

Georgiy CONUS

PIANO MUSIC

including

CHANT SANS PAROLES, OP. 17

3 STIMMUNGSBILDER, OP. 19

FEUILLETS D'ALBUM, OP. 13

TROIS MORCEAUX, OP. 36

BERCEUSE, OP. 24

PRELUDE, OP. 33

RÊVERIE, OP. 7

LARGO, OP. 39

Jonathan Powell, piano

GEORGIY CONUS Piano Music

Trois compositions, Op. 1

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|-------------|
| 1 | No. 1 Rêverie | 4:03 |
| 2 | No. 3 Caleïdoscope | 5:00 |
| 3 | <i>Rêverie, Op. 7</i> | 2:41 |

Feuillets d'album, Op. 13

- | | | |
|---|---|-------------|
| 4 | No. 1 | 2:36 |
| 5 | No. 2 | 4:29 |
| 6 | <i>Chant sans paroles, Op. 17 (1900)</i> | 3:55 |

3 *Stimmungsbilder, Op. 19*

- | | | |
|---|-------|------|
| 7 | No. 1 | 0:53 |
| 8 | No. 2 | 1:24 |
| 9 | No. 3 | 2:34 |

10 ***Berceuse, Op. 24 (1901)***

3:35

Huit morceaux, Op. 25 (?early 1900s)

- | | | |
|----|-------------------|------|
| 11 | No. 1 Prélude | 1:42 |
| 12 | No. 3 Mélodie | 2:26 |
| 13 | No. 4 Regret | 1:34 |
| 14 | No. 6 Consolation | 1:41 |
| 15 | No. 7 Printemps | 1:23 |

Huit morceaux, Op. 31

16	No. 1	Harpe éolienne	3:36
17	No. 2	Compassion	1:24
18	No. 3	En rêve	2:16
19	No. 4	Feuillet d'album	2:13
20	No. 5	Berceuse	2:22
21	No. 8	Regrets	2:57

22	<i>Prélude, Op. 33</i>	(1910)	2:24
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Huit morceaux, Op. 34

23	No. 2	Crépuscule	2:11
24	No. 3	Scherzino	1:18
25	No. 4	Romance	3:47
26	No. 7	Capriccioso	3:09

Trois morceaux, Op. 36 (1907)

27	No. 1	Air de danse	1:16
28	No. 2	Moment douloureux	2:50
29	No. 3	Étude	2:02

30	<i>Largo, Op. 39</i>	3:46
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TT 77:30

Jonathan Powell, piano

FIRST RECORDINGS

GEORGIY EDUARDOVICH CONUS: PIANO MUSIC

by Jonathan Powell

Born in Moscow on 18/30¹ September 1862, Georgiy Eduardovich Konyus/Conus² was the third son of Eduard Konstantinovich Conus (1827–1902), a pianist, composer and teacher of French descent born in Saratov; his mother, Klotilda Adolfovna, *née* Tambroni, was of Italian parentage and born in St Petersburg. His father, ‘despite extremely meagre earnings, gave each of his seven children a very thorough education [...] including instruction in foreign languages and musical instrument tuition.’³ According to his biographer, Dmitriy Rogal’-Levitsky, Eduard Conus ‘had all the basis to consider himself a Frenchman, but his whole life spent in Russia made him, not only by education, but by his soul, a truly Russian man.’⁴ Although the families of both parents had settled in Russia in the early nineteenth century, neither had renounced their foreign citizenship – only in 1904 did Georgiy exchange his French citizenship for Russian. At different times of his life he described himself as French (during earlier years) and Russian (latterly). Both versions of the composer’s name – the French ‘Georges Conus’ and Russian ‘Георгий Эдуардович Конюс’ (Georgiy Eduardovich Konyus) – appeared on the title pages of his compositions published during the pre-Revolutionary era. He and

¹ Old and New styles respectively.

² The Russian form of his family name – Конюс – has a semiconsonant which is usually lost in transliteration into the Latin alphabet.

³ G. E. Konyus, *Автобиографические записи* (‘Autobiographical Notes’), manuscripts held in the Glinka Museum, Moscow, quoted in G. Golovinsky (ed.), *Г. Конюс – Статьи, материалы, воспоминания* (‘G. Conus – Articles, Materials, Reminiscences’), *Muzika*, Moscow, 1965, p. 13.

⁴ D. Rogal’-Levitsky, *Жизнь и деятельность* (‘Life and Activities’), in Golovinsky, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

his brothers⁵ were only three of many composers active during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who were essentially Russian but descended from immigrants, the most notable being Felix Blumenfeld, Georgiy Catoire, César Cui, Reinhold Glière, Alexander Goedicke and Nikolai Medtner.

