

AMERICAN PIANO MUSIC • VOLUME I

Forgotten Ballrooms

Corte Swearingen • piano

LINER NOTES

ABOUT THE ALBUM

What does American music sound like when you step beyond the familiar names?

Forgotten Ballrooms explores the rich and remarkably varied landscape of American piano music through twenty-one works by seven composers, spanning more than half a century. From the unmistakable Americana of Aaron Copland to the blues and jazz of Dick Hyman, the ragtime of Glenn Jenks and Aaron Robinson, and the lyrical, imaginative voices of Dana Suesse, Donald Ashwander, and Judith Lang Zaimont, these pieces reveal just how many different forms an American musical voice can take.

The album moves freely between quiet reflection and playful ragtime, sophisticated jazz, haunting nostalgia, and the spacious landscapes of the American West. Rather than presenting the music in groups by composer, the works are arranged as a continuous journey, allowing one musical world to lead naturally into the next—like wandering through a series of long-forgotten rooms and discovering something unexpected behind each door.

Some of these composers remain familiar names. Others have slipped quietly from view. Yet each possessed a distinctive musical voice, and each left behind music worthy of rediscovery.

Forgotten Ballrooms is an invitation to listen beyond the familiar repertoire and encounter a remarkable corner of American musical history—music filled with character, beauty, wit, melancholy, and imagination.

Performed and recorded by Corte Swearingen

TRACK 01

Blues for Jay

DICK HYMAN

“Blues for Jay” is a soulful piano composition by legendary jazz pianist Dick Hyman, written in memory of pianist and bandleader Jay McShann. More than simply a memorial, the piece pays tribute to the blues tradition that shaped both musicians and remained central to their musical identities.

The work opens in a reflective mood before easing into a relaxed blues groove. From there, it unfolds with the natural freedom of a seasoned jazz musician, moving between introspective passages and more animated bursts of energy without ever feeling bound to a rigid formal design.

Hyman’s formidable command of the piano is present throughout, but virtuosity is never the point. The music is driven instead by touch, rhythm, phrasing, and the expressive language of the blues. At times, there are clear echoes of McShann’s own pianism—earthy, rhythmic, direct, and deeply rooted in the Kansas City blues tradition.

Yet Hyman never simply imitates him. He absorbs those qualities into his own musical language, creating a piece that feels both personal and affectionate. The result is a warm tribute from one master pianist to another, and a reminder of the deep, enduring bond between blues and jazz.

TRACK 02

Central Park

JUDITH LANG ZAIMONT

“Central Park,” by Judith Lang Zaimont, comes from her piano suite *American City: Portrait of New York*, an early musical portrait of the city in which she grew up.

What makes the piece especially striking is that Zaimont composed it at the age of twelve. Even at that remarkably young age, she already showed a sure instinct for melody, atmosphere, and musical characterization. Rather than merely describing a place, “Central Park” suggests the impressions of a young composer absorbing the movement, color, and changing moods of one of New York City’s most familiar landscapes.

Within *American City: Portrait of New York*, the piece forms part of a broader musical evocation of the city’s energy and character. Yet “Central Park” also stands comfortably on its own: concise, imaginative, and full of personality.

Heard today, the work is more than a youthful curiosity. It offers an early glimpse of the musical intelligence and expressive imagination that would later define Zaimont’s long career as a composer, while remaining an appealing and vivid piece in its own right.

TRACK 03

Dove in the Window

DONALD ASHWANDER

“Dove in the Window,” by American composer Donald Ashwander, is a quiet and lyrical miniature built around an image of simplicity and stillness. The title suggests an intimate scene—a dove resting near a window—and the music captures that sense of calm through a graceful melody and warm, gently shifting harmonies.

Ashwander’s writing often has an understated quality, and this piece is especially effective in the way it allows expressive depth to emerge from relatively simple materials. Nothing feels overstated. Instead, the music unfolds with a natural ease, its beauty found in subtle changes of harmony, delicate phrasing, and the quiet interaction between melody and accompaniment.

There is a reflective, almost private quality to “Dove in the Window,” as though the listener has been invited to pause for a moment and observe something fleeting and beautiful. Its charm lies not in virtuoso display, but in atmosphere, tenderness, and restraint.

