

Mattias Spee

Eclipse

Vol. 3: Sergei Protopopov

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1-3	Sonata for piano, Op. 1	14:38
	I. Rapido con attività	
	II. Lento	
	III. Lugubre tempestoso	
4	Intermezzo 1	2:01
5	Sonata for piano, Op. 5	16:15
6	Intermezzo 2	1:11
7	Sonata for piano, Op. 6	33:02
8	Intermezzo 2	2:03
9	Sun-Kissed Clouds	3:45

total playing time 1:13:01

all intermezzi composed by Mattias Spee

About the album

There is a lot of music in the world. Some of it, like Bach or Mozart, you hear often. Other brilliant composers slip through the cracks, for reasons that often have nothing to do with their music. Their music raises questions like "Why have I never heard this before?" and "What other treasures are still waiting to be discovered?". The circumstances leading to some composers being recognized as geniuses and others being completely forgotten, is something I find endlessly fascinating. I spend a lot of time looking for music on the brink of oblivion. The internet is a great source of material and once you get a reputation as a pianist who is interested in unusual repertoire, the music starts finding you. People from my personal network regularly send me things and even complete strangers reach out to me with music that they think might be of some worth. Over the years, I have unearthed a great number of pieces by composers that even the biggest music aficionados have never heard of – like a musical treasure hunt. I considered some of these hidden gems so valuable, that I wanted to make recordings of them. This has resulted in the Eclipse project. After Joseph Wölfl and Hans Henkemans, I conclude the Eclipse series with an album of music by Sergei Protopopov.

For some reason, I have always had a bit of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, which is strange, because I was born after it had already fallen. Still, when I read books like *Doctor Zhivago* or *The Master & Margarita*, when I see films like *Stalker* or *Cherry Town*, when I listen to composers like Mieczysław Weinberg, Alfred Schnittke, Sofia Gubaidulina and Dmitri Shostakovich, it somehow seems familiar to me. When I discovered Sergei Protopopov's music, I felt the same sense of acquaintance and familiarity. Even though his compositions are dark and brooding, I find a strange kind of comfort in them. As is the case with all great composers, it is almost impossible to categorize Protopopov. People still try and describe his style as "Russian modernism", "Soviet avant-garde", or "Scriabinism". Ultimately, his music is a category on its own. When I learnt about Protopopov a few years ago, I wished I had gotten to know it sooner. However, he was not well-known at all; a lot of his music was never even recorded. I wanted to change that. Once I got to know his heart-breaking life story, marred by oppression and sabotage, I was even more convinced that someone had

to do something about it. That's why I decided to dedicate the third and final album in the *Eclipse* series to the music of Protopopov.

There is an interesting story attached to my efforts to obtain the sheet music. Because the *Государственное музыкальное издательство* (Soviet State Music Publishing House) had a long-standing relationship with the Viennese publishing house Universal Edition, several of Protopopov's pieces were already known in the West. Those pieces are now freely available on the internet, including three of his *Sonatas for piano*. Universal Edition calls these *Sonata for piano No. 1*, *Sonata for piano No. 2* and *Sonata for piano No. 3*, but there is at least one known earlier sonata, that was not published by the Soviet State Music Publishing House. That means the numbering of the sonatas by Universal Edition is not completely correct, so it is safest to just call them Op. 1, Op. 5 and Op. 6 respectively. Unfortunately, there are quite a few mistakes in the scores from Universal Edition. In most cases, there was little to no communication possible between editors in the West and composers living in the Soviet Union. If something was unclear about the manuscript, the editor had to guess what the composer had intended and if an editor made a mistake, the composer couldn't correct it. Luckily, the mistakes are mostly notation errors and usually there is little to no confusion about what the composer meant. In a few cases, however, the pianist has to use their judgement in order to decide how to interpret certain things. That is simultaneously a big responsibility and a fun puzzle to solve.

