

UNDER THE STARS

American Piano Music, Volume 2

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Corte Swearingen, piano

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LINER NOTES

About the Album

Under the Stars, the second volume in the American Piano Music series, explores the remarkable breadth and variety of American music for solo piano through works by seven composers whose lives and careers span more than a century:

Scott Joplin (1868-1917)

Amy Beach (1867-1944)

Dave Brubeck (1920-2012)

Keith Jarrett (b. 1945)

Florence Price (1887-1953)

Dave Grusin (b. 1934)

ZeZ Confrey (1895-1971)

The album brings together three works by each composer, creating a program that moves across a wide range of American musical traditions and styles. Rather than grouping the music chronologically or presenting each composer's works together, I have arranged most of the pieces as a continuous program, allowing contrasting musical voices, moods, and eras to flow naturally from one to the next.

There are two exceptions. Florence Price's three works comprise her suite Dances in the Canebrakes, while ZeZ Confrey's three pieces form his Three Little Oddities. In both cases, I have preserved the composers' intended sequence and presented the works together.

One of the great pleasures of exploring American piano music is discovering just how varied it can be. The music on Under the Stars reflects seven very different musical personalities, yet together these works offer a glimpse into the richness and diversity of the American piano tradition.

I hope you enjoy discovering this music as much as I enjoyed bringing it together and recording it.

Corte Swearingen

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Gladiolus Rag

SCOTT JOPLIN

By the time Scott Joplin composed Gladiolus Rag in 1907, he was already firmly established as one of ragtime's great masters. The piece reveals a composer continuing to refine and expand his musical language, moving beyond some of the conventions that had characterized his earlier works.

While the familiar rhythmic foundation of ragtime remains, Joplin gives the left hand a more varied and expressive role, incorporating octaves and other departures from the traditional "oom-pah" accompaniment. The writing is equally inventive elsewhere, with flowing sixteenth-note passages and subtle rhythmic details that lend the music a sense of movement and sophistication.

Yet for all its craftsmanship, Gladiolus Rag never loses the melodic charm and rhythmic vitality that make Joplin's music so immediately appealing. Its graceful melodies unfold with an effortless quality, while the syncopated rhythms give the piece an irresistible buoyancy.

Gladiolus Rag captures Joplin at a fascinating point in his development - a mature composer working confidently within the ragtime tradition while continuing to explore its possibilities. The result is a piece that feels both unmistakably rooted in classic ragtime and remarkably fresh more than a century after it was written.

Under the Stars

AMY BEACH

Amy Beach was one of the most important American composers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, admired during her lifetime as both a pianist and composer. Although her music gradually faded from the concert repertoire after her death, recent decades have brought a well-deserved revival of interest in her work and a renewed appreciation for the beauty, craftsmanship, and individuality of her music.

Composed in 1907, *Under the Stars* reveals Beach at her most intimate and evocative. She had a deep affinity for the natural world and frequently drew inspiration from nature, transforming its sights, sounds, and moods into music. Here, she turns her attention to the nighttime sky, creating a delicate musical landscape filled with stillness, wonder, and quiet reflection.

There is an almost dreamlike quality to the piece. Its gently unfolding harmonies and lyrical writing suggest the experience of gazing upward on a clear night, when the familiar world seems to recede and the vastness of the sky takes its place. Rather than attempting to depict the stars literally, Beach captures something more elusive: the feeling of being beneath them.

It is this sense of intimacy that makes *Under the Stars* so affecting. In just a few minutes, Beach creates a private, contemplative world that feels suspended in time - a beautiful example of her gift for finding poetry in nature and translating it into music.

Nimble Feet

FLORENCE PRICE

Nimble Feet opens Florence Price's *Dances in the Canebrakes*, a three-movement suite that draws upon African American musical traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Price described the works as dances "based on authentic Negro rhythms," and throughout the suite she brings together elements of ragtime, syncopation, folk tradition, and classical piano writing with remarkable imagination and vitality.

Florence Price holds an important place in American musical history. A gifted and prolific composer, she became the first African American woman to have a symphonic work performed by a major American orchestra when the Chicago Symphony Orchestra premiered her *Symphony No. 1* in E minor in 1933. Yet her historical importance is only part of her story. Price possessed a distinctive musical voice, one that drew naturally upon both the European classical tradition and the African American musical heritage that surrounded her.