Georgiy Conus' absolute pitch and musical ability were noticed at an early age, encouraging his father to start teaching him from the age of four. However, structured musical education was to begin quite late, when Georgiy was already nineteen, partly because his father didn't wish his son to become a professional musician but a businessman. With this in mind, Georgiy was placed to work in a Moscow merchant bank, but both the director of the bank and young Conus himself quickly came to the conclusion that this arrangement was unsuitable for all concerned. So, having never completely abandoned his musical studies, in 1881 he passed the entrance exam to the Moscow Conservatoire. There he studied the piano with Pabst, with the initial intention of becoming a concert pianist, but hand injuries put a stop to these dreams and he transferred to the composition department, to study with Taneyev and Arensky. He soon attracted the attention of Tchaikovsky, who took an active interest in the efforts of the young composers; thus, the 'majority of Conus' orchestral pieces written while a student were looked over not only by his professors but also by Piotr Ilich.⁶ Georgiy Eduardovich had already started teaching at the age of fourteen, and while still a student had been invited by Pavel Pabst to teach music theory at the Chernyavsky Institute; two years after his graduation from the Conservatoire in 1891, he was invited by its director, Vasily Safonov, to teach orchestration and harmony there. The pianist and composer Alexander Goldenweiser later referred to Conus (with whom he studied analysis and orchestration at the Conservatoire) as 'one of the most remarkable teachers I've ever met.

⁵ Conus had two brothers who were musicians. Yuly Eduardovich (1869–c. 1950), a violinist, teacher and composer, studied at the Moscow Conservatoire and in Paris, where he played in the Colonne orchestra and others; in the 1900s he led a quartet and a trio, playing with Rachmaninov and Brandukov in Moscow. He advised Tchaikovsky in matters of violin technique, and his Violin Concerto (1896) was performed by many violinists, including Fritz Kreisler. In 1919 he left Russia and settled in Paris, but he returned to Russia in 1939. Lev Eduardovich (1871–1944), a pianist and composer, graduated from the Moscow Conservatoire, where he was professor of piano, 1912–20. He then left Russia and settled in Paris, moving in 1935 to Cincinnati.

⁶ Autobiography, p. 5.

He could present an orchestration class in such a manner that all present related to it with great interest. [...] He had an exceptional talent as a teacher?⁷

As a composer, Conus' first auspicious performance was of his *Ballade* for orchestra, which took place in 1886 under the baton of Taneyev in the Great Hall of the Assembly of Nobles. In 1890 his symphonic picture *Forest Murmurs* (Лес шумит) was performed under Safonov in a concert organised by the Russian Musical Society; Leopold Auer then scored a marked success with the work in St Petersburg. The critic Nikolay Kashkin remarked on some similarity to the 'Waldweben' episode in Wagner's *Siegfried*, and praised the excellent orchestration and the 'freshness and warmth' of the melodic invention. His next work, *From Childhood*,⁸ was again premiered by Safonov in Moscow but was soon performed across western Europe and in the USA. This nine-movement work for chorus and orchestra pleased Tchaikovsky⁹ so much he wrote a letter expressing his admiration for the work, addressed to *Russkie vedomosti*, then a daily newspaper, but somehow forgot to send the letter to its destination. The composer's brother Modest found the letter after Piotr Ilich's death, and he and other close family members saw it as a kind of artistic bequest. Modest immediately relayed the letter's contents to the chairman of the Russian Musical Society, by whose personal intercession Conus was

⁷ Alexander Goldenweiser: 'Georgiy Eduardovich Konyus' in A. Б. Гольденвейзер: Воспоминания ('Reminiscences'), ed. A. S. Skryabin and Ye. I. Goldenweiser, Deká-VS, Moscow, 2009, p. 235.

⁸ Из детской жизни – literally, 'From Childhood Life', Op. 1.

⁹ Tchaikovsky was responsible for the first St Petersburg performance of the suite. On 23 July/4 August 1893 he wrote:

Dear Georgy Eduardovich! In the forthcoming season I shall be conducting concerts for the Petersburg Musical Society. In the 1st or 2nd of them – thus at the end of October or the beginning of November – with your permission, I should certainly wish to perform your enchanting children's suite.

Judging from the contents of a letter dated 18/30 October 1893, Tchaikovsky was instrumental in securing another (probably partial) early performance there:

Dear Georgy! Could you ensure without delay that the choral parts for the finale of the suite are sent to the conservatoire in St Petersburg. The director, Johansen, is terribly interested in this children's chorus, and should like to do it as quickly as possible. I hug you, P. Tchaikovsky.