Other pieces by Protopopov, pieces that never left the Soviet Union, have been buried in archives by the Soviet government. I have tried with all my might to contact the right people in order to get my hands on those scores. After many months of fruitlessly sending e-mails, I finally got in touch with the Russian Ministry of Culture. I was granted formal authorization to come and view all available manuscripts by Sergei Protopopov in the archives of the Russian National Museum of Music, formerly the Glinka Museum. Considering the current war in Ukraine and the international sanctions on the Russian Federation, I didn't consider it a viable option to travel to Moscow. I requested a copy of the manuscripts be sent by e-mail, but never received a reply. It turned out to be another cul-de-sac.

Fortunately, a musicologist and fellow Protopopov-enthusiast living in Moscow visited the Russian National Museum of Music on my behalf and transcribed several pieces for me by hand. He copied his hand-written transcriptions into music notation software and sent me the scores he had drawn up. Unfortunately, because they had been transcribed twice by a non-professional musician, many of the scores contained a lot of mistakes. I am not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, however. Just like with the Universal Edition scores, I had to use my best judgement as an interpreter to see how I was going to deal with these errors. I received mostly unpublished songs from my Moscovite friend, which I am sorting through with the incredible singer/oboeist Maria Pedano for performances in the future. I also received one solo piano piece: *Облака, осыященные солнцем* (Sun-Kissed Clouds). This piece was originally written for violin, cello and piano, but the composer had made his very own arrangement for solo piano. Even though they contain a lot of mistakes, I was happy to have received both versions.

By comparing the original trio version and the later solo piano version, I could see where they did or did not overlap. In the places where the notes were exactly the same, I copied the transcription of the composer's solo piano arrangement note for note. In the places where the notes differed, I had to look carefully what made sense harmonically and melodically. I changed as little as possible, but nonetheless I had to take an active role in filling the gaps. Ultimately, I deduced a new score that made sense to me. To shield Protopopov from blame for any possible misjudgments on my part, I think it is safest to say that what I ended up with is my own arrangement of *Sun-Kissed Clouds*. I asked my Moscovite friend if he wanted to contribute the *About the composer* section to these liner notes. Initially he agreed, but then he stopped replying to my e-mails too and I haven't heard from him since. I hope he is doing well. The recording of *Sun-Kissed Clouds* you can hear on this album would not have been possible without him.

I would like to thank all the people who supported me in the process of making this album. I am lucky enough to be surrounded by several extremely kind-hearted people, who helped me to realize this album, including Willem Brons, Catharina Clement, George Demetriou, Aiske Fonda, Apollon Kalamenios, Ed Spanjaard, Aad Spee and

Hanna Yoo. A big thank you goes out to Han Bosch, Rembrandt Frerichs, Renée Simons and Tineke Smith, who hosted try-outs in order for me to get to know this repertoire. I would also like to thank Martijn van Dijk for his splendid work as piano technician and Westvest 90 for graciously hosting the recordings. Furthermore, I am forever grateful to Hans Erlich, Maya Fridman, Brendon Heinst and Ben van Leliveld from record label TRPTK for their trust and support. Of course, I have a lot of gratitude for everyone who contributed in the sponsoring of this album, including the Eusebiuskring Foundation, the Sena Music Production Foundation and all those who donated to the crowdfunding campaign on Voordekunst. Lastly, I would like to thank you, listener, for sharing the experience of this wonderful music with me.

Written by Mattias Spee

About the composer

Sergei Vladimirovich Protopopov was a Soviet composer, pianist, conductor, music theorist and musicologist, who was active in the first half of the 20th century. His work consists mainly of vocal works and virtuoso piano compositions, him being a prolific pianist himself. Protopopov was a pioneer in symmetrical harmony and a big proponent of a concept called *modal rhythm*. He was considered a part of the Soviet musical avant-garde and met harsh resistance from the Soviet regime because of his innovative and daring music.

