

Donna Coleman

pianist

"Spirit, Passion, and the Right Hands"

Peter Cossè, *Fono Forum* (Berlin, 1990)

Donna Coleman's worldwide recognition encompasses award-winning recordings, major prizes in international competitions, concert tours around the planet, and invitations from music schools on four continents for teaching and performance residencies. She is renowned for her interpretations of the music of Charles Ives, with two acclaimed recordings on the Et'cetera label, one of which, the "*Concord*" Sonata (KTC 1079) received France's *Diapason d'Or* upon release. In his review, Christian Tarting wrote, "This *Second Pianoforte Sonata* . . . finds here its most convincing recorded version, due to its assertion, the assurance in its manner of effectively carrying out each detail, its analytical finesse." The year 2020 marks the fiftieth since she began her research and study of Charles Ives and his music.

Coleman first achieved public recognition as an interpreter of Ives's music with the award of Second Prize in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts-Rockefeller Foundation International American Music Competition in 1978, for which she performed *Piano Sonata No.1*. Since then, she has toured the world playing that work and the notoriously "unplayable" "*Concord*" Sonata, for which her research led her to create a script to accompany the music. The Australian premiere of this version of the work that incorporates excerpts from the writings of Ives and from the authors for whom the four movements of this work are named (Emerson, Hawthorne, Bronson and Louisa May Alcott, Thoreau) in 1996 for the Sydney Spring Festival, led Roger Covell to write for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "Coleman's command of this vast and complex score is complete. Far from being merely a programmed, hard-hitting efficiency expert in the production of keyboard sounds, she supplied magically soft passages to complement Ives's moments of gloriously tangled assertion. . . . This amazing occasion [was] certainly one of the outstanding events in Sydney music this year." The concert was broadcast direct-to-air by ABC Classic FM and rebroadcast on at least two subsequent occasions.

Coleman's research into Ives's music has been guided and supported by John Kirkpatrick, Curator of the Ives Collection of manuscripts at Yale University and pianist who gave the first complete performance of the "*Concord*" Sonata in 1939, by William Masselos, who gave the first performance of the *Piano Sonata No.1* in 1948, by Lou Harrison who copied the sonata from Ives's manuscripts, and by copyists' copies for Masselos's use in preparing for its premiere.

Other milestones in Coleman's association with Ives's music include the Solo Pianist role in the Australian premiere of Ives's *Symphony #4* with Gunther Schuller conducting the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (on three weeks' notice) in 1995; an ABC Classic FM nationwide direct broadcast performance of Ives's *Piano Sonata #1* from the Salon at the Sydney Opera House (2000); and from the Iwaki Auditorium ABC Southbank in December 2009, the *Trio di Belladonna* (created by Coleman to develop a new interpretation of Ives's *Trio*) performed this work along with the *Trio in C major opus 87* by Johannes Brahms for another "Sunday Live" nationwide broadcast and worldwide Internet streamed event. Coleman has also created recordings for broadcast of Ives's *Sonata for Violin & Piano #3* (with Miwako Abe) and for the Percy Grainger Lecture Series, songs (with Merlyn Quaife) and the *Three Quarter-Tone Pieces* (with Glenn Riddle).

The Lost Lady ABC direct broadcast in May 2013 opened with the fourth movement of Ives's *Piano Sonata No. 1* and demonstrated the relationship between his Ragtime and Gospel style and the music of J.S. Bach, Fryderyk Chopin, William Bolcom, Jelly Roll Morton, and others. In 1996 she created, produced, and performed in a two-week Festival of the Music of Robert Schumann and Charles Ives at the Victorian College of the Arts where she had recently joined the staff as Head of Keyboard. The student piano trio, *Trio 303*, to whom she taught Ives's

Trio for that festival subsequently took First Prize in the Australian National Chamber Music Competition performing that work. In 2013, she began her new collaboration with two Los Angeles-based musicians, violinist Endre Balogh and cellist Antony Cooke, creating *The Emerson Trio* to further explore Ives's chamber music and that of his contemporaries and influencers [see separate biography]. The Emerson Trio gave its premiere performance of the *Trio* by Charles Ives at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's popular "Sundays Live" series in September 2017. *The Emerson Trio* has been the featured ensemble in Coleman's two recent initiatives, The OutBach® Festival of [Mostly] American Music (2018, featuring the music of Charles Ives) and The OutBach® Festival of [Mostly] Women's Music (2019, celebrating the two hundredth birthday of Clara Wieck), both presented as a series of three concerts over a single week in Santa Fe NM's historic San Miguel Chapel, the oldest church in the USA.

