



WILLIAM ALBRIGHT (1944-1998) was one of America's most influential and distinguished composers in the latter half of the twentieth century. Although probably best known for his keyboard works, he produced works for almost every medium, several of which involve electronic, visual and theatrical elements.

His more than 80 works include *Bealahland Rag* (1967-69) for jazz quartet, improvisation ensemble, electronic tape, film, narrator and slides; *Sphaera* (1985) for piano and computer-generated tape; *Seven Deadly Sins* (1974) for flute, clarinet, string quartet, piano and narrator; *Abiding Passions* (1983) for woodwind quintet; *Doo-Dah!* (1975) for three alto saxophones; *Take That* (1972) for four drummers; *A Song to David* (1983), an oratorio on texts of Christopher Smart; and numerous organ works including *Bacchanal* (1981) for organ and large orchestra.

He was the recipient of many commissions and awards, among them The Queen Marie-José Prize for *Organbook I*, an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowships, a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, two Koussevitzky Composition Awards, and a Koussevitzky Foundation commission.

Born in Gary, Indiana, Albright was internationally known for his concerts of new music for organ and piano. He premiered many new works for piano and for organ. His recital programs and compositions reflected his interest in classic and modern ragtime and other jazz styles. Albright's composition teachers included Ross Lee Finney, Olivier Messiaen, George Rochberg, and Aaron Copland. He was on the faculty of the University of Michigan from 1970 until his death in 1998.

The ragtime revival of the late 1960s and 1970s was two-fold: not only did the original works of classic ragtime composers such as Scott Joplin and Joseph Lamb find a new audience, but contemporary classical composers began writing new compositions in the ragtime style. In 1973 the movie "The Sting" brought a huge audience and renewed commercial success to Joplin's *The Entertainer* (ironically, the movie was not set during the ragtime era), and ragtime gained mainstream recognition and academic acceptance. Earlier in the century, classical composers such as Stravinsky, Milhaud and Berg had used elements of rag in various ways, and now new composers were being inspired by the energy, humor and pure fun of ragtime.

Before this public ragtime revival, however, William Albright and William Bolcom began a private exchange of their new piano rag compositions via mail in the late 1960s. Although classical composers had often used ragtime quotes in their compositions, or even based entire pieces on the style, this was something very different. These two composers did not merely take some audience-pleasing ragtime references and incorporate them into a work of contemporary style. Nor did they meld the two genres completely, creating "neo-ragtime" in the style of Stravinsky's neo-classicism, nor use ragtime as relief from more serious "art" music. Albright and Bolcom have created a homage to the old ragtime masters, a style that is infinitely more ragtime than it is 1960s classical experimentalism or standard concert music with "ragged" rhythms in a duple beat. Their later works become more sprawling and fantasy-like than

some of the original smaller rags, but the spirit of ragtime is never far away. Their compositions breathe life with a new perspective into the original ragtime style, giving it color and vitality that would surely have delighted the old masters of ragtime.



The piano rags of William Albright first caught my imagination in 1984, when I was a first-year student at Victoria University of Wellington (New Zealand). David Burge, the acclaimed American pianist, had programmed Albright's *The Dream Rags* (which were written for Burge). Quite simply, I was charmed – charmed by the wit, spontaneity and imagination of these compositions, first by their immediate accessibility, and then by the quality of expression and mastery of the style. I had the opportunity to finally meet William Albright in 1994, when I performed his *Five Chromatic Dances*, an exquisitely constructed and profound *tour de force* of twentieth century piano literature. At that time, I also had the rare pleasure of hearing Albright perform his *Four Fancies* for harpsichord, and the memory of his foot-stomping abandon in performance gives me a deeper interpretive perspective. To this day I remember that performance and feel the pure joy and exuberance of his music-making. Meeting Albright and playing for him also allowed me a little more insight into the deeply personal nature of his compositions. More than any of his other works, his piano rags seem to emanate naturally from the lighter, happier side of his character, highlighting his inherent wit and humor in a spectacular and quirky manner. There is staggering complexity, charming simplicity, profundity,

sentimentality, and an infinite and constantly changing kaleidoscope of imagination and color.

