is a strong contender for O'Brien's finest achievement in any medium. All his stylistic influences find their most complete fusion with his own personality, which here seems liberated and uninhibited. The voice of Brahms may still be heard, but it is evident only in superficial details. Although cast on a large scale – the movement is a couple of minutes longer than its counterpart in the First Sonata – everything is taut and concise, and in perfectly judged proportion. Responsibilities are evenly divided between the three instruments, although especially stringent demands are placed on the pianist. The stylistic advance from the First Sonata may well point to a significantly later date of composition.

The C minor turbulence with which the movement begins is maintained throughout the first-subject group. The music quickly becomes harmonically unstable and richly chromatic far beyond anything in the First Sonata, and even includes more extensively developed whole-tone elements. The tension is relieved only slightly by the shorter, more relaxed but still urgently expressive second subject, and the development is launched by a vigorous fugato (marked *energico*), based on the subsidiary theme of the first-subject group, the single-minded obsessiveness of which seems closer to Schumann than to Brahms. (It is also interesting to note O'Brien's aversion to exposition repeats in his sonata-form movements: he prefers to keep the developing drama on the move.) Although the recapitulation begins as in the First Sonata, with the piano and cello exchanging roles, it proceeds much more regularly and literally, and eventually leads to a tumultuous coda which comes softly to rest in a calm but uneasy C major.

After such drama, the central 'Air with Variations' [6]–[16] seems an oasis of Neo-Classical tranquillity, looking back in particular to Beethoven's sonata movements in the same form. The theme [6] provides a straightforward harmonic backdrop for an ever-increasingly complex and inventive array of variations, including a central

funeral march [11] and, in a most novel touch, incorporating a high-spirited Scherzo and Trio (explicitly labelled as such) as the final two variations [13]–[15]. Composers have experimented with hybrid movements at least since the time of the Bohemian-born Antoine Reicha (1770–1836); and the Swede Franz Berwald (1796–1868) may have been the first to enfold a scherzo and trio into a slow movement, in his *Sinfonie singulière* of 1845. But I cannot think of a precedent for encapsulating a scherzo and trio into a set of variations as part of a sonata, and this delightful movement seems effortlessly to reconcile O’Brien’s lightness of touch with his more high-minded aspirations.

The impassioned finale (*Allegro* [17]) is dominated by the theme first heard in the cello in the opening bars, and although the second theme is gentler, the music remains restless and agitated. Most surprising and impressive of all is the highly original ending. Just as a C major resolution comes into view, and the music at last seems to be finding some serenity, one final fervent outburst leads to two silent bars, and three darkly restrained closing chords, triads shared between the right hand of the piano and the violin, with the bass provided by the lowest open strings of the cello. It makes for a profoundly uneasy conclusion to what is by any standards an exceptionally fine work. One wonders what O’Brien might have achieved had he written more extensively for chamber forces, but in the absence of a large-scale piano quintet or string quartet, these two works stand as remarkable achievements, easily justifying their long-overdue restoration to the repertoire through this recording.

For the closing works in this album, the clock is turned back more than a decade to 1928, which seems to have been something of a waltz year for O’Brien. His four-movement *Waltz Suite* (Op. 26), in both its piano and orchestral versions, was composed contemporaneously with these *Deux Valses* for Piano Trio. Although the Op. 26 set is, on the whole, entertainingly extrovert, its four movements perhaps intended as *entr’actes* to be played in the theatres or newly emergent cinemas of the day, these two piano-trio waltzes are considerably more intimate, each sharing a touch of the gentle, wistful *Weltschmerz* of the best Viennese waltzes – indeed, the first of them, ‘L’Adieu’ [18], sounds like an out-take from Lehár’s *The Merry Widow*. On the other hand, the ‘Souvenirs’ of the second waltz [19] might be of Brahms’ setting of Hermann Lingg’s poem ‘Immer leiser

wird mein Schlummer', the second of the *Fünf Lieder*, Op. 105, with which it shares the first four notes of its melody and the melancholic sentiments of which it seems to reflect:

Oft in Träume hör ich dich
rufen drauß vor meiner Tür;
Niemand wacht und öffnet dir,
Ich erwach' und weine bitterlich.

*Often in my dreams I hear you
Calling outside my door;
No one is awake to let you in,
And I wake up and weep bitterly.*

Paul Mann is a frequent guest conductor of orchestras throughout Europe, the USA, Australia and the Far East. He has so far made eleven recordings for Toccata Classics, including three albums comprising the complete orchestral music of Charles O'Brien, made from his own critical editions. He also created new editions of all the works on this recording of O'Brien's piano trios.

