



# Freda SWAIN

## PIANO MUSIC, VOLUME ONE

SONATA NO. 2 IN F SHARP MINOR

SONATA NO. 1, THE SKERRIES

THE CROON OF THE SEA

AN ENGLISH IDYLL

THE RED FLOWER

SONATA SAGA

Timon Altwegg

FIRST RECORDINGS

## FREDA SWAIN: AN INTRODUCTION

by Timon Altwegg

Freda Swain was born in Southsea (just below Portsmouth, on the southern coast of England) on 31 October 1902. Her father, himself a musician, recognised and encouraged her early musical talent. At the age of eleven, she was already travelling by train to London on her own, to have piano lessons at the Tobias Matthay Pianoforte School. Later in life she remarked that these early journeys gave her a firm feeling of independence, which she retained for the rest of her life. It may also explain her character, described by almost everyone as ‘strong’, which clearly not only failed to gain her friends (quite the opposite!), but, sadly, might be a partial explanation for the later neglect of her music.

When she was fourteen, she was awarded scholarships by both the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music; she chose the latter so that she could study composition under Charles Villiers Stanford, for whom she held a lifelong veneration. She also studied piano with the New Zealand-born Arthur Alexander (1891–1969), whom she married in 1921.

By 1924 she, too, was teaching at the RCM and having her first successes with her compositions, which were praised by the musicologist Eric Blom in particular. She was also appearing more and more often as a performer of her own music and that of others. She and her husband appeared together as a well-known piano duo, setting off in 1939 to tour South Africa and Australia for three years, where they taught, gave recitals and recorded. On their return in 1942, they lived in Chinnor Hill, Oxfordshire, until Alexander’s death. They had no children. She died in Chinnor on 29 January 1985.

Freda Swain devoted her life entirely to composition, to teaching and performance, and to promoting young artists. She presented concerts of British

music in a series called 'NEMO',<sup>1</sup> which enjoyed the support of such prominent figures as the conductor Sir Adrian Boult and composers Ralph Vaughan Williams and Arthur Bliss. A particular emphasis was placed on supporting women in concert life (composers as well as performers) because of the numerous obstacles they faced at the time. This determination, and her refusal to follow the compositional trends fashionable then, in an age when musical experimentation was enthusiastically encouraged and supported by the male-dominated establishment, led to Swain and her music being not only neglected but later actually condemned. She nevertheless often found musicians who would perform her works, mainly in London, among them the clarinetist Frederick Thurston, the American-born violinist Achille Rivarde, the Danish violinist Henry Holst (leader of the Berlin Philharmonic under Furtwängler) and the Scottish violist William Primrose. But other than in her own NEMO imprint, very few of her works were ever published, and after her death it was not long before performances of her music dried up completely. Since the publication of the 1954 edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* she has not been mentioned in any musical works of reference.

It seems that over time Swain suffered more and more from this state of affairs: as the years passed, the number of new compositions dwindled. The vast majority of her works appeared before 1960; thereafter she wrote only occasional, smaller pieces. She may also simply have felt that in a musical environment suddenly dominated by avant-garde figures such as Boulez, Cage, Feldman, Stockhausen and the like, her works no longer had a place. No one knows; one can only speculate.

Even so, Freda Swain's compositional output was immense. Some 450 works have survived; although some of them are minor or incomplete, there are nevertheless enough substantial works to allow her to be counted amongst the most impressive British composers (not only women composers) of the twentieth century. Swain's works demonstrate her total commitment to her art and are, in Joseph Horowitz's words,

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<sup>1</sup> I have not yet discovered whether NEMO was an acronym for something like 'New English Music Organisation', or, since *nemo* is Latin for 'nobody', whether the name was something of a private joke. With luck, these recordings will stimulate the musicological activity that will bring this kind of information to the surface.

'frighteningly detailed'.<sup>2</sup> Her catalogue focuses on piano and chamber music, including three sonatas and some 40 other works for piano, a large-scale cello sonata, various pieces for violin, among them a sonata with piano and an unaccompanied sonata, as well as a substantial piano quartet, a sextet with horn and clarinet, string quartets, many songs and choral works. There are also an opera (possibly the only mid-twentieth-century English one by a woman), two piano concertos and several works for orchestra. Swain's piano pupils included beginners, which inspired her to produce many enchanting teaching pieces, placing her in a long tradition stretching from Bach via Schumann and Tchaikovsky to Bartók, Kurtág and beyond.

The quality of her works is astonishing and is generally on a par with the leading English composers of the time. She wrote mostly in an austere tonal style, a kind of 'archaic English late Romanticism', but she was not afraid occasionally to push the boundaries of tonality. There are indeed a few works which are almost atonal, but they remain exceptions. An excellent player herself, she produced piano-writing, which, while often virtuosic and dense, nevertheless usually lies well under the hands.