The result is a small but deeply evocative work—an intimate example of Ashwander’s gift for finding poetry in simplicity.

TRACK 04

The Alchemist

GLENN JENKS

“The Alchemist,” subtitled “A Ragtime Concoction,” is a slower, more reflective ragtime composition by American composer Glenn Jenks. Rooted firmly in the classic ragtime tradition, the piece combines graceful syncopation, lyrical melody, and a carefully shaped sense of momentum with Jenks’s own distinctive musical personality.

Its measured pace gives the music room to breathe, allowing the melodic lines and harmonic details to emerge with unusual clarity. At times, the piece recalls the elegant, lyrical rags of Joseph Lamb, whose music often favored warmth and melodic invention over sheer rhythmic drive.

Yet “The Alchemist” never feels like an exercise in imitation. Jenks draws on the language of classic ragtime and reshapes it into something personal—subtle, imaginative, and quietly expressive. The result is a piece that honors the tradition while adding its own distinctive voice to ragtime’s continuing story.

TRACK 05

Berceuse

DANA SUESSE

“Berceuse” is a lyrical piano work by American composer and pianist Dana Suesse, whose music often bridged the worlds of classical concert writing and jazz. Celebrated in the 1930s as “The Girl Gershwin,” Suesse became known for a style that combined sophistication, rhythmic vitality, and melodic appeal.

Here, however, she turns inward. The title Berceuse—French for “lullaby”—perfectly suits the piece’s gentle character. A flowing melody unfolds with warmth and tenderness, supported by harmonies that lend the music a quiet sense of intimacy.

There is little interest in display for its own sake. Instead, the expressive power of the piece comes from its graceful phrasing, restraint, and melodic simplicity. The music seems to hover in a calm, reflective space, creating an atmosphere that is soothing without ever becoming sentimental.

“Berceuse” reveals a more intimate side of Suesse’s musical voice: refined, lyrical, and beautifully understated.

TRACK 06

Down a Country Lane

AARON COPLAND

“Down a Country Lane” is a gentle, evocative piano piece by Aaron Copland, composed in 1962 on commission from Life magazine. In miniature form, it captures many of the qualities associated with Copland’s mature style: clarity, spaciousness, and an unmistakable sense of the American landscape.

The music unfolds with an easy, unhurried motion. Simple melodic lines and open harmonies suggest the quiet expansiveness of the countryside, while the steady flow of the piece creates the impression of moving gradually through a peaceful rural scene.

Copland never overstates the image. The music remains restrained and direct, allowing atmosphere to emerge from the sparseness of the writing itself. With remarkably economical means, he creates a vivid sense of distance, light, and open space.

“Down a Country Lane” is modest in scale but rich in atmosphere—a quiet example of Copland’s extraordinary ability to make landscape seem almost audible.

TRACK 07

Swamp-Bird

DANA SUESSE

“Swamp-Bird,” composed in 1941 by Dana Suesse, is one of the more unusual and imaginative works in her piano music. Far removed from the polished jazz-inflected style for which she is often remembered, the piece reveals a more experimental side of her musical personality.

The music is restless, quirky, and full of character. Sudden changes of articulation, dynamics, register, and texture give the piece an almost theatrical quality, as though Suesse is sketching the movements and calls of some elusive creature hidden within a strange, shadowy landscape.

Its technical demands are considerable, but they are always tied to expression. Rapid passages, sharp contrasts, and unusual pianistic effects serve the personality of the music rather than existing simply for display.

The result is a compact but striking character piece—playful, unpredictable, and slightly mysterious. “Swamp-Bird” offers a fascinating glimpse of Suesse as a composer willing to experiment with color, gesture, and atmosphere in ways that extend well beyond her more familiar musical world.

TRACK 08

Queen of Violets

GLENN JENKS

“Queen of Violets,” by American composer Glenn Jenks, is a lyrical and finely crafted piano piece distinguished by its graceful melody and understated beauty. From its opening measures, the music creates an atmosphere that feels intimate, poised, and quietly expressive.

The title suggests something both delicate and regal, and Jenks captures that character through flowing melodic lines, warm harmonies, and subtle changes of color. The music unfolds naturally, never calling attention to itself, yet revealing increasing depth as its phrases develop.