Sergei Protopopov was born on the 2nd of April 1893 in Moscow. Little is known about his youth. Before embarking upon his musical career, he studied medicine at the Moscow University. In 1913, Protopopov met pianist and musicologist Boleslav Yavorsky, with whom he started taking private lessons. He moved to Kyiv in 1918 to continue his studies with Yavorsky and earn his degrees in piano, composition and music theory at the Kiev Conservatory. After graduating three years later, Protopopov moved back to Moscow in order to teach at the Music Technicum, a private music academy that had been founded by Yavorsky. The two were no longer student and teacher, but colleagues on equal footing. Their working together extended beyond the

Music Technicum, for example in publishing their arrangements of several Russian folk songs. After a while, their relationship was not just professional anymore; a romantic relationship developed between them as well. The following years in Moscow proved to be the most fruitful in Protopopov's life. Besides teaching, he was an active member of the *Ассоциация Современной Музыки* (Association for Contemporary Music), conducted many ensembles, among them the Bolshoi Theatre choir, and composed new music, including a large number of songs and the three *Sonatas for piano* you can hear on this album.

The *Sonata for piano, Op. 1*, written in 1922, is a relatively traditional work in a good old fashioned three-movement structure. In this piece, one can detect a clear influence of late-romantic Russian composers – especially Alexander Scriabin. Even though Protopopov was experimenting with post-tonal harmony and used octatonic scales and tritone relations for all thematic material and texturing, the piece is still quite pleasant to the ear. The essence of his personal style is already there, but this piece is not as wild as his later works. In 1922, Protopopov's song cycle *Юность* (Youth), Op. 3 was premiered in Moscow by singer Olga Butomo-Nazvanova. For the lyrics, he had chosen poems by Sergei Lipsky about a starting romance – probably not a coincidence, as his lover Yavorsky was accompanying Butomo-Nazvanova on the piano. In this cycle, containing songs like *Накануне* (The Night Before) and *Знаешь ли ты?* (Do You Know?), the composer experiments with the way structure can enhance the music's emotional impact. The text of *Ромашки* (Daisies), in which the protagonist plucks the petals from a flower to see whether her love will be reciprocated, is particularly sentimental:

*He loves me, he loves me not
The leaves fall like snow
The outline of the forest
Illuminates their glow*

*He loves me, he loves me not
How nimble are my little fingers
My little heart beats*

*My little cheeks burn
He loves me!*

*Spiderwebs sparkle in the dew
That glitters as though it was real tears
The leaves glide around
He loves me, he loves me not
He loves me not*

*Mysteriously, fiery clouds shimmer
In my glimmering eye
Now a droplet rolls brightly
Down onto my cheek
He loves me not!*

In the *Sonata for piano, Op. 5*, written in 1924, Protopopov really developed his own vocabulary. The piece was written in one big uninterrupted movement of about 15 minutes long. All of the thematic material is derived from a three-note motif. By superimposing this motif on itself at different speeds, the composer has created a rich sound world that feels cohesive, yet never predictable. His opus magnum was the *Sonata for piano, Op. 6*, which took him from 1924 until 1928 to complete. It was dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci, whose genius was perhaps something the composer aspired to. This 30-minute piece takes on colossal dimensions. One gets the feeling the composer poured his heart and soul into this work. Like the sonata before, it was composed in one uninterrupted movement and very sparse in its thematic material, but in this piece the composer has gone off the rails much more. Near the end, the music builds to a climax that goes on for several minutes, confronting the listener with complex chords, cascading octave passages in multiple layers and lots of repetition. It is an unrelenting bombardment of sound that the composer could not have been written without being haunted by some kind of mania.

As a composer, Protopopov was very faithful to his former teacher. In 1908, Yavorsky had made a name for himself in the Russian music scene with his book *Строение музыкальной речи* (Structure of Musical Speech), in which he put forth the theory of

modal rhythm. This theory poses that the tritone is an inherently unstable interval, which always wants to resolve inwards and that this inward motion is the driving force in almost all music. Yavorsky used this idea to analyze different types of music, ranging from baroque counterpoint to romantic symphonies, from classical sonatas to folk dances. He also had ideas about how to implement modal rhythm in new compositions. However, not being a composer himself, Yavorsky needed an ambassador to put his theory into practice. Protopopov took on this role of ambassadorship and used modal rhythm in a most innovative way. He came up with scales that could be mirrored on the tritone, meaning that the driving harmonic force of the tritone could also be felt in a modal context. This cemented his status as a pioneer in symmetrical harmony. Composers like Olivier Messiaen as well as bebop musicians in New York would come to very similar conclusions in the 1940s and 1950s. They were probably not aware of Protopopov and his innovations, though. By then, he had already been long forgotten, along with his music.

