

FSM ONLINE

Sudden Heffes

Alex Heffes takes a journey of self-discovery and healing while preparing his new solo piano album, *Sudden Light*.

By Chris Hadley



After Alex Heffes suffered a devastating hand injury following a bike crash in 2018, a long period of surgery and recovery eventually enabled him to get back behind his main instrument, the piano. As part of “relearning” to play, the composer took the opportunity to “reverse engineer” some of his favorite film cues and bring them back to the instrument that birthed them. The result is the album *Sudden Light*, an intimate but powerful collection of Heffes-composed tracks rearranged for piano, performed by Heffes and released by Silva Screen Records.

Sudden Light’s selections from Heffes’ scores like Disney’s *Queen of Katwe*, *State of Play*, *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, plus documentaries including *One Day in September*, *Earth: One Amazing Day* and *Touching the Void*, reveal lyrical traits that were sometimes obscured or abbreviated in their original recordings. The album also features expanded takes on the composer’s ragtime-style cues for the World War I-era drama *The 24th*, plus two compositions of great personal meaning to Heffes: “The Final Letter,” from the 2004 film *Dear Frankie*, and “For John (In Memory of JAT),” a brief yet poignant tribute to Heffes’ longtime orchestrator and veteran composer/conductor John Ashton Thomas, who passed away suddenly in 2021 at the age of 60.

As an album, *Sudden Light* is doubly transformative: in a musical sense, given that many of its tracks previously existed only in their full orchestral form, and

also in a personal sense for the composer, who nearly gave up playing the piano in the aftermath of his injury, but instead rededicated himself to the instrument that fuels every part of his creative work.

Chris Hadley: In 2018, you suffered a major accident that resulted in a debilitating hand injury. After extensive surgery and rehab on that hand, you nearly quit playing the piano, but then you decided to rededicate yourself to doing just that. Besides the fact that you rely on piano to compose your scores, what else motivated you to try to play again, and how have you physically readjusted to the instrument since the accident?

Alex Heffes: First of all, I should say that after I had the accident, I sort of pushed to the back of my mind the problem I had with playing because I was in the middle of doing a movie and I just had to get through it somehow, and I was using one hand. I managed to finish the movie, which was great, but I [ignored] whatever ongoing problems there might be with playing the piano. And it wasn't for actually a very long time after then, when it really occurred to me, I might not be able to properly play that instrument ever again. Maybe I was just trying to avoid thinking about it, but really [*Sudden Light*] came about with me passing a piano one day, just thinking, "Gosh, I haven't played this instrument just for myself properly for over a year," and feeling like I didn't want to sit down and not be able to play properly because my left hand wasn't functioning at all.

I sat down and started trying to pick out themes and melodies I'd written for film, just for fun as a way of seeing what I could do and trying to reconnect with the instrument. It was out of curiosity and not really any other motivation. I carried on doing that for a while and it took a while for the light bulb moment to happen for me to think, "Well, I might have a nice piano record here. If I carry on trying to make these themes work on the piano, this could be a great collection of music." But how could I make it work with the left hand that wasn't really functioning properly? I tried to relax and not worry about that and see what I could do, and that's how the project evolved over a period of time.

CH: The left hand being your dominant hand when you play piano?

AH: It's funny. You know what they say, "You don't know what you've got until you miss it." It's not my dominant hand, but it's funny how you realize how much you depend on certain things when you can't do it. So I couldn't stretch. Usually I could stretch a 10th really easily with my left hand, so I could play nice wide cord spacings to get that John Barry sound, imagining the trombones in 10ths. I couldn't do that anymore. I didn't have any agility in that hand, but actually having some restrictions wasn't necessarily a bad thing because I started learning how to revoice things and do it slightly differently. The truth is that the more I relaxed about it, the more the hand actually played ball and started freeing up

and rehabilitating itself. It's funny, but it was almost like a mental hurdle I had to get over. As soon as I did that, it started getting a lot better.

CH: This album contains newly arranged piano versions of music from your scores, including narrative features such as *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* and *Queen of Katwe*, and documentaries like *Earth: One Amazing Day*, *One Day in September* and *Touching the Void*. Much of this music began on piano and was later fully translated for orchestra, with some of the film cues still including actual piano in the finished orchestration. How did you approach the process of reducing the material back down for piano?

AH: It was a really interesting thing to do as a composer to try and reverse-engineer my music back to something a lot more simple—just from a composing point of view, let alone a playing point of view. What I tried to do is think about what the music, in essence, really is. So like in the *Mandela* theme, even though we had a big orchestra and recorded at Abbey Road Studio One with loads of strings, I felt like reducing that theme down to something bare-bones and simple would be [really effective](#) on the piano, and it didn't need that sense of scale. I didn't necessarily feel like I had to mimic the arrangements of the orchestra on the piano, but I could reimagine how that music could sound. It was a bit like shining a sudden light on it, if you like, and reimagining how that music could speak in a different way.



