

The RING of BONE

The piano music of
ELISABETH LUTYENS

Arabella Tenniswood-Harvey *piano*

A foreword by Michael Finnissy

Lutyens: I think you would love her or loathe her. No half-measures. She was provocative and outspoken, deeply sensitive and fragile – uncomfortable contradictions that are embodied in her music. She had remained an authentic Fitzrovia bohemian twenty years on, fuelled by booze and cigarettes, an artist whose work was confrontational and whose intelligence commanded respect. I found that she was a delight to play for; I think she found musical performance rather sexy, and she was seemingly fascinated by colour-in-sound, her piano-writing is, above all, extremely sensual. The sensuality includes violence, darkness and pain as much as it does delicacy and fluidity. Liz honed away at her sounds, sculpting, polishing them rather than covering them with varnish.

Elisabeth Lutyens was born in London in 1906, the fourth child of the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens and Lady Emily Lutyens. In 1922 she went to Paris to study solfège and piano at the Ecole Normale and later attended the Royal College of Music, studying composition with Harold Darke and viola with Ernest Tomlinson. She returned to Paris in 1931 to study with George Caussade. Her first public performance, whilst still a student in 1932, was a ballet *The Birthday of the Infanta*, after Oscar Wilde.

Many of Lutyens early performances took place at the Macnaghten Concerts, which she co-founded in 1931, the Halle Concerts, London Contemporary Music Centre and

ISCM Festivals in Poland (1939), London (1946), Holland (1948) and Italy (1949). In the 1960s she received many of the major commissions of the day, including from Dartington Summer School (*The Valley of Hatsu-Se*, 1965), the BBC (*The Tyme Doth Flete*, 1968), and the Proms (*Essence of Our Happiness*, 1970). In 1969 she received the City of London Midsummer Prize for the Arts and a CBE.

That success came relatively late in her career was partly due to her pioneering and individual approach to composition. Lutyens discovered serialism in the late 1930s, and from then on singlemindedly pursued techniques which were more widely accepted in mainland Europe than in Britain, where she was regarded

with a certain disdain by many in the British musical establishment. This attitude and, moreover, being one of very few women in a predominantly man's world, meant that, for much of the 1930s and 1940s, Lutyens was forced to take on copying work and wrote 100s of scores for film and radio – pieces she dismissed artistically as a mere commercial necessity in order to support her young children. Meanwhile she was developing the techniques which, in many of her concert works, resulted in highly refined and essential pieces, as vital today as they were at the time of their inception.

Throughout her life Lutyens was also committed to teaching and encouraging young musicians – writing many chamber works for emerging young performers such as Jane Manning and Michael Finnissy – and to the promotion of new music; she was the first woman to chair the “Composers’ Guild” in 1959 and from 1972-75 was chair of the SPNM. She also taught composition and her many pupils remember with gratitude and fondness her encouragement and fervour. Lutyens autobiography, *A Goldfish Bowl*, was published in 1972, and, 6 years after her death in 1983, Meirion and Susie Harries published a study of her life and work, *A Pilgrim Soul*.

While the past decade has seen recordings of Elisabeth Lutyens’ chamber and choral works released to critical acclaim, her piano music has remained obscure and largely neglected: it is hoped that this CD of selected pieces will initiate a renewed interest in a valuable body of work that spans the 1940s

