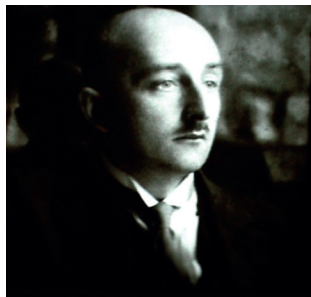




Music for Gurdjieff's
SACRED DANCES



Thomas de Hartmann, early publicity photo.

Music for Gurdjieff's SACRED DANCES

BY ELAN SICROFF

THE MUSIC of Thomas de Hartmann (1884-1956), acclaimed in Russia at the turn of the 20th century and widely performed in Western Europe in the 1930s and '40s, is returning to public awareness for the first time since his death. This is in large part due to the efforts of the **Thomas de Hartmann Project**, which was initiated in 2006 by pianist Elan Sicroff, under the guidance of guitarist Robert Fripp and supported by a team of specialists. Many of de Hartmann's works for orchestra, opera, solo piano, as well as his chamber and vocal music, are now available on CD and some of the world's great artists have begun to promote his work.

This album introduces another side of de Hartmann's output, the music that he composed for Gurdjieff's sacred dances, which are commonly known as the Movements. These were developed by Gurdjieff (?1866, ?1872, 1877? - 1949) during two periods: first between 1917 and 1924 and later in the 1940s. The music for the early dances was composed by Gurdjieff and de Hartmann together, in an unusual collaboration that began in 1918. De Hartmann wrote the music for the later dances alone in 1950, after Gurdjieff's death on October 29, 1949.

Thomas de Hartmann

De Hartmann was born into the aristocracy in the village of Khoruzhivka, then part of the Russian Empire and now in northern Ukraine. His musical talent manifested early and at the age of twelve he became a pupil of the Russian Romantic composer Anton Arensky (1861-1906), who also taught Rachmaninoff and Scriabin. He studied piano at the St. Petersburg Conservatory with Annette Essipova (1851-1914), one of the great virtuosos of the 19th century. Between 1906 and 1915 he pursued further studies with Sergei Tanayev (1856-1915), famous for his mastery of counterpoint and sometimes referred to as the 'Russian Brahms.'

De Hartmann rose to fame in Russia with the performance of his ballet *La Fleurette Rouge (The Scarlet Flower)* at the Marinsky Theater in St. Petersburg in 1907. Numerous performances followed in the years leading up to World War I with a cast that included luminaries such as Nijinsky, Karsavina, Fokine, Pavlova and Legat.

On the strength of his ballet, de Hartmann was given an exemption from military service by the Tsar in order to pursue his career in music. He left for Munich in 1908 to study conducting with Felix Mottl, a pupil of Wagner. While there, he met Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) and joined the Blaue Reiter group, which advocated for the avant-garde in art. During this period, the dancer Alexander Sacharov joined Kandinsky and de Hartmann to experiment in a number of multi-media productions that included dance, painting, music and theater. The most famous of these projects was *Der Gelbe Klang (The Yellow Sound)*, sometimes described as an abstract opera. It was so far ahead of its time that the director of the Moscow Arts Theater responded to de Hartmann's proposal for a performance by saying that they "could not do this kind of mad thing." The work languished incomplete and was only reconstructed from remaining fragments by Gunther Schuller in the 1980s, long after the deaths of Kandinsky and de Hartmann.



Thomas de Hartmann with Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter, c. 1913.

In his book *Our Life With Mr. Gurdjieff*, de Hartmann writes that the Russian fairy tales were an important influence upon him from early childhood. Many of them embody the story of the Quest, itself a metaphor for the spiritual path: "Go -- not knowing where; bring -- not knowing what; the path is long, the way unknown; the hero knows not

how to arrive there by himself alone; he has to seek the guidance and the help of the Higher Forces....” His search for deeper meaning came into focus while living in Munich between 1908 and 1914. Kandinsky, 18 years older than de Hartmann, acted as a guide for the young composer. He had joined the Theosophical movement, and through that association had been exposed to Hinduism and Buddhism.

