



W i l l i a m B o l c o m

From Rags to Riches

Bolcom's contribution to piano literature is a gift from a great pianist.

Twelve New Etudes for Piano won a Pulitzer prize and will win the hearts of those who play this riveting music. by Linda Holzer

The 10th Van Cliburn International Piano Competition will feature a commissioned work by William Bolcom. This comes hard on the heels of his new piano concerto, *Gaea*, premiered by Gary Graffman and Leon Fleisher during the 1996 spring season with David Zinman and the Baltimore Symphony. Tanglewood, Chicago's Lyric Opera, Marc-André Hamelin, Ursula Oppens, John Musto, Emanuel Ax, Yo-Yo Ma, Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, and Marilyn Horne have all premiered Bolcom scores in recent years. The catalog of Bolcom's work has become a musical well-spring, providing a rich array of choices for contemporary concert artists, especially pianists.

Bolcom is a member of the generation of American composers born in the late 1930s (John Corigliano, Joan Tower, and Ellen Zwilich) who are now at the national forefront of classical music. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for his second volume of etudes, *Twelve New Etudes for Piano*. However, he first became known for his part in the ragtime revival of the late 1960s and for his work in the field of American art song, as composer and recording artist.

Bolcom's work is distinguished by sophisticated wit. Consider the complexities of his recent concerto commission from Zinman: a request to write two left-hand piano concertos, one each for

Fleisher and Graffman, but in such a way that the two concertos could be performed simultaneously to create a third. *Gaea*, an exceptional, anagrammatic work of three piano concertos for two left hands (!) was the result (See Example 1). The title has multiple references. *Gaea* is the Greek name for Earth, a choice inspired by reading William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." The double fugue in the last movement is based on the notes G-A-E-A. For the world premiere in Baltimore, Fleisher performed his concerto on April 11, Graffman played his on April 12, and their *tour de force* "double-play" occurred on April 13.

Another hallmark is Bolcom's flair for stylistic variety. It is a challenge to categorize his compositional style because the music reflects so many different elements. He notes that "People have named what I do 'post-modern,' 'vernacular,' 'eclectic'—whatever is current that fits some part of my work or personality; but I am *anti-doctrinaire* since birth, and my music is the 'organic' result." In Bolcom's art and life, the worlds of classical and popular music enjoy a peaceful, thriving coexistence.

As a boy in Seattle, Bolcom absorbed plenty of American vernacular traditions: parlor songs (such as those found in Norman Lloyd's *Fireside Book of Songs*), Broadway musicals (George Gershwin and Irving Berlin), ragtime, and jazz. Later, freelancing to support his college studies, he immersed himself in the popular music scene,

playing in dance bands and musical theater, developing considerable skill as a pop improvisational performer.

By his late twenties, having earned a doctorate in composition at Stanford, Bolcom admits that he was still wrestling with the question of choices of style: popular versus classical, acoustic versus electronic media, American versus European influences. During the 1950s and '60s, there was substantial pressure on young American composers to "take sides" if they wanted to be taken seriously. Years later, in a 1992 *Opera News* interview, Bolcom wryly dubbed this period the "look-over-your-shoulder-lest-you-put-in-a-triad school of modernism."

A conversation with John Cage in 1966 gave Bolcom the courage to draw freely from all the musical styles he loved. Cage observed, "Some people divide the world into things that are good and things that are bad. Other people take it all in and let their own organism decide." Ultimately, Bolcom went on to embrace everything that he considered musically relevant. His self-declared technique: "My explorations in all sorts of music from America's past have been to learn the roots of our musical language, so that I can build from them."

Bolcom's international successes have come as no surprise to those who knew him in his student days, when he was a protégé of Darius Milhaud at Mills College and later at the Paris Conservatoire. Barbara Rowan-Whang, a classmate of Bolcom's in California and France, explained that entrance to Milhaud's composition class at the Conservatoire depended on the successful completion of a complicated written exam, a 17-hour test beginning at 7 in the morning and ending at midnight. Most students needed the full 17 hours to finish. Not only did Bolcom finish relatively quickly, but he wrote his exam in ink!

Milhaud had a tremendous appetite for life, for music of all styles and cultures, and a powerful sense of *joie de vivre*. He frequently admonished his students, "Get out of your matchbox! Open the windows!" A vigorous champion of contemporary music, Milhaud made sure that in addition to being familiar with the time-honored disci-

plines of counterpoint and figured bass, his students heard the latest modern compositions. He opened their ears to Messiaen and Boulez long before those composers were sanctioned by the history books. Milhaud had a profound

influence on Bolcom's musical development. Bolcom's own distinguished achievements as a composer, performer, and dedicated teacher (he has served on the faculty of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor since 1973) reflect a

G A E A
Concerto 3 for Two Pianos Left Hand and Full Orchestra
(Concertos 1 and 2 Played Simultaneously)
1. GAEA I (Air and Water)

William Bolcom
1995

The score is divided into two main sections: **Orchestra I** and **Orchestra II**. **Orchestra I** includes parts for Flute 1,2; Flute 3; Clarinet 1,2; Bass Clarinet; Contrabassoon; Trumpet 1,2, 3; Trombone 1,2; Bass Trombone; Tuba; Timpani; Thai Gong; Percussion; Celesta; Viola; and Piano 1. **Orchestra II** includes parts for Piano 2; Oboe 1,2; English Horn; Bassoon 1, 2; Horn 1,2, 3,4; Thai Gong; Percussion; Violin 1, 2; Viola; Violoncello; and Contrabass. The score features various musical notations such as dynamics (e.g., *mf*, *ff*), articulation (e.g., *acc*, *stacc*), and performance instructions (e.g., "a2 bells up", "div. ut").

