

Exploring Humphrey Searle's Piano Sonata

By John France

Introduction.

Music historians are doubly lucky in possessing two primary sources for understanding Humphrey Searle's Piano Sonata, op. 21 (1951). The first is his unpublished autobiography, *Quadrille with a Raven*, written between 1976 and his death in 1982, which is available on [the MWI website](#). The other is the programme note that he wrote for the premiere performance of his Sonata in 1951.

In his memoirs (Chapter 11), Searle explained that the Australian pianist, Gordon Watson 'intended to celebrate the 140th birthday of [Franz] Liszt, 22 October 1951, by performing the *Transcendental Studies* complete in the Wigmore Hall.' Watson had asked the composer for a new Sonata for him to play at this recital. Searle wrote that he 'decided to write a virtuoso piece - fiendishly difficult...more or less in the form of the Liszt B minor sonata but in a twelve-note idiom.' It was an act of homage to the Hungarian master. As he composed the music, he sent it to Watson, 'piece by piece'. Watson later told him that 'if he had received the whole sonata at one go, he would have despaired of ever learning it.' There was an eerie backdrop to the composition of this Sonata. Searle elucidates: 'While I was writing this work I had a very curious experience; three times while the music was progressing in a certain direction something told me to stop and write something completely different, and each time I heard the next day of the death of someone with whom I was connected, either as a colleague or a friend.' The three who died were Arnold Schoenberg, Constant Lambert, and Cecil Gray. Searle had adopted the serial techniques of Schoenberg and later translated the important biography of the elder composer, written by Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt (*Schoenberg - His Life, World and Work*, John Calder, 1974/1977). Constant Lambert had 'first revealed to [him] the true greatness of Liszt.' Lambert was a well-respected conductor, composer, author, and friend. Searle would become an expert on the Hungarian master, and later wrote a book about him (*Music of Liszt*, Dover, 1954, rev.1966). Finally, Cecil Gray was a composer, critic and author and casual friend of Searle.



Sketch by Gerard Hoffnung

Programme Notes

The following is a descriptive discussion of Searle's Piano Sonata, not an analysis. It is based on the composer's own programme note, written for the premiere performance. The Sonata is a fusion of the Lisztian idea of 'thematic transformation' with the twelve-tone methods of Arnold Schoenberg. Searle reminds the listener that the latter used thematic transformations, by way of serialism.

Grove's Dictionary defines 'thematic transformation' as 'a term used to define the process of modifying a theme, so that in a new context it is different but yet manifestly made of the same elements; a variant term is 'thematic metamorphosis''. Commenting on this process, Humphrey Searle (1966, p.61) suggests that 'the serial methods of Schoenberg, for instance, use precisely the methods of Liszt's thematic transformation within the framework of an entirely different [musical] language.' So, based on Searle's admiration for these two composers, it is hardly surprising that the Piano Sonata is a fusion of both constructive principles.

Searle's Piano Sonata is conceived in a single movement, divided into contrasting sections. Four elements form the constructive material of the Sonata and are first presented in the 'exposition.' These are the opening three-note 'Lento' phrase (Db, F, A), the rising theme of the 'Allegro' which

immediately follows, a figure consisting of repeated semiquaver chords, and finally, the material of the second 'lento section.'

After several broad opening bars forming the exposition, the music passes into a short 'scherzo' before leading into the 'development' section played 'Allegro risoluto.' Without a pause, the slow 'Andante' is written in standard ternary form, ending with a cadenza. This leads into the second 'scherzo', followed by the recapitulation of the opening theme (Allegro risoluto). Both scherzos have acted as interludes: the first exploits notes in the bass register of the piano, whilst the second uses the top notes. The Sonata ends with a sinister coda, that has the character of a 'recitative' played 'lento.'