In K. Yu. Davydova and G. I. Labutina (eds.), *П. И. Чайковский. Полное собрание сочинений.*

Том XVII: Письма (1893), Muzika, Moscow, 1981.

Yuly Ivanovich Johansen (Iogansen; 1826–1904) was director of the St Petersburg Conservatoire from 1891 to 1897. Tchaikovsky also tried to persuade Belyayev to publish the suite, but after it was turned down by his editorial committee of Glazunov and Rimsky-Korsakov, it was instead published by Jürgenson.

awarded a 'Composer's development/encouragement prize' of 1200 rubles 'for as long as he continues composing'. Tchaikovsky also expressed his delight in the work in a number of private letters, including one to his publisher Piotr Yurgenson (Jürgenson), who had recently decided to issue Conus' work (presumably with considerable encouragement from Tchaikovsky). His next large work was the Cantata, Op. 8, in memory of Tsar Alexander III, soon to be followed by the ballet *Daita*, which was based on Japanese folk-tales and which received its premiere at the Bolshoy Theatre. Critics were mostly ruthlessly damning of the scenario and staging, but several found good words for Conus' score, noting that, although using traditional Japanese melodies, the young composer was nonetheless following in Tchaikovsky's footsteps. Leonid Sabaneyev, writing much later (in the late 1920s) of these early works, described Conus as falling into the group of 'other musicians who rightly or wrongly roused expectations, and came into the category of candidates to succeed the great generation of Chaykovski and Rubinstein. His first compositions created a sensation.'¹⁰

The episode that almost never fails to be recounted alongside any mention of Conus' name is that relating to his dismissal from the Moscow Conservatoire: it became a subject of public interest and is usually referred to as 'the Conus affair'. The director Safonov had for some time intended to reduce the number of hours spent teaching theoretical subjects. Meanwhile, Conus had to teach students both specialist-level and (compulsory) basic orchestration in the same, over-large class, a situation that was highly time-consuming and unsatisfactory for both teacher and students.¹¹ Safonov

either didn't want to understand this situation, or gave the appearance of not understanding insomuch as he credited the theoretical subjects with little significance and considered that the fundamental activity of the conservatoire was concentrated in the piano faculty.¹²

¹⁰ L. Sabaneyeff, *Modern Russian Composers*, Pohl Press, New York, 1927, repr. Books for Libraries Press, 1971, p. 214.

¹¹ In a letter of 7 March 1898 Arensky wrote to Taneyev that 'I think Conus sorts out his students' orchestrations with some difficulty, and he needs more time for this', quoted in D. Rogal'-Levitsky, *loc. cit.*, p. 23.

¹² D. Rogal'-Levitsky, *loc. cit.*, p. 24.

He was known as a ‘despotic man [...] who didn’t tolerate dissent’,¹³ and so when Conus insisted on reducing student numbers in his class, open hostilities were declared. Furthermore, ripples of the conflict which ensued soon spread beyond the walls of the Conservatoire and portrayed Safonov’s leadership in a rather unfavourable light. On Safonov’s side were senior teachers with no inclination to get engaged in a battle of wills, and young members of staff eager to please the management. Supporting Conus were the outstanding figures of musical Moscow (with Taneyev at the fore) and several members of the directorate of the Russian Musical Society. Letters were published in newspapers signed by luminaries including Taneyev and Siloti, while support for Conus spread to St Petersburg, with Rimsky-Korsakov, Nápravník and Arensky joining the fray. The issue was decided by one vote – Safonov’s – at a Conservatoire committee, and Conus was dismissed from his post on 4 September 1899. Although crushed by Safonov and his supporters, public opinion remained on Conus’ side to the extent of becoming a *cause célèbre*.

Skryabin, who had been a student of Conus while still a teenager, gives a rather one-sided account (he was an admirer and protégé of Safonov) in a letter to Mitrofan Belyayev of 26 October/7 November 1899:

I didn’t sign any of the letters [of support] and wasn’t present at any of the committees and generally didn’t get involved in any of it. The following we’ll keep between ourselves. As is usually the case in similar situations, both [parties] consider themselves to be in the right, but in fact both are to blame. Conus, hating Safonov, and having an impossible character, systematically harassed the latter over the course of three years with his demands (perhaps I’m not the best judge of this as I don’t know the conservatoire’s statutes) and his reports to the artistic committee. This brought about the misunderstanding over the principal disagreement between Safonov and Conus (and Taneyev) over the teaching of obligatory (for non-specialists) orchestration (an unimportant subject, you see). [...] Conus insulted Safonov at every encounter [lit. ‘crossroads’] as much as he could, and once berated him in front of me, but I stopped him for reasons of friendship. Taneyev, to my great surprise,