There is a clear explanation for Protopopov's lack of notoriety, as he was successfully boycotted by the Soviet regime in the early 1930s. The composer had not been in good favour with the oppressive government for a while. He was already on thin ice for being a member of the Association for Contemporary Music, an intellectual and forward-thinking organization. Even worse, his art challenged the very foundation that the Soviet Union was built on. Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Communist Party, was of the opinion that an artist's goal should be to emancipate the proletariat. Complex, intellectual art was not suitable for uneducated workers and therefore elitist and anti-communist. This line of thinking was solidified as official Soviet doctrine at the First Congress of Soviet Writers. From then onwards, the regime required from its artists the adoption of *Socialist Realism*. This style was characterized by clear simplicity, unambiguous pro-communist narratives and the idealization of life in the Soviet Union. Protopopov's compositions were highly complex due to its unique application of modal rhythm. His music was challenging for both the player and the listener, definitely not in line with the mandates of Socialist Realism, and could absolutely be labeled elitist by someone malevolent. Besides, his pieces were wrought with grief and pain – something he was not supposed to feel, let alone express. He didn't emancipate the workers, but instead

showed them how painful life in the Soviet Union could be. This made Protopopov an enemy of the regime.

The final straw for the authorities was the publication of *Элементы Строения Музыкальной Речи* (Elements of the Structure of Musical Speech) in 1931. In this book, Protopopov expands on Yavorsky's theory of modal rhythm. In 1908, before the revolution, this theory had garnered Yavorsky a lot of respect, but under communist rule it was taboo. Instead of appeasing the authorities, Protopopov took an even more radical route. In his book, he presented his most avant-garde idea yet: applying the theory of modal rhythm in a microtonal setting. Microtonality itself was already not done in the Soviet Union and combining it with modal rhythm was a bridge too far. Protopopov's book was officially declared anti-Marxist and the authorities made sure his career was effectively over. In the following year, the composer tried to gain back some goodwill from the government by composing music according to the guidelines of Socialist Realism. Examples are *Комсомольская метелица* (Komsomol Snowstorm), Op. 13, a patriotic song lauding the youth division of the Communist Party, and *Рассудок и любовь* (Reason and Love), Op. 15, a sentimental love song on a poem by Alexander Pushkin. It was too late; his fate had already been sealed.

On the 4th of March 1934, Protopopov was arrested by the Joint State Political Directorate, also known as the secret police. He was sentenced to three years of imprisonment for "engaging in homosexual activity". Same-sex relationships were officially illegal in the Soviet Union, but in practice they were usually condoned, especially within the cultural elite of Moscow. Protopopov and Yavorsky had never made an effort to hide their love; the aforementioned *Sonata for piano, Op. 5* was publicly dedicated to Yavorsky and the diaries of composer Sergei Prokofiev contain an anecdote about him visiting the couple for dinner at the house where they openly lived together without problem. However, on the 17th of December 1933, the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union had passed a law making it easier to prosecute homosexuals, a law to which Protopopov fell victim.

With their relationship being common knowledge, it is noteworthy that only Protopopov was prosecuted. Yavorsky remained a free man and was even allowed

to visit Protopopov in prison. The authorities seemed to have an inconsistent policy on turning a blind eye to homosexuality. This course of events is puzzling, but it makes more sense, once you are aware of the context. While Protopopov was an independent artist, not a representative of the government, Yavorsky was a high-ranking public servant as chairman of the music section at the People's Commissariat of Education, as well as an esteemed teacher at the Kiev Conservatory and the Moscow Conservatory. If the authorities publicly condemned him, they would have had to justify how a known homosexual could have held such high positions. That would have stirred up a lot of trouble. It is more likely that sexual preference was never the real reason behind Protopopov's imprisonment, but that the authorities were rather trying to silence him as an artist. His being a homosexual just made him an easy target. Of course, the police couldn't state in the arrest report Protopopov had been imprisoned in order to suppress him. That would have been a blatant admission of the regime's corruption and lack of regard for human rights. The fact that Protopopov was in a same-sex relationship was a convenient cover; now the authorities could legitimize his arrest and get him out of the way.