### **Why Swain in Switzerland?**

A number of chance events lie behind the curious state of affairs whereby a Swiss pianist now administers the entire output of a female English composer. From 1990 to 1992 I studied at the Royal College of Music in London with the Welsh pianist Alan Rowlands. He was the first pianist to have recorded John Ireland's complete piano music, in collaboration with the composer. For some time afterwards this fact clearly marked him out as a specialist in British piano music, though he later tired of that label and instead concentrated mainly on Schubert and Beethoven. Even so, he retained his affection for British music throughout his life and was particularly occupied with the music of Frederick Delius, arranging many of his orchestral works for piano.

Thus it was that after my piano lessons, which were always in the evening and therefore Alan's last of the day, I was often expected to play through various works with

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by David Stevens in the programme notes for the 'Celebration Concert to mark the launch of The Swain-Alexander Trust', Purcell Room, London, 9 March 2005.

him: orchestral pieces by Bax, Delius, Elgar, Holst, Vaughan Williams, Walton and so on, in arrangements for two pianos or piano duet. To begin with, I found this requirement rather an imposition, but before long these exercises became a high point of my training and much enhanced my interest in, and knowledge of, British music. I then branched out on my own to explore composers ever more unfamiliar (at least to me back then), including the likes of Bantock, Boughton, Bowen, Holbrooke, Moeran and more.

Eventually I persuaded Alan to join me in Switzerland for a 'British Piano Music Night' given on two pianos; it naturally featured York Bowen, Delius, Howard Ferguson and Grainger. We repeated the programme in London in 2004, and over post-concert drinks a former pupil and friend of Freda Swain by the name of David Stevens approached Alan with the obvious intention of getting him to play her music. I could see from Alan's expression that David hadn't the ghost of a chance, and so in apparent desperation he turned to me as an obvious and ill-concealed expedient. He spoke at some length about this marvellous composer Freda Swain, whose estate he held; I should absolutely visit him, have a look at the music and maybe play it through.

When David had left, Alan came back over and warned me sternly against such a visit: it would be a total waste of time! He had known Swain as a colleague at the College; she was a terrible person ('a dragon') and whenever she appeared in the corridor, colleagues would disappear into their rooms and hide. Nor had he ever heard that she also composed – it could only be frightful rubbish! As Alan was actually an extremely calm, diplomatic and tolerant person, this outburst quite bewildered me, but it also aroused my curiosity. Shortly afterwards, then, I visited David Stevens, and in no time found myself kneeling on his living-room floor surrounded by plastic boxes full of manuscripts, under the watchful gaze of a photograph of Freda on the piano – and she did indeed have a very intimidating expression.

I stayed at David's for several days, trying to decipher and play through as many of the manuscripts as possible, though some were very hard to read. As I did so, I felt my amazement, even consternation, growing by the hour, at the evident quality of the music. And our composer seemed to grow friendlier, too.

David had recently set up the Swain-Alexander Trust, with the aim of promoting their music. He was also in the process of founding his own imprint to publish the works (and it is to an introductory note that he wrote to that end that I owe something of the biographical details in this essay). He invited me to play some of Swain's works in the launch concert for the Trust, planned for 9 March 2005 in the Purcell Room on the South Bank Centre in London. He also asked me to talk to Alan again and see if we could play some of the two-piano arrangements that Swain and Alexander had made of Bach and Clementi.

I therefore practised the first movement of the *Skerries* Sonata (No. 1) and four pieces by Alexander; once I could play them well enough, I went to Alan and played them to him without saying who had written them. He was utterly taken by the music, and completely stunned when I told him who they were by – I shall never forget his face! – and we duly appeared together at the Inaugural Concert of the Swain-Alexander Trust.

David Stevens died a few weeks after the concert – he had not told me that he was suffering from advanced cancer, but it seems that he had made no secret of the fact to others.<sup>3</sup> His widow asked me to take over the surviving music and to continue work on the planned project; she said she was not a musician and could achieve less than I might. Thus it is that since 2005 I have been the legal owner of these manuscripts.

Swain's manuscripts are very hard to read in places, which rules out a performance straight from the manuscript. My first step was to transcribe some of the works into modern score-setting programmes. I then performed some of them regularly in concerts, including the Piano Sonata No. 1, the Cello Sonata, and a big piece for viola and piano, *Summer Rhapsody*. I am in the process of reviving the Swain-Alexander Trust: the e-mail address is [fredaswain@bluewin.ch](mailto:fredaswain@bluewin.ch) and a website should be along soon.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Anderson told me (in an e-mail dated 30 January 2022) when we were preparing this album that David, revealing that his days were numbered, had asked him if he might take over the Swain archive, but Martin was preparing for the launch of *Toccata Classics* and so he felt unable to pick up this particular chalice. David very probably asked a number of other potential candidates, too, of course.