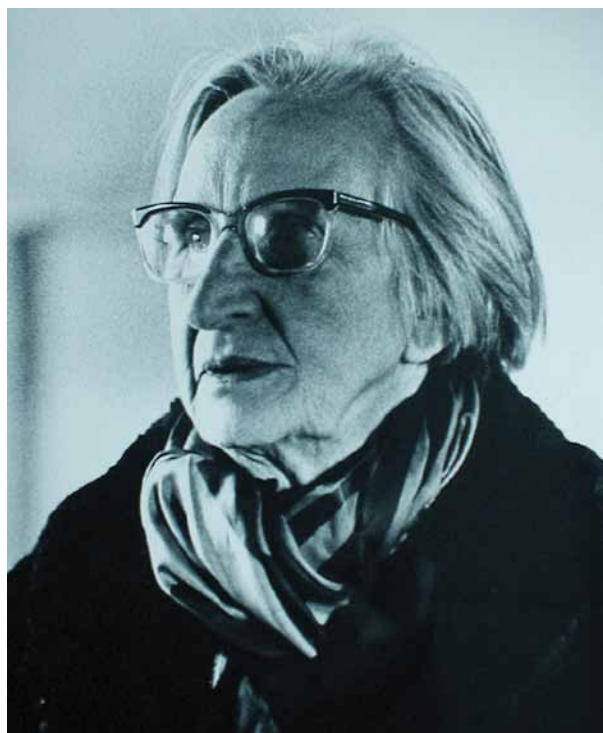
to the early 1980s. Lutyens' musical language is passionate, dramatic and highly assertive, and she exploits both the percussive and the sonorous capabilities of the piano to great effect.

"...the writing of music is my occupation, my profession, my means of livelihood, my giver of spiritual nourishment, my whole way of living by day and by night." (Elisabeth Lutyens, 1971).¹

Five Intermezzi, op. 9 (1942)

Known for 'recalling' her juvenilia, these are the earliest piano pieces Lutyens retained in her lists of serious compositions. They were published by Alfred Lengnick & Co (London) in 1947, and given their first performance for the BBC by Lisa Fuchsova the same year. Each intermezzo is approximately one-page long, of moderate difficulty, and displays motivic economy and textural restraint. In sequence they offer short, impassioned bursts of contrasting mood and musical material. Whilst being atonal, all but the third *Intermezzo* retain the multi-bar phrase length, focused and constrained register of thematic material, melodic linearity and lyricism (including clear melodic focal points), and the delineation of material between the hands that Lutyens had drawn from traditional pianism and used in earlier, non-published works.

Lutyens' piano music enjoyed considerable attention during the 1970s. The British pianist Richard Deering performed the *Five Intermezzi* at a Wigmore Hall recital on 2 March 1973 and then at the Purcell Room on 9 July 1976 in a concert celebrating Lutyens' 70th birthday. The latter concert – which also included Lutyens' *Piano e Forte*, Op. 43, *Five Bagatelles*, Op. 48



and *Plenum*, Op. 86; along with music by her students Brian Elias, Michael Blake Watkins and Robert Saxton, and by Schumann and Debussy (composers she admired) – was recorded and issued as the LP 'Lutyens: Birthday Recital' (Pearl SHE 537). The critics acknowledged the merit and integrity of her early work: the reviewer for the *Gramophone* stating that 'Even if Miss Lutyens was a late developer and the *Intermezzi* of 1942 are relatively early, they already form a fairly characteristic sequence, cogent and concentrated' (May 1977).²

Three Improvisations (1948)

The *Three Improvisations* published by Alfred Lengnick & Co in 1948 are dedicated to the composer Constant Lambert, and each carry an obscure, yet evocative subtitle: *Adumbration*

(meaning an outline or feint indication), *Obfuscation* (something obscure, unclear, bewildered or unintelligible) and *Peroration* (the concluding part of a speech, meant to sum up what has been said and inspire the audience). Lutyens seems to have been uncertain about these pieces and may have considered removing them from her published output: while a 1978 brochure lists them as published and available through Belwin Mills Music Ltd, a pamphlet produced by the London agents Ingpen and Williams – amongst Lutyens' papers at the University of York Music Press – has them listed but crossed out in pencil (while the *Five Intermezzi* are retained). It seems likely that they were not performed in public during Lutyens' lifetime.