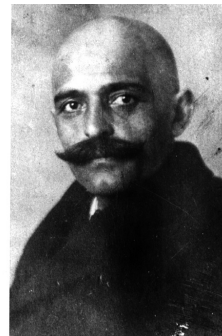
De Hartmann’s growing interest in spirituality led him to meet Gurdjieff in St. Petersburg in December 1916. This was a seminal moment for both men: de Hartmann found the spiritual teacher that he had been looking for and Gurdjieff now had a composer that he could work with, able to realize some of his most important aims. By this time de Hartmann was becoming a polystylist, able to utilize many different musical idioms to express himself. These included Russian Romanticism, Impressionism and Modernism. This ability would help him in his compositional work with Gurdjieff.

De Hartmann’s work on his ballet *La Fleurette Rouge* and the time spent with Kandinsky also helped to prepare him for working with Gurdjieff. By 1916 he had a well-developed understanding of the dance medium, and many of Kandinsky’s original ideas about art and the inter-relationship between color and sound, expounded in his book *Concerning the*

Spiritual in Art, were in line with what he would find in his work with Gurdjieff. One of the first projects they engaged in was *The Struggle of the Magicians* – another multi-media project, this time with the painter Alexander de Salzmann, who joined forces with Gurdjieff and de Hartmann. Like *Der Gelbe Klang*, *The Struggle of the Magicians* was never completed.

Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff

Most of what we know about Gurdjieff’s early life comes from his own writings. In his book *Meetings With Remarkable Men* he says that he left home at an early age, perhaps as young as eleven, to search for explanations of paranormal phenomena that he witnessed during his childhood in Eastern Turkey. His quest gradually turned into a full-blown search for higher knowledge, and he traveled extensively across Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa in search of answers.



Gurdjieff, c. 1923.

During this time, over a period that lasted almost 20 years, from 1888 to about 1907, Gurdjieff came across many folk and religious dances, some

of which formed the basis of his Movements. He writes with special emphasis about a brotherhood he visited in Central Asia that was connected to ancient spiritual traditions going back thousands of years. Sacred dances were a central practice for this group, and Gurdjieff goes into some detail to explain their nature and purpose.

Elsewhere in his writings Gurdjieff asserts that there is an “objective music” that has the same effect upon all listeners, regardless of taste, culture, or type. He also says that the seven-toned musical scale is based upon a universal law relating to how processes proceed from beginning to completion. As such, sound and music are naturally endowed with great power, including the ability to express a seemingly infinite variety of experiences and inner states.

Although Gurdjieff was not a trained musician, music played an important role in his life from early childhood. In *Meetings* we learn that he had an exceptionally fine voice as a child and sang in the choir at the Russian Cathedral in Kars. He also played guitar, harmonica, and the harmonium. According to de Hartmann in his book *Our Life With Mr. Gurdjieff*, Gurdjieff was able to read and write music. This sheds an important light upon the nature of their collaborative work, in relation to what Gurdjieff was able to contribute to the compositional process.



Thomas and Olga
de Hartmann,
c. 1920.

Between 1917 and 1922, de Hartmann and his wife Olga traveled extensively with Gurdjieff, fleeing Russia at the onset of the Bolshevik Revolution, living first in Essentuki (Russia), then Tiflis (now Tbilisi), Georgia, and later Constantinople (now Istanbul), Turkey. During this period de Hartmann gained first-hand knowledge of the music of the Circassians, the Armenians, and the Dervishes. With the outbreak of the Turkish Civil War in 1919 they left for Europe, eventually settling in Fontainebleau, France, where Gurdjieff established his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man in 1922.



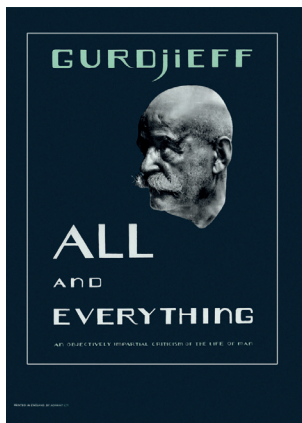
Gurdjieff's passport, issued in Batumi, Armenia, 29 June, 1920.



A tableau from one of the ritual Movements, Paris, 1923.

The Sacred Dances

Gurdjieff's sacred dances are also known as “the Movements” or “Sacred Gymnastics” -- the latter term used by de Hartmann in his book *Our Life With Mr. Gurdjieff*. They form an essential part of Gurdjieff's teaching, so much so that when signing his name to the introductory chapter of his magnum opus *All and Everything – Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, he settled upon a “Teacher of Dancing.” The dances were at the center, not the periphery of the teaching between 1917 and 1922, before Gurdjieff and his pupils arrived in Fontainebleau.