Protopopov was not the only one this happened to. The Soviet regime had a habit of concerning themselves with its artists, who would risk a sudden "disappearance", if they failed to comply. Usually, that meant these artists were quietly arrested in the night and sent to forced labour camps. A lucky few came back, but most prisoners died in captivity under harsh circumstances. Their body of work was often swept under the rug and their names were forced into oblivion. The reasons behind this practice were twofold; to silence the most egregious anti-communist offenders and to simultaneously send a message to all of their colleagues: fall in line, or the same thing could happen to you. Many, if not all Soviet artists constantly feared for their careers and even their lives.

Protopopov spent the first year of his imprisonment in the forced labour camp Dmitlag, working on a new canal connecting Moscow with the river Volga. He was still relatively close to home and able to receive visits from Yavorsky, until 1935, when he was temporarily relocated to a reeducation camp in Siberia, just outside the city of Irkutsk. In the archives of the Russian National Museum of Music, there are several

manuscripts by Protopopov dated between the 26th of July and the 4th of August 1935. These include orchestral arrangements of folk songs with unknown origin and a song called *Прощай, жизнь, прощай, радость м* (Farewell, Life, Farewell, Joy of Mine), with heart-wrenching lyrics:

*Farewell, life, farewell, joy of mine
Ah, I hear you are leaving me, my love
Our fate, my love, is to part
I shall never see you again*

This song gives us some idea about his state of mind during those days. His stay in Siberia was not permanent, though. After having spent a few months in the camp near Irkutsk, Protopopov was sent back to Dmitlag. This might not have been a coincidence, because shortly after the composer's return, the camp officers in Dmitlag decided to organize a music competition. All prisoners were encouraged to send in their most patriotic songs, to be judged by a committee of prominent Soviet musicians, like Ivan Dzerzhinsky, Mikhail Starokadomsky and Dmitri Kabalevsky. No fewer than 72 prisoners entered the competition, even though only two of the prisoners had a background in music – pianist Alexander Rozanov and of course Protopopov. As none of their fellow prisoners could write music, the two of them were tasked with notating the contestants' melodies, as well as providing an adequate piano accompaniment. The officer in charge of the competition, Michail Černiak, was quoted as saying that the success of competition was completely dependent on Rozanov and Protopopov. One can interpret that to mean that they practically composed the 72 songs themselves. However, this narrative would not have served the objectives of the Soviet regime. Instead, the official reading was the far less likely story that 72 prisoners with no musical experience whatsoever were suddenly capable of coming up with well-composed melodies after having been successfully reeducated, inspired through forced labour and moved by their love of communism. This story suited the Soviet regime much more than the more probable reality: that the prisoners did not actually have a collective epiphany and that the skill and talent of the only two available musicians was used to create an effective piece of propaganda. Sadly enough, it worked. Dmitri Shostakovich, a composer

whose troublesome relationship with the regime has been well documented, commented on the Dmitlag music competition in the communist magazine *на стурм трассы* (On the Storm Road):

"I have looked at pieces of music by the Canal Armists of Dmitlag. They are of a high standard. Some are better, some worse. I would like to encourage the Dmitlag music circles to find as many composers as possible from the Canal Armists. In the pieces I have heard, there are ideas that have been composed by talented people. The arrangements made by comrade Rozanov show this. The balalaika-song by comrade Stručko is beautiful. The wind by comrade Shevchenko reveals a great talent of the composer. The most important thing, however, is to work and to learn."

It is difficult to tell whether or not Shostakovich was being completely honest, or if he was just writing what the authorities expected of him, in order to protect his family and his career. It is unlikely that Shostakovich was actively trying to neglect his colleagues' efforts. In fact, Shostakovich was very fond of Protopopov and generally used his influence in the Communist Party to help him. In this situation, it was impossible for him to do so without damaging his own reputation. In any case, Rozanov and Protopopov never received credit as composers for the Dmitlag music competition, but were each awarded an honorary badge and 100 rubels for their work as melody notators. Yet again, it had been made all too clear to them that their purpose was not to express themselves through their art, but to play their part in fulfilling the goals of the regime.