The *Improvisations* lack the refinement, succinctness and structural clarity of the *Five Intermezzi*, and – in comparison – are limited in scope. The emphasis is on sound–colour and effect, rather than on motives and their development. The most unusual feature is the large amount of unison in *Peroration* – a device which suits the declamatory nature of the title, but which does not appear in any of her other works. The exploration of the extremes of the keyboard register in *Adumbration* is also worthy of comment – here Lutyens goes further than in any of the earlier *Five Intermezzi*. The use of extreme registers, along with the use of trills and 'rolled' chords (devices used in both *Adumbration* and *Obfuscation*) are stylistic features of Lutyens' later music. Similarly, both the 'impressionistic' approach to the piano found in *Adumbration* – in which sounds are layered and sustained in the pedal – and the

percussive approach featured in *Obfuscation* remain prominent features of her soundworld. In later works such as *La Nature dell'Acqua*, the juxtaposition of the two approaches at short intervals provides a ready means of creating drama and generating content. Given Lutyens' ambivalent attitude to the *Improvisations* in later life, it seems likely that they were formative works in which she developed her approach to composing for the piano.

Five Bagatelles, Op. 49 (1962)

Lutyens wrote the *Five Bagatelles* for Katharina Wolpe, whom she first heard – and admired – in a recital at the Wigmore Hall. Deeply impressed, she decided to fulfil her current Proms commission by composing *Symphonies for Solo Piano, Wind, Harps and Percussion* (1961) with Katharina Wolpe as performer and dedicatee. As Wolpe remembers: 'the Bagatelles were inspired by the success of the Proms piece'. They were not commissioned, but written simply because Lutyens really liked Wolpe's playing.

Wolpe subsequently premiered the set in Liverpool in October 1963, and played them many times in recital. She later recorded them on LP (Argo ZRG 5425), and the two women became great friends.

Written in a serial language, the *Five Bagatelles* are short, but highly dramatic pieces that are tightly and logically constructed. Brief, contrasting gestures quickly utilise the full range of the keyboard, and are charged by extreme dynamic changes: the neatness and precision of the pencil manuscripts, and the corrections on the initial version of Schott's score (both of which are held in the British Library) indicate

the importance Lutyens placed on articulation and dynamics at this time. Her interest in structure is evident not only in the sectional nature of the individual pieces, but also in the large-scale organization of the set into an arch form: the final bagatelle recalls the lyricism of the first, the second and fourth share a tempestuous mood, and the third (and central) piece is itself a three-part form.

Lutyens had produced her first major piano piece in 1958 – the twelve-minute *Piano e Forte*, Op.43, premiered by Wilfred Parry – in which we hear the new and confident approach to the instrument informed by the latest European music that continues in the *Five Bagatelles*. In a letter to William Glock in 1955, she bubbled with enthusiasm over their plans for promoting contemporary music in London:

'Our scheme includes different TYPES of concerts I.E. a series at Wigmore Hall with international celebrity artists, – Arts' Council Drawing Room events including Dallipiccola and Reitzenstein in person playing their works and [a] whole concert of specially written works by British composers, – a BBC orchestral concert with Goosens and an excellent programme with exciting first performances, – a "new idea" of a series of late nite [sic] concerts at the F[estival] H[all], – Messiaen and new organ works by English composers. With performances of the most "recherche" composers...Boulez, Stockhausen, Nono presented by such experts as Rosbaud and Loriod...In fact a dazzling array of new types of concerts, new works, especially written works for us and first performances along with contemporary classics.'³

As Michael Finnissy recalls, in later life she

remained incredibly well read and informed about new developments in the arts.

The Ring of Bone, Op. 106 (1975)

The British pianist Peter Lawson was in his mid-20s when he was asked to premiere *The Ring of Bone*. When I met with him in 2009, Lawson remembered Manchester in the 1970s and 1980s as a place where there was significant interest in contemporary music, fuelled by the activities of the group 'New Music Forum' and by BBC Radio Manchester's generous funding for new music. It was within this context that *The Ring of Bone* premiered in May 1976. As Lutyens explained: 'I wrote this piece in response to a commission from the Manchester New Music Forum [funded by the Arts Council and North West Arts]; it was given its first performance at a concert for my 70th birthday put on by Anthony Gilbert at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester.'⁴ Part of the *BBC Radio Manchester Festival*, the two-hour concert also included the world premiere of Lutyens' String Quintet, Op. 51 (1963), and works for solo viola, solo oboe, oboe and strings, and voice and piano.

