
charles tomlinson griffes



Born in upstate New York in 1884, Charles Tomlinson Griffes was a promising pianist before shifting his focus to composition. His early achievements as a performer took him to Berlin, where he enrolled at the Stern Conservatory. While in Europe he also studied briefly with Engelbert Humperdinck, renowned composer

of the opera *Hansel und Gretel*. After returning to the US, Griffes taught music at a preparatory school in Tarrytown, NY, for 13 years beginning in 1907. While not entirely to his liking, the position allowed Griffes to pursue composition without being tethered to commissions or wealthy patrons.

Griffes' published compositions include numerous piano works, a concertante work for flute and orchestra (entitled *Poem*), orchestral and chamber arrangements of his own piano pieces, and several dozen songs. He was fascinated by the music and traditional performing arts of Japan, and composed arrangements of Japanese folk melodies and dances as well as a one-act pantomime (a staged dramatic work), *Shō-jo*, based on Japanese themes.

Among Griffes' wholly original works, the influence of the so-called Impressionist composers, namely Debussy, is clear. The use of whole tone collections, evocative titles, and floating, non-functional harmony (in other words, lacking clear dominant-tonic cadences or other conventional chord progressions) imparts a distinct atmosphere to these mature works composed in the final decade or so of his life.

In what direction Griffes' style as a composer may have evolved will forever remain a mystery: a victim of the Spanish Flu pandemic, Charles Griffes died in 1920 at the age of 35.

practice & performance

The Lake at Evening

Just as the dark surface of a lake conceals its depths, the soothing ostinato and simple texture of this music indeed obscure its difficulties.

Griffes suggests a tempo and character of *tranquillo e dolce*. While it is tempting to read this and revert to, simply, 'slow', there are a couple of factors to consider when choosing the right tempo. First, the pulse must be fluid enough that the longer notes in the melody (such as the dotted half note tied to a quarter note in mm. 3–4) sustain and connect to the next note, even when played *pp*. If too slow a tempo is taken, these long notes will decay too soon to complete the phrase. Also, the underlying *ostinato* pattern creates a hemiola effect: we hear three groups of two that coincide with two measures in a feeling of three beats per bar, resulting in a subtle metric dissonance. Too slow a tempo can ruin this effect by making the meter sound like $\frac{3}{4}$.

In addition to rendering the small-scale waves lapping on the shore (the ostinato patterns and individual phrases), some thought must be given to the large-scale emotional 'wave' of the piece. The listener must be able to follow this overarching shape as it builds one phrase at a time to the climax at measure 40 then recedes the rest of the way until the end.

While this climax will likely be clear due to the thicker, active texture, the outer sections will benefit from a careful delineation between *pp*, *p*, and *mp*. Experiment with the una corda pedal: what kind of colors can result, and how firmly can the melody be voiced, when using the left pedal in the sections marked *pp*? By playing with a bit more finger pressure, the melody will project well despite the use of the una corda, and the background *ostinato* will remain hazy and distant. Then, a gentler touch without the soft pedal in *p* or *mp* dynamics will create a clear and light-bodied, yet slightly more present, color.

As with several measures in “The Lake at Evening”, half-pedal marks have been added in order facilitate an effective diminuendo in mm. 33–37. The damper pedal tends to increase the overall dynamic: as sounds sustain, they accumulate and are amplified. A too-clean change of pedal therefore creates a sudden drop in the overall dynamic and a noticeable dearth of resonance (the “cloud” of pedal is most palpable when it has disappeared suddenly). For this reason, a succession of half-pedal changes, or a gradual “fluttering” of the pedal to clear it, is a technique that should be mastered and used in such situations.

8va

33

f

dim. molto

1/2 ped. 1/2 ped. 1/2 ped. 1/2 ped.

The RH in mm. 30–32 should be practiced in separate voices: outer notes first (i.e., an octave), followed by combinations the middle note plus either the top or bottom voice. Similarly, both hands should practice different permutations of voices in the chords in mm. 33–34 to ensure a confident rendering of this climactic moment.

31

8va

31

8va

31

8va

While the LH in mm. 51–53 must play the 16th note triplet patterns alone and could feasibly continue unaided in mm. 54–55, the suggestion to redistribute several notes to the RH is intended to facilitate greater control of an extremely *pp* touch.

54

pp

1 5 4 2 1 6 5 3

The Night Winds

A weightless, rapid finger touch will be essential to mastering this piece; no matter how loudly the wind is howling, it is always fleeting (*fuggevole*, in Griffes' marking) and ephemeral. Even in *f* or *ff* sections, the performer must avoid resting the fingers into the keybed. The long slurs should be viewed as phrase instead of articulation markings: feel how the line sweeps all the way through each slur, in one gesture. Maintain a slightly *non-legato* finger touch, rather than overlapping. With a bit of added pedal (and plenty of speed), these notes will sound sufficiently connected; a legato touch will only blur the texture and tend to drag at performance tempo.

The ever-present running 16th and 32nd notes will require the most diligence in polishing the technical challenges of “The Night Winds”. The primary approach to running passagework like this typically relies on what many teachers call “practice rhythms”: place an imaginary fermata on the first note of the group, visualize playing through to the next stopping point, then get to the first note of the next group in a fluid tempo and pause there. Continue through any particular passage the same way. After mastering one “rhythm”, shift the *fermata* to the final (or any other) note in each group.

11

f

molto cresc.

1 2 6 2

Three Tone-Pictures

I. The Lake at Evening

... for always...

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore...

—W. B. Yeats, *The Lake Isle Of Innisfree*

Charles Tomlinson Griffes

Op. 5, No. 1

Tranquillo e dolce *pp ma espressivo*

una corda

6 *poco cresc.*

12 *p*

18 *pp* *dim.* *1/2 ped.* *flutter ped.*

II. The Vale of Dreams

At midnight, in the month of June, I stand beneath the mystic moon.
An opiate vapour, dewy, dim, exhales from out her golden rim, and,
softly dripping, drop by drop, upon the quiet mountain top,
steals drowsily and musically into the universal alley.

—Edgar Allen Poe, *The Sleeper*

Charles Tomlinson Griffes
Op. 5, No. 2

Sognando

pp

p

mf

poco cresc.

5

9

13

4 3 5 4 3 1 4 2 5 4 2

2 2 4 2 5 3 4 2

3 1 5 5 3 2 1 1 3 4 3 2 1

3 3 3 3 5 2 1 2 4 4 1 2 1 2 5 1 3(4)

III. The Night Winds

But when the night had thrown her pall upon that spot, as upon all,
and the mystic wind went by mumuring in melody—then—ah then
I would awake to the terror of the lone lake.

—Edgar Allen Poe, *The Lake*

Charles Tomlinson Griffes
Op. 5, No. 3

Presto fuggevole

8va

pp

1 2 4 5

6 6

6 *molto cresc.* 6

4 3 1 5 2 3 1 3

2

8va

f

7 7 7 6

1 3 4

pp

molto dim.

5 3 5

5 2 1 2 1

1/2 ped. 1/2 ped.

4

4-5 2-3

4 1 3 4 2

mf

5 3 2 5 3 2 3 1

1 2 3 2 1 2 3 4 1 3

mf

1 2 4

dim.

6

pp

4 5

f 7

dim. 6

molto cresc.