

Charles T. Griffes, in a short but productive career, wrote some of the best songs and piano music of our century, one published string quartet (based on American Indian themes), two works for the stage written for New York's Neighborhood Playhouse (including the beautiful chamber score for *The Kairn of Koridwen*), and several orchestral works, most of which were exquisite arrangements—transformations, really—of compositions Griffes had first written for the piano.

While still a teenager in Elmira, New York, where he had been born in 1884, Griffes thought seriously about pursuing a career as a pianist. But, after he went to Berlin to study (in 1903), he changed his mind and decided to concentrate on composition. However, he declared, “the piano will always be my instrument.” Griffes’ musical genealogy as a pianist is impressive. His teacher in Elmira, Mary Selena Broughton, had studied in Berlin with Karl Klindworth, who in turn had been a pupil of Franz Liszt, who in turn had studied with Carl Czerny, who had studied with Beethoven. Griffes’ first piano teacher in Berlin, the Russian-born Ernst Jedlitzka, was a product of the Moscow Conservatory, where he had studied with Peter I. Tchaikovsky and Nicolai Rubinstein. When Jedlitzka died in 1904, Griffes studied with Gottfried Galston, who had been a pupil of Theodor Leschetizky in Vienna. Leschetizky, like Liszt, had been a pupil of Czerny, and Czerny, of course, of Beethoven. Impressive, indeed. Although Griffes did not pursue a career as a concert pianist, he was nevertheless an excellent pianist—characterized, in fact, as “a superb pianist” by singer Eva Gauthier. He often accompanied singers, including Gauthier, when they performed his works in New York City and elsewhere; he often performed his own piano compositions, and premiered the Sonata in New York City in 1918; and he was ensemble pianist in 1917 for the Neighborhood Playhouse production of *The Kairn of Koridwen*. Griffes also performed regular Sunday night concerts at the Hackley School in Tarrytown, where he was Director of Music from 1907 (the year he returned to the United States from his studies in Berlin) until his death in 1920. Griffes practised regularly and greatly enjoyed doing so. The amount of piano literature he learned was amazing and included works by established masters as well as modern composers of the day, such as Alexander Scriabin, Arnold Schoenberg, and Griffes himself. The piano was, most assuredly, “his instrument.” Without his talent as a pianist, Griffes would have had a difficult time gaining recognition for his music among pianists, singers, conductors, and publishers.

Griffes’ music often conjures up pictures of exotic peacocks and pleasure-domes in the minds of music lovers. From his earliest childhood, Griffes was fascinated by literature and poetry, and the written word inspired him to write some of his most colorful and enchanting compositions. One need only hear the titles of some of his best-known piano works—*The White Peacock*, *Clouds*, *Nightfall*, *The Night Winds*, *The Vale of Dreams*—to steal a glimpse into the world of musical imagery which Griffes so successfully created. However, that is but one aspect of the inspired and multifaceted creativity which informs Griffes’ music. His Piano Sonata, for example, considered by many to be the composer’s finest piano work; is an abstract composition with no thought of exotic birds, flowers, or other imagery. Furthermore, his last three pieces for piano (Three Preludes) are also abstract works (though miniatures, unlike the Sonata) bordering on atonality.

A Winter Landscape is a bit of a “mystery” piece because Griffes’ diaries and letters contain no references to it. I first became aware of it in 1986 through the courtesy of Dr. Margery Morgan Lowens. The autograph manuscript, which is neatly copied and complete, is titled and signed by Griffes. However, there is no indication of composition date, poet or text. If the title comes from a poem or a prose text, I have not yet found it. The title, *A Winter Landscape*, may well be Griffes’ own. The composition was probably written ca. 1912, or earlier, since it exhibits strong evidence of Griffes’ Germanic style, which gave way to a more impressionistic idiom in the early 1910s.

Donna K. Anderson

Duration: ca. 5 minutes

Published with the kind permission of the Irving and Margery Morgan Lowens Collection

A WINTER LANDSCAPE

Charles T. Griffes

Edited by Donna K. Anderson

Lento e mesto

Piano

5 *poco rit.* *a tempo* *pp* *mf* *espr.* *8ba*

9 *poco rit.* *a tempo* *pp* *p* *(8ba)* *pp* *la mano sinistra*

13 *cresc.* *f* *(f)*

17