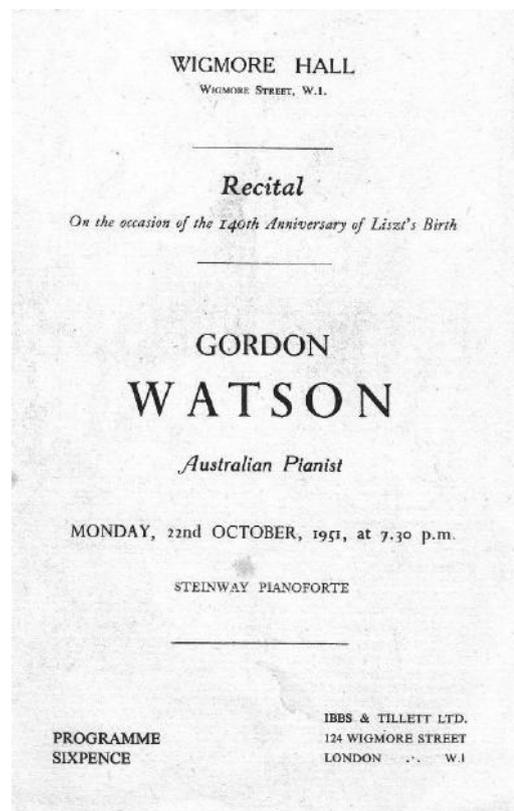
It is important to note that, like most 'serial' works, few listeners can *aurally* follow all the permutations of the series as the Sonata progresses. A score, paper and pencil and a lot of time and skill are needed to unravel all the 'changes and chances' of the underlying structural material. What is clear, is the inherent unity of purpose underlying this Piano Sonata.

The Premiere

The premiere of Humphrey Searle's Piano Sonata, op.21 was given at a recital at the Wigmore Hall, London, on Monday 22 October 1951. The concert programme declared that it was 'On the Occasion of the 140th Anniversary of Liszt's Birth.' The soloist was the Australian pianist Gordon Watson (1921-1999). Two works were performed: Franz Liszt's *Études d'exécution transcendante* (1852) and, after the interval, Searle's Sonata. The composer recalled in his memoirs that 'Gordon Watson's performances of the Transcendental Studies and my Sonata were very successful, and both he and I got good notices in the Press.' (Searle, *Quadrille*, Chapter 11.)

It was a surprise to read that Gordon Watson was 'distinctly more eloquent in [his] account of Searle's Sonata than he was in the Liszt Transcendental Studies. The critic of the long-running journal *The Stage* (25 October 1951, p.12) insisted that only 'the utmost technical mastery and all the dramatic and rhetorical resources of the grandest romantic style can give [both] these pieces their proper effect.' As for the Studies, 'although the young Australian pianist' - he was 30 at the time - 'displayed a technique of exceptional facility, neither his execution nor his style could truly be called transcendent.'

The following Monday, *The Times* (29 October 1951, p.2) reported that Gordon Watson 'stormed high heaven with Liszt's 12 Transcendental Studies.' He noted that the pianist 'dropped a wrong note here and there' in this work but this was balanced by 'his technique [which] was fully competent to display the craftsmanship, invention and imagination in these hair-raising studies.' The reviewer, possibly Frank Howes, recalled that Searle's Sonata 'owes some of its design and textures to Liszt's B minor work', and that part of its 'impulse' was to the memory of Arnold Schoenberg, Cecil Gray and Constant Lambert. The power of the Sonata 'is quite individual, suffused with darkling elegiac poetry and commanding thought; brilliantly scored, it was brilliantly played by Mr Watson, whose memory is evidently equal to his courage and virtuosity.'



The *Musical Times* (December 1951, p.563) A.P. (Andrew Porter) considered that Searle's Sonata was 'the most important new work' heard during October 1951. Remarking Gordon Watson's performance of the Liszt Studies, he felt that it was 'marked by an astonishing technical facility and by a poetical feeling for the writing which made one forgive wrong notes.' Noting Searle's fusion of Lisztian Transformations with Schoenbergian serialism, he feels that 'it was not surprising to find in the Sonata an affecting beauty; at any rate it would be surprising only to those who regard the twelve-note system of Schoenberg as a purely intellectual device.' In conclusion Porter highlighted the 'passages of brilliant pianistic excitement, and passages of lyrical emotion.' His overall impression on a first hearing was that 'it seemed a fine work and left one waiting for its second performance.'