Nimble Feet immediately establishes the lively character of *Dances in the Canebrakes*. True to its title, the music seems constantly in motion, propelled by crisp syncopations, quick-footed rhythms, and playful melodic gestures. There is a wonderful lightness to the piece, as though the music itself were dancing across the keyboard.

Beneath its seemingly effortless charm lies Price's sophisticated command of rhythm and form. Nimble Feet is both exuberant and beautifully crafted, providing an irresistible opening to a suite that captures the energy and character of American dance while speaking unmistakably in Florence Price's own musical voice.

Tropical Noon

FLORENCE PRICE

The second movement of Florence Price's *Dances in the Canebrakes*, *Tropical Noon* offers a striking contrast to the quick-footed energy of *Nimble Feet*. Here the pace relaxes and the music settles into the languid atmosphere of a hot Southern afternoon.

Price draws upon the slow-drag tradition, using gently syncopated and offbeat rhythms that retain a connection to ragtime while creating an altogether more relaxed and sensuous mood. The music seems to move at its own unhurried pace, its rhythmic sway suggesting both the weight of the midday heat and the easy movement of a dance.

There is a wonderful richness to the piece. Beneath its seemingly relaxed surface, Price continually shifts the harmony and rhythmic emphasis, giving the music a subtle sophistication while never disturbing its effortless character. The result is music that feels warm, graceful, and quietly hypnotic.

Within *Dances in the Canebrakes*, *Tropical Noon* provides the suite's moment of repose - a beautifully atmospheric interlude in which Price transforms the rhythms of American dance into something almost dreamlike.

Silk Hat and Walking Cane

FLORENCE PRICE

Silk Hat and Walking Cane brings Florence Price's Dances in the Canebrakes to a spirited and elegant conclusion. After the quick-footed energy of Nimble Feet and the languid warmth of Tropical Noon, the final movement introduces a character all its own - confident, stylish, and full of rhythmic charm.

The title itself suggests an image: a finely dressed figure strolling with unmistakable poise, silk hat in place and walking cane in hand. Price captures that sense of personality through syncopated rhythms and jaunty melodic gestures, giving the music a wonderfully theatrical quality. There is elegance here, but also humor and playfulness, as though the music takes particular pleasure in its own sense of style.

As throughout Dances in the Canebrakes, Price draws upon the rhythmic language of African American dance and ragtime while shaping it through her own sophisticated classical technique. The result never feels like a simple imitation of an earlier musical style. Instead, these traditions become part of Price's distinctive musical voice.

With its combination of swagger, grace, and rhythmic vitality, Silk Hat and Walking Cane provides a fitting finale to the suite. Together, the three dances form a vivid miniature portrait of an American musical world - by turns energetic, atmospheric, elegant, and irresistibly alive.

All My Love

DAVE BRUBECK

Dave Brubeck composed All My Love in February 1999 while vacationing on the island of Maui. Written for his wife, Iola, the piece is an intimate musical tribute to the woman who had been his partner in both life and music for more than five decades.

Far removed from the driving rhythms and unusual meters for which Brubeck is perhaps best known, All My Love reveals a quieter and more contemplative side of his musical personality. Its gentle melodies and tender harmonies unfold with a sense of simplicity and sincerity, allowing the emotion of the music to speak without embellishment.

The piece feels less like a public declaration than a private conversation. There is warmth and affection throughout, but also a reflective quality - the feeling of love deepened by a lifetime shared together. Brubeck does not attempt to overwhelm the listener with sentiment; instead, the music communicates through restraint, giving its most expressive moments an almost conversational intimacy.

All My Love is ultimately just what its title suggests: a musical love letter. In its quiet tenderness, Brubeck offers a deeply personal glimpse into a relationship that remained at the center of his life for nearly seventy years.

Cuba Libre

DAVE GRUSIN

Cuba Libre, also known as Cuba Libre ("Se Fue"), comes from Dave Grusin's score for the 1990 Sydney Pollack film Havana. Set against the political turmoil of Cuba in 1958, on the eve of the Cuban Revolution, the film provided Grusin with an opportunity to combine his gift for lyrical film writing with the rhythms, colors, and atmosphere of Latin music.