The concert received considerable attention: it was broadcast live on BBC Radio Manchester, and in February 1977, BBC Radio 3 broadcast the concert recording of *The Ring of Bone* and the String Quintet as the fourth of a series of six programmes dedicated to Lutyens' music. Gerald Larner praised Radio Manchester's support in his *Guardian* review of the concert, writing:

'Even BBC Radio 3 would think twice, or more, about broadcasting whole two-hour concert of music by Elisabeth Lutyens. But Radio Manchester did it last night...Whether

the audience listening at home was any bigger than that in the hall – a mere handful – no one will even know for certain. But local broadcasting history has been made and, until Piccadilly devotes two hours on 261 to the music of Humphrey Searle, it is not likely to be repeated.

‘Actually, few living composers would survive this sort of exposure as well as Elisabeth Lutyens did...’⁵

The published score of *The Ring of Bone* (University of York Music Press) includes a transcript of unidentified text and instructions for an optional speaker. Originally intending the text to be spoken as a round at two specific moments in the music, Lutyens subsequently altered her ideas. In her note for the LP *Peter Lawson plays Cowie, Knussen, Lutyens, Poole and Sherlaw Johnson* (1982) she explained: ‘there were [originally] twelve reciters quietly speaking a ‘poem’ over sections of the music. Though Peter Lawson played beautifully, the speaking voices did not work. Later [in 1977], the work was performed at the Wigmore Hall by the pianist Jeremy Brown. On this occasion [sic] the single voice of the woman turning the pages entered suddenly, and unexpectedly began to speak the words at the place and for the duration specified in the score. This achieved exactly the effect I wanted and is the version I now stand by. The title is taken from a prose poem by Samuel Beckett, – “Imagination dead imagine”.’⁶

In an interview with Robert Saxton in *The Musical Times* in 1981, Lutyens referred to Beckett as ‘the greatest living writer’.⁷

As the above process indicates, Lutyens’ approach to composing and performance was

very fluid and relaxed at this time. Lawson recalls that he received the score and prepared it without any interaction with the composer before the performance. Lutyens met him briefly on the afternoon of the concert and gave very little immediate feedback following his evening performance. Later on however, a brief but generous note of thanks and suggestions for contacting Dutch Radio conveyed her appreciation.

Lutyens’ lack of specificity in the notation of *The Ring of Bone* indicates her willingness to give the performer significant interpretative freedom. The form of the work evolves from the alternation of passages in a ‘stream-of-consciousness’ style – that is, without metre and with ‘free’ notation (semibreves, note-heads, lines indicating duration and commas indicating slight pauses) – with shorter, faster-moving passages that have specific rhythms and set tempi. On the fourth and fifth pages the duration of silences are specified exactly in seconds, as are the duration of each spoken line. In January 1976 Lutyens explained that ‘it consists of an interplay between two types of material: *quasi voce* (as in singing); *quasi strummenti* (as instrumental). These two elements are mostly antiphonal but, sometimes, combined.’⁸

Lutyens uses a similar notation in the sixth of the *Seven Preludes*, Op. 126 (1977), where she provides a key indicating the duration of each note-head, and it can be presumed that she had similar ideas in mind for *The Ring of Bone*. At the same time, as Peter Lawson has suggested, the ambiguity of the score invites, and requires, a somewhat improvisatory approach from the

performer in order to make sense of the musical gestures. Despite the rhythmic flexibility in the *quasi voce* sections, Lutyens is quite specific about dynamic, articulation and pedalling, and her interest in exploring the piano’s resonance through layering sounds with the sustain pedal, and her specific instructions regarding attack (for instance, differing between *ffff* and *ffz*) indicates a real engagement with the possibilities of the instrument.