Please get in touch, especially if you are taken by the music on this album and would like to help with future recordings.

Michael Ponder, the producer of this recording, has personal memories of Freda Swain:

In 1979, as a young thrusting viola-player, I came across the Rebecca Clarke Viola Sonata. In those days nobody played this piece, and I was determined to put it on the map. Clarke's music really spoke to me: her melodies, harmonies and the influences of English and French music made her language captivatingly individual. After a long and fascinating life and now living in New York, she had completely disappeared from view and been forgotten. Her fascinating, even rather extreme, life only increased my interest in her. After two years of research, I had managed to write a few articles and promote some concerts of her music. She had been Charles Stanford's first female composition student. To my surprise, I was then asked if I would like to try and promote Stanford's last female composition student, Freda Swain, who was still living in a bungalow on Chinnor Hill in Buckinghamshire at the age of 80. Her name was familiar to me from the countless number of educational piano pieces she had written. I went to see her a number of times with my viola, and she made me play through some of her viola music, with her playing the piano. She was a formidable lady who looked like the stern headmistress of a girls' boarding school. After Rebecca Clarke, whom I just missed knowing (she died in 1979), I wasn't so sure that I wanted to be associated with Freda Swain. Her music was intricate and quite dense in texture and ideas, and it didn't seem to me then to have Clarke's wonderful melodic or emotional feel, and so I ended my brief association with her. She died two years later and I forgot all about her until I met Timon Altwegg ten years ago. And here I am, 40 years after those visits to the composer, finally where I should have been 40 years ago, promoting her music – which I now find very individual and quite compelling. How the years can change your conceptions!<sup>4</sup>

## **The Music**

Freda Swain's manuscripts are not simple fare: many of the works exist in at least two handwritten versions, which themselves often contain additional corrections, deletions,

<sup>4</sup> E-mail to me, dated 2 January 2022.

overwriting and so on. Sometimes there is also a version on transparent sheets (clearly as a preliminary to projected printing) and occasionally a printed version.

The problem I faced again and again is that some of these versions differ considerably from one another. In my initial naivety I naturally thought that I was 'safe' if a printed version existed, since it would logically be the final version. But unfortunately Swain was often quite careless, so that even the printed versions often still contain errors. What was more difficult, though, was that she often altered performance directions (such as *rit.*, *dim.*, *cresc.*, etc.), as well as indications of tempo – not infrequently (in my view) to the detriment of the music. Finally, there are often passages that are extremely difficult to decipher and yet at the same time are so advanced in harmonic terms that it is almost impossible, at least for me, to know what she might really have intended.

After a while, then, I abandoned the idea of playing her intended 'final version' (if it could even be ascertained) and tried instead to play a version that was as musically consistent as possible – my own 'performing edition,' so to speak, compiled from the various available versions of each piece. If the music is ever (re-)printed, I imagine the editorial notes will end up as long as the music itself.

David Stevens had told me that there were two piano sonatas by Swain: No. 1, *The Skerries* ('tremendous,' in David's view), and another one, 'late, strange, not as good'. In the list of all the manuscripts in the boxes, a kind of catalogue of works which I have never managed to fathom, they are identified as 021 and 022, both in Box B. That is the box containing nearly all the completed works for piano and a good deal of chamber music; Box A holds works for orchestra and the rest of the chamber pieces. By the time one gets to Box E, there are only small or unfinished pieces, which led me to think that the music was sorted in descending order of 'significance' from A to E (there are three more boxes, which are mostly filled with assorted loose pages in no special order).

I was therefore all the more surprised to happen upon entry 523 (in Box E!): 'Sonata Saga – Keyboard'. Out came a mighty sonata in F minor, written before the *Skerries* Sonata, and thus the first of what were now three piano sonatas! Swain did not give this sonata a number, and numbered *The Skerries*, which could now be seen to be her second sonata, as No. 1.



### ***Sonata Saga* in F minor (1925, rev. 1929 and 1930)**

Two manuscript versions survive, one of which (obviously the earlier) begins only on page 4, just after the second subject of the first movement – the opening seems to be lost. The second version is complete, with this dedication at the top of the title page: ‘To Arthur Alexander, whose love and understanding of the sea is boundless’, followed by these lines by Swain:

To the sea and its vastness,  
its depth and remoteness,  
its aloofness from the world and its works;-  
to the wind-swept, lonely coasts,  
to rocky cliffs and caves,  
haunted by sea-birds and spirits;-  
and to the strife and conquest of the ancient Vikings  
this work is dedicated

Work began on the sonata on 25 July 1925 and, according to Swain’s note at the end of the manuscript, ‘final revisions’ were made on 22 June 1929 and in January 1930. The title page also reads ‘First performance by Arthur Alexander June 25th 1929’, which explains the apparently eleventh-hour revision in June 1929.