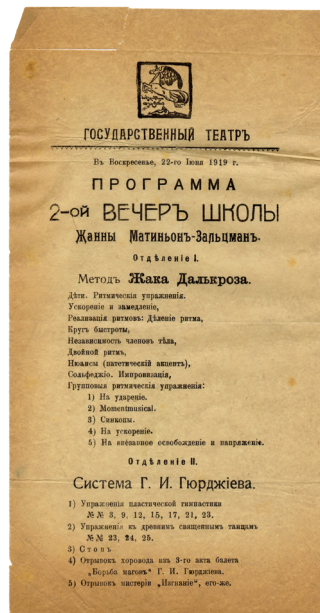
Publicity poster for Gurdjieff's book, 1950.

In the chapter “Art” in *Beelzebub's Tales*, Gurdjieff states that the original purpose of the sacred dances was to transmit important information, inserted into them by initiates, that would be deciphered by people of future generations. In the brotherhood, referred to above in *Meetings*, he recounts the following:

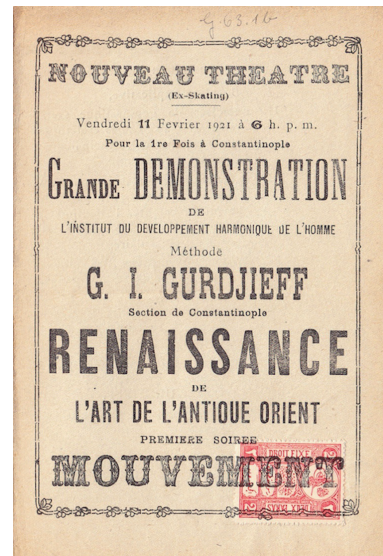
“Everyone in the monastery knows the alphabet of these postures and when, in the evening in the main hall of the temple, the priestesses perform the dances indicated for the ritual of that

day, the brethren may read in these dances one or another truth which men have placed there thousands of years before.”

“These dances correspond precisely to our books. Just as is now done on paper, so, once, certain information about long past events was recorded in dances and transmitted from century to century to people of subsequent generations. And these dances are called sacred.”

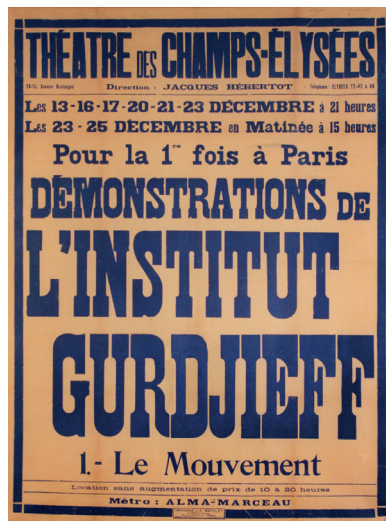


Program for a demonstration of dances by Dalcroze and Gurdjieff in Tiflis, Georgia, 22 June, 1919.



Poster for Movements demonstration in Constantinople, Turkey, 11 February, 1921.

Poster for Movements demonstrations in Paris, December 1923.

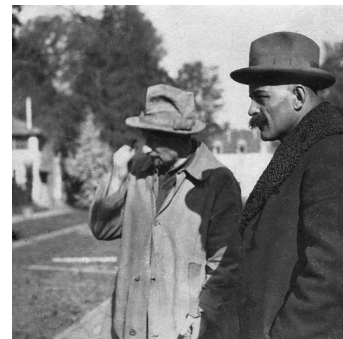


In order to attract new students to his work, Gurdjieff began giving public demonstrations of the Movements, first in Tiflis in 1919 and again in Constantinople in 1920. At the Institute in Fontainebleau Gurdjieff added many new elements to his teaching, including the building of a Study House and vegetable gardening, along with lectures and various spiritual

practices. At the same time, intensive work on the dances continued during 1922 and 1923, leading to Movements demonstrations at the Champs-Elysées Theater in Paris in December 1923, and in Carnegie Hall and elsewhere in the United States in 1924.