Coleman's interest in the nineteenth century background for Ives's music evolved into the *Rags to Riches* series of concerts (also direct broadcast from the Eugene Goossens Hall at ABC Ultimo Centre in Sydney) and recordings by ABC Classics for which Australia's *Soundscape*s awarded its *Editor's Choice* to Volume I, *A Syncopated Century* (1996). *Havana to Harlem* (Volume II) was released in July 2005. In 2010 Coleman released on her own CD label, OutBach® *Don't Touch Me*, the thirty-seven solo piano *Danzas Cubanas* by Ignacio Cervantes, a production described by Jean-Marc Warszawski writing for online www.musicologie.org as "a rare musical success, thanks to the serene majesty of the interpretation, the presentation, and the interest and curiosity that these compositions arouse." *The Lost Lady* (OutBach® November 2015 release) traces the Ragtime idea back to J.S. Bach.

Among Coleman's prizes are the Solo Recitalist Fellowship from the United States Information Agency, the Southern Arts Federation Touring Fellowship, Second Prize in the first International American Music Competition (John F. Kennedy Center, Washington D.C.), three Rockefeller Foundation grants for touring in the U.S.A., and a Fulbright Senior Scholar Award that sponsored her first residency in Australia in 1992. *The Celestial Railroad Tours* featuring her eclectic repertory encompassing Bach to Bill Evans and compositions written yesterday have taken her to thirty of the United States of America, and to Canada, Europe, and Australia for concerts and for masterclasses and workshops featuring her *Dancing with the Piano* philosophy of whole-person music making. The OutBach® project, an initiative dedicated to exploration of the relationships between the ancient musical traditions of Australia, Western European art music, and the African-inspired styles in the Americas, created a sensation with the first-ever piano and didgeridu collaborations in another ABC Classic FM "Sunday Live" direct broadcast featuring William Barton, didgeridu, and John Scurry, banjo in May 2003. Other OutBach® initiatives include the world premiere of the *Concerto in D minor for Piano, Didgeridu and Guitars*, originally composed by J.S. Bach, for the Shell-Darwin International Guitar Festival in July 2005, and in July 2007, with Tom E Lewis and his associates in the Djilpin Arts Aboriginal Corporation for their annual *Walking With Spirits* festival in Beswick NT. Born and educated in the USA, Donna Coleman has held Associate Professor and Artist-in-Residence posts in three U.S. universities and for twenty years mentored many of Australia's finest pianists in her role as Head of Keyboard in the Victorian College of the Arts. For several years she was co-principal of the *L'Accademia Pianistica Internazionale "Ferruccio Busoni"* in Bologna (San Lázaro), Italy where she has given summer masterclasses. She continues to tour the world presenting her solo concerts-with-commentary, *Dancing with the Piano* workshops, performing with orchestras and for festivals, and working with *The Emerson Trio* (USA), *The Celestial Cowgirls* (Australia), and other ensembles upon invitation.



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"Spirit, Passion, and the Right Hands"

**Charles Ives: Second Pianoforte Sonata ("Concord, Mass., 1840-60")
recorded for Et'Cetera Records Amsterdam [KTC 1079]**

"The formidable dimensions and the equally high technical and psychic demands experienced throughout the course of the *"Concord" Sonata* are not only overcome by the interpreter, rather, she far surpasses a mere ordering of the interrelated, stylistically colorful material and uses her manual and didactic possibilities for a strongly moved, impulsive interpretation. Donna Coleman takes the aura of inaccessibility from what is in the truest sense of the word an unwieldy, complex composition. A work for both specialists and aficionados becomes unexpectedly familiar, without having its edges or its stylistic autonomy appear tempered."

Peter Cossè, *Fono Forum* (Berlin 1990)

"This *Second Pianoforte Sonata* . . . finds here its most convincing recorded version, due to its assertion, the assurance in its manner of effectively carrying out each detail, its analytical finesse."