Seven Preludes, Op. 126 (1978)

Lutyens was a lifelong admirer of Debussy, whose music she found refreshingly modern and experimental in comparison to the heavy diet of Brahms she received at the Royal College of Music from 1926 to 1930. In 1981 she publicly aligned her own music with the tradition of ‘French clarity’ over ‘German expressionism’,⁹ and that same year Katharina Wolpe performed three Debussy Preludes (*La Puerta del Vino*, *Feuilles Mortes* and *Général Lavine-Eccentric*) alongside Michael Finnissy’s premiere of the first book of Lutyens’ *Three Books of Bagatelles*, Op. 141 (1979) in the 75th birthday tribute concert held at the Wigmore Hall.

Debussy’s influence is felt in the *Seven Preludes* – a set commissioned by Jeremy Brown (with funds provided by the Arts Council of Great Britain) and premiered by him at the Wigmore Hall in September 1978 – in which a descriptive ‘subtitle’ is placed at the end of each prelude, in the same way that Debussy entitled his piano preludes. The critic for *The Daily Telegraph* alluded to the similarities in compositional approach, writing that the work carries ‘a set of subtitles which suggests

impermanence – for example, “Whose name was writ in water” or “Night Winds.” And much of the piano writing more relaxed and retrospective than usual, is similarly cast in a shadowy, almost impressionist vein’ (6 September 1978).

The subtitles refer to the life and work of the English Romantic poet John Keats, whose words Lutyens also set in her *Chorale Prelude and Paraphrase*, Op. 123 (1977) for tenor and ensemble. The first piano prelude is linked with the inscription on Keats’ tombstone in Rome – ‘Here lies one whose name was writ in water’ – an epitaph chosen by the poet himself, in protest to the critical reception his work had received. The fifth (*strange thunders from the potency of song*) and seventh (*The shifting of mighty winds that blow hither and thither all the changing thoughts of man*) carry subtitles from Keats’ poem *Sleep and Poetry*, and contain the most forceful and dramatic music within the set. The fifth prelude in particular is remarkable for its sustained energy and assertiveness, placing it in high contrast to the mournful lyricism of *Tenebrae*, the clarity of *Starlight*, and the more impressionistic writing of *Night winds* and *Labyrinths*.

La Natura dell’ Acqua, Op. 154 (1981)

Lutyens’ final work for solo piano was written as a token of gratitude to the young composers who organised a series of three concerts around a Lutyens exhibition at the British Music Information Centre. While the second and third concerts were dedicated solely to her music, the first included tributes by the composers Virgil Thomson, Glyn Perrin, Anthony Payne, Jennifer Fowler, Brian Elias, Michael Finnissy, Robert

Saxton and John Patrick Thomas – all played by Michael Finnissy – alongside a performance of Lutyens’ *Plenum I*, Op. 87 (1972) played by Richard Deering. At the top of the score, *La Natura dell’ Acqua* is dedicated specifically ‘to’ Brian Elias and Glyn Perrin, and ‘for’ Michael Finnissy. Unfortunately, it was not performed in public during the brief remainder of Lutyens’ life.

La Natura dell’ Acqua is remarkable for its succinctness and use of silence. In an feature interview with Mary Blume in the *International Herald Tribune* the following year, Lutyens explained the direction her work was taking: ‘If you look at five paintings Turner did of the same subject, the first is lush and naturalistic, the one he did late in life you can hardly see what it is. It’s like late Cezanne. I’ve noticed that with old age – with certain exceptions – people know what to leave out. There is just the skeleton.’¹⁰

