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John Field
(1782-1837) and his Piano Music

by Gwilym Beechey

John Field was born in Dublin in 1782, and was brought to London at an early age to become a pupil of Clementi. Field took piano lessons from Clementi and gave many performances in concerts which his master organised. He was also expected to demonstrate his master's pianos to prospective customers, and no doubt this activity amongst others helped him to cultivate his marked gifts as an improvisor. It was no doubt because of Field's abilities as a pianist in various capacities that Clementi decided to take his pupil with him on a long and arduous tour of Europe culminating in Russia at St Petersburg. They left London in 1802, when Field was about twenty, and the *Quarterly Musical Magazine* of 1820 (page 313) gave an account of their progress through Europe:

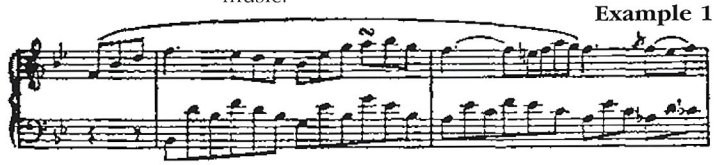
> From Paris he [Clementi] proceeded to Vienna, where he intended to place Field under the instruction of Albrechtsberger, to which his pupil seemed to assent with pleasure; but when the time arrived for Clementi to set off for Russia, poor Field, with tears trembling in his eyes, expressed so much regret at parting from his master, and so strong a desire to accompany him, that Clementi could not resist his inclinations — they therefore proceeded directly to St Petersburg.

Clementi was a miserly employer, and Field lived a frugal life in material terms. Nonetheless there does seem to have been a genuine musical attraction for Field in Clementi as a tutor and performer. Field on his side was known to be lazy, and this led to his eventual downfall. Clementi left him behind in Russia, and it was not until 1831 that Field made another tour of Europe, this time to Italy. But his concerts in Venice and Milan were failures, and he was obliged to spend nine months in hospital in Naples. He spent his final years with a benevolent Russian family who looked after him until his death in 1837.

During Field's lifetime the piano came into its own as a solo instrument, and Field himself had the good fortune to be able to follow much of this development at first hand in London where some of the finest pianos of the time were manufactured. Field too lived in an age of virtuosi and in a period when many startling and fresh developments were being made in keyboard technique. Field's seven concertos and four sonatas for the piano have many traditional features. The first sonata, op.1 no.1, in E-flat major, was dedicated to Clementi, and its first movement has moods and feelings that are associated with some of Haydn's piano music and some of the early works of Beethoven. The affinity with Beethoven is more marked in the C minor sonata, op.1 no.3, which is a fine vigorous work. The two-movement form of the E-flat sonata — *Allegro moderato* and *Rondo* — has its origins in the 18th-century sonata, rather than in the more progressive and original developments of the early 19th century.

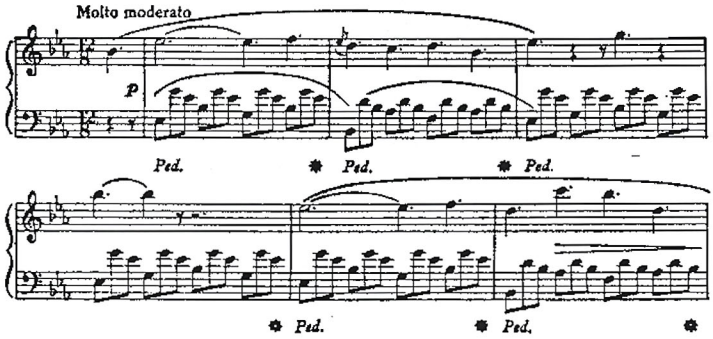
It is in the famous set of eighteen nocturnes that Field departed from his inherited traditions.[1] Here there is a definite feeling of romanticism that was not derived from earlier keyboard music, but rather from song and opera. The operas of Gluck, and even occasionally of Mozart, have melodic lines and accompaniments that may have prompted the sensitive mind of Field to explore new sonorities and methods in composing for the piano. The elements of melody and accompaniment are now clearly differentiated, and the slowish tempo of many of these pieces inhabits a dream world whose style must have been much influenced by the tone of the pianos of the early 19th century. The fourth Nocturne in A major is a good example of this, as is also the simpler texture and style of the fifth, in B-flat (see Ex.1). Here it will be observed how important the pedal is to the effect of the music.

Example 1



The arpeggio patterns are widely spaced out, and need to be sustained, and it is in these accompaniments that Field showed how classical accompaniment patterns may be reconceived in romantic terms. Field's favourite key was E-flat major, and the first nocturne that he wrote, which he composed in this key, shows not so much the influence of the Italian operatic aria as the influence of the slow movements of the solo violin sonatas of the time, with a languid melody and restrained accompaniment (see Ex.2).