The original soundtrack is filled with an impressive range of musical influences, moving between jazz, Latin rhythms, sweeping orchestral writing, and more intimate melodic passages. Cuba Libre is one of its most memorable themes, drawing upon melodic material heard elsewhere in the score and transforming it into something expansive and deeply expressive.

At the heart of the piece is a wonderfully lyrical melody - romantic and wistful, yet carrying an unmistakable sense of forward motion. Grusin surrounds it with rich harmonies and subtle rhythmic inflections that give the music both warmth and sophistication. There is a cinematic quality to the writing, but the strength of the melody allows it to stand completely on its own, apart from the film for which it was written.

The version heard on this recording is based on Grusin's later solo-piano treatment of the piece. Stripped of the orchestral colors of the original soundtrack, the music takes on a more intimate character, allowing the beauty of the melody and Grusin's distinctive harmonic language to come to the foreground.

Cuba Libre is a wonderful example of Grusin's ability to blur the boundaries between jazz, classical music, and film composition. What began as music written to accompany a story on screen becomes, at the piano, a compelling and evocative work in its own right.

Testament (Paris, Part VII)

KEITH JARRETT

Keith Jarrett occupies a unique place in the history of solo piano music. Rather than beginning with a written score, many of his most celebrated solo performances are created spontaneously in concert. Jarrett walks onto the stage without predetermined musical material and allows the music to take shape in the moment, responding to the instrument, the acoustics of the hall, the audience, and his own musical instincts.

Testament (Paris, Part VII) originated in one such performance at the Salle Pleyel in Paris on November 26, 2008. The concert consisted of eight separate improvisations and was recorded along with another solo concert given five days later at London's Royal Festival Hall. The two performances were subsequently released by ECM in 2009 as the three-disc album Paris/London - Testament.

The concerts came at an emotionally difficult period in Jarrett's life, lending particular significance to the title Testament. Jarrett himself has written about the extraordinary vulnerability involved in approaching the piano with no prepared material and attempting to create something entirely new and meaningful in front of an audience. The music that emerged during these two evenings ranges widely in character, moving between abstraction, rhythmic intensity, lyricism, and moments of remarkable stillness.

Part VII of the Paris concert reveals Jarrett at his most lyrical and introspective. A gently unfolding melodic idea gradually develops into music of considerable warmth and emotional depth. As with so many of Jarrett's improvisations, it possesses the remarkable sense of inevitability normally associated with a carefully composed work, despite having been created spontaneously in the moment.

The version heard on this recording presents an interesting transformation of that process. Jarrett's original performance was improvised and never existed as a conventional written composition. A note-for-note transcription of the performance allows the music to be recreated at the piano, turning something born in a single, unrepeatable moment into a work that can be studied, interpreted, and performed again.

In that sense, Testament (Paris, Part VII) occupies an unusual space between improvisation and composition. What began as a spontaneous musical creation in Paris in 2008 has taken on a life beyond that evening - a beautiful example of Jarrett's extraordinary ability to discover fully formed musical worlds in the act of creating them.

Magnetic Rag

SCOTT JOPLIN

Published in 1914, just three years before Scott Joplin's death, Magnetic Rag was the last rag he published during his lifetime. It is also one of his most remarkable and forward-looking compositions - a work in which the familiar language of ragtime is expanded into something more complex, expressive, and at times deeply introspective.

By this stage of his career, Joplin had long since demonstrated that ragtime could be far more than popular entertainment. He increasingly sought to broaden its musical possibilities, experimenting with form, harmony, texture, and influences drawn from outside the traditional ragtime vocabulary. Magnetic Rag represents one of the fullest realizations of those ambitions.

The piece is unusual from its very structure. Rather than following one of the more conventional patterns of classic ragtime, Joplin creates a larger, more rounded design, eventually returning to the opening material near the end. He also ventures into unexpected tonal territory, moving between major and minor and incorporating passages with a distinctly blues-like character. The result is music of striking contrasts - at times buoyant and rhythmically infectious, at others dark, wistful, and unusually reflective.

There is an emotional depth to Magnetic Rag that distinguishes it from many of Joplin's earlier works. Its melodies can seem almost nostalgic, and moments of brightness are repeatedly shadowed by more melancholy harmonies. Yet the piece never abandons the rhythmic vitality and melodic elegance that make Joplin's music so immediately recognizable.