There is a tenderness to the piece, but also a sense of dignity and restraint. Jenks allows the melody to remain at the center, shaping the music with an elegance that feels effortless rather than ornamental.

“Queen of Violets” reveals the deeply lyrical side of Jenks’s musical voice—a work of quiet charm, warmth, and refinement.

TRACK 09

Ragtime Waltz

AARON ROBINSON

“Ragtime Waltz,” by American composer Aaron Robinson, brings together two familiar musical traditions in an unexpected way. The buoyant syncopation of ragtime is set against the graceful triple meter of a waltz, creating a piece that feels both elegant and slightly off-center.

Much of its personality comes from Robinson’s adventurous harmonic language. Dissonances appear at unexpected moments, briefly unsettling the music before giving way to resolution, while sudden changes of key continually shift the listener’s sense of direction. These turns give the piece a restless, unpredictable quality beneath its outwardly graceful surface.

The result is music that never settles into convention. Its charm lies in the tension between familiarity and surprise—between the recognizable gestures of ragtime and waltz, and a harmonic world that is distinctly Robinson’s own.

“Ragtime Waltz” is playful, sophisticated, and wonderfully idiosyncratic, a fresh reimagining of two traditions that might seem unlikely companions.

TRACK 10

The Banana Song

JUDITH LANG ZAIMONT

“The Banana Song,” by American composer Judith Lang Zaimont, comes from her piano suite *In My Lunchbox*, a collection that transforms the familiar world of childhood into music. Here, an ordinary banana becomes the subject of a miniature character piece filled with wit, energy, and playful imagination.

Zaimont approaches the idea with a light touch. The music has a bright, animated personality, capturing something of the spontaneity and humor with which children can invest even the most commonplace objects. Rhythmic playfulness and crisp musical gestures give the piece a sense of motion and personality far beyond its modest scale.

Part of the charm of “The Banana Song” lies in this transformation of the everyday into something memorable. Zaimont finds character where one might least expect it, reminding us that imagination can turn even the contents of a lunchbox into a world of its own.

The result is a delightful miniature—clever, spirited, and full of youthful charm.

TRACK 11

Corral Nocturne

AARON COPLAND

“Corral Nocturne,” by Aaron Copland, is one of his most evocative portraits of the American West. Originally composed as part of the ballet *Rodeo*, the music was later arranged by Copland for solo piano, where its spaciousness and quiet lyricism take on an especially intimate character.

The title suggests a Western landscape at night: the activity of the day has subsided, the horses are quiet, and the open country stretches into darkness. Copland creates that atmosphere with remarkable economy. Simple, folk-like melodies unfold over open intervals and spare harmonies, giving the music a sense of distance, stillness, and space.

There is also a gentle undercurrent of nostalgia. The music seems to look beyond the immediate scene toward an imagined American West—vast, solitary, and already touched by memory. Subtle harmonic tensions prevent the piece from becoming merely picturesque, adding depth and quiet emotional complexity.

“Corral Nocturne” is Copland at his most atmospheric: restrained, spacious, and deeply expressive, transforming the Western landscape into music of solitude and reflection.

TRACK 12

Forgotten Ballrooms

DONALD ASHWANDER

“Forgotten Ballrooms,” by Donald Ashwander, was inspired by the growing effort to rediscover and preserve America’s neglected historic spaces—old railway depots, theaters, filling stations, dance halls, and other places that once formed part of everyday community life.

Among the more intriguing branches of this movement is the exploration of abandoned ballrooms: rooms that once echoed with music, conversation, and dancing, but now stand silent. Ashwander’s piece draws on that sense of rediscovery, inviting us to imagine these spaces not as ruins, but as places still charged with memory.

Syncopated rhythms, playful melodic gestures, and colorful harmonies evoke the vitality of an earlier era, when ballrooms served as important centers of social life and entertainment. Yet beneath the surface is a distinct sense of nostalgia. The music seems aware that the world it evokes can only be partially recovered.

“Forgotten Ballrooms” is therefore both celebration and remembrance—a musical glimpse into spaces where countless lives once intersected, and a tribute to the people working to preserve the traces that remain.

TRACK 13

Reflective Rag

JUDITH LANG ZAIMONT

“Reflective Rag,” by Judith Lang Zaimont, comes from her 1974 set *Two Rags for Solo Piano*. Rooted in the syncopated rhythms and formal traditions of classic ragtime, the piece looks inward, transforming the familiar language of the genre into something more lyrical and contemplative.