There was obviously never a clean, definitive copy prepared for performance, and the differences between the two versions are considerable: long passages are completely different; whole pages are crossed out completely (even in the second version, unfortunately, so that there is no alternative available); extra notes are added throughout – the whole thing is a massive muddle. This first recording has therefore to be seen as my reconstruction; later performers may well come up with different solutions. Any published edition of the work will have to deal with these issues in detail.

The opening of the *Sonata Saga* [1] – marked *Misterioso* – is sombre and heavy with foreboding; it features a descending three-note motif, the germ-cell of the whole work. These three notes correspond exactly, though in a different key, to the opening of

Rachmaninov's C sharp minor Prelude, Op. 3, No. 2 – which can hardly be a coincidence: Swain must surely have known that ubiquitous piece.

The first six bars are repeated a tone lower and then developed until the theme itself emerges (1:17). It sings out heroically, almost like a fanfare, over a threatening accompanying pattern in the lowest register of the left hand. The writing remains dense and almost orchestral, and Swain appears to have difficulty leaving the home key until, without any real modulation, the second subject suddenly appears, in E minor (2:45). This choice of key is highly unconventional, as is the fact that its melody is accompanied wholly in ninths – and so, although the start of the movement is rooted in late Romanticism, here there is suddenly a whiff of Impressionism.

At 4:15 the development begins, leading through many keys and becoming markedly dramatic: one can hear the sea foaming, the waves, the spray... The powerful climax at 5:40, marked *superbo e molto ritmico*, is followed by another, more powerful yet, and suddenly the second subject, previously so tender, appears in an extremely vigorous, almost brutal form (5:58). According to the theory books, the recapitulation should now emerge, but it never comes. That may have been Swain's plan from the outset, or it could be that the young composer, already too far into this substantial work, suddenly realised that the first movement was getting out of hand. In any case, she moves still deeper into the development, culminating at 7:03 in a passage marked *grandioso e largamente*. Here the writing becomes even more overblown, and the mood turns almost apocalyptic – one can almost imagine Leviathan heaving out of the depths.

What follows is a truly inspired idea: the tension and excitement having reached their absolute maximum, the music reaches a fermata and, almost as in a concerto, there follows a solo cadenza (7:55). At this point it is clear that Swain was thinking in orchestral terms: she pencilled in amongst the notes 'brass...glockenspiel...cellos'. As if the pianist were not exhausted enough at this point, the music is marked *martellato* and even *granulato*; after this point, the transition at 8:55 into the next movement must feel like a welcome breather.

Chords in quite advanced harmony lead *attacca* into the second movement, marked *Lento tranquillo* [2]; in D major, it is again, like the second subject of the first movement,

a very long way from the home key of the work. Over ten minutes long, this movement too is laid out on a grand scale and also has a number of formal difficulties to overcome. The core motif appears in the right hand at the very beginning of the movement and is marked *lontano*. It is developed into a melody, landing on a *lunga pausa* (2:40). The basic motif then undergoes some transformation and passes through several keys, *più mosso*, before landing in familiar territory (4:07: *più lento*). At 4:47 there is the delightful marking *barcarollando*, and the whole development reaches a conclusion (5:06), again marked *grandioso* – clearly one of the young Swain's favourite moods.

There now appears a new theme, which leads to a powerful climax in B flat major, rather more *grandioso* than before, but not marked as such. Then the music gradually subsides into more gloomy and reflective realms before yet another theme arrives at 8:04, one which on closer listening does have a degree of kinship with the preceding material. In fact, it is the theme with which the next movement will soon begin – but, of course, the listener cannot know that. Before this point, however, the motif from the opening of the movement reappears (8:36) in its original form, though with ominously rumbling notes in the bass, thus rounding off the movement in a cyclical and satisfying way. The concluding motif in fifths (10:10) appears three times and anticipates the opening of the third movement.