Pianist and Joplin scholar Joshua Rifkin famously characterized Magnetic Rag as a kind of valedictory work, hearing in it echoes of European musical traditions that Joplin admired and interpreting its brief closing coda as a possible farewell. Whether Joplin himself intended such a meaning is impossible to know. Heard in retrospect, however, the effect can be difficult to escape.

After exploring an unusually wide range of moods, Magnetic Rag returns to its opening theme before ending with a surprisingly brief and understated coda. Knowing that this would be Joplin's final published rag gives those last measures an added poignancy, but the music needs no biography to make its impact.

Magnetic Rag stands as one of Joplin's most mature achievements - a work that honors the language of classic ragtime while reaching beyond it. More than a century later, it offers a tantalizing glimpse of where Joplin might have taken the form had he lived longer.

Columbine

AMY BEACH

Composed in 1894, Columbine is one of six character pieces that make up Amy Beach's *Children's Carnival*, Op. 25. Written for young pianists, the suite draws its inspiration from the colorful theatrical characters of European pantomime and the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, transforming them into a series of miniature musical portraits.

Columbine was traditionally one of the most graceful and appealing figures of this theatrical world. Clever, spirited, and often mischievous, she frequently appeared as the object of Harlequin's affection. Beach captures something of that elegance and playful personality in a delicate waltz that seems almost to dance its way across the keyboard.

There is a wonderful lightness to the music. Its lilting triple meter, graceful melody, and gently shifting harmonies create a sense of movement that is both elegant and charming. Although conceived as music accessible to younger pianists, Beach never treats simplicity as a limitation. The writing is beautifully shaped and filled with subtle expressive details, giving the piece a sophistication that extends well beyond its pedagogical purpose.

That combination of accessibility and artistry is one of the pleasures of *Children's Carnival*. Each miniature offers the pianist an opportunity to develop musical expression and technique while also inhabiting a particular character and atmosphere.

In Columbine, Beach creates an especially enchanting portrait. Brief, graceful, and touched with a sense of innocence, it demonstrates her ability to suggest an entire theatrical personality within the confines of a small piano piece - a miniature waltz whose charm belies the refinement of its craftsmanship.

One Moment Worth Years

DAVE BRUBECK

One Moment Worth Years first appeared on Dave Brubeck's 1956 album *Brubeck Plays Brubeck*, an intimate collection of original compositions performed entirely on solo piano. Recorded several years before the extraordinary success of *Time Out* would make the Dave Brubeck Quartet one of the most recognizable groups in jazz, the album offers a revealing portrait of Brubeck alone at the keyboard.

Without the interplay of a jazz ensemble, the distinctive qualities of Brubeck's musical language come into particularly sharp focus. His background included extensive study of classical composition, and throughout his career he drew freely from both classical and jazz traditions. Rich harmonies, unexpected turns of phrase, rhythmic freedom, and improvisation coexist naturally in his music, often making the boundaries between a written composition and a spontaneous musical idea difficult to discern.

One Moment Worth Years reveals the more lyrical and introspective side of Brubeck's writing. Its memorable melody unfolds over characteristically rich harmonies, creating music that feels at once reflective and deeply personal. There is an unhurried quality to the piece, as though Brubeck is allowing each musical thought the time and space it needs to resonate before moving to the next.

The evocative title inevitably suggests the strange elasticity of memory and time - the possibility that a single experience can remain with us long after the moment itself has passed. Whether Brubeck intended such a specific interpretation is less important than the atmosphere the music creates. There is a sense of looking inward, of lingering over something remembered and allowing its emotional significance to emerge gradually.

Although Brubeck would become famous for the rhythmic experimentation and unusual meters of recordings such as *Time Out*, pieces like *One Moment Worth Years* reveal another essential part of his musical personality. Quiet, thoughtful, and beautifully understated, it demonstrates that Brubeck could be just as compelling in a moment of intimate reflection as in the rhythmic innovations for which he became famous.

Thanksong

DAVE GRUSIN

Thanksong first appeared on Dave Grusin's 1980 album *Mountain Dance*, a recording that helped establish the distinctive blend of jazz, contemporary instrumental music, and sophisticated studio production that would become closely associated with Grusin and the emerging GRP sound.