CH: Beyond the obvious difference in instrumentation, in what ways do these solo piano arrangements transform this music so that it stands out from the fully arranged versions?

AH: I often think of a theme a bit like a piece of DNA. It's got lots of information packed up inside it. The process of writing rewriting this music for *Sudden Light* was a little bit like letting that DNA unravel. In [the case of] *Queen of*

Katwe, I had a theme that was quite short and concise in the film. For the piano version, I wanted to unravel it and let it go into a slightly new space and see where that music would take me. It was interesting to let the musical DNA unravel and see where it wanted to go, and it sort of surprised me. It's funny having written it, but when you have space to let something breathe, because the film isn't dictating exactly where the music needs to go, it was fascinating to see where it wanted to expand.

CH: What factored into your choices for the score selections we hear on this album? Did they have any personal meaning to you, or were they chosen more based on how they would work, given the contrast of a larger orchestral backing and solo piano?

AH: I chose [some of the music on *Sudden Light*] because it had a personal connection to me. *Mandela* is a very important film for me. I got to go to South Africa and work with incredible musicians, singers and percussionists there, and I got to meet Nelson Mandela's daughter during the process.



It made a huge impression on me, so I wanted that piece of music to be included, but there are other pieces and films that are less well known that I wanted to include for personal reasons. The first track on the CD [[“The Final Letter”](#)] is taken from a small film called *Dear Frankie*, which I did many years ago. I got a lot of fan mail about that film at the time. People really connected with the piano score. I had people writing to me; lots of kids wanting to learn it, but also parents wanting to learn the music with their kids. I even had an adult write to me saying that their father, who had dementia and was struggling to communicate, was still able to play the piano, and they were able to learn the theme from *Dear*

Frankie together on the piano. It was a way of them connecting with each other in difficult times.

That piece has a lot of memories for me and it's really incredible as a composer, because we are locked away in our studio a lot of the time. It's great to get feedback and to hear people really connecting with your music. That was why I wanted to include that piece and why I wanted some of this music to be out there, because I have a lot of requests for people wanting to play my music on the piano. Hal Leonard actually had issued piano scores for some of these as well, so that people can play, and I love hearing people play my music on YouTube. They do their own arrangements and versions of it, and it's lovely to connect with your audience directly and have them be able to enjoy your music in a new way.

CH: Following up on *Dear Frankie*, how did the solo piano arrangement of "The Final Letter" differ from the film version?

AH: Well, there were strings and winds in the original version, so I had to think about ways of replacing those. The piano part is largely drawn from the solo piano part from the film, but I was interested in trying to find those orchestral colors in the original score in the piano arrangements. A lot of piano music almost tries to avoid coloration, because simple piano music is really effective and speaks to people. I wanted the music to retain that simplicity, but I wanted to find some coloration, as well.

We had a really wonderful piano from Steinway [that we used on the recording]. The one I chose, it turns out, is the one that John Williams has used on many of his scores in recent years. They told me after I picked it, and he loves it because of that gradation of color it has. Even though the piano can play strongly and loudly, it was the quiet end that really attracted me. As you carry on with the piano getting quiet, the colors change. I could find different ways of finding those orchestra colors with the dynamics with that piano. So one way I approached it with the *Dear Frankie* piece was to play it a lot quieter than it is in the film, to see if I could invoke some of those different shades and tones.

CH: Did the knowledge of how this music has touched people, and this general connection with your listeners, influence your performance on this particular track or elsewhere?

AH: It's definitely influenced me doing this project, and originally when I wasn't feeling confident about my hand and being able to play, I had thought of having a concert pianist perform the music on the record. I had a lot of friends and colleagues who encouraged me to try and do it myself because it would be a way of me being able to voice my own way of playing my music, which I'm really grateful for. Having gone over that worry with my hand, I feel that it's been a way for me to be able to put my own performance stamp on the music, which is something you don't often get to do when you're doing film music. I was taking a

little bit more time [with] the music and having the space to let it breathe, and I would play in the way that I've always played. Even though I'm classically trained and I was a relatively good pianist, my heart always lay in writing and improvising and playing my own music, rather than being a concert pianist. This is a chance for me to be myself and be natural and to have that come across on the record.

CH: Two of the tracks on this album, "[Boston and Marie](#)" and "Marie's Rag," come from your score to the Kevin Willmott-directed historical film *The 24th*. They're performed on camera in the movie in the popular ragtime piano style of the early 20th century. Discuss how you not only reworked these cues for the album, but also the ways you creatively expanded on them, as a means of showing your appreciation of the style.