The third movement, *Con molto energia*, in D minor, again follows without a break [3]. Horn-like chords in the left hand sound against fast notes in the right, and at 0:10 the main subject proper appears. This is the melody from the second movement already mentioned, but now in martial chords in the right hand against thrilling runs in the left. At 0:34 there follows a section marked *caldamente*, comprising relentless unison chords played in both hands. It is a very dangerous moment for the pianist, but it produces truly heroic expression. A new march-like section begins at 1:27. It develops in a genuinely remarkable way, since from 1:46 onwards Swain intersperses piercing dissonances and almost cluster-like sounds. The music surges back and forth before suddenly reaching a passage in F sharp minor (2:46), which finally returns to luxuriate in late-Romantic sounds. A heart-stoppingly beautiful melody spun over a dense and mostly polyphonic accompaniment *à la* Godowsky evokes a nostalgic mood – abruptly

cut off at 4:23, when Swain tears her listeners from their reverie and carries them straight into a more warlike realm (perhaps that of the Vikings mentioned in the dedication). Bold modulations lead to the first of three climaxes (5:12), this one having a similarity to the main motif of the second movement. After a succession of bewildering and almost violent chords, the music suddenly breaks off.

After a brief, threatening tremolo the opening theme of the first movement then appears over surging double notes, which could come straight out of a Chopin étude. The observant listener will by now have realised that Swain is using a cyclical form (and the key is now F minor once again) and that the work is probably drawing gradually to a close. But Swain still has a few surprises in store.

After a further powerful climax (6:02) a new, barely recognisable transformation of the basic motif of the second movement is heard, this time in march-like garb (6:20). A build-up based on fifths in both hands leads via strange harmonies to a further passage marked to be played *con rabbia* ('with rage') (6:54) – another marking which hardly ever appears in a score. The music finally arrives at a resplendent climax in G major (7:28), headed *allargando superbamente*. This climax is maintained and even reinforced up to a triple *forte* before a final coda (08:52) restates the opening theme in F minor, this time in octaves in both hands. The sonata ends in the most magnificent way possible, in a radiant F major and an orchestral frenzy of sound which cry out for rapturous audience applause complete with cries of 'Bravo!' (I've tried it, and it works!).

Although Swain had already some experience in composing sonatas, given that she had already written her C minor cello and piano sonata in 1923, one can find fault with all sorts of things in this, her first piano sonata: formal problems, writing that is at times too orchestral, some modulations that don't quite work, clichéd borrowings from other composers. Even so, one must pay her much respect for her achievement: that a 23-year-old should create such a powerful and thoroughly original work in cyclical form was rare among composers before her and has been since.

### ***The Croon of the Sea* (1920)**

Another very early work is *The Croon of the Sea* [4]. The manuscript is undated, but the piece was printed in 1925, and it has 1920 inscribed at the end. It is once more dedicated 'To Arthur Alexander' and clearly also has the sea as the basis for its inspiration, as the title makes clear. It is a wholly coherent piece in B flat minor, in a wonderfully late-Romantic style. After a gently swaying, reflective opening, a melody marked *cantabile* takes up the action. It grows to a big climax, which drives forward into heroic dimensions. At the end, the opening motif is heard again, thus completing an ABA form, albeit a free one. No wonder that a year after his young student dedicated this passionate music to him, Arthur Alexander married her.

### **Piano Sonata No. 1 in A minor, *The Skerries* (1936–37, rev. 1945)**

According to a note on the title page of the manuscript, Swain's second sonata for piano – which, of course, she styled 'No. 1' – was evidently written in the short period between December 1936 and 5 January 1937; at the end of the third movement, an annotation in the manuscript reads 'revised 30.11.45'. At first the work was designated a sonatina, but it was then upgraded to sonata status. According to David Stevens, the first movement alone was initially composed as a sonatina, with the other two movements added later. But that cannot be true of the second movement, at least, since it is dated '30.12.36', which tallies chronologically with the first movement. There is no indication as to the genesis of the third movement – it may indeed have been composed later. All three movements are written out separately and on different paper.

The beauty and mysteries of nature and the power of the elements always made a deep impression on Swain and were often the trigger for her musical inspiration. This work apparently came about after a holiday trip with her husband to Scotland, where she was hugely impressed by the cliffs and rock formations known as 'skerries'. The word 'skerry' stems from the Old Norse 'sker' or the Irish 'Na Sceiri', both meaning 'a rock in the sea'.

Arthur Alexander gave the first performance of the first movement in the Wigmore Hall on 20 January 1937, and Swain herself played the whole sonata there a decade later, on 20 March 1947. This performance was not billed as a premiere, but it is not known who, if anyone, had played it in the meantime.