Among the album's eight tracks, Thanksong occupies a special place. While much of *Mountain Dance* surrounds Grusin with an accomplished group of jazz musicians and an array of acoustic and electronic instruments, Thanksong strips everything away. On the original recording, Grusin performs the piece entirely alone on acoustic piano.

That simplicity suits the music beautifully. Thanksong is gentle and reflective, built around Grusin's characteristic gift for lyrical melody and richly colored harmony. There is a natural, almost conversational quality to the writing, with phrases that seem to unfold without urgency. The music never strives for grand gestures; instead, its emotional effect comes from restraint, warmth, and the subtle way Grusin allows melody and harmony to interact.

The title suggests gratitude, and the music seems to embody that feeling without attempting to define its object. There is warmth in the piece, but also a touch of wistfulness, giving it an emotional ambiguity that allows each listener to find something personal within it. Like many of Grusin's finest melodies, it feels immediately familiar while following harmonic paths that are distinctly his own.

Thanksong also reveals how naturally Grusin's musical language translates to the solo piano. Without the orchestration and ensemble textures often associated with his film and jazz work, the essentials of his writing come clearly into focus: melody, harmony, pacing, and an extraordinary sensitivity to musical color.

Quiet and understated, Thanksong demonstrates that Grusin needs very little to create an expressive musical world. A piano, a memorable melody, and a few minutes are enough.

Solace

SCOTT JOPLIN

Published in 1909 under the full title *Solace: A Mexican Serenade*, this hauntingly beautiful work reveals a very different side of Scott Joplin. Far removed from the exuberance often associated with classic ragtime, *Solace* is slow, wistful, and deeply reflective - one of the most emotionally expressive compositions in Joplin's piano music.

At the heart of the piece is its distinctive habanera rhythm, a gently swaying rhythmic pattern with roots in Cuban dance music. Joplin places this rhythm primarily in the left hand, where its persistent pulse provides a foundation for the lyrical, often melancholy melodies above it. The combination gives *Solace* an unusual character: the music is rhythmically grounded yet seems to drift almost dreamlike from one phrase to the next.

Joplin himself subtitled the piece "A Mexican Serenade," although its rhythmic language is more closely associated with the habanera and related Latin dance traditions. This blending of musical influences gives *Solace* a sound unlike virtually anything else in his output. Rather than simply writing another rag, Joplin takes the syncopated language that had become his hallmark and places it within a slower, more introspective musical world.

There is an extraordinary tenderness to the piece. Its melodies have a vocal quality, unfolding over the gently insistent rhythm with a sense of longing that at times seems almost improvisatory. Moments of warmth give way to passages of melancholy, creating an emotional ambiguity that is central to the music's appeal. Even the title, *Solace*, seems perfectly chosen: this is music that suggests comfort touched by sadness.

For many listeners, *Solace* became familiar through the 1973 film *The Sting*. Marvin Hamlisch's enormously successful adaptations of Joplin's music for the film helped introduce ragtime to an entirely new generation, and *Solace* was among the Joplin compositions featured on the soundtrack.

Yet *Solace* deserves to be heard apart from its association with the film. It is one of the clearest demonstrations of the expressive range Joplin could achieve at the piano. Beneath the syncopation and gently rocking habanera rhythm lies music of remarkable emotional depth - intimate, melancholy, and quietly beautiful.

More than a century after it was written, *Solace* remains one of Joplin's most distinctive works: a piece in which rhythm and melody seem to suspend time, creating a small musical world filled with longing, tenderness, and reflection.

Radiance (Part XVI)

KEITH JARRETT

Radiance (Part XVI) originated during Keith Jarrett's solo concert at the Metropolitan Festival Hall in Tokyo on October 30, 2002. As with so much of Jarrett's solo piano music, nothing had been written beforehand. The melody, harmony, rhythm, and structure emerged spontaneously at the piano, created in real time before an audience.

The concert came at an important moment in Jarrett's career. After illness had interrupted his performing life for several years, he gradually returned to the stage, and the 2002 concerts in Japan represented a renewed exploration of the completely improvised solo format that had produced some of his most celebrated recordings. The Tokyo appearance was also a milestone: it marked Jarrett's 150th concert in Japan, a country in which he had developed an especially devoted following.

