

Language of Angels

Larry Sitsky & Ancient Mysticism



Edward Neeman, piano

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The Golden Dawn	28:31
① Mahorela (Dark Heavens)	2:51
② Malpirgi (Fiery Darts)	3:21
③ Vinu (Invoke)	4:37
④ Ser (Lament)	5:11
⑤ Luciftias (Brightness)	3:11
⑥ Yor (Roar)	3:25
⑦ Vaoan (Truth)	5:55
Apocryphon of Initiation	45:29
⑧ The Pyramid of Light	4:13
⑨ The Veil of Isis	7:53
⑩ Mysteries of Osiris	6:11
⑪ The Avenue of Sphinxes	3:25
⑫ The Hidden God	6:46
⑬ Voices from Silence	3:33
⑭ Night of Seth	4:10
⑮ Opening the Eyes of Horus	3:45
⑯ Illumination of the Adept	5:33
Total Length	74:00

Liner Notes

When I received the extraordinary gift of *Apocryphon of Initiation* from Larry Sitsky at the end of 2021, I immediately saw it as an opportunity to present two of Larry's large scale piano masterworks on a single album. When I was a piano student of Larry's in the early 2000s, he remarked that he only wrote small scale piano pieces, mainly from his series of Fantasias—free, improvisatory compositions inspired by the fantasias of C. P. E. Bach. As a composer of large scale works for chamber ensemble, orchestra, and operatic forces, the solo piano was his vehicle for his more personal and experimental voice.

A commission from Canadian pianist Gordon Rumson in 2006 completely changed his perspective, and for the past 16 years he has poured his creative energies into a stream of major piano compositions. This album presents two of them, showing both the evolution of his musical journey from *The Golden Dawn* (2009) to *Apocryphon of Initiation* (2019).

Mysticism in a variety of forms is a constant theme throughout Larry's creative output, and these late piano works in particular seem to be musical expressions of a personal spiritual journey. Larry has frequently remarked that his descriptive titles do not represent any specific extra-musical program but rather represent the source of his inspiration. Indeed, though the subject matter of *The Golden Dawn*, with movement titles from the Enochian “language of angels” and *Apocryphon of Initiation*, based on a highly personal interpretation of themes from Egyptian mythology, have little in common, there are some common musical ideas that represent mystical experiences:

- **An Awakening.** The opening movements both depict the feeling of awe, of being dwarfed by a power so much beyond human abilities, building to a final drum beat pattern in the lowest piano register.

- **Meditation.** With the piano dampers left raised for extended periods, the piano turns into a resonating box where single notes ripple gently and lightly brush against each other. These quiet sections become a form of personal mediation for the pianist and audience. Much of “The Veil of Isis” in *Apocryphon* has this character, and in *The Golden Dawn* there are such meditative fragments in “Vinu,” “Ser,” and “Luciftias”.
- **Chanting.** The sound of intoned prayer defines the “Vinu” (Invoke) movement of *The Golden Dawn*, as well as “The Hidden God” from *Apocryphon*.
- **Light and Darkness.** Toward the end, forces of light and darkness clash and fuse in opposing movements. In *The Golden Dawn*, Light (movement 5, *Luciftias* or light) comes before Darkness (movement 6, *Yor* or roar). *Apocryphon of Initiation* plunges to the depths in *Night of Seth* before rising triumphantly in *Opening the Eyes of Horus*. (In Egyptian mythology, Seth killed his brother Osiris to become king, and Osiris’s son Horus in turn avenged his father and defeated Seth, losing an eye in combat.)
- **Final Contemplation.** The final movements of both works return to a final place of contemplation and reflection at the end of a long journey.

The Golden Dawn was written for seven pianists (Anna Goldsworthy, Gabriella Smart, Jane Burgess, Inna Fursa, Rosanne Hammer, Phuong Vuong, and Debra Andreacchio) all students of the Russian-Australian pedagogue Eleonora Sivan, whose long and distinguished career at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide produced many brilliant piano artists and teachers. Each movement has a single word as a title from the Enochian language, a language of angels that was documented by John Dee and Edward Kelley in the late 16th century. Larry Sitsky represents this language musically with shimmering, ringing timbres that extend the impressionistic pianism of Debussy and Szymanowski. The movements are structured according

to their dynamic shapes, with a combination of crescendos (<) and decrescendos (>):