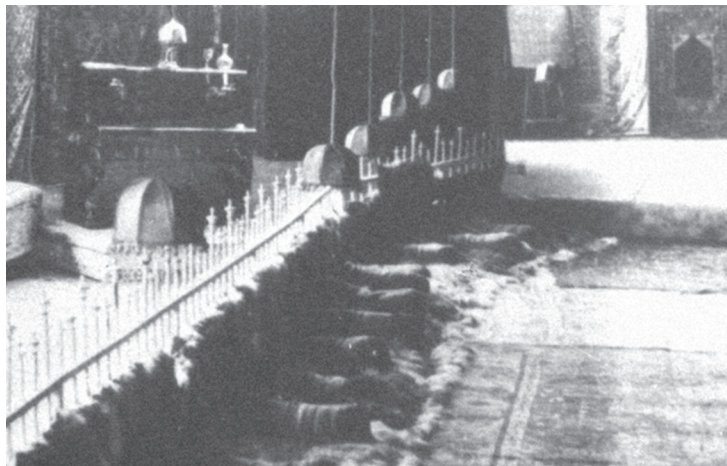
Composing the Movements Music 1918 – 1923

It is rare to find examples of composers who have worked in collaboration on the same piece of music, outside of the popular music idiom. Even this is somewhat of a rarity. While some composers have contributed to different sections of the same piece, true collaboration depends upon a subtle connection, on the essence level.



Gurdjieff and de Hartmann, during the building of the Study House, Fontainebleau, 1923.

In the case of the music for the early Movements, Gurdjieff would present de Hartmann with a rhythm and a melody. De Hartmann's chameleon-like abilities then came to his aid. He was able to understand intuitively



The upright piano in the Study House on which most of the Movements music was composed, 1923.

what Gurdjieff required and to produce a completed work, virtually on the spot. It is notable that the process of composing always took place in front of a class. This enabled the two men to draw from the energy of their audience, in much the same way that musicians are sometimes able to receive new insights and perform on a higher level than when playing on their own.

The following is an account by J.G. Bennett in his book *Witness, The Story of a Search*, about how the music for the Movements was composed by Gurdjieff and de Hartmann, written during his stay at the Institute in Fontainebleau in the summer of 1923: “At that time, Gurdjieff was preparing a special class – composed almost exclusively of Russians – to give public demonstrations. The general class could learn any new exercises, but did not take part in the special training reserved for the demonstration class. Gurdjieff’s method of creating new exercises had a living spontaneity that was one secret of his success as a teacher. While the new pupils were practicing on the stage, some of the Russians would gather round the piano, where Thomas de Hartmann sat with his bald head perked like a bird. Gurdjieff would begin to tap a rhythm on the piano top. When it was clear to all, he hummed a melody or played it with one hand on the piano and then walked away. Hartmann would develop a theme to fit the rhythm and the melody. If he went wrong, Gurdjieff would shout at him and Hartmann would shout furiously back.”



Thomas de Hartmann, Fontainebleau, 1923.



Gurdjieff observing a movements class, Paris, 1923.

“Then the older class would line up in rows, and we would stand at the side and watch or go back to our places on the floor. Gurdjieff would teach the postures and gestures of the exercises partly by doing them himself; or, if they were complicated, involving different movements by different rows or positions, he would walk round and place each pupil in the desired posture. There would be vehement arguments. The stage became a chaos of dispute, gesticulation and shouting as the pupils tried to work out the sequence required. Suddenly, Gurdjieff would

give a peremptory shout and there would be a dead silence. A few words of explanation, and Hartmann would begin to play the theme that by then he had worked out into a rich harmony. Sometimes the result was spectacular: a beautiful ensemble never seen before would appear as if by magic. At other times, the task was too difficult and the exercise broke down, to be worked over for hours during the succeeding days.”

The Split with Gurdjieff -- Composing the 39 Series

In 1929 de Hartmann left Gurdjieff. For some time Gurdjieff had been encouraging him to move away and resume his own musical exploration, but when de Hartmann didn't take the hint an explosion eventually took place. De Hartmann never saw his teacher again, although he remained faithful to Gurdjieff's teaching and regarded him as his teacher to the end of his life. He moved to the Paris suburbs where he supported himself, first by composing more than 50 film scores and then returning to the classical idiom in 1935. Over the next 15 years he developed a flourishing career, composing his greatest large-scale works, and gaining the respect of some of the major performing artists of the 20th century.