These performances also signaled a change in Jarrett's approach to improvisation. Earlier solo concerts, such as the famous Koln Concert, often unfolded as enormous continuous musical journeys lasting twenty, thirty, or even forty minutes. With Radiance, Jarrett deliberately moved toward shorter, more clearly defined improvisations. Rather than attempting to sustain one vast musical structure, he allowed an idea to emerge, develop for as long as it seemed necessary, and then come to an end before beginning again with something entirely new.

The resulting Radiance album, released by ECM in 2005, combines the complete October 27 concert from Osaka with four selections from the Tokyo performance three days later. Jarrett later observed that, despite making a conscious effort not to predetermine the larger form, the music nevertheless seemed to organize itself into a coherent sequence.

Part XVI is among the shortest of these improvisations, yet it demonstrates one of the most remarkable aspects of Jarrett's artistry: his ability to discover lyrical melodies seemingly out of nowhere. Within only a few minutes, a musical idea emerges, takes shape, and develops with the natural balance and emotional logic one might expect from a composition refined over days or weeks.

That spontaneity is especially striking when the music is later transcribed note for note. What Jarrett created once, without a written score and without knowing where the music would lead, can then be studied and performed as though it had been composed in the traditional sense. The version heard on this recording is based on such a transcription of Jarrett's original Tokyo improvisation.

Radiance (Part XVI) therefore occupies the same fascinating territory as Testament: somewhere between improvisation and composition. The notes were invented in a single moment in 2002, yet the strength of the musical ideas allows them to exist beyond that moment. What began as spontaneous creation has become music that another pianist can return to, interpret, and bring to life again.

Impromptu

ZEZ CONFREY

Impromptu is the opening movement of Zez Confrey's *Three Little Oddities*, a suite that reveals a more subtle and sophisticated side of a composer best known for the dazzling novelty-piano style of works such as *Kitten on the Keys*.

Rather than emphasizing rhythmic tricks or virtuosic display, *Impromptu* unfolds with a quiet elegance. Its harmonies are unusually rich and colorful, and the melodic writing has an almost floating quality, giving the piece a sense of refinement and gentle introspection.

There are moments in the music that suggest the influence of French impressionism, particularly in the way Confrey uses harmony for color rather than simply for direction. The result is a sound world that can recall Debussy or Ravel without ever feeling imitative. Confrey filters those influences through his own distinctly American musical voice, creating something intimate, polished, and unexpectedly lyrical.

As the first movement of *Three Little Oddities*, *Impromptu* immediately broadens our sense of who Confrey was as a composer. Beneath the wit and rhythmic ingenuity for which he became famous was a musician with a keen ear for harmony, atmosphere, and expressive detail.

Brief and understated, *Impromptu* is a small gem - proof that Confrey's musical imagination extended far beyond the novelty-piano style with which his name is most often associated.

Novelette

ZEZ CONFREY

Novelette, the second movement of Zez Confrey's Three Little Oddities, continues the suite's more refined and atmospheric side. Where Impromptu introduces a world of rich harmonies and impressionistic color, Novelette feels even more intimate - gentle, lyrical, and quietly expressive.

The piece unfolds with an easy naturalness, its melody shaped by delicate harmonic shifts and subtle changes of mood. There is a story-like quality to the music, suggested by the title itself: a "novelette" is a brief literary tale, and Confrey's miniature seems to possess that same sense of compact narrative, moving through a series of small emotional turns without ever becoming overstated.

Its impressionistic qualities remain evident in the soft harmonic colors and the way phrases seem to drift rather than drive forward. Yet the music retains Confrey's unmistakable gift for melody, giving the piece a warmth and accessibility that balances its more sophisticated harmonic language.

As the central movement of Three Little Oddities, Novelette serves as a moment of repose - a graceful, understated miniature that reveals once again how much expressive range Confrey could achieve beyond the novelty-piano style for which he is best remembered.

Romanza

ZEZ CONFREY

Romanza, composed in 1923, is the final movement of Zez Confrey's Three Little Oddities. Despite the playful title of the suite, there is little that feels eccentric or whimsical about this music. Instead, Romanza brings the set to a warm and lyrical conclusion, revealing once again the more refined side of a composer often associated with novelty piano.

As its title suggests, the piece has the character of a romance: expressive, melodic, and gently sentimental without becoming overly dramatic. Confrey shapes the music with graceful phrasing and richly colored harmonies, allowing the melody to unfold with an almost vocal quality.