1. Mahorela (Dark Heavens) < (crescendo)
Percussive effects dominate, from quiet drum taps at the beginning to rich gong-like textures to a thunderous end that seems to herald the arrival of a supernatural force.
2. Malpirgi (Fiery Darts) > (decrescendo)
Beginning with harsh low clusters and shrieking tremolos, rapidly shifting textures and volatile moods give this movement an aura of humour and unpredictability.
3. Vinu (Invoke) <> (crescendo-decrescendo)
Chanting and wailing melodies give way to the emergence of a mysterious chord that slowly unfolds and then disappears at the centre of this movement. Near the end, thickly pedalled lines coalesce into a dark, otherworldly texture from which the faint cries of a distant being are scarcely audible, then fade into nothingness.
4. Ser (Lament) >< (decrescendo-crescendo)
The composer notes that he completed this movement just before the death of his longtime colleague and friend, the violinist Jan Sedivka. The wailing, widely spaced melody at the opening gradually quietens to a hymn-like lull. As the music builds to a final climax, the famous BACH motif (B flat-A-C-B natural) is intoned three times, accompanied by progressively denser and harsher counterpoint.
5. Luciftias (Brightness) <>< (crescendo-decrescendo-crescendo)
This movement is a glorious example of Sitsky's "water music", recalling the impressionist piano palette. It features static harmonies and flashing gestures that build up into a watery resonance.

6. Yor (Roar) ><> (decrecendo-crescendo-decrecendo)
The “roar” fluctuates between chaotic perturbations and sinister growls. It is the antithesis of the brightness in the previous movement.
7. Vaoan (Truth) <<>> (crescendo-decrecendo-crescendo-decrecendo)
Warm radiance and contemplation reign at the end of this spiritual journey. The sudden swell near the end, building to clashing cymbal-like clusters, seems to evoke a celestial being. The piece ends with a slow harmony drifting to the top of the piano before dissipating into silence.

Apocryphon of Initiation was originally intended to be played in recital together with Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” Sonata. The longest and most complex of Beethoven’s 32 piano sonatas, the “Hammerklavier” revels in its sheer outrageousness, constantly developing and building every motif into a frothing climax, indulging in a 20-minute slow movement (by itself longer than most Classical sonatas!) and concluding with a fugue that pushes the limits of the piano and of the fugal form. If the “Hammerklavier” was Beethoven’s *ne plus ultra* of Classical sonatas, *Apocryphon of Initiation* is the apex of Sitsky’s exploration of piano forms. Like Beethoven, Sitsky uses crescendi liberally, constantly inching up the tension one notch further. Each of its nine movements can stand alone as the definitive expression of a particular compositional technique or style that Sitsky has explored in earlier works, and together the nine movements form a masterpiece of symphonic proportions, both in terms of length and orchestral ambitions—Sitsky indicates “orchestration” in the score, from “muted trombones” to “doubling high metallophones” to “computerised harp with reverb”. The movement descriptions below include some of these printed orchestrations (as well as some possible further orchestrations—the “drum solo” idea at the end of the last three movements was posited by Edward and seemed to meet with the composer’s approval). Like many

of his large-scale works, these movements are linked by common musical threads, most prominently an exploration of repeated notes. A melody that repeats a single pitch over and over seems to recall chanting or prayer, or a more rapid repetition can sound like a pianistic “vibrato”. Rhythmic repeated notes imitate drums in a low register or bells and xylophones in a high register, and more widely spaced repeated notes become more atmospheric, like intermittent disturbances within a broad musical landscape.

1. The Pyramid of Light

The Pyramid is represented by rich warm string melodies, with bright rays of light shooting upward in piccolo strokes. Percussion—gongs and xylophones predominating—adds a brilliant warmth. Toward the end, the brass section enters in powerful low doubled octaves, and the orchestral mass expands, gradually centring on a pulsing repeated A.

2. The Veil of Isis

Beginning with a warm but distant texture, Isis gradually emerges in an expressive yet hypnotic melody. As the music acquires more energy, the themes spiral out into different directions—nervous patterns, volatile runs, quiet watery textures—before finally settling on a chorale melody accompanied by a contra-bassoon drone.

3. Mysteries of Osiris

The chorale motifs from the previous movement return in the peaceful middle section, surrounded by passionate and rhapsodic turbulence on either side.

4. The Avenue of Sphinxes

Tapping on the piano morphs into an urgent march, building relentlessly into an explosion of sound before suddenly fading into rapid descending scales. The end of the movement tries twice to build to a similar climax but abruptly cuts off mid-flow.