The rhythmic lift of ragtime is still present, but Zaimont tempers it with expressive melodic writing and a more thoughtful emotional atmosphere. Instead of relying on brightness or exuberance alone, the music seems to pause, reconsider, and linger, giving the piece a sense of introspection unusual for the form.

What makes “Reflective Rag” especially compelling is the balance between tradition and individuality. Zaimont never abandons ragtime’s essential character, yet she finds within it a more personal and nuanced expressive world.

The result is a piece that feels both familiar and quietly transformed—a rag that invites not only movement, but reflection.

TRACK 14

The Story of Our Town

AARON COPLAND

“The Story of Our Town” is Aaron Copland’s piano arrangement of music originally composed for the 1940 film adaptation of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. Set in the fictional New Hampshire community of Grover’s Corners, Wilder’s story finds meaning in the ordinary rhythms of daily life, and Copland’s music reflects that same world with warmth, simplicity, and quiet dignity.

For the film, Copland deliberately adopted a clear and restrained musical language. Direct melodies, spare harmonies, and an unhurried sense of motion evoke the familiarity of small-town life without romanticizing it. The music is modest on the surface, yet beneath that simplicity lies a deep sense of tenderness and reflection.

Copland later arranged three excerpts from the orchestral score for solo piano, with “The Story of Our Town” serving as the first. In this more intimate setting, the music feels especially personal, allowing its gentle melodic lines and subtle emotional weight to emerge with unusual clarity.

The result is a quietly moving portrait of a community—and of the beauty, fragility, and significance hidden within seemingly ordinary lives.

TRACK 15

Planxty

GLENN JENKS

A planxty is a musical tribute composed in honor of a particular person, a tradition associated with the Irish harpers and especially with the music of Turlough O'Carolan. These pieces were often written as expressions of friendship, gratitude, or admiration, giving them a personal quality that distinguishes them from music intended simply for entertainment or display.

Glenn Jenks composed his “Planxty” in 1993 as a tribute to his friend Jim Stewart. The piece is especially notable within Jenks’s body of work because it stands apart from the ragtime style with which he is most closely associated. Instead, it draws on the older tradition of the personal musical homage, revealing a quieter and more intimate side of his writing.

There is something particularly appealing about hearing Jenks step outside the rhythmic language of ragtime and work in a more reflective vein. The music feels less concerned with style than with gesture and sentiment, allowing the idea of friendship to remain at its center.

“Planxty” is therefore both a personal tribute and a revealing glimpse of Jenks as a composer beyond ragtime—an understated work rooted in an old tradition of honoring someone through music.

TRACK 16

Caterpillar Hill

AARON ROBINSON

“Caterpillar Hill,” by Maine composer Aaron Robinson, is a gentle musical portrait inspired by the landscape of Blue Hill, Maine. With its warm country-folk character, the piece reflects the quiet beauty and unhurried atmosphere of the region.

Rather than attempting to describe the scenery literally, Robinson evokes its spirit through simple melodic lines, relaxed rhythms, and a natural sense of flow. The music suggests open views, wooded hills, and the stillness of coastal Maine without ever becoming overly picturesque.

There is an appealing sense of ease to the piece, as though the music is simply taking in the landscape rather than trying to explain it. Its charm comes from that restraint: a feeling of place created through warmth, simplicity, and lyrical understatement.

“Caterpillar Hill” is a small but evocative example of Robinson’s gift for turning a specific landscape into music that feels personal, intimate, and distinctly American.

TRACK 17

Old Streets

DONALD ASHWANDER

“Old Streets,” by American composer Donald Ashwander, is a reflective piano piece that seems to emerge from memory. Jazz critic Rudi Blesh once described Ashwander’s music as drawing “on memory and the unconscious, a remembrance of things past,” and few pieces capture that quality more naturally.

The music suggests the feeling of walking through an old Southern neighborhood where weathered houses stand beneath tall trees and familiar streets seem to carry traces of lives once lived there. Ashwander does not portray a specific place so much as evoke the emotional atmosphere of one—the warmth, stillness, and quiet melancholy that can accompany memories of places altered by time.