¹³ *Ibid.*

turns out also (in this story) to be far from a good man, although perhaps this is just irritability.¹⁴

Friendly relations¹⁵ evidently ceased during the autumn of 1899 between Scriabin and not only Conus but also Taneyev (Skryabin was very loyal to Safonov); Taneyev wrote to Arensky that ‘ever since I defended Conus against that unpleasantness dealt him by Safonov, Skryabin has cut me like a knife. He never comes to see me.’¹⁶ So the incident had knock-on effects on the relations between several of Moscow’s leading musicians.

The resulting break from teaching seemed to be beneficial for Conus’ composing career: the period 1901–12 turned out to be the most productive of his life, before his theoretical studies began to draw him away from composition. His four-movement symphonic poem *From the World of Illusions*¹⁷ was performed at the Moscow Philharmonic Society on 27 January 1902 under his own baton; he subsequently renamed this choral-orchestral work ‘Symphony.’ Apart from a Double Bass Concerto, Op. 29 (written for Koussevitzky in 1910), and the large pieces that appeared at the beginning of his career, Conus’ output consists mostly of miniatures – songs and piano pieces, although his last compositions include, unusually for him, a Septet, Op. 42, for woodwind and brass and, as was usual in the early Soviet period, three orchestral *pièces d’occasion*: the ‘hymn’ *The Year 1917*, Op. 43 (with chorus), *War March*, Op. 44, and an arrangement of the *Carmagnole*, Op. 45.

In January 1902 Conus returned to formal teaching, accepting the chair of composition at the Music School of the Moscow Philharmonic Society; there he taught not only free composition but also analysis, orchestration, harmony, conducting, choral singing, score-reading and ensemble playing. In 1904 he became director of the school, but in 1905 was dismissed ‘for political reasons’,¹⁸ along with Boleslav Yavorsky, Leonid Nikolayev, Koussevitzky and others. So again Conus lost his job. In 1909 he and his

¹⁴ A. N. Skryabin, Письма (‘Letters’), ed. A. V. Kashperova, Muzika, Moscow, 1965, new edn. Muzika, 2003, p. 221.

¹⁵ In a letter dated only 1898, Skryabin invites Conus to come and spend an evening with him at home (*ibid.*, p. 212).

¹⁶ Taneyev, like Conus, had also taught Skryabin. Letter quoted in Skryabin, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

¹⁷ Из мира иллюзий, Op. 23.

¹⁸ Rogal’-Levitsky, *loc. cit.*, p. 31. Conus had come out in support of independence for all higher education institutions, in a wave of attempted reforms inspired by the abortive 1905 revolution.

family lived abroad for several months, where he reworked *Forest Murmurs*; the revised version was designated Op. 30 and received its first performance under Koussevitzky in July 1910. The influential critic Vladimir Derzhanovsky wrote glowingly about the work in *Utro Rossii* ('The Morning of Russia'), calling it 'sparkling and perfect' and remarking that it received a 'noisy and deservedly successful reception from the public'. During these years Conus also became more active as a conductor and his increased opportunities in this domain presumably prompted him to orchestrate several of his songs for concerts he directed.

From 1912 Conus was the head of the composition and theoretical faculties in the newly opened conservatoire at Saratov, his father's place of birth. There, as in Moscow, his tenure was not without incident and the occasional clash with authorities, but he was nonetheless appointed director of the Conservatoire in 1917 and held the post until his resignation two years later. During his Saratov years, Conus was an active animateur, organising orchestral concerts (which he conducted himself) and raising the standard of the town's music-making to a professional standard. In 1919 he returned to Moscow at the invitation of the music section of Narkompros¹⁹ to take part in the committee for reform of higher musical education in the Russian Federation; in 1920 he became the manager of the section for professional music education, the overall boss being another theoretician, Boleslav Yavorsky. In a final act of rehabilitation, Conus was invited back to teach at the Moscow Conservatoire in 1919, immediately becoming professor, and a year later dean of the faculty of composition (until 1929) and director of the department of analysis, which he created (the first in Russia). His pupils spanned the Russian and Soviet eras, and include Skryabin, Glière, Goldenweiser, Medtner, Sergei Vasilenko, Aleksandr Gedike,²⁰ as well as Kabalevsky, Khachaturian, Leonid Polovinkin, Matvey Blatner,²¹ the celebrated pianist (and initially also composer) Lev Oborin (1907–74),

¹⁹ The Народный Комиссариат Просвещения ('National Commissariat for Enlightenment'), headed by playwright Anatoly Lunacharsky, was an umbrella organisation of the early Soviet period that dealt with arts and education. Rather improbably, the one-time futurist composer Artur Lourié was the director of the music section for the first years of its incarnation.