Born in Moscow into a musical family, **Yuri Kalnits** received his first violin lessons from his father and went on to become a pupil at the Central Music School in Moscow and later at the Gnessin Music School for Gifted Children. At the age of sixteen he began studying at the Royal College of Music in London with Itzhak Rashkovsky, winning several major College awards, including the Foundation Scholarship, the W. H. Reed and Isolde Menges prizes and the Leonard Hirsch Prize for the outstanding string-player of the year. He went on to win other major prizes, notably those of the Bromsgrove and Watford Music Festivals in England, the Yehudi Menuhin Award from the Sudborough Foundation, the Barthel Prize from the Concordia Foundation and the KPMG/Martin Musical Scholarship in the UK, the Cziffra Foundation competition in France and the Web Concert Hall Competition in the USA. Upon graduation from the RCM he was awarded the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Scholarship for postgraduate studies there. He completed his training with Yfrah Neaman at the Guildhall School of Music and Vasko Vassiliev at Trinity



College of Music, while receiving further artistic guidance from such eminent musicians as Valentin Berlinsky, Sergei Fatkulline, Edward Grach, Shlomo Mintz, Igor Oistrakh, Abram Shtern and Sylvia Rosenberg.

Recognised with two prestigious 'Diapason d'Or' awards for his Toccata Classics recordings of Weinberg's violin sonatas, Yuri has participated in festivals throughout the world, among them the Festival Musicales Internationales Guil-Durance (France), Young Artist Peninsula Music Festival (USA), Festival Cziffra (France), Waterford International Music Festival (Ireland), Irina Kandinskaya and Friends (Russia), Pharos Trust Festival (Cyprus), Festival Musica da Camera (Germany), Festival International Ciudad de Ubeda (Spain), Beyond the Music Festival (Spain), Loch Shiel Spring Festival (Scotland) and Ljubljana International Festival (Slovenia). He has played at many important venues, including The Purcell Room, Kings Place, St John's, Smith Square, the Barbican and St Martin-in-the-Fields in London (where he lives), the Small Hall of Moscow Conservatoire, the Walter Reade Theater at Lincoln Center in New York and Suntory Hall in Tokyo. Tours have taken him to Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Ireland, Israel, Russia, Spain, Switzerland and the USA.

As a concerto soloist he has appeared with the London Festival Orchestra, Mozart Festival Orchestra, Arpeggione Chamber Orchestra, London Soloist Chamber Orchestra, Novosibirsk Symphony Orchestra, Kazan Chamber Orchestra La Primavera, London Musical Arts Ensemble, Minsk Symphony Orchestra and the New Philharmonia Köln, to name only some, and his playing has been broadcast on BBC Radio 3 as well as New Zealand national radio.

A dedicated chamber musician, Yuri has worked among others with such artists as his fellow violinist Ivry Gitlis, clarinetist Eduard Brunner, oboist Emanuel Abbühl, violist Roger Chase and cellist Alexander Chaushian. He joined the Erato Piano Trio in 2010 and has since performed with the group at many prestigious venues across the UK and abroad, not least in a well-received Purcell Room debut and a recording of David Braid's *Music for Dancers* on Toccata Classics (TOCC 0149).

Yuri is one of the organisers and a jury member of the Moscow String Project, a series of master-classes and a competition aiming to provide an opportunity for young players to obtain scholarships to leading European conservatoires. Together with the cellist Julia Morneweg, Yuri also co-directs the London concert series ChamberMusicBox, which brings together leading British and European artists.

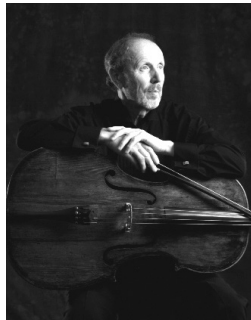
Born in Sverdlovsk, Russia, **Alexander Volpov** started playing the cello at an early age at the Yekaterinburg School for Musically Gifted Children and went on to train at the Rachmaninov Conservatoire in Rostov-on-Don and the Gnessin Institute in Moscow. A prize-winner of multiple competitions, notably the All Union Chamber Music Competition, he launched his international career in 1975 as cellist of the Rostov Quartet, with which he toured extensively for many years, culminating in their Wigmore Hall debut in 1996. Other chamber-music collaborations and recordings followed, and he is currently a member of the Razumovsky Quartet Vienna and regularly appears at festivals throughout Europe and as far afield as China.

A distinguished orchestral player, he has appeared as guest principal cello with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, the BT Scottish Ensemble, Scottish Opera, Northern Sinfonia, Opera North and the London Concert Orchestra. He currently serves as Principal Cello of the Northern Ballet Sinfonia.

Equally recognised as an outstanding teacher, he is a guest professor at Nanjing University, having previously taught at the Rachmaninov Conservatoire in Rostov-on-Don for sixteen years. He regularly gives master-classes in Austria, the Czech Republic, Spain and the UK.