**Christian Tarting, *Diapason* (Paris, February 1990)
recipient of the *Diapason d'Or***

"Donna Coleman offers a marvelously modulated reading of the composition [Ives's *"Concord" Sonata*] and extracts its true essence. The American pianist does a mirror playing of the work, full of nuances, and with a diversity of approach. She interprets this gigantic painting with complete technical mastery, and with malleable intonations, all fully at her command; she therefore has an infinite variety of ambiances at her disposal. The playing is rigorous and regular and constantly at ease. Never seeming to force things, Donna Coleman presents a magnificent album of poetic and colourful images . . . A very beautiful twentieth-century piano recording, an important piece of the 'Ivesian' puzzle."

Bruno Serrou, *Compact* (Paris 1990)

"Donna Coleman is one of the splendid interpreters of the 20th-century American repertoire, whose rhythm she faithfully reproduces and whose physical elements she expresses, moreover, in a way that makes us keenly feel the music."

B.B., *Privilège* (Belgium 1990)

"Stunning is the best word to describe [Coleman's] technical capabilities. Coleman always seemed to be in control of the music. The challenges of playing the Ives score include all of the traditional skills necessary to play Chopin, including tonal beauty, balance between melody and accompaniment, and interpretive nuance . . . Her intimate familiarity with the music was evident in her ability to highlight melodic ideas while keeping the thick harmonic texture in the shadows . . . she turned nearly every difficulty into a moment of beauty and strength."

Larry Warkentin, *The Fresno Bee* (December 1995)

"The music ranges from large scale pianistic effects—for which her elfin figure was the source of immense power—to moments of the most fragile delicacy. Ives [in his *"Concord" Sonata*] left no part of the frequency or intensity range of the keyboard unexplored and Coleman challenged, fretted, cajoled and overwhelmed her audience with what she achieved in this redoubtable music."

John Carmody, *The Sun Herald* (Sydney 1996)

"At her piano recital in [Merkin Hall, Abraham Goodman House] last Sunday, Donna Coleman gave a serious, worthy performance of Ives's "Concord" sonata, a work that has achieved classic status but is too difficult to be an everyday item. She played spaciously and deliberately, and took the enormous first movement at a slower than usual tempo. But she had wit and nerve, too: in some pages of the second movement that can sound like clattery noise, she caught and emphasized the latent ragtime feeling quite vividly. She stuck closely to the denser, more clangorous second edition of the work (some pianists pick and choose among the first and second), and added to it only a few things, such as the ghost in the churchyard episode in the "Hawthorne" movement, from the surviving alternate sources . . . one would gladly go hear her play it again."

Will Crutchfield, *The New York Times* (10th March 1985)

“Coleman’s command of this vast and complex score is complete. Far from being merely a programmed, hard-hitting efficiency expert in the production of keyboard sounds, she supplied magically soft passage to complement Ives’s moments of gloriously tangled assertion. She even managed to follow Ives’s direction to make a proportional reduction in the whole scale of dynamics for the final Thoreau movement . . . This amazing occasion [was] certainly one of the outstanding events in Sydney music this year.”

Roger Covell, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (16th September 1996)

The first movement [of Ives’s “*Concord*” Sonata on KTC 1079] is presented in a slowish tempo (clocking in at about 18.5 minutes) and the deliberate pacing is typical of Coleman's performance in general. This is not the most impetuous or massive of interpretations, but it is a reading that's often full of dark, meditative poetry. In fact, there's a nocturnal quality that runs throughout Coleman's performance. Rather than four disparate movements, it seems as if she offers one long elaboration on a single overriding mood. This dark-toned quality can be very appealing (and it helps that the piano's sound is beautifully recorded), but some may prefer a performance that offers more drama and more contrast between each of the four movements. Coleman offers very strong performances of the "Three Page Sonata" and the Emerson Transcriptions. Very much like her reading of the "Concord" Sonata, these are dark-chocolate performances, rich and meditative.

Scott Mortensen, <http://www.musicweb-international.com/Ives.htm> (online 2001-2005)

“I already have two CD versions of the Ives Concord Sonata, but after listening to Coleman perform the other pieces on this record (which I hadn’t heard before), decided to download the Concord as well. This performance brings out the poetry of Ives’ masterpiece without losing its more muscular qualities. This record as a whole is highly recommended.”