²⁰ Or Goedicke (1877–1957, Medtner's cousin).

²¹ Blatner (1903–90) was one of the most celebrated composers of light music in the USSR and was famous for his song *Katyusha* which is known internationally to this day.

the composer and proletarian art agitator Viktor Bely (1904–83) and the conductor Boris Khaikin. He died in Moscow on 29 August 1933, aged 70, and was buried in the Novodevichy cemetery.

Sabaneyev wrote that ‘since 1900 [Conus] has practically been out of the ranks of active composers, studying as he does the field of musical theory and the laws of symmetry in musical works’,²² and although this album, with a series of fine works dating from the next decade, disproves Sabaneyev’s statement, it’s probable that Conus started gradually to withdraw from composition around this time. Music theory was a young discipline in Russia at this time (the other chief exponent being another ex-composer, and Conus’ future comrade in Narkompros, Boleslav Yavorsky) and Conus gave ‘himself up to it with a zeal approaching lunacy’,²³ his chief work being the creation and partial elaboration of an original theory of musical form, ‘metrotectonism’ (measured structure), which attempted to apply a sense of spatial symmetry to the temporal relationships of musical form. According to *Grove*, ‘he rejected the traditional nomenclature for the theory of forms and often explained his analyses with sketches, reminiscent of architectural drawings.’²⁴ To popularise his theories he undertook lecture tours in Germany (1923–24) and France (1923–24 and 1928–29). After his death, ‘metrotectonism’ seems to have died its own death. His chief theoretical writings include *A Course of Strict Contrapuntal Writing in Modes*, *A Critique of Traditional Theory of Musical Form*, *Metrotectonic Research on Musical Form* and *Scientific Research on Musical Syntax*.²⁵ The diagrammatic representations of musical form, which played such an important role in metrotectonic illumination of symmetries inherent in the structure of any work, also found their way into the publication of some of Conus’ later compositions.

²² Sabaneyeff, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

²⁴ L. M. Butir and Lyudmila Korabel’nikova: ‘Conus, Georgy’, *Revised New Grove Dictionary of Music*, eds. S. Sadie and J. Tyrrell, MacMillan, London, 2001, accessed online.

²⁵ Курс контрапункта строгого письма в ладах, 1930; Критика традиционной теории в области музыкальной формы, 1932; Метротектоническое исследование музыкальной формы, Moscow, 1933; and Научное обоснование музыкального синтаксиса, 1935 – all published by Gosudarstvennoye izdatel’stvo, Muzykal’nyy Sektor, Moscow.

Almost half (twenty of 45) of Conus' opus numbers are dedicated to piano works; the next most represented genre in his output is song (twelve opus numbers), many of which feature intricate and full-bodied writing for the piano. Some piano pieces are grouped into large cycles – the collections of eight pieces, Opp. 25, 31 and 34, are respectively labelled *Première*, *Deuxième* and *Troisième série*; the Prelude, Op. 33, by contrast, may be the only instance of a prelude occupying its own opus number. None of the works available for inspection²⁶ has a duration of much over five minutes. In this respect Conus is no different from his teacher and contemporary Anton Arensky (1861–1906), whose piano works are all modest in dimension, and who also made an impressively varied collection of 24 pieces, his *Morceaux caractéristiques*, Op. 36. Both Glazunov and, to a lesser extent, Lyadov occasionally essayed larger forms but both, like Tchaikovsky before them, were essentially miniaturists when composing for the piano. Conus 'composed slowly and with effort, elaborating details with painstaking accuracy'.²⁷

Like Arensky, Conus fell under Tchaikovsky's influence as a young composer but, unlike his teacher, he was able to outgrow this early enthusiasm and develop what is arguably a far more distinctive voice. The *Trois compositions*, Op. 1, demonstrate enormous facility, the first, 'Rêverie' [1], being the first of many pieces imbued by the spirit of *hera* – a type of delightful languor, or carefree contentment (the *Rêverie*, Op. 7 [3], follows suit), whereas the third, 'Caleïdoscope' [2], has a balletic lightness of touch and firmness of metre that suggests a deep familiarity with Tchaikovsky's scores. Sabaneyev characterised Conus' art as an odd combination of 'the refinement and elegance of the typical Gallic musician with the lyricism and melodiousness of Chaykovski's school',²⁸ and these early pieces certainly match this description.