I find Swain's development as a composer, in the mere seven years between her first sonata and this one, quite astonishing. Instead of opulent late-Romantic harmonies and piano-writing to match, what one encounters here are concise, terse ideas expressed in a wholly individual tonal language. Right from the opening *Vigoroso* [5], the listener's attention is grabbed by the open fifths and the toccata-like forward drive. The second subject (0:56) offers a beautiful contrast. This first movement is formally of classic construction, and the exposition is followed by a development (1:54), which is very long in comparison with the exposition. Here the action intensifies, reaching a climax in the minor, characterised by harsh dissonances and archaic-sounding fifths and octaves (2:48–3:09). Bubbling runs in the right hand evoke a spray of waves breaking on rocks, and then the recapitulation begins (4:02). Swain now alters the exposition material in a most sophisticated way, showing her mature compositional ability. The movement ends resolutely with violent fifths and octaves which one can recognise from the development.

The second movement [6] is headed *Non troppo lento, malinconio*, which shows that although by 1936 Swain may well have become a prodigious composer, her knowledge of Italian was not quite so fully developed: it should, of course, be *malinconico* ('melancholy'). This criticism (admittedly a petty one) is the only one that can be made of this beautiful and profound movement. Once more, fifths predominate at the beginning, but here they produce a calm and indeed melancholic atmosphere. The music unfolds organically and reaches a climax and a brief but virtuosic cadenza (2:03). The opening theme of the movement is then heard again, but emotionally intensified and with a taint of pain. The music dies away in the major, but not without a faintly menacing undertone in the little concluding bass figure. After more than fifteen years of playing this sonata, I find that it is this slow movement that continues to move me deeply.

Swain does not leap with both feet straight into the third movement, but ushers it in with a short introduction marked *Moderato misterioso, lontano* [7]. The main theme

then begins *poco allegro e ritmico* at 0:24. This tune takes Gaelic melodies as its model, and a further hint at the origins of the movement lies in the repeated use of the ‘Scotch snap’ (an *acciaccatura* on the beat, followed by a longer note). The music is cheerful throughout, constantly moving and ending in an exhilarating final *stretta*. At only four minutes, it is the shortest of the three movements, but is by no means inconsequential: it brings to a convincing conclusion a work which is at times very serious.

### ***An English Idyll* (1942)**

*An English Idyll*, in G minor [8], is a surprisingly serious piece. It was written in Sydney in only two days, 3–4 October 1942, during the major three-year tour that Swain and Alexander undertook from 1939 to 1942. It is dedicated to the British composer, conductor and pianist Edgar Bainton and his wife, Ethel. They had left England in 1934 and settled in Sydney, remaining there for the rest of their days. It is highly likely that Swain and Alexander visited them there.

*An English Idyll* was composed six years after the Sonata No. 1, but it still has a late-Romantic feel to it. After two bars of introduction, a rather serious melody is heard, with chromatic tinges from the accompaniment. The piano writing is dense, with many secondary voices. The second theme (0:58) is strikingly reminiscent of the style of Nikolai Medtner, who lived in London from 1935, and whom Swain and Alexander are almost certain to have met. After an unusual central section, broken up by a number of little cadenza-like interpolations (from 2:02), the main theme returns (3:09), this time more thickly scored than at the opening. Only towards the conclusion does the mood brighten into B flat major (4:01) and at the end one even hears the cuckoo call four times (4:24).

### ***Piano Sonata No. 2 in F sharp minor* (1950)**

Swain's third and last sonata dates from 1950. The manuscript is incomplete: the last movement is missing and apparently lost. Fortunately, she had the work published by Channel Publications, apparently her own imprint, and so the complete sonata exists on transparent sheets and in a single printed copy. David Stevens asserted that this sonata

started out as a one-movement sonatina, with the remaining movements added in 1956. And indeed the manuscript bears the title 'Sonatina', altered in pencil to 'Sonata'. On the transparent-sheet version, however, and on Swain's printed copy, it is 'Sonata', and at the end of the transparent-sheet version is found: '29.9.50, Copyright by Freda Swain, High Woods, Chinnor, Oxfordshire'. I therefore assume that the Sonata was completed in 1950, contrary to David Stevens' assertion, for which I do not know the source.

It is also interesting to note that Swain called this work *Sonata II*, so that, for whatever reason, the *Sonata Saga* was still denied a place among her numbered sonatas. Like its two predecessors, this sonata is in three movements; on this occasion, though, the last movement is introduced by an 'Interlude', which serves as a link between the second and third movements. Here, too, for the first time, all three movements have titles.