AH: I'm a real fan of ragtime and all types of jazz, and ragtime is interesting for me as it's proto-jazz. It's there at the vanguard of that new music, and it crosses over from classical music into something totally new, where blues and jazz and dance music were appearing. I found writing the music for Kevin Willmott's film so fascinating from that point of view. It's an amazing film and story, but the reason why I wanted to include these pieces on the record was that I had written a part of "[Marie's Rag](#)" that she plays on screen, as you said, but I felt like there was more music in there and we only needed 16 or 24 bars of that in the movie. It was a fragment of music that never found its natural end. I thought this would be a lovely way of me imagining in my head if Marie were to sit down at the piano and play the whole piece through, what it would sound like. That was my fun sort of replaying of the movie in my head, in my own way.



CH: Were there other tracks where you got to expand upon the original structure and add substantial new elements like this?

AH: I definitely had fun with the BBC *Planet Earth* tracks, [“The Rainforest Waltz”](#) and “The Penguin Raiders” [from *Earth: One Amazing Day*]. Nature films are really fun to score for composers because we can go to town, but what I did [with] the piano versions was take the themes and reimagine those scenes so that the piano could go on its own adventure. There were moments where I would stick to the theme and then suddenly go off in a totally different direction because the music was pulling me there. Then I would come back in the middle of the piece to the original cue. I enjoyed freewheeling in and out of the original music. It was a fun thing to do. And because they’re nature films, they’re quite colorful and notey and fun to experiment with. So those two, I definitely had a blast with.



The Steinway of Choice: The instrument chosen by John Williams and Alex Heffes.

CH: As for the selections that were originally heard in large orchestral form, which were the most challenging to rearrange for piano and which were the most challenging, if any, to perform for this album?

AH: The piece from *The Elephant Queen* (the Apple TV+ feature documentary) was definitely challenging, especially as the movie is set in Kenya. It’s a phenomenal film following the lives of this troop of elephants and the ups and downs of their incredible story. In the original, of course, we had big orchestra and we had lots of African percussion and vocals, as well. Trying to think about how to adapt that big palette for something that would work just on the piano was definitely a challenge. But again, I wanted to key into what the melodic, thematic material was and work with that as the starting point. It was a technical

challenge playing that one for me, not least because of the hand, but it was fun. That one is called [“Moving On.”](#)

CH: The album’s penultimate track, titled [“For John \(In Memory of JAT\).”](#) is a tribute to your longtime orchestrator and collaborator, John Ashton Thomas, who unexpectedly passed away last year. Describe how you created it and how both composing and performing it helped you to honor his memory and his legacy.

AH: A lot of your readers, even if they don’t know John’s name, will certainly be familiar with his work because he was the foremost orchestrator of his generation, for sure. They’d know his work through so much of John Powell’s music over the years and so many other composers. John Ashton Thomas and I had worked together for many years. When he died very suddenly last year, it was a shock to everyone. The day I heard about it, I just sat down at the piano and I wrote a very short little fragment of music, on my own, really just as a personal thing. When I was recording *Sudden Light* in the studio down at United Recording in Hollywood, on a break, I was sitting at the piano noodling. I played this theme that I’d written for John and I think [album recording engineer] Dennis Sands chimed up and said, “What was that?” I explained that it was just a simple thing. I’d written it the day John died, and he said, “We think you should record it and put it on the record.” So this was literally a one-take little thing at the end, but John had been a really big part of my musical life and a good friend. So I felt like this was a fitting memorial to him, seeing as some of the music on this record was really quite bound up with him, too.

CH: Could you speak a little more about the recording process?

AH: After two years of the pandemic, it was actually really exciting to get into a studio because so much of what I’d done [lately] had been done remotely. Even though it was just me in the studio with the producer and the engineer, it was exciting to be back in a place that I’m so used to being in. From that point of view, it was great. I was in very good hands with Peter Miles, who was producing the record for me. He’s an extremely experienced music editor and you would know him from many films, but he’s also a good friend and was a record producer. I felt like surrounding myself with Peter and Dennis Sands and all the staff there at United. I had fantastic backup and I had great ears in the box, because sometimes when you’re playing in the room, you don’t necessarily hear it the way that people are hearing it on speakers. It was great to know I had people there who could give me feedback, and I told them not to be too polite, so we were well covered with takes. It was a very intense couple of days, but very rewarding and a great way to try and get back into real life, like we’ve all had to try and get back into after the strange last couple of years we’ve had.

CH: Were many of these performances captured in one take like “For John?”

AH: Some of them were one take, and some of them we did splice [from multiple takes]. I think the idea was always to get a good master take all the way through that covered the whole piece really well. Then we would go in and fix certain things, but I certainly wanted to keep some sense of flow and naturalness about it.



CH: As a composer, a performer, and a human being who has overcome injury to continue writing and playing music, what has making *Sudden Light* meant to you?

AH: It's meant an awful lot. In a way I've had to look at my catalog of work and think about it, which is interesting because I don't often look back. I'm always looking forward to the next project because I'm always excited about looking forward, but it's nice once in a while to look back and see where you've come from and to acknowledge that. And also to connect with an audience directly and be able to be the person out front and to present the music and say, "Here it is, this is how I hear it. I hope you enjoy it this way."

—FSMO