5. The Hidden God

An unwavering voice sings a plaintive chant, accompanied by punctuating noises from a variety of instruments. As the singing becomes full and warm, the instruments become more insistent, eventually coalescing into brutal bass clusters. At three points, the “hidden god” emerges and sings three short phrases accompanied by rumbling bass patterns.

6. Voices from Silence

Single notes emerge from a bed of silence. Gradually, longer gestures form, and as the texture becomes more dense, they combine into broader melodies that fill the piano with resonance.

7. Night of Seth

Pounding and shrieking predominate in this dark movement. Bare and jagged attacks in the bass register lead to a quiet reminiscence of the chorale from the Isis and Osiris movements (2 & 3), which is then brutally interrupted by fistfuls of chords stretching across the entire instrument. A brief drum solo finishes the movement with a bang.

8. Opening the Eyes of Horus

The god Horus is usually depicted with a single eye, but in this movement he opens four eyes, in four waves of sound, each one more intense than the last. If the Seth movement represented darkness, the ascending, blossoming gestures of Horus represent light. The drum solo at the end of this movement is even louder and more triumphant than in the previous movement.

9. Illumination of the Adept

Like in many of Sitsky’s multi-movement works, this last movement ties together loose threads with fragmentary recollections of previous melodies. The Isis/Osiris chorale returns triumphantly, bolstered by rich tutti chords. The movement seems to die away into the quiet tapping from “The Avenue of

Sphinxes” and the sparsely textured opening of “Voices from Silence”, but is resurrected in a sudden climax recalling the merciless aggression of “Night of Seth”. The end comes abruptly with vigorous drumming as in the previous two movements, this time even more intense and dramatic.

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Larry Sitsky AO was born in 1934 in China of Russian-Jewish parents, and emigrated to Sydney in 1951. He studied piano with the distinguished Australian pianist and teacher Winifred Burston, and then with Egon Petri at the San Francisco Conservatory. He taught at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, and in 1966 was appointed Head of Keyboard Studies at the School of Music in Canberra (now part of the Australian National University), where he is currently an Emeritus Professor. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for his distinguished service to the arts in 2017.

As a composer, Sitsky has received two A. H. Maggs awards, the Alfred Hill Memorial Prize, a China Fellowship, the Fellowship of Composers prize, and the National Critics’ Award. In 1984 he received the inaugural Australian Composer’s Fellowship presented by the Australia Council. Sitsky was the recipient of a Fulbright Award and an Advance Australia Award for achievement in music. He has had works commissioned by the ABC, Musica Viva, the International Clarinet Society, the Sydney International Piano Competition, Flederman, and the International Flute Convention.

Sitsky has published numerous scholarly books, including a two-volume set on the reproducing piano roll, *Music of the Repressed Russian Avant-Garde*,

1900-1929, two books on Australian music, and an upcoming three-volume set on the music of Ferruccio Busoni. His recordings include the complete sonatas of the Australian composer Roy Agnew among several recordings of Australian piano music.

For further information and a list of works:

<https://www.australiancomposers.com.au/pages/larry-sitsky-ao>



The Australian-American pianist **Edward Neeman** has performed across five continents. Critics have lauded him as a “true artist” with “an excellent technique” who “isn’t afraid to put a distinctive stamp on whatever he touches, without resorting to mannerism.” A top prizewinner of numerous international piano competitions, including first prize in the Joaquín Rodrigo Competition in Madrid, Dr. Neeman has appeared as a soloist with the Prague Philharmonic, Sydney Symphony, Melbourne Symphony, Kentucky Symphony, Symphony of

Northwest Arkansas, and the American West Symphony among others.

Dr. Neeman’s debut album, *Rachmaninoff & Sitsky*, was released to critical acclaim in March 2016. An enthusiastic collaborative artist, he has performed with musicians including Itamar Zorman, Kristian Winther, the New Zealand String Quartet, and members of the JACK quartet. Dr. Neeman has made numerous piano duet arrangements for the Neeman Piano Duo, in which he performs with his wife, the Indonesian pianist Stephanie Neeman.

Dr. Neeman holds a Bachelor of Music degree from the Australian National University, a Master of Music from the Manhattan School of Music, and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from The Juilliard School. His teachers have included James

Tocco, Jerome Lowenthal, Solomon Mikowsky, and Larry Sitsky. He is on the piano faculty at the Australian National University in Canberra.

www.neemanpianoduo.com

Credits

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