

Tobias Picker
1955

Collected Works for Solo Piano

Edited by Ursula Oppens

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Preface

When Soft Voices Die was composed for Ursula Oppens in 1988. The slow middle movement, it is music of highly compressed hyper-romanticism, characterized by sudden shifts in harmony, character and a dense unfolding musical events. The work takes its title from a poem by Shakespeare.

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory –
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heap'd for the beloved's bed;
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on.

The Blue Hula was extracted and arranged for piano from a chamber piece of the same name that I'd written with Leonard Kurtenbach in 1981. I adapted the jazzy middle movement for piano, Leonard Kurtenbach and Ursula Oppens in Carier debut.

Although I had written several piano concertos between 1980 and 1986, I had not composed any other solo piano pieces. *When Soft Voices Die* until *Old and Lost Rivers* in 1986. I discovered the piece from a road sign on Highway 10 heralding the Old and Lost Rivers. The sign read "Old and Lost Rivers" – an inspiring biblical poem in an otherwise monotonous landscape. I had been driving for nearly 100 miles from New Orleans to Louisiana in a straight, flat line through a landscape devoid of any relief. I noticed a little black and white sign on the side of the road that said "Old and Lost Rivers" on the back of an envelope. I began to ascend and I found myself crossing a short high bridge. I felt a sense of relief as I gazed out upon the winding bayous as far as I could see in both directions. These old and lost rivers, tributaries and backwaters of the Mississippi were carved in the earth by the great river moving in geological time. They led me east and they gave me a sense of hope tinged with nostalgia.

I completed *Three Pieces* at the end of 1988 and dedicated the work to Peter Serkin who had commissioned it. To describe its structure in the simplest terms: the slow middle movement consists of two streams of dense counterpoint. Each of these streams are stripped of rhythm, jettisoned into the two outer movements, and played at break-neck speed – a torrential succession of disembodied voices. The slow inner movement, or Piece II, my twelve-tone version of the world of Old and Lost Rivers, contains one brief quote, five notes from *Pagliacci*. Piece III is reminiscent of the opening of *When Soft Voices Die*. The *Three Pieces* are marked *Svelto, Liberamente and Feroce*.

Late one summer night in 1994, I sat down at the piano and composed *Where the Rivers Go*. I wrote it as I had written *Old and Lost Rivers* – in one sitting. I had just begun work on my first opera *Emmeline* and this moody, emotional music in B-flat minor became the basis of the opera's opening scene underlying words that have to do with loss, sadness and religious faith.

Ursula Oppens asked me to write her a set of etudes for a series of recitals she'd planned at Carnegie Hall, Tanglewood, the Konzerthaus in Berlin and Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Having heard Ursula play the *Two Tangos* for Ursula that Nancarrow had recently written for her, I decided to call the new collection *Keys to the City for Ursula* in honor of Ursula and Nancarrow with whom I had become friends in the 1980s.

The first Etude is a study in lyric and mechanics, playing, the study in polyrhythm, fast repeated notes and jazz; the third Etude takes a detour, a roller road I'd sometimes traveled, the road that had brought me to *Old and Lost Rivers* and *Where the Rivers Go* to a place deep within nature, a place that gave me the strength to share raw emotion through music and enabled me to write *Emmeline*. The third Etude – even with its fragile melodic line – is a study in melody and the balancing of voices within thick chordal structures. The fourth Etude studies the difficulties of polyrhythm, simultaneous rhythms, expansive chords in the context of sheer bravura and pianissimo force. I have seen pianists out of breath by the double bar. (Apparently enough, I later adapted the fourth Etude for the scene in which *Emmeline* suffers a debilitating stroke in my opera, *Thérèse Raquin*.)

My music may seem to inhabit the space between what sounds like atonality and tonality. But, in fact, all of it is tonal. Even the twelve-tone – it is tonal. Sometimes the tonality changes as in *Old and Lost Rivers* and *Where the Rivers Go*. But usually the tonality of the music in this collection – the keys change rapidly, sometimes in a single phrase. I have left the keys for you to discover.

Tobias Picker
New York
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for Ursula Oppens

Old and Lost Rivers

Tobias Picker
(1986)

Tranquillo e rubato

(♩ = 36 - 76)

Piano

pp

ppp

loco

rall.

a tempo

rall. ... *a tempo*

loco

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rall. a tempo

11 *loco*

16 *loco*

19 *loco*

22 *loco*

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25 *8ma* *loco*

28 *rall. - - - - - tempo*

31 *8ma*

loco

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Musical score system 1, measures 36-37. Treble clef, bass clef. Includes a slur over measures 36-37 and a *rall.* marking with a dashed line.

Musical score system 2, measures 38-39. Treble clef, bass clef. Includes a slur over measures 38-39, a *loco* marking, and an *a tempo* marking with a dashed line.

Musical score system 3, measures 40-41. Treble clef, bass clef. Includes a slur over measures 40-41 and a *rall.* marking with a dashed line.

Musical score system 4, measures 42-43. Treble clef, bass clef. Includes a slur over measures 42-43, a *ppp* marking, and a *rall.* marking with a dashed line.

Musical score system 5, measures 44-45. Treble clef, bass clef. Includes a slur over measures 44-45, a *pppp* marking, and a *rall.* marking with a dashed line.

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