Its expressive melodies, rich harmonies, and unhurried pacing give the piece the quality of a faded photograph: intimate, familiar, and slightly distant. The past is not recreated exactly, but felt through fragments of mood and memory.

“Old Streets” becomes, in this way, more than a portrait of a place. It is a meditation on how landscapes remain within us, long after the places themselves have changed or disappeared.

TRACK 18

Variations on Shenandoah

DICK HYMAN

“Shenandoah” is one of the most enduring melodies in the American folk tradition, a tune whose origins reach back into the nineteenth century and whose lyrical, expansive character has allowed it to survive in countless arrangements and interpretations.

In “Variations on Shenandoah,” Dick Hyman takes that familiar melody as a point of departure rather than a destination. Across a series of inventive transformations, he reshapes the tune through changes of harmony, rhythm, texture, register, and mood, revealing new possibilities within material that at first seems almost too familiar to surprise us.

Some variations are intimate and reflective, while others are broader, more animated, and more pianistically elaborate. Yet no matter how far Hyman travels from the original statement, the identity of “Shenandoah” remains present beneath the surface.

The result is both an affectionate tribute to a beloved American melody and a demonstration of Hyman’s extraordinary imagination—showing how a simple folk tune can become the foundation for a richly varied and continually evolving musical journey.

TRACK 19

Midnight in Gramercy Square

DANA SUESSE

Written in 1941, “Midnight in Gramercy Square” is an elegant miniature by American composer Dana Suesse. Composed during her years in New York, the piece is associated with the area around Gramercy Park and evokes an atmosphere of old Manhattan after dark—refined, intimate, and touched with nostalgia.

Suesse casts the piece as a minuet, drawing on the graceful triple meter and poised character of an earlier dance tradition. Yet the music never feels like a historical imitation. Instead, she transforms the form into something more personal, suggesting the image of a late-night gathering in a dimly lit ballroom, where the elegance of the past seems briefly to return.

Delicate trills and ornamental figures lend the melodic lines a subtle shimmer, while the restrained pacing gives the music an air of composure and sophistication. Beneath its polished surface, there is also a faint sense of distance, as though the scene exists partly in memory.

“Midnight in Gramercy Square” is a lovely example of Suesse’s ability to blend classical traditions with her own distinctly twentieth-century sensibility, creating music that feels both nostalgic and timeless.

TRACK 20

Bluet Rag

AARON ROBINSON

“Bluet Rag,” by American composer Aaron Robinson, is a graceful and lyrical piano piece whose beauty feels both warm and quietly melancholy. Rooted in the ragtime tradition, it unfolds with an unhurried, reflective character, as though recalling something distant and half-remembered.

Its melodies have an expressive simplicity, while subtle harmonic turns give the music a wistful, bittersweet quality. The familiar rhythmic language of ragtime is present throughout, but Robinson softens its usual brightness, allowing the music to breathe with a gentler and more contemplative spirit.

There is something especially appealing in the contrast between the piece’s understated syncopation and its emotional restraint. Robinson never pushes the music toward overt sentimentality. Instead, its beauty emerges gradually through melody, harmony, and the quiet sense of longing that seems to linger beneath the surface.

“Bluet Rag” is a tender and distinctive contribution to the ragtime tradition—a piece of elegance, warmth, and subdued nostalgia.

TRACK 21

Carousel Memories

DICK HYMAN

“Carousel Memories,” by Dick Hyman, is a graceful piano waltz written for Woody Allen’s 1985 film *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. Although Hyman is best known as one of the great jazz pianists of his generation, his work as a composer and arranger reveals an equally strong gift for atmosphere, color, and emotional nuance.

The piece unfolds with the gentle sway of a waltz, but its mood is less about dance than memory. The melody has the quality of something half-recalled—warm, elegant, and tinged with longing. Hyman allows the music to remain restrained, giving its nostalgia a quiet sincerity rather than pushing it toward sentimentality.

There is also an unmistakably cinematic quality to the piece. Its harmonies and phrasing seem to suggest images just beyond reach, as though scenes from another time are briefly coming back into focus before fading again.

“Carousel Memories” is a beautifully understated work, combining the intimacy of the piano with the dreamlike atmosphere of the silver screen. It is music shaped as much by memory as by melody.

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