The Score

The score of Searle's Piano Sonata was published by Oxford University Press in 1952. It was priced 10/6d. At today's prices that would be about £34. The holograph was completed between June and September 1951. The date of the work's premiere is included in the frontispiece, as well as noting that Gordon Watson had made a recording of the Sonata on Argo ATC 1002, 12 inch (long playing). The score is inscribed 'For the 140th Birthday of Franz Liszt, 22 October 1951'.

A review of the score was included in *Music and Letters* (April 1953, p.174). The critic began by admitting his review was not based on 'a personal performance with any pretensions to accuracy', as it would have taken 'weeks so to familiarize oneself with the notes that one could begin to tackle the technical problems of playing them.' So, use was made of Gordon Watson's recording to assess this Sonata. The impression is given that I.K. does not warm to 'serial music.' He wonders if Humphrey Searle 'gains inspiration from wrestling with his note rows, or whether his fervour and technique enable him to carry the mill-stone (presumably serial technique) like a banner is perhaps neither here nor there, for this Sonata makes a thoroughly convincing impression of power and necessity.' I.K. reminds readers that the Sonata is 'a worthy monument to [Liszt] for whom [Searle] has already done much.' Importantly, he considers that the elder composer's concept of 'thematic transformation' finds its consummation in the twelve-note technique. Finally, three other features of Searle's Sonata share Liszt's qualities: 'the dauntlessly leaping contours, an urgent and extravagant dramatic sense and a sure feeling for the sound of the instrument.' The last thought is the observation that this Sonata is for 'professional pianists only.' Controversially, I.K. suggests that Searle's Sonata is not as difficult as Liszt's example. The sad fact is that few pianists will be prepared to invest the time and effort to master Searle's work as they would to study the Hungarian master. At least Liszt does not introduce 'serial arpeggios'.

The Recordings

The March 1953 edition of *The Gramophone* (p.xxvii) carried an advert for several new Argo 'long playing microgroove' records. Interestingly, these included a recitation of T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land and other poems' by British actor Robert Speaight, and records of music by Bartok, Debussy, Rawsthorne, Arensky, Bloch and Wolf. Humphrey Searle's Piano Sonata, played by Gordon Watson was coupled with Peter Racine Fricker's Sonata [No.1] for violin and piano, performed by Maria Lidka, violin, and Margaret Kitchin, piano. It was issued on ATC 1002. This was reviewed in *The Gramophone* (June 1953, p.16). Lionel Salter begins congratulating Argo for displaying 'courage' for being 'willing to risk its arm by publishing two 'advanced' British works', which are described as 'tough nuts.' The critic reminds the reader that both composers are still in their thirties, and both owe their training to foreign musicians. In Fricker's case it was the Hungarian émigré Mátyás Seiber at Morley College, and for Searle, Anton Webern in Vienna. Sadly, both composers have in common little save that their works are better known in Germany than in this country.'

Turning to Searle's Sonata, after introducing the piece, Salter wrote:

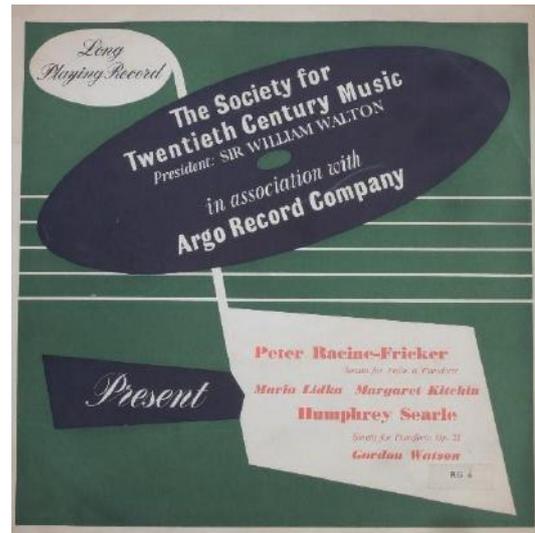
'The massive piano writing makes a pleasant change from the coy keyboard pecking usual with the dodecaphonists, though I feel that Searle overdoes the perpetual growling semiquavers in the bass. Gordon Watson...plays the sonata in masterly fashion and is completely at home in its challenging

idiom: it is unfortunate that he does not get a better recording - this is both shallow and rather rattly. Nevertheless, this disc is a valuable one for all interested in the art of our time, and Argo's enterprise is much to be applauded.'