Given their dimensions, the three *Feuillets d'album*, Op. 13, were composed over a long period (1897–1901) which spans Conus' difficulties at the Conservatoire; if the

²⁶ Conus' music is very difficult to run to ground, but I believe I have traced all the piano music and songs, except, perhaps, for one or two (probably very short) items, and this album is intended to present the best of his piano music.

²⁷ Sabaneyev, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

$$\overbrace{1. \frac{22}{4} \frac{22}{4} \frac{22}{4}}^{\frac{15}{4}} \overbrace{22. \frac{22}{4} \frac{22}{4}}^{\frac{15}{4}} 1. \overbrace{22. \frac{22}{4} \frac{22}{4}}^{\frac{15}{4}} \overbrace{22. \frac{22}{4} \frac{22}{4}}^{\frac{15}{4}} 1.$$

$$\left[\frac{12}{612} \frac{2}{2} \right]$$

Prélude. GEORGES CONUS. Op. 33.

Nebuloso. \downarrow : 40. *cantabile*

Piano. *pp*

The beginning of Conus' Prélude, Op. 33, showing his diagrammatic representation of symmetry in the piece

first [4] hints at admiration for Lyadov's *Barcarolle*, Op. 44 (with which it shares a key), then the symphonically conceived second (surely one of the expansive examples of the genre) [5] suggests a farewell to the century of Tchaikovsky, and the *adages* (slow, sustained movement) of his ballets in particular. Alongside the Op. 13 pieces, the *Chant sans paroles*, Op. 17 [6], presents Conus' fully formed, sophisticated and yet easygoing musical language. Completed on 28 August 1900 (it certainly exudes the languor of late summer) in the village of Kochemirovo,²⁹ its simple ternary structure belies the complexity of the continuous development of the main motif (easily identifiable amidst ever-sophisticated accompaniment with its repeated four notes), a process only temporarily interrupted by the more unstable central section.

The 3 *Stimmungsbilder*, Op. 19,³⁰ are a varied set, the first [7] uncharacteristically lively, and whereas the second [8] is particularly close to middle-period Skryabin (the

²⁹ In the Ryazan oblast, some 400 kilometres from Moscow; the nearest town is, appropriately, Sumerki, meaning 'twilight'.

³⁰ Dated May 1903, 28 July 1905 Yastrebovo (probably the village of this name c. 70 kilometres south-east of Moscow), and 1905 Yastrebovo respectively.

III. Etude.

$\frac{9}{8}$ $\frac{3.3.2}{8}$ $\frac{9}{8}$ $\frac{3.3.3}{8}$ $\frac{3.2.3}{8}$ $\frac{3}{4}$ $\frac{12}{8}$ $\frac{3.3.3.3}{8}$ $\frac{12}{8}$ $\frac{9}{8}$ $\frac{3.3.3}{8}$ $\frac{3.2.3}{8}$ $\frac{3.2.3}{8}$ $\frac{9}{8}$ $\frac{3.3.3}{8}$ $\frac{3}{4}$

$\frac{6}{8}$ $\frac{3}{3}$

Giocoso. $\downarrow = 60$ GEORGES CONUS.

PIANO. *p*

The beginning of the Étude, the third of Conus' Trois morceaux, Op. 36, again showing his diagrammatic representation of symmetry

opening of the Fourth Sonata, or the Prelude, Op. 27, No. 2, in particular), the third ^[9] inhabits the world of the *bogatir* (a mythical warrior of ancient Rus') as portrayed in music by Borodin, in his Second Symphony, and Glière, in his Third, both works which share the epic tone and tonality of Conus' miniature. The *Berceuse*, Op. 24 ^[10], was completed in Moscow on 17 May 1901 and combines a folkish melody with tolling bells – like the last of the *Stimmungsbilder*, the central section has a distinctly kuchkist³¹ feel to it. Sabaneyev felt that there is much in 'the graceful and minutely refined piano style' that anticipates Skryabin, especially the 'tasteful underscorings of dissonances, extraordinary purity of part-writing, a tendency towards the pungent in harmony'.³²

³¹ That is, related to the music of the *Kuchka* or 'Mighty Handful' of Russian nationalist composers: César Cui, Aleksandr Borodin, Mily Balakirev, Modest Musorgsky and Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov.

³² *Op. cit.*, p. 215.