After having been forced into submission, Protopopov was released from Dmitlag in 1938. With help from Yavorsky, he got a job as a music theory teacher at the Moscow Conservatory. After all he had been through, he continued to compose, but his music was not as adventurous and passionate as it had been. Most of his works were based on Russian folk music; safe, toothless and predictable. His first publication after his release was a lullaby, inspired by a Russian folk tune. The accompaniment is pianistically excellent and the piece is quite charming, but ultimately lacking in imagination, especially considering what the composer had written before. In 1941, Protopopov published *5 Pieces for piano, Op. 23*. The composer's craftsmanship in writing this set of pieces has to be acknowledged, but his personal signature is hardly

recognizable. One can still hear an experimental and rebellious spark, but it is neatly packed away in a subdued and conformist box. Even when the music does have clashing dissonances, it never lasts for more than a moment. Before it can get truly exciting, it recedes into a comfortable and recognizable tonality.

Yavorsky, the love of his life, passed away in 1942. Soon after, Protopopov left his job at the Moscow Conservatory. It is unclear whether he left of his own volition, perhaps stricken by grief and unable to work, or if he was forced out, since Yavorsky could no longer use his influence to protect his position. In the following years, Protopopov composed very little. He arranged a number of Russian folk tunes and revisited some earlier works that had not been published yet. Examples of this are the *9 Song on poems by Mikhail Lermontov, Op. 25*, which had been collecting dust since the late 1930s, and *Облака, освященные солнцем* (Sun-Kissed Clouds), a composition from 1915 with a strong influence from Sergei Rachmaninov. His final feat as a musician was arranging a collection of songs by composer Johann Sebastian Bach. Several years earlier, Yavorsky had already started on the piano accompaniment and Protopopov finished the arrangements for two-part and three-part choir. It took him a full two years to complete this project, which was ultimately published in 1953. Protopopov died a quiet and anonymous death on the 14th of December 1954 in Moscow at the age of 61. Joseph Stalin had died only one and a half years earlier and in the period that followed, the Soviet Union would see major revisions of the strict laws suppressing artists. In the post-Stalin era, there was more freedom for personal expression and the punishments for breaking the rules of Socialist Realism weren't nearly as severe. Unfortunately for Protopopov, he didn't live to see those days.

Written by Mattias Spee

About the pianist

Mattias Ivo Adrianus Spee is a young, multi-talented musician from The Netherlands. Over the years, he has garnered praise as a classical pianist because of his highly personal interpretations and his "velvet touch" on the keys. Especially in regards to contemporary repertoire, he has discerned himself as an adventurous musician, for whom no challenge ever seems big enough. More recently, he has developed himself as a composer, improviser and interdisciplinary artist as well. Spee is celebrated for his versatility as a musician and has regularly been called "one of the biggest piano talents of The Netherlands".

Mattias Spee grew up in Hilversum. When his sister started taking piano lessons, he was initially deemed too young to be taken as a student himself. However, when he started playing the piano by himself anyway and copying his sister's exercises, he started having his very own lessons too. It was the start of a journey that continues to this day. One of his first teachers, Maaïke Eijkman, introduced him to Ton Hartsuiker, one of the most prolific Dutch pianists of the 20th century. Hartsuiker and Eijkman encouraged Spee to cultivate his interest in contemporary music. After joining the Young Talent Music Almere in 2008 and transferring to the Young Talent Department of the Royal Conservatory in 2012, Spee officially started his studies in classical piano with David Kuyken and contemporary music with Ralph van Raat at the Conservatory of Amsterdam in 2015. After graduating, he started focusing on composition and improvisation, being coached by such accomplished musicians as Willem Jeths, Rembrandt Frerichs and Harmen Fraanje. Throughout the years Spee had masterclasses with several legendary pianists, including Michail Voskresensky, Pascal Rogé, Jacques Rouvier and Håkon Austbø.