The first, marked *Allegro vigoroso e ritmico*, is headed 'Toccatà' [9], and it is immediately obvious why. The main subject sounds out like a fanfare, stands still for a moment, is developed further and then repeated. The first four bars end with a resolute downward figure after the manner of a *glissando* (0:08) and are then repeated with slight alterations. Only then (0:22) does the music move forward uninterrupted. From 1:00 onwards the music takes on an almost aggressive character: rough runs lead into dissonant chords. Its title of 'Toccatà' notwithstanding, Swain is still using recognisable sonata form: at 1:38 a wonderful second subject emerges, which, for all its tranquillity, clearly speaks of longing and perhaps even pain. At 2:21 there begins a kind of development featuring fairly virtuosic material. After a powerful build-up, which then dives ominously into the lowest register of the piano, the second subject suddenly appears *con passione* (3:52) and sounding desperate. The music subsequently calms down, but the undertone of pain remains, until at 4:27 the toccatà elements regain the upper hand. The recapitulation begins at 4:56, but without the second subject, which had reappeared in the development – an admirable formal sleight of hand. Swain's mastery of form is evident also in the way she deals with the problem of the second subject in the recapitulation, when it has already been used twice: instead of reiterating it, she replaces it (6:28) with a completely new, ethereal, almost Impressionist melody, which has the same effect of contrast. The end of the movement is virtuosic and laconically conclusive.



In the fourteen years separating the *Skerries* Sonata from this one, Swain appears to have developed considerably as a composer. Her music is still rooted in tonality, but her harmonic language is far richer and more advanced. She handles matters of form with mastery and considerable freedom, arriving at completely individual compositional solutions. Of course, avant-garde music had come to the fore in 1950, even leaving the experimentation with twelve-tone music behind – in this sonata Swain achieves an absolutely modern and valid musical language of her own.

The second movement is a ‘Canzona Pastorale’ in C minor/E flat major [10], marked *Poco andante e semplice*, and begins with a gentle striding movement, in a mood of contemplation, which will remain throughout the movement. Melody is predominant, and the *cantabile* character of the opening is never lost. Through the modal character of the music, and despite a few dissonant added notes, the harmony remains strangely indeterminate for long stretches, which creates a wide-open sonic space. The wide sweep of the ending, from 4:24 onwards, is also wonderful: the movement gradually dies away with slowly falling chords over a pedal point.

So as not to put too abrupt an end to the mood of the central movement, Swain uses a similar procedure to that of the First Sonata: the third movement does not begin immediately, but is introduced by an Interlude [11]. It starts quietly and retains the mood of the second movement; the tonality joins on seamlessly as well. Then comes a brief build-up and modulation, and suddenly the music is near A major, the key of the final movement.

This short section is monophonic throughout, making it reminiscent of a shepherd’s pipe, which naturally fits in nicely between the ‘Canzona Pastorale’ and the ‘Pandean Rondo’ [12]. As far as I am aware, this extremely unusual title is without precedent in the history of music, although it could be a musical term, since it refers to Pan or his pipes. Pan was the god of nature and the forest, and he took delight in music, dance and merriment. The music of this final movement, headed *Poco allegro, giojoso*, conveys just that: against constant movement in the left hand, a flute-like melody can be heard; it appears merry but not without inner substance. The movement is barely four minutes long and is constantly in motion. The music flows back and forth but has no real

contrasts, so that it is given up wholly to its bucolic character. The movement, and with it the sonata, ends with a quiet upward gesture; and the music dies away to nothing, entirely unspectacularly.

### ***The Red Flower***

*The Red Flower* [13] exists in two manuscript versions by Swain: one rather chaotic, with a fair number of corrections, and an obviously later, easily legible copy. The first version has some fingerings marked, and so I assume she performed it at some stage. Neither copy is dated, but the inscription 'London and High Woods, Chinnor Hill, Oxfordshire' at the end of the second copy suggests that it must have been composed after 1942 – unless, of course, she made the second copy considerably later than the first. In any case, here is an utterly charming work in E major, headed *Allegretto grazioso – rapsodico*. The opening melody could be Pan with his flute again; then the piece develops quite freely and indeed rhapsodically. The opening motif, on which the whole piece is based, undergoes a multitude of transformations.

**Timon Altwegg** began his career with Hubert Mahler in Kreuzlingen, Switzerland. In 1989 he finished his studies with the diploma of the Swiss Association of Musical Education in Zurich. He then stayed for two years in London, studying with Alan Rowlands at the Royal College of Music, graduating in 1992 with the Piano Performing Diploma and was appointed 'Associate of the Royal College of Music'.

He lives in Berg in the canton of Thurgau, in north-eastern Switzerland, where he runs his own concert series 'Konzerte im Haus Langrut'. He teaches at the Pädagogische Maturitätsschule and the Kantonsschule Kreuzlingen: for over twenty years he has spent some 40 hours a week teaching extraordinarily stimulating, pleasant children and young people. He views playing the piano as a hobby that he still loves.



