

PROFILE: RODERICK CHADWICK

Roderick Chadwick is a pianist and writer on music whose wide-ranging approach to repertoire over the last three decades has taken him to some of the world's leading venues and festivals. He has performed numerous modern piano classics: Lachenmann's *Serynade* at the inaugural London Contemporary Music Festival and John McGuire's 48 Variations for Two Pianos with Mark Knoop (most recently at l'Auditori in Barcelona); his recording of Stockhausen's *MANTRA* with Knoop and Newton Armstrong on the Hat Hut label received widespread praise. Other composers he has recorded include Gloria Coates, Maurice Duruflé, Sadie Harrison, Alex Hills, Michael Finnissy, Julian Anderson, Betsy Jolas, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Karol Szymanowski.



Roderick Chadwick,
photo credit Claire
Shovelton

Partnerships with several renowned violinists have taken Roderick to Wigmore Hall, Seoul Arts Centre, Auditorium du Louvre and Tokyo Opera City and he has appeared in a variety of roles at festivals including Aldeburgh, Bergen and Huddersfield. With Peter Sheppard Skaerved he recorded the violin and viola sonatas of Hans Werner Henze and as a member of Plus-Minus Ensemble he performs across the European new music scene. His radio broadcasts include live performances during BBC Radio 3's Beethoven and Schubert seasons. In 2025 he will release several premiere recordings, including Bryn Harrison's *Towards a Slowing of the Past* with Mark Knoop (another timbre), and Edward Cowie's 3 Piano Sonatas Rock Music for Métier Divine Art.

Roderick is a Reader in Music of the University of London and Associate Professor at the Royal Academy of Music, where his research has centred on the music of Messiaen. In 2017 his book, *Messiaen's Catalogue d'oiseaux: from conception to performance*, co-authored with Peter Hill was published by Cambridge University Press. He is currently recording Messiaen's *Catalogue* alongside related repertoire for the Divine Art label. In 2008 he was artistic advisor to the Academy for their part in the Southbank's Messiaen centenary celebrations.

I'm interested in the breadth of your repertoire. You have recorded avant-garde classics like *MANTRA*,¹ but also new music like the Edward Cowie works you discuss in this issue and music from the earlier part of the 20th century. How do you decide what to play?

One of my first professional concerts was at the Canterbury Sounds New Festival, playing Stuart MacRae's First Sonata, Tippett's Fourth, and some Gibbons (Lord Salisbury). I think of that now as the Domaine Musical model of old, new and modern classic that I happen to rather like and so yes, I've continued with that approach to repertoire,

¹ Roderick Chadwick, Mark Knoop and Newton Armstrong, *Karlheinz Stockhausen: MANTRA* (Hat Hut Records, ART190, 2017).

compressed to a much shorter time frame according to my tastes and abilities but the same underlying idea. It's the same approach on the two discs I've released so far of the Messiaen *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, programmed with Julian Anderson, a fellow called Claude Debussy, David Gorton, Edvard Grieg, Sadie Harrison, Betsy Jolas and Karol Szymanowski.² If I'm feeling bold with the last instalment (Books 6 and 7) I'll play some Chopin and by rights there'd be some Boulez as well as Jim Aitchison's *Sea-Sea* but let's see.

All that repertoire is linked to the Messiaen in some way, in my mind at least, but the most important thing of course is to play music that you really feel you can say something with. It's not always instant realisation, like an actor reading a script and thinking 'that role's for me'. With Betsy's *Chanson d'Approche* I performed it, sounded out friends, left it alone for about seven years and then found that, in whatever way I'd changed, I could relate much better to all those fluid lines and potent sonorities and the course they chart, quasi-plainchant eventually emerging – I'd been initially attracted to the piece but wasn't sure exactly how. After the recording came out I was delighted to receive a card from her saying that she'd heard it as if new after a long break – perhaps the piece itself really had changed with the times.

Sometimes the music finds you; that was the case with Sadie's *Hidden Ceremonies I* (Toccata Classics, 2015),³ thanks to our mutual close association with Peter Sheppard Skaerved (also Michael Hersch's immense cycle *Zwischen Leben und Tod* which I've played more recently with Peter). They're extraordinarily powerful miniatures and I feel quite at home with them but also transported to somewhere mysterious and, in places, sacred and not entirely benign. *MANTRA*'s a special case: a long-time ambition to learn and perform it, but I wasn't prepared for how those four phrases get inside you, almost infiltrate your bloodstream.

This year I've been playing Bryn Harrison's new *Towards a slowing of the past* with Mark Knoop, and that's an example of an enduring relationship, courtesy of Plus-Minus, with someone whose music we feel very close to, and it was an obvious piece to agree to play.

As well as your solo work you are a member of the ensemble Plus Minus and active in a number of duos too. Do you have a preference?

It's an interesting time to be asked that question! I've long seen it all as a continuum and thought of myself as instinctively collaborative, but I definitely have a stronger drive towards expressing myself individually these days. Which is not to say that I want to move away from musical partnerships, just that there's clearer air between the different experiences, and I'm probably more choosy about who I work with! Perhaps I'm subconsciously mimicking some of my favourite rock musicians who've gone in a solo direction...

A recent project has been playing in various parts of the UK with flautist Sarah O'Flynn and cellist Clare O'Connell: a terrific new trio by Freya Whaley-Cohen, *Glass Flowers*, and we play in all permutations on any given night – and share the compèring duties too, everyone bringing their own style to it. Audiences like that, of course.

² Roderick Chadwick, *La Mer Bleue* (Divine Art Classics, DDA 25209, 2020) and *Souvenirs d'Oiseux* (Divine Art Classics, DDA 21240, 2023).

