

***Syndesi* (Seed Music, 2024)**

EMMA STRATTON



“And she brought forth her firstborn son; and she wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:7)

And Emma Stratton brought forth her first-born album.

From Latin *primo* ('first') and *genitura* ('to beget'), the adjective 'firstborn' refers, according to the dictionary, to the first child in order of birth.

I fear we will never know if Luke was wrong when he used the word 'firstborn' to describe Mary's son. According to the doctrine, 'only begotten' might have been the more appropriate term, but who knows. Perhaps the evangelist knew something we do not and used this term 'firstborn' intentionally.

Whatever the case, it is always a pleasure to celebrate the 'first' of anything. That is why we are so happy when a new writer pens their 'first book', or when a young actor comes onto the scene and we talk about their 'first film or play', or when a musician accomplishes the feat of recording and we celebrate their 'first album'.

The wonderful thing about the case at hand is that the person who wrote the lines you are currently reading, akin to the convictions of the evangelist Luke, uses the adjectives 'firstborn' or 'first', with the certainty that this album titled *Syndesi* (from the Greek, 'connect') is not the 'only begotten', but the beginning, the first, the firstborn of others that will undoubtedly be brought forth thanks to a career that has been marked with the certainty of someone who does things well.

In fact, it is inevitable that this is the case because as the great soprano Victoria de los Ángeles said, “we need Musicians!” (with a capital letter ‘M’). We need Musicians (again with a capital letter ‘M’) to help us understand that Music (also with a capital letter ‘M’) is, after the important things in life, the most important thing in the world. In short, we need Musicians, Musicians in this case, like Emma Stratton. A performer who is much more than an infallible pianist who plays notes. Stratton is an interpreter with

the ability to communicate the significance and emotion of what she has in her hands; with all letters and, of course, with all capital letters.

Sonata for piano no. 18 in E flat Major, Op. 31 no. 3 / Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven; the 'first' of the 'first', of course.

It couldn't be any other way. You need only look to the 'first' commandment engraved on the two stone tablets with which Moses came down from Mount Sinai: You shall love God (that is, Beethoven) above all things.

Any of his 32 sonatas, the new testament of the piano according to Hans von Bülow, would have been a perfect starting point, although perhaps there is no better way to do it than with number 18. It can not be overlooked that the entire Opus 31 is the result of the new Beethoven that emerged after Heiligenstadt's will. The Beethoven willing to live in the Major key (again with a capital letter 'M'), the one who refused to be defeated by the fate of deafness, the Beethoven who explored new paths, the one who transitioned from Neoclassicism to Romanticism, the one who became a creative genius (the 'first' creative genius), the heroic Beethoven, the Beethoven who, as Leonard Bernstein taught us in his third lecture at Harvard in 1973 entitled '*Musical Semantics*', left the doors wide open for the four movements of this symphony (*Allegro, Scherzo, Menuetto and Presto con fuoco*) which were, beyond the will of the composer himself, at the whim of individual interpretation.

Beethoven, determined to live in a Major key (with a capital M once again), the one who refused to be defeated by the fate of deafness, the Beethoven who explored new paths, who transitioned from Neoclassicism to Romanticism, who became a creative genius—the 'first' creative genius—the heroic Beethoven. As Leonard Bernstein taught us in his third Harvard lecture in 1973, titled 'Musical Semantics,' Beethoven left the doors wide open for the four movements of this symphony (*Allegro, Scherzo, Menuetto, and Presto con fuoco*) to mean, beyond the composer's own intentions, whatever each of us wishes them to.

Chaconne para piano / Sofiya Gubaidulina

Music of the 20th century! Music of Sofiya Gubaidulina! Perhaps the most important living composer of contemporary music. The composer who, according to the God Beethoven, feels and makes us feel that music is, above all, a transcendental and spiritual phenomenon, a synthesis of what we have been, what we are and what we will be. A means to travel from the horizontal (the earth) to the vertical (the sky) represented by the tree he has planted in the garden of his house in Hamburg.

To think of Chaconas is to think of Johann Sebastian Bach and the final movement of his violin partita number 2 from 1720; a solemn, serious and calm musical monument that, despite having little or nothing to do with the morphology of the original chaconnes, ended up imposing itself in the collective imagination as the example to be followed by everyone who wanted to compose in this genre.

Sofiya Gubaidulina was no exception. Her Chaconne for piano from 1962, composed under the unwavering influence of the great Bach, is the perfect example of her obsession with feeling and shaping what she calls 'the sound substance'. A tripartite and dynamic work (just like Bach's) with a very personal harmony and virtuosity that offers a possibility of thought, a spiritual, almost religious balm against the materialistic lifestyle that was sanctioned and that she so detested.

Rhapsodie espagnole S.254 / Franz Liszt

Precisely that mundane lifestyle Sofiya Gubaidulina would never approve of was the world in which the incredible Franz Liszt lived and triumphed. The piano virtuoso who, together with Niccolò Paganini, would invent the fan phenomenon a century before The Beatles did so.

The word *Flour mania*, invented by the writer Heinrich Heine, served to describe the frenzy, especially feminine, that was unleashed in front of his imposing figure and his impossible virtuosity. The fans chased him down the street, wore his image on medallions, fought to get a piece of his wardrobe, screamed while he played, destroyed his piano after concerts to take a piece home, threw flowers at him and tried to get on stage to hug him.

A true Rock Star.

So great was his fame, that in his Austro-Hungarian passport there was an annotation that read: "*Celebritate sua sat notus*" (He is well known for his celebrity).

He did more than a thousand concerts throughout Europe, including those through Spain and Portugal between 1844 and 1845; Madrid, Córdoba, Seville, Cádiz, Lisbon, Gibraltar, Málaga, Valencia and Barcelona. After his trip through Iberian lands, he premiered *Spanish Fantasy* S.523, a notable work that would not, however, reach the height of the famous *Rhapsodie Espagnole* that he would compose in Rome almost twenty years later when he was already retired from worldly life as a reminiscence of his Spanish memories. A work of maximum difficulty in two parts; a slow one, the *folia*; and another quick one, the Aragonese *jota*.

Allegro de Concierto / Enric Granados

Enric Granados knew a lot about Aragonese *jotas*. He also knew a lot about Spanish dances and Franz Liszt. So much so that his Concert Allegro evokes a lyricism and virtuosity that one could easily associate with that of the Hungarian star.

In any case, the circumstances that led Granados to compose this work undoubtedly influenced the brilliance of its melodic character, full of octaves, chords and arpeggios. With it he won the grand prize in a competition organized by the Madrid Conservatory and it became the piece that the students who finished their degree in 1904 performed.

Tomás Bretón, director of the Conservatory at that time, communicated this in a letter dated January 30 of the same year, "Very distinguished friend: On this date I was informed by the jury of the competition that the unanimously chosen piece, *Allegro de concierto*, belongs to you. I hasten to share it with you, sending you my warmest congratulations [...]"

Looking back, the 500 pesetas (€3.00) prize that was so good for Granados at that time, seems ridiculous today compared to what the work meant for his career: reputation, connections, attention from the musical world and a path planted in which all his art would grow.

That same attention, that same connection (Syndesi), that same reputation and that same path paved the way, one hundred and twenty years after Granados won the contest, for this 'first-born' album from Emma Stratton.

For all this, according to the evangelist Lucas, let us celebrate this 'first' album as it deserves; let us wrap it in swaddling clothes and lay it in the manger of transcendence so that we may all rejoice to hear it.

Ramon Gener

Writer and music expert

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