CHAPTER 1

Gurdjieff, His Music and Teaching

This book focuses on a significant but little-understood part of Gurdjieff’s work: the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann piano music. This music was composed in a peculiar collaboration between Gurdjieff, the unpredictable and provocative spiritual teacher with little musical training, and his devoted pupil de Hartmann, a refined and cultivated aristocrat, classically trained in composition to the highest of standards. In de Hartmann’s memoirs and those of other pupils Gurdjieff and de Hartmann’s unusual compositional process is described; Gurdjieff would whistle, sing, and tap melodies and rhythms and de Hartmann would immediately transform these indications into written Western notation, adding harmonies. De Hartmann attributed their music to Gurdjieff, “[i]t is not my music; it is his. I have only picked up the Master’s handkerchief,” but de Hartmann’s compositional role should not be undervalued. After all, Gurdjieff could only minimally read and notate music, and he composed nothing before or after his contact with de Hartmann. Altogether, Gurdjieff and de Hartmann composed around 223 pieces of piano music; 156 pieces were published in four volumes of sheet music by Schott, and around sixty-seven pieces remain unpublished. More sketches of pieces exist in draft form.

The piano music was not published or recorded in Gurdjieff’s lifetime, and it appears that he never had plans for this to be done. Regardless, soon after his death in 1949 pupils were eager to preserve his legacy, including the piano music. On his successor Jeanne de Salzmann’s initiative, it was organised to be privately recorded and published by de Hartmann. Between 1950 and 1955 de Hartmann made a large selection of recordings and oversaw the publication of five volumes of sheet music by Janus in Paris. Both the recordings and sheet music were intended initially for use strictly within Gurdjieff Foundation groups. The piano music first came to public attention decades later in 1979 with the release of the soundtrack to Peter Brook’s relatively successful cinematic adaptation of Gurdjieff’s semi-autobiographical Meetings with Remarkable Men. This featured orchestrations of the piano music by Laurence Rosenthal.

Moore, Gurdjieff The Anatomy of a Myth, 350.
2 See Appendix D, from Linda Daniel-Spitz, Charles Ketcham, Laurence Rosenthal, “Chronological Order of Compositions,” in Gurdjieff/de Hartmann: Music for the Piano, Vol. 4 (Mainz, Germany: Schott, 2005), 109–115. This number excludes pieces in the volumes that were composed for Gurdjieff’s ballet The Struggle of the Magicians, and for Movements. For more see Chapter 6.
The following year renowned jazz and classical pianist Keith Jarrett released his *G.I. Gurdjieff Sacred Hymns*, recorded on the prestigious and eclectic German record label ECM (Editions of Contemporary Music). At this time Jarrett was at the height of his career; his landmark improvised recording *The Köln Concert* (1975) had sold more than five million copies and became the top-selling solo piano album of any genre.³ Jarrett’s *G.I. Gurdjieff Sacred Hymns* was a catalyst in drawing attention to the music for a mainstream audience, and it remains the best-selling recording of Gurdjieff’s music.⁴ More recordings of the music, mainly from within the Work, followed. Between 1996 and 2005, under the direction of de Salzmann, Schott released four ‘definitive’ volumes of sheet music of the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann piano music. This was the first and only edition of the sheet music available to the public, making accessible a large quantity of the music that enabled yet more recordings, and now by musicians who were outside the Work. These recordings represent the piano music’s greatest cultural penetration into wider society, though the consensus among more orthodox Work members is that the Gurdjieff/de Hartmann piano music only has value when experienced live and in a Work context. Before delving further into Gurdjieff’s music, it is necessary to give some background to Gurdjieff and his teaching.

**Categorising Gurdjieff**

Gurdjieff notoriously evades simple categorisation. To begin, it is difficult to class him as either an Easterner or a Westerner as he was born in Alexandropol in Russian Armenia, an area of the world that could be considered a meeting point between East and West. This is sometimes explained as symbolic of his attempts to reconcile Eastern and Western spiritual traditions.⁵ As he spent his most fruitful years as a teacher in Europe, and since his teaching can largely be placed in the lineage of Western esotericism (see below), he is here loosely considered a Westerner. This is the view taken by Andrew Rawlinson, who includes Gurdjieff in a long list of Western teachers in Eastern traditions. Rawlinson defines the act of synthesising various Eastern spiritual teachings as genuinely Western, stating that the uniqueness of “the phenomenon of Western teachers” is their discovery and absorption of Eastern teachings.

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⁴ Steve Lake, pers. comm. (5 December 2010).