A major review was included in *The Record Guide* (1952, rev.1955, p.693). Desmond Shawe-Taylor considered that 'the sonata is a most arresting piece, which could not fail to create a majestic impression in a concert hall.' The pianist, Gordon Watson, 'must be congratulated on the aplomb with which he tackles the difficulties of the work.' However, there was a problem. The recording was 'too ill managed' ...and the soloist could have been 'better served by the engineers.' Otherwise it would have been 'a wholly praiseworthy contribution to the catalogue.'

The critic concludes with a short footnote. Since he wrote this review in 1952, Argo announced that the record had been withdrawn with the intention of releasing a new version. It was never re-released, and listeners had to wait until 2014 before another edition of Searle's Piano Sonata was issued on Naxos.

The Malcolm Smith Memorial Album was the result of a bequest. Smith (1932-2011) was head of the Promotion and Hire Library at Boosey and Hawkes. A vice president of the British Music Society, Smith bequeathed a sum of money to facilitate this recording, which includes Robin Holloway's six-handed Grand Heroical March, Leslie Howard's Sullivan-inspired *Ruddigore Concert Fantasy*, and Humphrey Searle's Sonata.



Malcolm Smith had a passionate interest in British music, with his job allowing him to know most of the composers of the post war generation. Composer and academic Peter Dickinson provided the assessment of this somewhat unusual CD for *The Gramophone* (March 2015, p.75). Commenting on the Searle Sonata, Dickinson notes that the composer was a 'devotee of Liszt, not the obvious enthusiasm for one of the first British 12-note composers.' Perhaps Dickinson was thinking of the Hungarian composer's 'romanticism', rather than as a progenitor of 'thematic transformation'. Dickinson continues by insisting that 'Julian Jacobson puts this taxing, but impressively rhetorical piece through its paces brilliantly – just the kind of gesture [Malcolm] Smith would have admired, bringing something unknown to a wider audience.' Peter Dickinson subsequently explained to me that Jacobson told him what a dreadful time he had learning the Sonata: 'The point is that if you have rapid arpeggios based on note-rows, every single one is a different layout, unless you're very careful – which Searle wasn't. That means that every bar must be separately fingered, and nothing repeats. This is virtually impossible.'

David Denton (*David's Review Corner*, October 2014) provides a short but apposite comment on the Sonata: '...if you can imagine Liszt's B minor sonata being rewritten by Schoenberg, you will have Humphrey Searle's Piano Sonata. Composed in 1951 it received critical acclaim at the time but has since fallen by the wayside, this being the first modern recording. The magnificent performance comes from the much-experienced Julian Jacobson who makes light of its demands.'

Finally, Mark L Lehman in the *American Record Guide* (March/April 2015, p.200) gave a crisp review of this performance: 'Searle's 1951 sonata, a frenetic, jagged, dissonant, tormented excursion into extremes of dynamics, tessitura, and emotion, that combines Schoenbergian chromaticism, Mahlerian weltschmerz, (world weariness) and Lisztian cataracts splashed up and down the keyboard, is the most ambitious item on the [CD's] program. Listeners who find Allan Pettersson optimistic and genial and Harrison Birtwistle pastoral and folk-like are sure to cosy up to this porcupine. Others beware.'

It seems strange that one of the most important post-war British Piano Sonatas has 'fallen by the wayside.' This work can be regarded as entry level into Humphrey Searle's compositional style. The balance between Serialism and Lisztian romanticism is skilfully crafted. It is a Sonata that surely deserves its place in the canon of 20th century music, no matter how tentative its hold.

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[MusicWeb International Searle pages](#)

Discography:

1. Searle, Humphrey, Piano Sonata, op.21 Gordon Watson (piano), with Peter Racine Fricker's Sonata [No.1] for violin and piano, Maria Lidka (violin) and Margaret Kitchin (piano) Argo ATC 1002 (1953)
2. Searle, Humphrey, Piano Sonata, op.21 Julian Jacobson (piano) with works by Georg Frederic Handel, Robin Holloway, Leslie Howard and Robert Matthew-Walker, Mark Bebbington, Leslie Howard and John Lill (piano). Naxos 8.571354 (2014)

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