Oleg Poliansky, born in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1968, started to study the piano at the Lysenko Music School there; his teachers were Natalia Gridneva and Natalia Tolpygo. Simultaneously, he also studied cello with Galina Grishenko. There are three other well-known musicians among his teachers: Alexandr Alexandrov at the Gnessin Institute in Moscow, Sergei Dorensky at the Moscow Conservatoire and Pavel Gililov at the Musikhochschule Köln. Oleg Poliansky has lived in Cologne since 1993, holding the position of Associate Professor for Major Piano at Hochschule für Musik Köln since 2007.

He is the prize-winner of many international competitions, first of all of the international Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1998. In addition, he has won prizes in Tokyo in



1986, in Montreal in 1988, at the international Duo Competition in memoriam Christian Ferras and Pierre Barbizet in Marseille in 1997, at the World Piano Competition in Cincinnati in 1999, as well as the Città di Cantu in Italy in 1998 and 2003.

In the course of his career, he has made appearances at the largest international concert venues and given concerts as a soloist with such renowned orchestras as The Moscow Soloists, The Moscow Symphony Orchestra, The National Symphony of Ukraine, The Novosibirsk Symphony Orchestra, The Urals Symphony Orchestra in Yekaterinburg, Budapest Strings, Neue Philharmonie Westfalen, Sinfonietta Hungarica, Junge Philharmonie Köln, The National Orchestra of Malta, Orchestra Giovanile della Calabria, The Mariinsky Theatre Symphony Orchestra, The KBS National Radio Orchestra of Korea and, also in Korea, the Busan and Seoul Philharmonic Orchestras, the last with Myung-Whun Chung. Among the festivals at which he has been a guest are the Klavierfestival Ruhr, Rheingau Music Festival, Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival, The New Generation in Dortmund, Europaisches Klassikfestival Ruhr, Festival du Vigan, La Grange de Meslay, La Folle Journée in Nantes and the Waterbury Arts Festival in Connecticut.

He is also an enthusiastic chamber musician, counting among his partners Pierre Amoyal, László Fenyő, Pavel Gililov, Mayuko Kamio, Mayu Kishima, Natasha Korsakova, Leticia Muñoz-Moreno, Mikhail Ovrutsky, Kirill Rodin, Erik Schumann, Sayaka Shoji, Henry Sigfridsson, Dmitri Sitkovetsky and Tatyana Vassilieva.

He has made numerous recordings for different Russian and German broadcasting companies, the works including Tchaikovsky's *Grande Sonate*, Op. 37, and, with Mikhail Ovrutsky, Weinberg's First Violin Sonata for the German broadcasting company WDR. He has also recorded a duo album with the cellist László Fenyő for Aulos Records.



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Producers: Julia Morneweg (Trios) and Rhonan Phelan (*Deux Valses*)
Engineer: Ronan Phelan
Editor: Michael Csányi-Wills

Booklet text: Paul Mann
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Toccata Classics, 16 Dalkeith Court, Vincent Street, London SW1P 4HH, UK
Tel: +44/0 207 821 5020 E-mail: info@toccataclassics.com

CHARLES O'BRIEN Complete Chamber Music, Volume One

Sonata for Piano Trio No. 1, Op. 27, in B flat major (first performed 1940)	25:23
1 I <i>Allegro assai</i>	8:36
2 II Scherzo and Trio	3:52
3 III <i>Andantino quasi Allegretto</i>	7:19
4 IV Rondino (<i>Allegro giocoso</i>)	5:36
Sonata for Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor (first performed 1940)	26:50
5 I <i>Con moto moderato</i>	10:20
II Air with Variations:	10:02
6 <i>Andante</i> –	0:50
7 Variation 1: <i>Più mosso</i> –	0:52
8 Variation 2: <i>L'istesso tempo</i> –	0:44
9 Variation 3: <i>Vivace e Scherzoso</i> –	0:44
10 Variation 4: <i>Andantino quasi allegretto</i> –	0:43
11 Variation 5: <i>Lento (Funèbre)</i> –	2:03
12 Variation 6: <i>Più mosso</i> –	0:38
13 Variation 7 (Scherzo): <i>Vivace</i> –	1:11
14 Variation 8 (Trio): <i>L'istesso tempo</i> –	1:12
15 Scherzo da capo –	0:36
16 Coda: <i>Andante come prima</i>	0:29
17 III Finale (<i>Allegro</i>)	6:28
Deux Valses for Piano Trio (1928)	7:21
18 No. 1 <i>L'Adieu</i>	3:09
19 No. 2 <i>Souvenirs</i>	4:12

TT 59:54

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FIRST RECORDINGS