Gurdjieff was preoccupied with his writings until 1935, after which he returned to teaching, working with pupils individually and in small groups. In the 1940s, after a hiatus of nearly twenty years, he again began

composing new Movements. The 39 Series emerged from this body of work, and is considered by many to be the magnum opus among his sacred dances.

Since de Hartmann was no longer working with Gurdjieff, the music for these dances was originally improvised by various pupils at the time of composition. Shortly before he died, Gurdjieff sent his best dancers to show them to de Hartmann and have him compose the music to accompany them. This was done in 1950 and resulted in the music for the 39 Series and 16 other dances that Gurdjieff had composed in the 1940s.

Purpose of this Recording

The music for the early Movements recorded on this CD serves to fill in de Hartmann's timeline, linking his early classical output (1899-1916) with the later works (1929-1956) that increasingly embrace the Modernist style. The Movements music composed in 1950 reflects this stage of his development, particularly in the use of dissonance.

Between 1916 and 1929 de Hartmann gave up composing in the classical idiom, with a few exceptions in 1919 and 1920. This was done in order to assimilate Gurdjieff's teaching, and to help write the music for the Movements and the sacred piano music. This collaboration gave him an encyclopedia of material, showing how to express the essence of inner

states, rituals, and elements of Gurdjieff's cosmology in musical form.

De Hartmann drew upon this resource in his later classical works.

Examples can be found in his *Violin Sonata Op. 51* (1935), the *Piano Concerto Op. 61* (1939), and *The Music of the Stars Op. 84* (1953), among many others.

Another purpose for this recording is to provide a record of how the dances were originally conceived, from the point of view of what is written in the music. While many differences in interpretation have emerged over the years regarding issues of tempo, dynamics and articulation, the indications in the sheet music point back to the moment of composition, inviting us to hear the music as Gurdjieff and de Hartmann first intended. The recordings on this album have been prepared and performed with sensitivity to these directions. We have been able to examine the original manuscripts for both the early Movements as well as the 39 Series, and have cross-referenced them with the printed versions by Editions Janus (Paris, 1950) and the Triangle Edition (Canada, 1990) before drawing our own conclusions.

Notes on the Music in this CD

The Obligatories

The study of Gurdjieff's Movements begins with the six "Obligatory" Exercises, so named in order to convey the need for assimilating them first, before proceeding to the other dances. Each one previews an important aspect of the repertoire. For example, the 1st Obligatory provides a key to understanding the language of gesture, and asks the dancer to use his/her attention in non-habitual ways – a hallmark of almost all of the dances that follow. The fifth, entitled *Note Values*, is a mini-ritual dance in which the early sections build energy for a particular manifestation at the end. The 6th Obligatory, entitled the *Mazurka*, expresses the joy of letting go while at the same time maintaining accuracy in the gestures of the dance.

Style

As has been noted above, the music for Gurdjieff's sacred dances were composed during two periods, from 1918-1923 and in the 1940s. Stylistically, the early dance music draws predominantly from Russian Romanticism, with which de Hartmann had been imbued since early childhood, and the Eastern influences that he was exposed to during his travels with Gurdjieff.

Examples of Russian Romanticism in the early Movements are found in many of the *Obligatories*, as well as *The Fall of the Priestess* and *The Women of Essentuki*. The latter brings up the question of authenticity – did Gurdjieff actually hear this music or was it 'folklore imaginaire,' created by Gurdjieff and de Hartmann in the style of that music? In some cases it is possible to substantiate a direct connection with original sources, while in others we are left to guess.

Examples of Eastern influence in the early Movements can be found in the *Thirty Gestures* and the *Ho-Ya*, both of which make use of scales that are not commonly used in Western music. The florid melodies, particularly in the *Ho-Ya*, have the same melismatic style that one hears in Eastern songs and instrumental solos.

The later Movements music also contains Romantic and Eastern influences, but in addition there are many Modernist elements. Numbers 20, 24, and 32 from the 39 Series, contain dissonant clusters, which provide energy for the Dervish character of the dances. The melodic material for these dances is much simpler than that which is found in the earlier *Ho-Ya*, a Dervish dance that has roots in Sufi practice.