Certainly, a pared-down approach to texture and density is prominent in this final work. In much of it, she approaches the piano as a ‘single-line’ instrument, only occasionally using the more typically pianistic chordal and polyphonic textures. The use of silence – both within phrases and sections, and as a framing device for the many sections which are defined by tempo changes and changing musical ideas – is a significant feature of the piece, placing it in stark contrast to the density of earlier works such as the *Five Bagatelles*. From a performer’s point of view it is interesting that the rests (that is, the silences) are given such specific attention, often carrying a new (and temporary) time signature and directions such as *accelerando*, which require the performer to somehow ‘embody’ that which

cannot be heard. Therefore, the silences are just as musically ‘alive’ as the passages of sound. In this way, *La Natura dell’ Acqua* continues the ideas Lutyens had explored a decade earlier in her series of three instrumental works entitled *Plenum* (the first of which was written for solo piano in 1972 and premiered by Katharina Wolpe). As Lutyens explained, “the word of the title is derived from the Latin ‘Plenum’, implying Plenum Spatium (a space completely filled with matter).” In her programme note for *Plenum II* (for solo oboe and 13 instruments) she elaborated that ‘in musical terms, [it means] silence filled – emptied – and refilled with sound.’ From this perspective, silence is the starting point.

1 Elisabeth Lutyens, typescript for *The Listener: The British Broadcasting Corporation’s Literary Weekly*, 2 July 1971, Box H, Lutyens Papers, University of York Music Press, p.3.

2 Max Harrison, ‘Lutyens. Seventieth Birthday Recital’, *Gramophone*, Vol. 54, No. 648 (May 1977), p.1714.

3 Elisabeth Lutyens, letter to William Glock, 6 November 1955, William Glock Collection, Vol. 12, British Library.

4 Elisabeth Lutyens, liner notes, *Peter Lawson plays Cowie, Knussen, Lutyens, Poole and Sherlaw Johnson*, LP, ECR, 1982.

5 Gerald Lerner, ‘Lutyens Birthday Concert’, *The Guardian*, 13 May 1976.

6 Lutyens, *Peter Lawson plays*, LP, 1982.

7 ‘Elisabeth Lutyens at 75: An Interview with Robert Saxton’, *The Musical Times*, Vol. 122, No. 1660 (June 1981), pp.368-369.

8 Elisabeth Lutyens, typescript, ‘The Ring of Bone (op.106) (1975)’, January 1976, Box F, Lutyens Papers, University of York Music Press.

9 ‘Elisabeth Lutyens at 75: An interview with Robert Saxton’, *The Musical Times*, p.369.

10 Elisabeth Lutyens quoted in Mary Blume, ‘Elisabeth Lutyens’, *International Herald Tribune*, 9-10 January 1982.

LINER NOTES: ARABELLA TENISWOOD-HARVEY

Born in Tasmania, Arabella Tenniswood-Harvey studied piano in Melbourne where, in 1999, she was one of the few elite young Australian musicians awarded full scholarship for the prestigious Australian National Academy of Music’s inaugural Advanced Performance Program. Now teaching classical piano, music history and art theory at the University of Tasmania, Arabella maintains an active



performance career. She performs frequently as a chamber musician; as soloist with organisations such as the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, the State Orchestra of Victoria, and the Melbourne Chorale; and has performed in the United Kingdom with violinist Edwin Paling, and in numerous festivals within Australia. In addition to her musical talents, she also holds a doctorate degree from the University of Tasmania. Research for her dissertation considered James McNeill Whistler's interest in music and how it influenced his creation of art. Her articles have been published in *The British Art Journal*, *Music and Art* and *The Burlington Magazine*. She has presented lecture-recitals at the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow, Scotland; the Freer Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) and at Colby College Museum of Art (Maine, USA), and is a sought-after presenter of pre-concert talks for the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra.



Helen Noonan is a singer and actress whose long career in opera and music theatre features self-devised and collaboratively-devised new works such as “Recital”, (with Douglas Horton for ChamberMade Opera); and “Voicing Emily” – the life and art of Emily Dickinson, poems and letters having been set by composers Jane Hammond, Greg Mason and Eddie Perfect.