The impressionistic atmosphere heard in the earlier movements remains present here, but Romanza feels especially direct in its emotional expression. There is a tenderness to the writing that gives the music an intimate quality, as though Confrey is momentarily setting aside wit and virtuosity in favor of something more personal and reflective.

Taken as a whole, Three Little Oddities is somewhat deceptive in name. Rather than a collection of musical curiosities, the suite offers three beautifully crafted miniatures filled with harmonic color, lyricism, and classical elegance. Romanza provides a fitting conclusion - graceful, expressive, and quietly moving.

Together, the three pieces reveal a dimension of Confrey's musical personality that can easily be overlooked: not simply a master of novelty piano, but a composer capable of delicacy, atmosphere, and genuine lyrical beauty.

Heartsease

AMY BEACH

Heartsease is the second movement of Amy Beach's *From Grandmother's Garden*, Op. 97, a five-part piano suite composed in 1921 in which each movement takes its inspiration from a different flower. Here, Beach turns to the heartsease - a small wild pansy known for its delicate blossoms and its shades of violet, yellow, and white.

The flower's old-fashioned name is especially well suited to the character of Beach's music. "Heartsease" suggests comfort, calm, and the easing of sorrow, and the piece unfolds with exactly that kind of gentle serenity. Its lyrical melody emerges quietly from a bed of warm harmonies, creating an atmosphere that feels both intimate and restorative.

Beach was particularly gifted at translating impressions of the natural world into musical color. In *Heartsease*, she does not attempt a literal depiction of the flower so much as capture its character. The music is soft, poised, and unhurried, with subtle harmonic shifts that continually change the color surrounding the melody.

The principal theme appears several times in different registers, allowing the same musical idea to take on slightly different shades as the piece progresses. Beach's extended harmonies and fluid modulations give the music a richness that can at times suggest the impressionistic sound world of Debussy and Ravel, yet the melodic warmth remains unmistakably her own.

There is something particularly appealing about the modest scale of *Heartsease*. Like the small flower that inspired it, the piece makes no grand gesture. Its beauty lies instead in delicacy, balance, and quiet attention to detail.

Heartsease is one of those miniature works in which Beach seems able to suspend time for a few moments. Gentle, reflective, and beautifully colored, it transforms a simple garden flower into a small musical meditation on stillness and beauty.

Audrey

DAVE BRUBECK AND PAUL DESMOND

Audrey was composed by Dave Brubeck and alto saxophonist Paul Desmond as a musical portrait of Audrey Hepburn. Originally recorded in 1954 and released the following year on the album *Brubeck Time*, the piece reflects the cool, lyrical elegance that had become one of the defining qualities of the Brubeck-Desmond partnership.

The inspiration was very real. Brubeck later recalled that Desmond was particularly enamored of Hepburn and would sometimes keep an eye on the clock during performances so that, during intermission, he could cross Broadway and watch her leave the theater. Hepburn's grace and understated sophistication became the emotional image behind the composition.

That image seems perfectly matched to the music. Audrey begins quietly and unfolds with a restrained, almost weightless quality. Its blues-inflected harmonies are softened by an unusually tender melodic character, creating music that feels elegant rather than overtly dramatic. There is melancholy in the piece, but also warmth, intimacy, and a sense of effortless poise.

On the original *Brubeck Time* recording, the musical chemistry between Brubeck and Desmond is central to its character. Desmond's light, lyrical alto saxophone floats above Brubeck's harmonically rich piano writing, creating the conversational interplay for which the two musicians became famous. Brubeck later described their musical relationship as almost instinctive: each felt that he played better in the presence of the other.

The piece ultimately became connected to Hepburn herself in a poignant way. Brubeck later recalled that he and Desmond never knew whether she had even heard the composition during her lifetime. After her death in 1993, however, Hepburn's husband requested that Audrey be played at a memorial service honoring her at the United Nations.

The version heard on this recording is based on a solo-piano performance by Brubeck featured in Clint Eastwood's documentary *Piano Blues*. That film, part of Martin Scorsese's 2003 series *The Blues*, brought together performances and reflections from many important figures in blues and jazz piano, including Brubeck.