Member Reviews [GNOX], <http://www.emusic.com/listen/#/album/-/-/11042061/>

“Ms Coleman is partaker of the mind and ability to communicate ideas incisively through music and through words. By her tersely perceptive program notes, elaborated with informal comments and musical examples, we were well-advised of the thematic guideposts . . . Ms Coleman answered the abounding challenges of the “*Concord*” with care, intelligence and passion.”

William Dargan, *The Durham Morning Herald* (1988)

“Genuinely inspired.”
[Charles Ives’s *Second Pianoforte Sonata*]
***The Times* (London 1985)**

Donna Coleman’s *Et Cetera* recording of the *Concord Sonata* has been uploaded to youtube as separate movements. The first, “Emerson,” is at this link, and the other tracks from the CD may be found along with it. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ue3jRS5IjjI>

Charles Ives: Symphony No.4 Solo Pianist for Sydney Symphony Orchestra’s Australian Premiere 1995

"At a technical level, much of the work [Charles Ives's *Fourth Symphony*, in its Australian premiere in the Sydney Town Hall, May 1995] is indefensible—impossibly dense, wildly, almost gratuitously complicated, near-unplayable, stylistically utterly inconsistent, and so forth. But it's a masterpiece! . . . The authority of Schuller's performance lay not only in a cool head steering the orchestra through the dense thickets of the Second Movement, but in a constant capacity to make the music speak and stir. . . . The orchestral piano [solo] part was marvelously played by Donna Coleman, an Ives specialist whose recordings for the Etcetera label are well worth looking out for."

Richard Toop, *The Sydney Review* (June 1995)

**Charles Ives: Piano Sonata No.1
recorded for Et'Cetera Records Amsterdam [KTC 1147]**

"Donna Coleman's performance of Ives's *First Sonata* is grand and sweeping, strong and confident, filled with charm and overflowing with joy. It immediately becomes my preferred version."

James H North, *Fanfare Magazine* (USA 1993)

I like Donna Coleman's performance of the First Sonata very much. It's a dark and mysterious reading, full of foreboding. It doesn't swing as hard as some others; rather, the feeling is more consistent across all of the movements. But the cumulative impact is quite impressive, and the final movement works especially well. The recorded sound is excellent. Recommended. The[se] shorter works offer even more reason to track down Coleman's fine recording of the First Sonata. Again, some of these are more meditative than you might expect, but Coleman's performances are consistently convincing. I especially like her rendition of Study No. 23, with its borrowings from "Hello, Ma Baby!" The "Varied Air & Variations" is excellent too, full of billowy, diaphanous notes and mysterious pauses.

Scott Mortensen, <http://www.musicweb-international.com/Ives.htm> (online 2001-2005)

"A recital earlier this month by the four runners-up in the 1978 Kennedy Center-Rockefeller Foundation International Competition for Excellence in the Performance of American Music did not fill Tully Hall, but it was enthusiastically received. I heard . . . Charles Ives' sprawling, vivid First Sonata, performed with concentrated intensity and fervor by Donna Coleman."

Nicholas Kenyon, *The New Yorker* (USA, 24th March 1980)

"Donna Coleman uses her first-rate piano technique to achieve an atmospherically compact rendering of [Ives's *Piano Sonata No.1* on KTC 1147]. She tracks the heterogeneous features of the music, which Ives forges - one might say - almost forcibly, and presents thus an uncommonly comprehensive Ives portrait. The sometimes tumultuous handling of the piano becomes just as much an experience as the dynamic, subtle differentiation of voices which could barely be any further discerned."

G. Sch., *Fono Forum* (Berlin 1993)

"Donna Coleman's outstanding account of the Ives *First Piano Sonata*. . . was high tension piano playing, with an enviable grasp of the work's seven part structure, in turn lyrical, penetrating, passionate, rhetorical, and always on top of the frightening technical demands of the piece. Ms Coleman's performance radiated conviction and mastery of the sound—and emotional world—of the work."

Michael Morley, *The Adelaide Review* (August 1992)



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