Example 2



In this respect the music anticipates much of the violin repertoire of the 19th century, although Field's conventional and conservative forms, and his lack of willingness to develop his materials and explore related tonalities to any extent, gives his music a strong traditional element. The tempo of the music and the spaciousness of the phrases all point back ultimately to an operatic influence or, rather, forward to the operatic solos of Bellini and their consequent influence on Chopin. Both these pieces of Field, in B-flat and E-flat, look forward to Chopin's A-flat nocturne, op.32 no.2. It is remarkable that such original pieces as these by Field should be composed at about the same time as Beethoven was composing his sonatas, op.101 and op.106. Field's B-flat Nocturne was printed in 1816 in the form in which it is best known now, but another version was also made, which was published posthumously in Leipzig in 1863. This latter version was entitled *Serenade*, and may have been conceived either as a second version of the piece, or as a variation of it. Indeed, in some ways the two versions of the piece are variants of one another, although the posthumous version is the more elaborate of the two. The lesser-known of the two may give some clues as to Field's powers as an improvisor, and may simply be a written-down improvisation. The familiar repeat of the theme, which is only slightly varied in the well-known version of the piece, has a slightly more elaborate variation in the *Serenade* version.

The sixth Nocturne exists in two versions: as a piano solo and as a movement for piano and orchestra. In the latter form, in E major, it forms the slow movement of the sixth concerto in C major, where it has an accompaniment for woodwind, horns and strings. The solo version, in F major, was originally very elaborate and the melodic line was full of ornamental flourishes, particularly turns. The movement was simplified somewhat for publication, but with many twists and turns still forming a basic element in its melodic structure. The movement looks forward especially to Chopin's lovely F major Nocturne, op.15 no.1, and may, in Field's own mind, have owed something in the first instance to the slow movement of Mozart's C major Concerto K503.

The eighth Nocturne, in A major, recalls the moods and feelings of the fourth Nocturne in the same key. Like some of these other pieces too, it was composed in various forms. As a solo piece it was first issued as the third of three romances in 1815, and in another version for piano and strings it formed the first movement of a *divertissement*, which was completed in 1811. The version that is generally played nowadays dates from before 1832, for in that year the piece was published in London by Collard with some extra elaborations. He entitled it 'Pastoral', and issued it again two years later in 1834 with an accompaniment (or with parts) for string quartet. Field evidently did not intend the piece to be included among his nocturnes, and never gave it that title. Its inclusion in the cycle of nocturnes seems to be due in the first instance to Liszt, who included it in the second edition of his Field nocturnes. Perhaps Field preferred to regard it as a piece of chamber music rather than a piano solo. There is no reason why it should not sound perfectly satisfactory and satisfying in either form, and it is important to remember that Field, in any case, grew up in an era when music could be, and was, very easily adaptable from one medium to another. (Haydn's piano trios, for instance, could be played as piano solos without

their string parts if desired, and many violin sonatas were published as piano solos 'with violin accompaniment', and could often be performed as such in the manner in which they were published.) Field's A major piece is thus a piano piece, and could be played as such with or without string accompaniment.

The ninth Nocturne, in E-flat, was at first published under another title, as a Romance, which was issued by Breitkopf in 1816. Nearly twenty years later, and just before Field's death, in 1835, it was issued in Leipzig by Hoffmeister as the second of two *Nocturnes ou Romances*. Melodically the movement is rather disappointing, but it may have had an influence on Chopin's famous Nocturne in the same key, op.9 no.2, with which it has often been compared. Field's eleventh Nocturne is also in E-flat, and was first published in 1833 by Schlesinger. This movement is on a large scale, but retains the simplicity of its opening more consistently and unrelentingly than most of the nocturnes do. It may well have appealed to Chopin a little more strongly than the earlier E-flat nocturnes that Field had published, and may have influenced the later composer's less well-known E-flat Nocturne, op.55 no.2, which was also first issued by Schlesinger in Paris in 1844.

The twelfth nocturne, in G major, is one of the most difficult of the collection, and has more in common with 19th-century piano studies than with lyrical and delicate fantasy pieces. The elaborate accompanimental patterns which surround the melody anticipate some of the Liszt studies, especially the sixth and eleventh of the set of Transcendental Studies. The problem with Field's movement is its brevity and lack of development. The spaciousness of its materials suggests the composition of a much longer movement than comes about, and the attractive theme and its lay-out lead to disappointment when the movement subsides all too soon. The d minor Nocturne, no.13, is also rather brief, and has a faster section in the middle in the tonic major. The music here seems to owe its inspiration to the music of the last movement of Haydn's string quartet in E flat, op.76 no.6, with which it has a good deal in common.

The C major Nocturne, no.14, appeared in 1835, and is an extended movement of some consequence. At one stage it had a long central section in G major, but this was suppressed before Field issued the work. It is interesting to notice how the patterns of notes become shorter as the movement progresses; passages of quavers give way to triplet quavers, then to semiquavers and, at the end, triplet semiquavers. The movement seems to have had a distinct influence on Chopin in the composition of the Impromptu in F-sharp major, op.36, which appeared only a short time after in 1840.