The first group of eight pieces, Op. 25 (from the series that also comprises Opp. 31 and 34), was probably written in the early 1900s but, unlike many of Conus' other works, there are no dates attached to any piece in this cycle. The mood of the first three recorded here (Nos. 1 [11], 3 [12] and 4 [13]) is introverted but intense; they are mostly subdued and rhythmically regular but punctuated by outbursts where the metre is subverted. The later pieces possess a fresher, almost naïve, openness. They are all dedicated to colleagues and students: No. 1 to the pianist of German descent Woldemar Wilschau,³³ No. 3 to the composer and organist Teodor Bubeck (also of German descent),³⁴ No. 4 to the pianist Adolf Yaroshevsky,³⁵ and Nos. 6 [14] and 7 [15] to Conus' erstwhile students Goedicke and Goldenweiser respectively.

Whereas the Op. 25 collection requires the intimacy of a salon for their proper appreciation, the Op. 31 pieces justify the acoustics of a concert hall and are conceived in more ambitious terms, both in terms of musical material as well as pianistic imagination. In 'Harpe éolienne' (No. 1 [16]) the sharp textural contrast provided by the two initial episodes is gradually resolved – and dissolved – into hazy resonance; 'Compassion' (No. 2 [17]) has a retrospectively Tchaikovskian feel but with surprising harmonic twists; and 'En rêve' (No. 3 [18]) opens with bell strokes ('quasi soneria') alternating with melancholic melodic fragments,³⁶ but the texture soon opens out to encompass a wide tessitura and, unusually for Conus, a bravura octave passage. 'Feuillet d'album' (No. 4 [19]) returns to more familiar territory but, again, with surprising harmonic twists

³³ In Russian Владимир Робертович Вильшау (1868–1957); like Conus, he was a student of Arensky and Taneyev, but was chiefly a pianist and studied with Pabst and later Busoni. He was a friend of Rachmaninov, who helped him and his family materially during times of need; Wilschau was responsible for the four-hand piano version of Rachmaninov's Second Symphony. He taught at the Moscow Conservatoire from 1910 until 1924.

³⁴ Bubeck (Теодор Христофорович Бубек in Russian) (born in Stuttgart in 1866, died in Moscow in 1909/10) also studied composition with Taneyev, but was chiefly known as an organist and for this reason went to Paris in 1905 to study with Widor. He taught at the Moscow Conservatoire from 1905 until his death.

³⁵ Yaroshevsky (1863–1910/11) was a student of Pabst and taught Konstantin Eiges and Issay Dobrowen. Rachmaninov dedicated his 6 *Romances*, Op. 8, his second collection of songs, to him.

³⁶ Conus quotes the opening of the piano part of his song, Op. 18, No. 1, to Fet's poem: Какие-то носятся звуки / И льнут к моему изголовью. / Полны они томной разлуки, / Дрожат небывалой любовью ('Some sounds carry themselves / And they cling to my head. / They are full of the languor of parting, / They tremble with unheard-of love').

I. Air de danse.

$$\frac{15}{5} \quad \frac{15}{5}$$

$$\frac{15}{5} \quad \frac{15}{5}$$

$$\frac{15}{5} \quad \frac{15}{5}$$

$$\frac{15}{5} \quad \frac{15}{5}$$

GEORGES CONUS.

Con grazia. *dec. es.*

PIANO.

The beginning of 'Air de danse', Op. 36, No. 1, with its 'microtectonic' diagram

and considerable decoration, and the 'Berceuse' (No. 5, dedicated to Grechaninov [20]) alludes to folksong and thus, unavoidably, the Kuchka. 'Regrets' (No. 8, dedicated to the pianist-composer Leonid Nikolayev [21]) is a minor masterpiece in the Rachmaninov vein.

Between the second and third series of eight pieces is the stand-alone Prelude, Op. 33 [22]. It's in this work that Conus comes closest to the language Skryabin employed in his later works. Pervading its languor and the 'nebuloso' half-light required by the score are whole-tone/dominant harmonies that only fleetingly resolve onto the only common chord in the piece, in bar 11. Conus' Prelude is dated May 1910, and so it is tantalising to speculate whether he was aware of Skryabin's *Albumleaf*, Op. 58, which was written around that time, and which was among the first of the latter's works to expound his later style clearly. The Prelude, Op. 33, is the furthest Conus would wander along this modernist path – the ending on an augmented chord is the only such ambiguous

conclusion in his piano *œuvre*; such daring harmonic and pianistic sensibilities are not explored with such consistency in any other piece.³⁷