What began with an exchange of rags sent back and forth for the amusement and musical conversation of two great composers has ended with a substantial and irreplaceable contribution to the genre. The identifying "ragged" rhythms that first characterized ragtime are largely intact, the basic melodic shapes mostly retained, the sectionalized structures kept, but what we now hear is ragtime taken to a truly artful level. The illusion of order and symmetry is created just enough for us to be thrown out of kilter by a jolt of unanticipated rhythm or harmonic direction. Just when one thinks a musical idea is finally predictable, it takes a sharp turn into extraordinarily unexpected places. Despite the true ragtime spirit and character that Albright has meticulously captured, his piano rags could never be mistaken for ragtime from the turn of the twentieth century. The dedications of these rags, mostly to friends and composers, reemphasize their intensely personal nature. They are almost all written for or dedicated to a close acquaintance, each is imbued with a special personality, no two are alike - a remarkable accomplishment considering the seemingly limited and modest beginnings of ragtime. His rags are full of quirky twists of rhythm and harmony, unexpected melodic shapes and sonorities that lift ragtime to a higher and infinitely more sophisticated plane. Ragtime has been honored by, as Albright describes it, "some of the zaniest music ever written".

GRAND SONATA IN RAG (1968)

Scott Joplin's Victory
Ragtime Turtle dove
Behemoth Two-step

This set of rags represents a close wedding of traditional ragtime elements with contemporary proportions and sensibilities. Joplin's "victory", explains Albright, is that of finally being recognized as a composer of importance in America. This extended and ambitious rag is sectionalized in the traditional sense, yet it retains something of the classical sonata expectation of a contrasting second, more lyrical, section. Albright has set part of this slower section as a leisurely "Cakewalk in the Sky". Restated sections are developed to some degree, and there is a pianistic outburst of Lisztian proportions and emotional content towards the middle of the piece. There are



many moments of jagged asymmetry in the rhythms, and unexpected turns, both melodic and harmonic, that leave the listener gasping for breath. The rag ends with a repeat of the Cakewalk, which slides gracefully into the *Ragtime Turtle dove*. This rag is dedicated to Albright's wife, Sarah, and is, in his words, "frankly sentimental". It is graceful and soulful, full of light and hope. The *Behemoth Two-step* is a joyful, unabashed romp, one of the few extroverted rags not to use rhythm or metric changes for effect. Each of the sections is vastly different, with startling mood shifts and splashes of humor that keep us smiling, and the overall effect is virtuosic and brimming with energy.

THREE NOVELTY RAGS

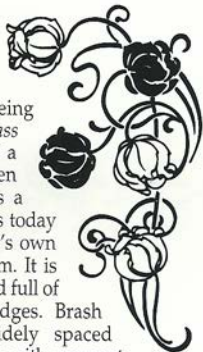
Sleight of Hand Rag (1969)

Burnt Fingers (1969)

Brass Knuckles (1968) (with William Bolcom)

As Albright explains, these three "hand" rags were "thrown together", and not intended as a set in the same way as *The Dream Rags* or the *Grand Sonata in Rag*. They were composed while Albright was in France, hence the alternative French titles on the score. *Sleight of Hand Rag* is bursting at the seams with energy and eccentricity and includes wildly contrasting sonorities, changing meter, and a pointillistic section amusingly entitled the "Hesitation Chorus". This sparse writing is followed by the direction "Hit it!", and what follows is pure, foot-stomping fun. *Burnt Fingers* has a seamless sound, the energy of the ragtime rhythms subsumed within a smooth and easy texture. One of the inner sections is marked "*In memoriam Jelly Roll Morton*", a tribute to one of the great

pianists who took ragtime forward into the jazz age. It finishes without the veneer of glossy calm ever being truly disturbed. *Brass Knuckles*, the product of a collaboration between Albright and Bolcom, is a favorite amongst pianists today and was one of Albright's own favorite pieces to perform. It is bold, daring, exciting, and full of musical winks and nudges. Brash palm clusters and widely spaced sonorities are contrasted with moments of elegance and poise, all capped by a witty, tongue-in-cheek ending. It is pure ragtime combined with twentieth century aesthetics.