A tableau from N2, Prayer in 4 parts, 1950.

The Movements cover a wide range of subject matter. The Mazurka (6th Obligatory) and *The Women of Essentuki* both contain folk elements. *The Big Group* -- for which the Movement has been lost -- and No. 2, also called the *Prayer in Four Parts*, are ritual movements. There are also dervish movements, referred to above, that have powerful

rhythms which act upon the breathing, to produce different states of awareness.

A number of Movements refer to definite psychological states. In No. 1, the *Automaton*, the dancer is like a puppet on a string, arbitrarily jerked around by external events, while at the same time asked to maintain a sense of inner freedom. No. 21, *Remorse of Conscience*, is a powerful Movement which, when combined with de Hartmann's music, arouses feelings associated with the moments that we deviate from our own moral compass. No. 17 uses the inner pattern of the Enneagram symbol, which Gurdjieff used in many of his Movements, to express the process of transformation and all completing processes. Gurdjieff stated that performing this dance has health benefits for many of our internal organs.

A Personal Note

I first encountered Gurdjieff's sacred dances in late 1972, when I joined the second Basic Course at the International Academy for Continuous Education in Sherborne, Gloucestershire, England. Directed by J. G. Bennett, one of Gurdjieff's pre-eminent pupils, the aim was to provide students with a practical application of Gurdjieff's teaching. As one of the pianists on the course, I found myself playing for Movements classes. My first impression of the music was that it was fairly simple, easy enough to

sightread. At the same time, the art of accompanying for dance classes was new to me, and this became my chief focus.

The question of meaning encapsulated in the Movements surfaced occasionally. My interest was first aroused by Gurdjieff's writings on the subject, and further piqued by comments that Mr. Bennett gave in our pianist meetings and the Movements classes. In one memorable instance, in the Fall of 1973, he elicited the arm gestures of the First Obligatory from the students, simply by asking questions. This was like the Rosetta Stone: armed with this information, it was possible to decipher meaning in many other Movements.

In 2010 I gave up playing for Movements classes in order to work full time recording de Hartmann's classical music, and to give performances and lecture recitals about de Hartmann's life and music. Since 2018 I have been giving seminars and lectures under the title of "Music, Movements and Meaning." There have been many new discoveries. One aim is to make contact with others who are interested in this kind of study. Enquiries may be addressed to elan@sicroff.com.

Since taking on the project to record the Movements music in 2025, I have had to reassess my earlier impression that it is "fairly simple." I believe

it is more accurate to say that it is Mozartean, in the sense that it is transparent, and that every note is vitally important. Any inconsistency of touch immediately shows. In addition, de Hartmann's dynamics and articulations are written to mirror the gestures and feelings of the dancers, and it often requires a high level of skill and subtlety to bring them out. All of this must be done within the framework of a strict, steady beat, which makes further demands on the pianist.



PHOTO BY DIANE MARRON

Olga de Hartmann with Elan Sicroff,
Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1976.

A few words should be said here about Mme. Olga de Hartmann, who had an important influence on my approach to de Hartmann's music, both in his classical style and the works that he composed with Gurdjieff, as well as the music for the later Movements written after Gurdjieff's death. In 1973 Mr. Bennett sent her a letter to say that I might be a person who could help promote her husband's work. My first meeting with her came about in the autumn of 1975, when she

invited me to perform in a concert at McGill University in Montreal. Over the next few years, I gave a number of concerts under her auspices in Santa Fe, New Mexico, near her home in Nambe. Madame provided a wealth of information about how her husband played his music. Born in 1885 during the Romantic era of classical music, her approach to rhythmic pulse was quite flexible, in stark contrast to the metronomic way of playing that was common in the late 20th century. She often remembered instances of de Hartmann playing his piano music quite differently from how it appears in his published works, not only in terms of dynamics, articulations and tempo, but sometimes even in the notes themselves.

However, all of these details were of secondary importance to Mme. de Hartmann. Her main purpose was to enable me to convey the feeling content of the music, which she accomplished by singing along with me, very expressively, or by putting her hands on my back to make me aware of the feeling that was emanating from her.