Heard at the piano alone, Audrey becomes even more intimate. Without the saxophone and rhythm section of the original quartet recording, the beauty of the melody and the subtlety of Brubeck's harmony come into sharper focus.

Quiet, graceful, and touched with melancholy, Audrey is less a conventional jazz tune than a musical portrait - an affectionate evocation of the elegance and warmth that Brubeck and Desmond associated with Audrey Hepburn.

Staircase

KEITH JARRETT

Staircase grew out of one of those fortunate accidents that sometimes shape musical history. In May 1976, Keith Jarrett and ECM producer Manfred Eicher arrived at Studio Davout in Paris to record music for a film soundtrack. The work was completed sooner than expected, leaving them with several hours of unused studio time. Impressed by the piano in the room, they decided almost on impulse to use the remaining time for a solo recording session.

What followed became Staircase, a double album of completely improvised solo piano music. Jarrett entered the session without written compositions or predetermined structures, allowing the music to develop spontaneously at the keyboard. The album was recorded in May 1976 and released by ECM the following year.

The recording is organized into four larger groups - Staircase, Hourglass, Sundial, and Sand - with each divided into several shorter parts. The title work itself consists of three connected improvisations, each revealing a different aspect of Jarrett's ability to develop musical ideas in real time.

What is especially striking about Staircase is the sense of structure that emerges from music created entirely in the moment. Jarrett builds from small melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic ideas, gradually allowing them to suggest their own direction. Passages can feel lyrical and contemplative one moment and rhythmically insistent the next, yet the music unfolds with the coherence of something carefully composed.

The circumstances of the recording make that achievement all the more remarkable. There had been no plan to make a solo album that day. The opportunity arose simply because a good piano, an excellent studio, and several unexpected hours were available. From those circumstances Jarrett and Eicher created a substantial recording that became another important chapter in Jarrett's exploration of the improvised solo piano.

The version heard on this album is based on a transcription of Jarrett's original improvisation. As with Radiance and Testament, that creates an intriguing transformation: music originally invented once, spontaneously and without a score, becomes something another pianist can study, interpret, and perform again.

Staircase is therefore both a record of a particular moment and a reminder of Jarrett's extraordinary improvisational imagination. What began as an unplanned afternoon in a Paris studio became music with a life far beyond the circumstances in which it was created.

On Golden Pond

DAVE GRUSIN

Dave Grusin composed *On Golden Pond* for the 1981 film of the same name, directed by Mark Rydell and starring Henry Fonda and Katharine Hepburn. The score became one of Grusin's most recognizable film works, built around a lyrical main theme that perfectly complements the film's reflective atmosphere and its themes of memory, family, aging, and reconciliation.

The original version was conceived for orchestra, where Grusin was able to shape the music through a rich palette of instrumental colors. Yet at the heart of the score is a melody strong enough to stand on its own, and more than two decades later Grusin returned to it in a very different form.

In 2004, he recorded *Now Playing: Movie Themes - Solo Piano*, an album devoted entirely to new solo-piano interpretations of music he had written for films. *On Golden Pond* opens the album, stripped of its orchestral setting and reduced to the most essential elements: melody, harmony, pacing, and touch.

The transformation is remarkably effective. At the piano, the theme becomes even more intimate. Its gently unfolding melody has an almost nostalgic quality, while Grusin's warm harmonies give the music a sense of emotional depth without ever becoming overly sentimental. There is spaciousness in the writing, with moments of silence and resonance becoming almost as important as the notes themselves.

This is one of Grusin's great strengths as a composer: his melodies often sound inevitable, as though they have always existed and merely needed to be discovered. *On Golden Pond* is a particularly fine example. The theme is memorable without being showy, and its emotional effect comes through restraint rather than dramatic gesture.

The solo-piano version also reveals just how successfully Grusin's film music can live apart from the images for which it was created. Without the movie, the piece still evokes reflection, tenderness, and a certain bittersweet nostalgia. What began as a film theme becomes an expressive piano work in its own right.

The version heard on this recording is based on Grusin's 2004 solo-piano interpretation. In this more intimate setting, *On Golden Pond* becomes almost a meditation - a quiet, beautifully crafted piece whose simplicity allows its emotional warmth to speak directly.

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Under the Stars

American Piano Music, Volume 2

Corte Swearingen, piano