SWEET SIXTEENTHS (1975)

Albright once said that his favorite rag was *Morning Reveries* from *The Dream Rags*, but my personal favorite is *Sweet Sixteenths*. Its thinly-veiled sentimentality seems to speak from a place of easy intimacy, and the emotion is underscored with a true poignancy that holds us spell-bound until the final chord. This sweet rag was written for Albright's friend, Robert Hodesh, on the occasion of his birthday. It is, like so many of his rags, dedicated to a person with whom Albright shared the joy of close companionship and music. Although this rag is perhaps played more often on the organ, it was originally written for piano. The intensely personal inspiration and impact of the rags never seems more close than in this touching, heartfelt gem.

THREE ORIGINAL RAGS

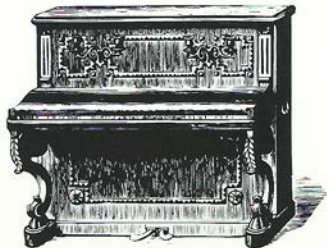
On the Lamb (1967)

The Queen of Sheba;

Slow Drag and Stomp (1968)

Onion Skin (1967)

Of all Albright's sets of piano rags, the *Three Original Rags* are the closest to purely authentic ragtime. This is not surprising, given that *On the Lamb* and *Onion Skin* were Albright's first compositions in this style. The title of *On the Lamb* makes reference to one of the masters of classic ragtime, Joseph Lamb, but it is dedicated to William Bolcom and was in fact the first rag sent by Albright to Bolcom in their early rag exchange. It is simple and straightforward, but even here there are fleeting moments of quirky rhythmic humor. *Onion Skin* is also a small rag of similar proportions to *On the Lamb*, and likewise it has just the right amount of surprise. These two outer rags have multiple sections of classic rag proportions, expectations and structures. *The Queen of Sheba* is a more extended rag, written in two parts. The opening Slow Drag stops just short of sounding sleazy, its lugubrious lines and insinuating harmonies winding effortlessly. This is followed by a chordal section in the same tempo, the effect reminiscent of an organ. The foot tapping that permeates this section seems to suggest a subtle soft-shoe, straight and syncopated chords placed against the backdrop of a steady beat. The ensuing Stomp is a rousing good time, with rhythmic twists and stutters, sharp harmonic turns, and an "obsessive energy" that pushes the audience right to the edge of their seat by the last chord.



THE DREAM RAGS (1970)

Sleepwalker's Shuffle

The Nightmare Fantasy Rag

(*A Night on Rag Mountain*)

Morning Reveries

Possibly the most popular, and certainly the most performed, of his rag sets, *The Dream Rags* is both programmatic and ambitious. The overall set has a narrative thread: the Sleepwalker is plunged into a Nightmare, only to awaken to the tranquility of the Reverie. *The Sleepwalker's Shuffle* creates a slow and other-worldly sensibility that is shocked with frightening outbursts of dissonance, and a special "Harlem style" section, for the late Eubie Blake (1883-1983), to whom this rag is dedicated. Blake was one of the original New York ragtime composers, and he brought the ragtime tradition directly to Albright. They spent many hours playing the piano and exchanging musical ideas and friendship. *The Nightmare Fantasy Rag*, perhaps the most fantastical of all Albright's rags, is certainly the longest and most musically intense. The relentless advance of popular music seems to have found its way to the ragtime

revival, and this piece is a dazzling integration of many contrasting, yet oddly complementary, styles. Ragtime elements of rhythm and structure are interspersed with other popular styles such as boogie-woogie and hard rock in a basic fast-slow-fast framework. There is a romantic virtuoso passage at the end of the slow section and fantasy elements that push the boundaries of ragtime to their limit. Albright has stated that the *Morning Reveries* was perhaps his favorite rag (although this was before he composed *Sweet Sixteenths*), at a time when he seems to have felt that his rag-writing days were over. It is a tranquil and peaceful end to a night of intense musical and emotional turmoil and it leaves the listener feeling reassured of the ultimate survival of the pure spirit of ragtime.