He has always much preferred playing chamber music, since being on stage on his own strikes the fear of God into him, and in any case he hates playing from memory. As a result, he actually has quite a large repertoire of chamber music for various combinations. He plays recitals only *in extremis* – either because they pay incredibly well or because he is forced into it.

He is in much demand as a chamber musician and soloist and has been invited to play in the United States, South America, the Middle East and all over Europe. In May 2004, indeed, he gave an historic performance with the Iraqi National Symphony Orchestra in front of 1,200 listeners in Iraq, and was the first foreign soloist to appear there since 1990. During his stay in Baghdad he also gave master-classes at the Music and Ballet School, under the patronage of the Swiss Embassy in Baghdad, the Swiss Foreign Secretary and the cultural ministry of Iraq. His journey also found its way into the literary work of Elisabeth Horem, in *Shrapnels – En marge de Bagdad*, published in 2005. In acknowledgement of his popularity abroad, the Centre de Compétence Culturelle des EDA (Foreign Ministry of Switzerland) often supports his projects. In one such concert – in Beirut in 2013 – he performed Hans Huber's Fourth Piano Concerto for the first time since its premiere in 1911.

Among the first performances he has given are works by Gilles Colliard, Ernst Levy, Frank Ezra Levy, Wolfgang Andreas Schultz, Graham Waterhouse and Aaron Yalom. He has edited various works of the twentieth and 21st centuries for Amadeus Verlag, Heinrichshofen, Edition Kunzelmann and other publishers. He is chairman of the Gesellschaft für Musik und Literatur, Kreuzlingen.

He is always amazed at how unimaginative and formulaic most of the programmes played by his famous piano idols are – and that by far the largest parts of the piano and chamber-music repertoire are never played. That's why all his recordings up to now have been devoted to out-of-the-way repertoire. His discography includes four albums for Guild Music. Together with Gilles Colliard, violin, he recorded works by the late-Romantic Swiss composer Hans Huber, and with the Orchestre de Chambre de Toulouse, directed by Colliard, four piano concertos by Jacques Castérède, Robert Casadesus, Jean Rivier and Jean Wiener. The album *Sonata Ebraica*, with Hana Gubenko, viola, is dedicated to rare repertoire for viola and piano, the works including the only viola sonatas by Ernst Levy and Graham Waterhouse in their first recordings, as well as Aaron Yalom's mystic *Sephardic Poem*. The last of these recordings was a portrait of the Swiss composer Frank Ezra Levy, with *concertante* works for strings and soloists from the years 2013–16. His most recent project was a double album, *Jewish Music in Switzerland*, recorded in collaboration with Swiss Radio SRF2 in September 2019, featuring chamber music by Max

Ettinger, Boris Mersson, Daniel Schnyder and Aaron Yalom, among others, released on the Swiss label Doron Music. This album of Freda Swain's piano music is his first solo recording.

He has a wife and two daughters, all of them delightful, with whom he is happy to spend the rest of his free time. And so, unlike many famous pianists, he unfortunately cannot score points with an eccentric lifestyle or any brilliant quirks: he leads a scandalously bourgeois life. He loves table football and, when he had more free time, he used to be an enthusiastic tournament bridge player.

On the advice of some well-meaning souls, he maintains a website which is fairly up to date most of the time: [www.timonaltwegg.com](http://www.timonaltwegg.com).



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This recording is dedicated to Hoshang Raufi,  
whose decades of support laid the basis for everything.  
*Timon Altwegg*

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## FREDA SWAIN Piano Music, Volume One

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<b>Sonata Saga in F minor (1925–30)</b>	<b>29:39</b>
1 I <i>Misterioso</i> –	9:38
2 II <i>Lento tranquillo</i> –	10:34
3 III <i>Con molto energia</i>	9:27
4 <b>The Croon of the Sea (1920)</b>	<b>6:21</b>
<b>Piano Sonata No. 1 in A minor, The Skerries (1936–37; rev. 1945)</b>	<b>14:18</b>
5 I <i>Vigorouso</i>	5:46
6 II <i>Non troppo lento, malinconio</i>	4:34
7 III <i>Moderato misterioso, lontano – poco allegro e ritmico</i>	3:58
8 <b>An English Idyll (1942)</b>	<b>4:46</b>
<b>Piano Sonata No. 2 in F sharp minor (1950)</b>	<b>17:57</b>
9 I <i>Toccata: Allegro vigoroso e ritmico</i>	7:20
10 II <i>Canzona Pastorale: Poco andante e semplice</i>	5:34
11 III <i>Interlude</i>	1:09
12 IV <i>Pandean Rondo: Poco allegro, giojoso</i>	3:49
13 <b>The Red Flower</b>	

Timon Altwegg, piano

TT 77:34

FIRST RECORDINGS