Over the course of his career, Spee was a prize winner at several competitions, including the SJMN Competition, the Rotterdam Piano Festival and Op de Stip, where he performed Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Piano Concerto in F major, KV 459* with Holland Symfonia during the finals in 2011; his debut as a soloist. In 2014, he was awarded the 1st prize at the Steinway Piano Competition, resulting in an invitation to perform at the 16th International Steinway Festival in Hamburg. After winning the

1st prize in the regional finals and the 2nd prize in the national finals at the Princess Christina Competition in 2014, Spee was invited for a concert tour in Taiwan with fellow prize winners Gerbrich Meijer on clarinet and Liesbeth Bosboom on cello. In 2019, Spee won the Vrienden Culture Prize, where jury chairwoman Daria van den Bercken lauded him for the vulnerability displayed in his performance of Henri Dutilleux's *3 Preludes for piano* and Ludwig van Beethoven's *Sonata for piano, Op. 90* during the finals. Spee was one of the nominees for the Dutch Classical Talent Award 2024. As such, he toured all major concert venues in The Netherlands with a program consisting of several nocturnes and a 9-part cycle of original compositions, entitled *Insomnia*. The jury of the Dutch Classical Talent Award describes him as follows:

"An opiated and versatile musician, who also improvises and composes. In his playing, his air and his choice of repertoire, you can see his activist and rebellious nature. He doesn't let anyone tell him what to do and totally sets his own course."

When composing, Spee draws much inspiration from stories. As a child, he loved fairy tales and mythology and you can hear this in his music. He primarily writes for solo piano, but more and more often leaves his comfort zone in order to write for bigger formations. Examples of this are his compositions *Parachute for piano and cello*, premiered at a concert in the Janskerk celebrating the 900th anniversary of the city of Utrecht in 2022, and *Loria for piano and strings*, premiered in collaboration with the Nova Sonantia Ensemble in 2023. As classical music was Spee's first love, this is one of the foremost influences on his own pieces, but he has always had a passion for other genres and styles as well, like jazz, minimal and free improvisation. Many of his compositions originate from improvisation and he often leaves space in his pieces for spur-of-the-moment ideas.

Besides his own compositions, Spee premiered music by several other composers, including rediscovered pieces by 20th century composers Gerard van Brucke Fock and Hans Henkemans, as well as new music. Some examples of this are Lisa Weyrauther's *Nocturnal*, Gijs Idema's *Mirage in Blue* and Samuel Carl Adam's *Sonata for piano no. 3*, which Spee performed at the Concertgebouw in 2022. The program of this concert also contained Adams's *Sonatas for piano no. 1 and no. 2* and a new

composition entitled *Violin Dyptich for violin, piano and electronics*. Natálie Kulina played the violin part and Spee took charge of the piano part and the electronics. He has also collaborated with fellow composer/performers on premieres of their compositions. Examples include Joshua Herwig's *What do You Know?*, Linda Diaz's *Time's Lament* and Pepijn Streng's *Jij*. In 2022, Spee worked with composer Titus Tielen on several new piano pieces, resulting in the album *Shades of Life*. At November Music 2023, he premiered a new piano concerto by composer Jo Sporck, called *Into Silence*, in collaboration with Phil Zuid. NRC crowned this performance "the high point of festival November Music" in their 5-star review. In 2025, Spee will collaborate with composer Amir Swaab on his new album *Elaiá*, alongside Hadewych van Gent on cello, Piotr Majoor on trumpet and Lucas Bernardo da Silva on violin and at the Mostly Modern Music Festival 2025, he will premiere a new piano concerto by composer Catharina Clement.

Playing with others is important to Spee, as to him there is nothing more joyful than making music together. Besides performing in many project-based ensembles, he has been part of the Goudsbloem Trio for several years with Hadewych van Gent on cello and Ana Prazeres on clarinet. Together, they explored the well-known repertoire for this combination of instruments, like the *Trio in A Minor, Op. 114* by Johannes Brahms, the *Gassenhauer Trio, Op. 11* by Ludwig van Beethoven and the *Trio in D Minor* by Gabriel Fauré. However, they also explored exciting, hardly-ever performed music from lesser-known composers, like Robert Muczynski, Nino Rota and Alexander von Zemlinsky. Furthermore, Spee performed with a lot of musicians from many different backgrounds, like Ed Spanjaard, Eva van der Sterren, Maria Pedano, Maya Fridman, Arturo den Hartog and members of the Amsterdam Andalusian Orchestra.