Notes by Nicola Melville



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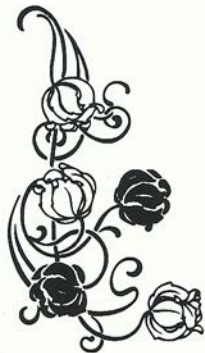
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Nicola Melville enjoys a multi-faceted performing career on both sides of the Pacific. She is active as a recitalist, concerto soloist, chamber musician and as an avid promoter of New Music. Ms. Melville is a native of Wellington, New Zealand, and a graduate of Victoria University of Wellington, where she was a student of Judith Clark and the recipient of the Rere Beckway award for piano performance. She also holds a M.M. and a D.M.A. from the Eastman School of Music, Rochester, New York, where she studied under Rebecca Penneys. At the Eastman School she was awarded both the Lizzie T. Mason award for Outstanding Graduate Pianist and the prestigious Performance Certificate.

Ms. Melville has won many awards in New Zealand, including the National Concerto Competition and the Auckland Star Concerto Competition, and she continues her activities as a performer and teacher there, giving concerts and master classes throughout the country regularly. She is also a recording artist for Radio New Zealand, and has been broadcast numerous times in recital as a soloist and chamber musician. She has toured under the auspices of Chamber Music New Zealand and the QE II Arts Council, and has been a featured artist and panelist in the biannual International Festival of the Arts. She is also a winner of the SAI International Concerto Competition at the Chautauqua Summer Festival and the Connecticut Young Artists competition.

Ms. Melville performs throughout the United States, Canada and the South Pacific. She has appeared in radio broadcast many times in the United States, Canada, New Zealand and China, and has been featured regularly as an adjudicator, clinician and teacher at many conferences and competitions. Ms. Melville also has a keen interest in New Music, and has been instrumental in obtaining grants for commissioning and performing new works from organizations such as Creative New Zealand, Meet the Composer Fund, and the Ohio Arts Council. She has commissioned and premiered works from numerous composers on both sides of the Pacific, and was a founding member of the Gerstl New Music Ensemble. She is currently Associate Professor of Piano at Heidelberg College, Ohio, and has also served on the faculty at the University of Evansville, Indiana. Nicola has recorded for the Equilibrium label.

Grand Sonata in Rag (1968)

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|---------------------------|------|
| 1. Scott Joplin's Victory | 8:17 |
| 2. Ragtime Turtledove | 4:15 |
| 3. Behemoth Two-step | 3:59 |

Three Novelty Rags (1968-69)

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|---|------|
| 4. Sleight of Hand Rag | 3:24 |
| 5. Burnt Fingers | 4:53 |
| 6. Brass Knuckles (with William Bolcom) | 3:36 |

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|-----------------------------------|------|
| 7. Sweet Sixteenths (1975) | 5:31 |
|-----------------------------------|------|

Three Original Rags (1967-68)

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|-----------------------|------|
| 8. On the Lamb | 3:27 |
| 9. The Queen of Sheba | 6:27 |
| 10. Onion Skin | 3:04 |

The Dream Rags (1970)

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 11. Sleepwalker's Shuffle | 4:13 |
| 12. The Nightmare Fantasy Rag (A Night on Rag Mountain) | 10:56 |
| 13. Morning Reveries | 6:54 |

William Albright's works are registered with ASCAP

Total Time

68:56



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