

NWCR766

Richard Cumming

Silhouettes



<i>Silhouettes</i> Five Pieces for Piano (1993)	(8:54)
1. Allegro giocoso	(1:43)
2. Lazy: as slow as possible ("3 A.M. Blues")	(1:22)
3. Vivace	(0:55)
4. Rubato: undulating ("Serenade")	(2:09)
5. Not slow	(2:45)
John Browning, Piano	
<i>Postcards from Italy</i> ("Cartoline") (1968)	(16:54)
6. Maggiore	(1:00)
7. Capri	(1:30)
8. Venezia	(2:18)
9. Firenze	(1:29)
10. Siena	(1:13)
11. Ansedonia	(1:27)
12. Spoleto	(1:06)
13. Orvieto	(0:46)
14. Sorì	(1:20)
15. Roma	(1:39)
16. Tarquinia	(1:44)

17. Positano	(1:22)
F. Murray Abraham, narrator; Richard Cumming, piano	
<i>Holidays</i> Five Pieces for Piano Four-hands (1961) ...	(6:32)
18. Prelude	(0:50)
19. Sarabande	(2:14)
20. March	(0:37)
21. Waltz-Musette	(1:25)
22. Lullaby	(1:26)
John Browning and Richard Cumming, piano	
23. <i>The Knight's Page</i> for Recitation and Piano (1953)	(15:54)
(Words by Anthony Livesey); F. Murray Abraham, narrator; Richard Cumming, piano	
<i>We Happy Few</i> Ten Songs for Voice and Piano (1963)	(24:20)
24. The Feast of Crispian (Shakespeare)	(3:05)
25. To Whom Can I Speak Today? (Egyptian circa 3000 BC)	(2:25)
26. Fife Tune (John Manifold)	(1:19)
27. Here Dead Lie We (A.E. Housman)	(1:19)
28. A Ballad of the Good Lord Nelson (Lawrence Durrell)	(3:16)
29. Going To The Warres (Richard Lovelace)	(1:20)
30. A Sight In Camp (Walt Whitman)	(3:34)
31. The End of the World (Archibald MacLeish)	(1:52)
32. Grave Hour (Rainer Maria Rilke; trans. M.D. Herter Norton)	(2:33)
33. The Song of Moses (from the <i>Book of Exodus</i>)	(3:24)
Donald Gramm, bass-baritone; Richard Cumming, piano	

Total playing time: 72:34

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Notes

These five works cover a period of forty years—1953 to 1993. Recently I uncovered a snapshot of myself taken by a street photographer in London at the time I was writing *The Knight's Page* and was momentarily jolted. What's happened to that kid? The face looking back at me daily in the mirror tells me I am no longer that twenty-four-year old. There is much less hair and what remains is gray. I look more and more like my parents. It is a face that has done a lot of laughing. In that ancient photo the smile is pretty endearing, so I hope that kid is still part of me. Despite some of his silly behavior, I remember him with fondness.

So, chronologically:

In 1952, I played a nifty recital in London that included my Sonata ("...immaculate craft...one of the most attractive sonatas published since the war" wrote Alec Rowley in the *Musical Times*) and was approached by the BBC to contribute to a new radio series for young adults—in this case, a program on the game of chess. Anthony Livesey, a young English writer/actor, came up with the story and I had wonderful fun composing it in a couple of weeks. Despite clapping their collective hands, the BBC scuttled the series.

So Tony and I first performed *The Knight's Page* in San Francisco in 1954.

Holidays was a Christmas present in 1961 for my sister's five children. In the time-honored tradition of self-pilfering, I stole from theatre music I had written for *Godot*, *Romeo*, *Six Characters*, and Saroyan's *Cave Dwellers*. My favorite performance memory is with John Browning in Positano, Italy, at a benefit concert for the Society of Stray Cats and Dogs.

In 1962, I was commissioned by the Ford Foundation's Program for Concert Soloists to write an extended work for my beloved friend and colleague, Donald Gramm. The idea of a set of war songs resulted in assembling more than 200 poems from which ten were gleaned for the cycle *We Happy Few*: pre-Christian Egypt, Moses crossing the Red Sea, Henry V at Agincourt, Nelson at Trafalgar, the American Civil War, the Boer War, World War I & II—stupid, tragic, sentimental, searing, eternally naive human experiences. After first hearing *The Song of Moses*, my very dear friend Ned Rorem referred to it as an "immoral" song. I do recall that I was neither hurt nor offended (I doubt I could ever be hurt or offended by his Quaker spirit), but I was surprised—all I had hoped to do was to come up with a rouser to close the set. But from this vantage point (my father a prisoner-of-war for three years, a brother killed in a B-29 crash, friends and loved ones maimed physically and emotionally in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War), I not only see Ned's point but tend to agree. I probably would not choose the same words today; if so, I would certainly treat them differently. But how could I not be pleased and placated to have Ned write of me, twenty years later: "...no one is quite like him; that is all that counts in an artist. And a true artist he has surely become one of the only song composers in the world." Nay—I be abustin' with joy.