³ Roderick Chadwick, *Sadie Harrison: Solos and Duos for Strings and Piano* (Toccata Classics, TOCC0304, 2015).

What drew you to playing new music?

Messiaen was the gateway. Early on at music school (Chetham's) the pianist Tim Horton showed me some of the music he was working on (aged 10!) – this included *Île de feu I*, and I was amazed by the sound and the look of the first page, and the revelation that piano playing didn't have to be restricted to the middle register and ornately phrased, so I didn't pay attention to anything else. After that there were other great teenage experiences: playing Takemitsu's *Rain Tree* on three pianos rather than percussion (the ending still moves me deeply), heading to Huddersfield for the famous Cage-Boulez-Messiaen reunion concert in '89, school visits from Lutosławski, Judith Weir, playing friends' music in the composers' concerts...it seemed the obvious way to make music meaningfully.

There were important influences that helped me convert this enthusiasm into a genuine *métier*, too. Peter I've mentioned; I got to know Matthew Shlomowitz after playing duos with his violinist wife Kirsten – he wrote *Deirdre's Threat* for us and after an eventful premiere in Bath with an inebriated page-turner we played it in the old BMIC and took it to California, where he was studying. Shortly after that, Plus Minus was formed and at the very first gig in London there was an amazing sense of having found an environment where one could operate with total conviction. Chroma, the other ensemble I've been with long-term, has played a key role too.

I am intrigued by the internal workings of your piano duo with Mark Knoop. You and he play very differently so how do you approach your duo work?

This requires a multifaceted answer! Firstly it's worth saying that many musicians enjoy playing with Mark, not just because of his considerable musical qualities, but also his razor-sharp awareness and empathy: he hardly ever misses a trick and invariably understands why you've approached something in a certain way. That's what makes him such a fine producer and conductor as well as pianist.

You're right that our pianistic approaches are different (this can be seen, if not heard, in the clip of John McGuire's *48 Variations* in Barcelona on the Plus Minus website).⁴ The key things in a duo are adaptability and understanding of each others' musical aims. Of course in some pieces the parts are more matched than others; in Bryn Harrison's *Towards a Slowing of the Past*, which is a pianissimo continuum flecked with accents, we needed to ensure that we matched textures and weightings closely at each of the three speeds (fast, medium and slow). The slow sections (crotchet equals 28!) were most demanding in this respect, the material also being in a low register, so avoiding muddiness and listening to each other projecting the accented notes, finding the compound melodies in Bryn's close canons/unaligned heterophony was key. Listening well is always the secret because the ears have such influence on the muscles. Even when you're playing the piece, never mind following with the score (which is really tricky!) there can be uncertainty about who's played what, a subtle undermining of your sense of identity. Am I modulating my tone, or reacting to what you just did?

⁴ <https://plusminusensemble.com/media/john-mcguire/>, accessed 16/12/24.

Rhythm is a different matter, because that's where everyone's musical DNA creates micro-variations (see my comments on Edward Cowie's duos elsewhere in this issue). I've just been reading in the *London Review of Books* about Wyndham Lewis's rejection of Henri Bergson's relativist ideas about time;⁵ when it comes to musical time we're in a Bergsonian world of flux, for sure. Bearing this in mind, *MANTRA* was a great rhythmic work-out early in our partnership. There's such a variety of challenges, stretched, compressed and sometimes played with a crotale mallet lodged between your fingers, and we could work at demanding pages for a long time with Newton Armstrong (electronics) taking some of the timbral responsibility thanks to the ring modulation.

Evidence that this was successful is the first part of Cassandra Miller's *Traveller Song* for ensemble, a more recent undertaking, which is really one four-armed pianist shadowing Cassandra's 'automatic singing'. The rhythms didn't all fall into place immediately, but after some rehearsal we knew what adjustments and/or signs were needed in performance.

More generally: we appreciate each others' strengths, and look to use them to mutual advantage. Mark is more of a wizard with extended techniques than me, that's for sure, and I've benefited from that whether asking his advice or leaving it to him. And we're also trusting of each other's work ethics, one reason why I asked him to produce my solo recordings, as I knew we'd both be willing to keep working until the job was done.

If we'd been doing a complete Schubert duets project all this time a different working dynamic might have developed, it might not, but having a new type of challenge to take on with each piece has suited us really well. A final thought is that you don't always want the two parts of a duo to resemble each other – consider *Visions de l'Amen*, not a bad piece!

Your tastes in new and recent music are remarkably broad, as this discussion has demonstrated. Are there any edges to the musical territory you're prepared to explore?

You're not the first person to ask that question. I should come up with an equivalent of the last line of Zoë Martlew's biography: 'She is naturally blonde, and draws the line at country and western', not that I have a tenth of her range. There have been pieces I've encountered, some having been slated to perform, where the idea (let's call it extramusical for convenience) has seemed to eclipse the musical impetus, and that troubles me. I don't mean music where the sounding outcome is intentionally uncertain up until the performer's contribution – Plus Minus had an excellent time, very musically fulfilling, playing your *Everything You Need To Know* at the National Portrait Gallery in 2007.

I've just turned 50 and haven't yet got round to playing any Kurtág. There's no plan for that to change, in the near future at least. It's not a question of the quality of his work, which everyone reading this will be aware of, but I have to mind my blood pressure.

⁵ Seamus Perry, 'My God, they stink!', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 45, No. 23, 5th December 2024, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v46/n23/seamus-perry/my-god-they-stink>, accessed 16/12/24.