Helen has sung roles as diverse as Violetta in “La Traviata” and Carlotta in “Phantom of the Opera” and has recorded two solo CDs: “Woman’s Song” and “A Classic Case of Love”.

In 2011 Helen travelled to Italy having been awarded the Alcorso Foundation Arts Residency to enable research for two new Chamber

operatic works in English and Italian. Helen also appeared in David Hare’s play “Breath of Life” for the Tasmanian Theatre Company.

Painter, sculptor and designer Conrad Clark is the son of composer Elisabeth Lutyens. Born in 1941 in the UK, he lived in Greece before emigrating to Australia in 1986. Conrad’s work is totemic sculpture, combining strong design and poetic images in ceremonial space. His latest work is in a series of musical themes: “Down at the Crossroads” (The Blues of Robert Johnson) and “Miles in the Oz desert”. Conrad lived and worked in the Blue Mountains for many years, and now lives in Melbourne. For further information see www.conradclark.com.au

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The RING of BONE

Five Intermezzi, op. 9 (1942)

- 1 I Allegro moderato 1'24"
- 2 II Allegro, ma non troppo, ma agitato 0'34"
- 3 III Allegretto capriccioso 0'39"
- 4 IV Adagio 1'43"
- 5 V Poco allegro e con moto 0'35"

Three Improvisations (1948)

- 6 *Adumbration* 1'57"
- 7 *Obfuscation* 0'54"
- 8 *Peroration* 1'22"

Five Bagatelles, Op. 49 (1962)

- 9 1 1'45"
- 10 2 1'05"
- 11 3 2'08"
- 12 4 1'23"
- 13 5 1'00"

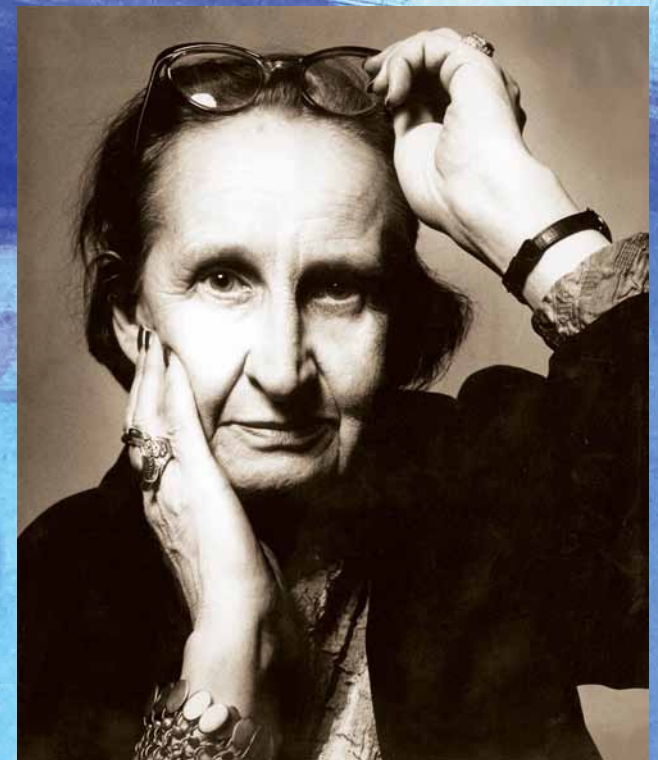
14 The Ring of Bone, Op. 106 (1975) 13'28"

Helen Noonan, speaker

Seven Preludes, Op. 126 (1978)

- 15 I "...whose name was writ in water" 3'41"
- 16 II *Night Winds* 4'07"
- 17 III *Starlight* 1'06"
- 18 IV *Tenebrae* 2'11"
- 19 V "strange thunders from the potency of song" 3'05"
- 20 VI *Labyrinths* 4'04"
- 21 VII "The shifting of mighty winds that blow hither and thither
all the changing thoughts of man" 4'29"

22 La Natura dell' Acqua, Op. 154 (1981) 9'26"



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