In 1968, John Browning had a summer house, a converted seaside watchtower, in a tiny fishing village north of Rome. Leonard Bernstein had a villa up the road and legend had it that Puccini had composed part of *Tosca* in the next tower to the south. What else could I do but tackle an opera? Henry Butler had given me a libretto (*The Picnic*) and I plunged into work. All went well until I hit my soprano's Act I aria. We learn, in time, that she has just spent a rapturous night in her cousin's arms, so perhaps she was allowing herself the luxury of wallowing in sexual splendor—she certainly was not singing for me. In irritation, I set *The Picnic* aside for six days, turning to a Suite for Solo Flute and the words and music for these "Cartoline," or *Postcards From Italy*. When I returned to the opera, my properly chastised young lady had found her voice. One memorable performance of *Postcards* I treasure was during the 1990 summer festival on the ancient island of Pantelleria, an isolated rock in the Mediterranean between Sicily and North Africa, used by imperial Rome for the banishment of classier exiles. Paolo Calabresi, a gifted young actor from Milan's Piccolo Teatro, translated the words into Italian and read them beautifully on a terrace fit for Salome, under a full moon shimmering on Homer's wine-dark sea.

The *Silhouettes* (1993) were composed for John Browning, a dear, patient, and loving friend for more than forty years. The first movement uses the keyboard from its lowest note to the topmost. The second is subtitled "3 A.M. Blues", while the finale, with its pre-Civil War Creole melody which I first heard used by Ernest Bloch (another beloved influence) in his *America* Symphony, is certainly New Orleansy. I thought the fourth piece a serenade until others heard post-coital langour.

There is a saying that "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." Hogwash! Live each day as if it were your last; drain it of every drop of juice it can provide. No life of any vitality is devoid of pain, anxiety, misfortune, and tragedy, but to quote Bernard Berenson: "Even though life may be a vale of tears, it is one in which it is pleasant to weep."

Richard Cumming (b 1928) studied with Ernest Bloch, Arnold Schoenberg, and Roger Sessions. He has written works for chamber groups, chorus and vocal ensembles, opera, orchestra, solo piano, solo strings, solo voice, film, radio, theatre and TV. His compositions have earned awards, fellowships, grants and prizes from ASCAP, the Ford Foundation, Meet the Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Federation of Music Clubs, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, the Rubin Opera Award, the Wurlitzer Foundation, among others. He currently lives in Providence, Rhode Island.

F. Murray Abraham is one of the most mesmerizing actors of our time, completely deserving of his Academy Award as Salieri in *Amadeus*. If you have not seen his heart-catching dance with the bag of groceries in *By The Sword*, I suggest you rent it tonight. I've had the pleasure of providing music for two of his *King Lear*s and have never caught Murray playing it safe or taking it easy, and that scene on the moors with the blind Gloucester was transcendent.

John Browning is one of the great pianists. We met at a riotous Juilliard Christmas party in 1954 (he had just won the Steinway Prize and I had just come to New York) and we have shared time, lives, houses, and careers since then. He has championed my music for years (*Alleluia for a Joyous Occasion*, *Twenty-Four Preludes*, and these *Silhouettes*), along with that by our mutually loved Samuel Barber (who fashioned his Piano Concerto for my friend). He has won two Grammys and performed on every major land mass in the world. Earlier this year, I switched on PBS during a performance of John Alden Carpenter's *When I Bring You Colored Toys*. "Who," thought I, is doing that gorgeous piano playing?" It was John.

Donald Gramm, a major American artist, was a major influence in my life. I was his piano accompanist for sixteen years, composed for his voice, lived with him, argued with him, laughed with him (how he laughed!) and loved him. He died in 1983 and not a day passes without my remembering. Not only were these songs written for him but they were the last recording he made.

As for the composer Richard Cumming, all ye need to know should come through in the music. He is busy trying to live each day as if it were his last.

—R.C., 6 July 1997

Production Notes

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Holidays: Boosey & Hawkes

The Knight's Page: MS

We Happy Few: Boosey & Hawkes

(ASCAP)

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