The two E major pieces at the end of the collection of eighteen nocturnes were not so named by the composer. The first one was called *Grande Pastorale*, which was published when Field came to England in 1832. A revised version was made by Field shortly afterwards, and this first appeared in print in 1851. Later Liszt included this in his collected edition. As with various other piano pieces by Field, he conceived it in the first place as a piece for piano and string quartet, in which medium it has a distinct beauty and colourful content that the solo piano version in any form does not possess. The well-known rondo, *Le Midi*, also appeared first as a string quintet in 1810, and was reprinted many times with various different titles. Schlesinger first called it a nocturne in his print of 1833, and Liszt followed suit in his edition of 1869. In mood and spirit the music has some Polish characteristics, and its gaiety and good humour are in a similar vein to that of the spirited finale of Chopin's E minor piano concerto.

Field's piano concertos were much admired in the early half of the 19th century, and their subsequent neglect in difficult to understand in view of this.[2] The second concerto, in the unusual key of A-flat major, was a favourite with both Chopin and Schumann, and was performed by many leading pianists including Clara Schumann and von Bülow. It was first published by Breitkopf in 1816, and was available from then until about 1930. In its early years it had a marked effect on Mendelssohn, whose lovely concerto for two pianos in the same rather unusual key was influenced by it. The work marked a distinct advance on the first concerto, in E-flat, and evidently gave the composer a new confidence in his composition and piano playing. Its easy, lyrical flow and graceful charm (even in the lively finale) owed something to Beethoven — to the slow movement of the C major concerto, op.15, and perhaps to the A-flat sonata, op.26. Field had problems with the form and structure of his music, and the last movement of his concerto is

probably too long, and its fugal section, influenced a little perhaps by a similar idea in the last movement of Beethoven's third concerto, is a little uneasy in its context.

In his third concerto, in E-flat, Field reverted to the two-movement pattern of his early E-flat sonata, and of many other works of the time. Both movements are very long, and the question of proportion and balance is again left unresolved. The lack of a slow movement is something of a disappointment, although the composer himself often played one of his own nocturnes in between the fast movements in his own performances. This is an attractive feature of a performing score, and nowadays performers need not restrict themselves to a piano solo, as a quintet version of a solo piano piece might also be used to serve this function. The last movement is a polka in a style more familiar in the last movement of Chopin's E minor concerto.

Field's third and fourth concertos, the latter also in E-flat, owe some of their inspiration to Mozart. The opening of the fourth concerto seems to be derived directly from the opening movement of Mozart's E-flat quartet, K428, particularly as far as its harmony is concerned, and the calm flow of Field's music again looks forward very strongly to Mendelssohn.
The g minor slow movement of Field's fourth concerto again looks back to Mozart and forward to Mendelssohn, although the latter elements are more strongly noticeable in its 6/8 gondola-song type theme and feeling, and in its chromatic harmony. The last movement is a gentle *Allegretto* which contains some modulations to distant keys; in this respect it is rather reminiscent of the last movement of Beethoven's E-flat concerto, by which it may have been influenced, but in other respects the movement is very characteristic of its composer, and akin to the music of Weber in its virtuoso piano style. The work does not seem to have been widely admired or played a great deal in the 19th century, although Field himself chose to perform it on one of his appearances in London in 1832.

One wonders whether Field had studied and admired any of the keyboard music of CPE Bach, and whether he knew any of the sets of published sonatas or published concertos by that composer. That several of the sets of sonatas were known in the early 19th century, and still in demand from Breitkopf, is known from various sources, including one or two references in Beethoven's letters where he was enquiring for copies of them. Both Haydn and Mozart greatly admired CPE Bach's sonatas, but Field, in London, is more likely to have encountered keyboard solos and concertos by the 'London' Bach, JC Bach, who lived in England from about 1760 until his death in 1782. The keyboard concertos of Emanuel Bach are full of surprises of all kinds, both thematic and tonal, and the abrupt modulations and changes of mood that were particularly characteristic of his music were especially echoed in some of Beethoven's works. Field's last concerto, in c minor, was first performed in Moscow in 1822, and published in 1834. Its first movement contains a slow interlude, whose material is quite unconnected with anything else in the movement. This may seem an unusual feature, but it may be that this idea may have been derived from many a slow movement by Emanuel Bach, or even from the A-flat sonata of Beethoven, op.110, which was completed in 1821 and published about the time that Field was composing his last piano concerto. Schumann may have been influenced by the work, which did have some success when it appeared, particularly in Paris. He reviewed it for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1835, and the first movement of his own piano concerto, the 'fantasia' (op.54), has some affinity with it.

Field enjoyed playing the rondos of his concertos, and most of them were rearranged and published as piano solos, in which form the composer also performed them in public. The rondos of concertos 3, 4 and 5 were issued in this revised form for solo piano in his lifetime, and became very popular.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Field's *Eighteen Nocturnes* have been edited by L Kochler (Peters 491).
2. See John Field Piano Concertos, edited by Frank Merrick, *Musica Britannica* XVII (London 1959)

Gwilym Beechey is a regular contributor to Harpsichord and Fortepiano.