Madame de Hartmann died on September 12, 1979. I felt a responsibility, both to her and Mr. Bennett, to do what I could to promote Hartmann's music. Over the years I made many efforts and received help from many people. Foremost among these has been guitarist Robert Fripp. Thanks to

his support I recorded my first CD of Gurdjieff/de Hartmann music, *Journey to Inaccessible Places* (1987). In 2006 he encouraged me to take on a long-term project to bring de Hartmann's music into the mainstream, and offered his help. In 2010 the project was given a name, **The Thomas de Hartmann Project**. Its work is ongoing.

The contributions of Producer Gert-Jan Blom have also been of primary importance in this endeavor. The two of us were introduced by Robert Fripp in 2010, and his wide-ranging knowledge of the music associated with Gurdjieff -- including the improvisations on the harmonium, the orchestral recordings of the early Movements music, and Thomas de Hartmann's classical music for solo piano, voice, and chamber ensemble -- along with his indomitable enthusiasm, have made his participation invaluable. It was he who suggested that we record this album of music for Gurdjieff's Movements.

May 9, 2026



Elan Sicroff. Photo by Sanne Schouwink, 2016.

Recorded on September 8, 9 & 10, 2025 at MCO Studio 1,
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Recording and Mastering: Guido Tichelman at Azazello Studios,
Haarlem, Netherlands
Recording Assistant: Pim van der Lee
Graphic Design: Sonja van Hamel

Cover photo digisleeve by Al Daggett.
Movements demonstration in the Great Hall at Sherborne House in 1973.
JG Bennett is on the left, observing the class.

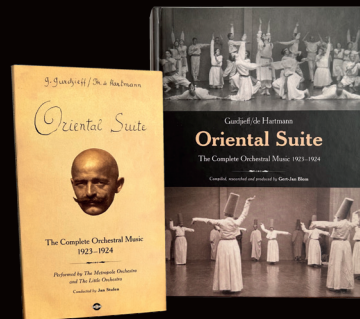
Cover photo booklet by Al Daggett.
Movements demonstration in the Great Hall at Sherborne House in 1973.

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Avrom Altman for his valuable support of our work; Web Wrangler Reg
Bloor; and fund raiser Bob Antia for making the impossible possible.

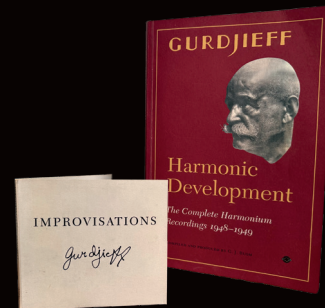
Music Supervisor: Guido Tichelman
Producer: Gert-Jan Blom

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www.thomasdehartmannproject.com
Artistic Director: Elan Sicroff
Executive Director: Robert Fripp

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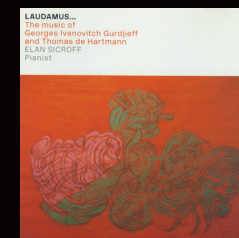
Oriental Suite - The Complete Orchestral Music
1923-1924 (Basta Music 2006)



Harmonic Development - The Complete Harmonium
Music 1948-1949 (Basta Music 2004)

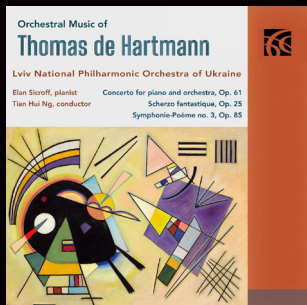


Journey To Inaccessible Places - Elan Sicroff
(Editions EG 1987, remastered 2013)

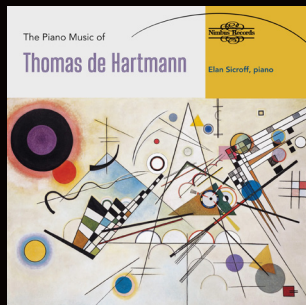


Laudamus - Elan Sicroff (2010)

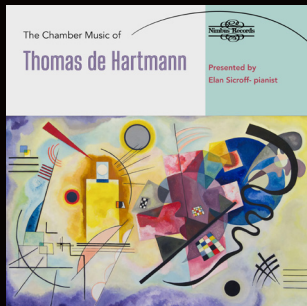
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Concerto for Piano, op. 61



The Piano Music of Thomas de Hartmann



The Chamber Music of Thomas de Hartmann



The Songs of of Thomas de Hartmann