Spee is also fascinated by the incredible amount of music that has, justifiably or not, slipped into oblivion. Brilliant composers sometimes disappear from the radar for myriad reasons, which often have nothing to do with their music. Examples of forgotten children of music history, whose music Spee has performed, are Louis Couperin, outshone by his nephew François, Mélanie Bonis, unable to have a musical career as a woman, Alexei Stanchinski, who tragically died before breaking through, and of course the composers on the *Eclipse* recordings. Spee takes on a role of ambassador for

these composers, because he thinks it's important to pay special attention to music that hides underneath a layer of dust and bring it to life again.

Another one of Spee's big passions is working with artists from other art disciplines. He was commissioned by the Grachtenfestival to make a so-called "story-telling concert" with novelist Shula Tas and cellist/vocalist Chieko Donker Duyvis, entitled *Waar Gezongen Wordt* (Where there is Singing). This performance was based on Tas's book, in which she tells the story of how and why she stopped singing. At the end of the concert, Tas sang in public for the first time in over a decade. Spee was also in charge of the music for the radio play *Dansen met de Dood* (Dancing with Death), a collaboration with writer/director Tabula Raas and voice actor Celine Vermeulen. This piece, loosely based on William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, deals with the temptation of being released from suffering by suicide. Recently, Spee was a part of the project *Tijdcapsules* (Time Capsules) with trombonist Arjan Linker, guitarist Gijs Idema, double bassist Benjamin de Boer and live electronics specialist Dimitri Geelhoed. For this show about the relentless passing of time, this group of like-minded musicians combined elements from a wide variety of inspirations, including Indian raag, Georgian folk music, Renaissance polyphony and pop bands like Radiohead by means of improvisation into a dreamscape, supported with light effects by visual artist Lisa Derksen Castillo. The Piano Biennale 2025 has commissioned Spee to create an interactive concert for children, called *Bartók, de Barbaar* (Bartók, the Barbarian). For this performance, he will collaborate with choreographers from dance company Dansstorm Oost.

Spee's practising instrument is a 1992 Grotrian-Steinweg grand piano, made available to him by the Dutch National Musical Instrument Foundation.







In the heart of what we do lies a simple truth: music should be felt as much as heard. Our label is founded on the idea that the purest form of listening replicates the magic of a live performance. It's not about grandeur; it's about authenticity, about capturing the essence of the moment when music comes alive.

With each recording, we try to craft an auditory journey, where the walls of your listening space dissolve to reveal the vaulted grandeur of a concert hall, the sacred quiet of a church, or the intimate warmth of a studio. Our role is that of a careful curator — we blend into the background, allowing the artists and the space to speak through the music.

We choose artists who resonate with this philosophy: musicians who inspire us not just with their talent, but with their drive to push boundaries whilst maintaining a heartfelt connection to their audience. It's this balance that guides our collaborations and helps us fulfill our pledge to bring forth recordings that honour the integrity of high fidelity sound, and the essence of musical storytelling.

At TRPTK, we quietly step back and let artistry take the spotlight. We're here to capture rather than enhance, and to deliver not just the sound, but the very soul of the music to you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Brendon Heintz'.

founder & senior recording and mastering engineer

Credits

Recording & mastering engineer Brendon Heinst

Editor Hans Erbllich

Assistant mastering engineer Tycho Verhagen

Liner notes Mattias Spee

Cover artwork Jac van Exter

Session photography Brendon Heinst

Recording dates October 16th to 18st 2024

Recording location Westvest90 Church, Schiedam (NL)

Recording format 11.2MHz 1bit (DSD256)

Equipment

Microphones Josephson Engineering C617

Microphone preamplifiers Grace Design m802mk2

AD/DA conversion Merging Technologies Hapi MkII

Headphones Audeze LCD-X

Loudspeakers Grimm Audio LS1be

Cabling Purecable Optimus Series

Tuning Pura Power Supplies linear power supplies and power conditioners

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