The *Huit morceaux*, Op. 34, herald a return to more solid ground; they differ from Op. 25 and 31 with their denser textures and more thoroughly developed chromatic harmony. Twilight is a recurring theme in the works of Russian symbolist poets and it found its way into the music of their composing contemporaries more than once;³⁸ Conus' 'Crépuscule' (No. 2 of the set [23]) encompasses both aspects of the subject matter – of approaching night and fading colours and, conversely, of the supernatural, even demonic (in the menacing central section). The Scherzino (No. 3 [24]) revisits the sparkling (usually orchestral) scherzos of Glazunov and the previous century, and the 'Romance' (No. 4 [25]), harks back, though with added plangent dissonances, to the melancholia of Tchaikovsky. The Capriccioso (No. 7 [26]) has a sinewy physicality and contrasts double-dotted rhythms with a *religioso* chorale in an interplay of asynchronicity between hands, registral shifts and complex chromatic sequences.

The *Trois morceaux*, Op. 36, were dated 11, 15 and 25 October 1907 at Koshelevka.³⁹ No. 1, 'Air de danse' [27], is predictably balletic, though its unconventional phrase-lengths (illustrated by a microtectonic diagram at the top of the score) lend it an air of capricious whimsy. The tragic underscoring of No. 2, 'Moment douloureux' [28], reaches its apotheosis in a memorable descending chromatic sequence marked *piangendo*. The concluding Étude [29], dedicated to Joseph Lhévinne, is a study on repeated chords (in the right hand) and contrapuntal playing (in the left).

Even though the *Largo*, Op. 39 [30], may not have been Conus' last piano work chronologically speaking,⁴⁰ it certainly serves as a fitting end to this recorded anthology. The reserved dignity of the opening chorale – in totally diatonic harmony – is countered by the understated fervour of the following phrase; the central section sees the melody

³⁷ It's not impossible that this is Conus' last piano work, as the Op. 36 pieces date from 1907, and the *Largo*, Op. 39, is undated.

³⁸ As in Catoire's *Chants du crépuscule*, Op. 24 (?1914), and as late as Mosolov's symphonic poem *Twilight*, Op. 9 (1925).

³⁹ There is one such village about 100 km south-south-east of Moscow.

⁴⁰ Given that Conus seems not to have applied opus numbers to works as he wrote them, it's possible that the *Prélude*, Op. 33, may have been written after the *Largo*.

reduced to a single line surrounded by arabesques, the chorale eventually reappearing clothed in decoration, only to come to a temporary halt on a whole-tone chord. An array of subtle colours – both harmonic and textural – underscores the quiet intensity of the concluding bars.

Having concentrated on composition during the 1990s, **Jonathan Powell** established an international career as a soloist after studying with Sulamita Aronovsky and Denis Matthews. Over the last decade, solo recitals have taken him to the Rachmaninov Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire, on a six-concert US tour, to Musica Sacra in Maastricht, the series Fundación BBVA in Bilbao, Musica Nova in Helsinki, the Festival Radio France Montpellier, Borealis Festival in Bergen, broadcasts for Radio Netherlands and Radio Deutschland Kultur, the Raritäten der Klaviermusik am Schloss vor Husum, Vredenburg Muziekcentrum in Utrecht, and the Jewish Museum and Altes Rathaus in Vienna. His recent concerto appearances include Brahms' Second (Slovak Philharmonic), Liszt's *Malédiction* (in Kyiv), Finnissy's Second Concerto (Moscow) and Sorensen's Second (with the Prague Philharmonia), Rachmaninov's Third and Chopin's Second (Kropyvnytskiy in provincial Ukraine). In 2009 he gave the first of many performances of the cycle of Skryabin's ten sonatas in single concerts. During 2013 he toured Messiaen's *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus* and Albéniz's *Iberia*, and in 2015 he gave numerous performances of Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier' Sonata and Reger's Bach Variations. Recent activities include a European tour featuring the complete piano works of Xenakis and, in 2017, Liszt's Sonata, Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke* and several performances of Sorabji's *Opus clavicembalisticum*. Master-classes, lecture-recitals and coaching have recently taken him to the Janáček Academy (Brno), Oxford University, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (London), Akademie für Tonkunst (Darmstadt), Cornish College of Arts (Seattle) and Det Jyske Musikkonservatorium (Denmark). His articles on many aspects of Russian music appear in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*. He lives in southern Poland.

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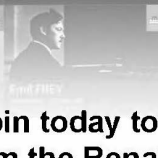
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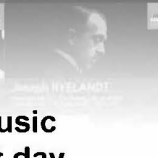
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