GAEA: Concerto 2 for Piano Left Hand and Chamber Orchestra
1. The Sea

III* Adagio

II* Adagio

*I, II, III markings differentiate tempo for Concertos 1, 2, and 3.

Example 1 Gaea: Concertos for Piano Left Hand

Book I

1. **Fast, furious (1977)**
Sweeping gestures of hands, forearms, the body. Freedom of movement.
2. **Récitatif (1977)**
Recitative style, rubato; finger-changes for smoothness' sake; smooth passage of line between hands.
3. **Mirrors (1977)**
Leaps. Distorted mirrors. Lateral stretches between fingers.

Book II

4. **Scène d'opera (1980, revised 1982)**
A steady, rhythmic ostinato vs. varied irrational rhythms.
5. **Butterflies, hummingbirds (1980, revised 1986)**
The lateral tremolo. Mercurial changes in color, attack and rhythm.
6. **Nocturne (1981)**
Absolute contrast in dynamics and tone.

Book III

7. **Premonitions (1982)**
"Free-falls into piano keys; size of tone, without banging. (Inside-piano plucking).
8. **Rag infernal (Syncope apocalyptiques) (1982)**
Lateral hand-jumps and stretches. Use of practically no pedal.
9. **Invention (1983)**
Controlled legato lines with minimal pedal. Clear delineation of voices.

Book IV

10. **Vers le silence (1983-86)**
Use of pedals. Wide leaps and dynamic contrasts. Trills.
11. **Hi-jinks (1986)**
Dynamic contrast (in the piano-section least naturally apt).
12. **Hymne à l'amour (1983-86)**
Contrast of timbres, mostly by means of pedal. "Orchestral" sonorities.

Example 2 Content and Titles of Twelve New Etudes for Piano



Bravos and bows at the world premiere of *Gaea*. From left: William Bolcom, Gary Graffman, David Zinman (conductor of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra), and Leon Fleisher.

strong kinship with his former teacher's breadth of endeavor.

Twelve New Etudes for Piano

Like Debussy (*Études*), Bartók (*Mikrokosmos*), and Crumb (*Makrokosmos*), Bolcom has extended the vocabulary of modern piano performance with a collection of etudes. He is a pianist-composer in the tradition of Chopin; the piano is at the center of his musical activity. Bolcom's Pulitzer prize-winning *Twelve New Etudes for Piano* is one of the most celebrated recent installments in modern etude repertoire.

Composed from 1977-1986, *Twelve New Etudes* is a single volume comprising four books each of which contain three etudes. Each etude has a title; six have French titles and six English. The italicized text beneath the title is a direction from Bolcom (which likewise appears at the beginning of each etude), describing the technical problem addressed by the music (See Example 2).

Bolcom's scores are rich in explanatory details for the performer; he is fastidious about communicating his musical intentions. The scores of *Twelve New Etudes* and that of his earlier 1966 volume, *Twelve Etudes*, include brief glossaries of notational symbols to address subtleties of pedaling, pauses, and articulation. Bolcom does not like to talk about his own compositions, however, having expressed his ideas fully in the musical manuscript. An active performer, he often speaks of "the living tradition of music," and he emphatically asserts that the equation for a successful performance necessarily includes players adding their "two cents" interpretively.

Twelve New Etudes is readily identifiable as music of the late 20th century. Rhythmic notation is subject to a wide range of expression. Etudes 3, 4, 6, 8, and 9 feature strictly notated meters with time signatures and barlines. Etudes 1, 5, 11, and 12 lack time signatures and, in some cases, barlines. Instead, the tempo and pulse are clearly conveyed through the composer's metronome markings. The descriptive titles of some of the etudes also provide clues to the desired rhythmic flow, for example, #8: *Rag infernal (Syncope apocalyptiques)*.

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2. Récitatif

Recitativo style, rubato; finger-changes for smoothness' sake; smooth passage of line between hands.
Free, expressive, very frank

Example 3 Twelve New Etudes for Piano: Book I, "Récitatif"

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Book II
4. Scène d'opéra

A steady, rhythmic ostinato vs. varied irrational rhythms.
Molto moderato ♩ = c. 84 Repeat at least once

Example 4 Twelve New Etudes for Piano: Book II, "Scène d'opéra"

Bolcom explores pedaling, with very specific designations for all three pedals. Damper pedal (full, half, and flutter), una corda, and sostenuto pedal are carefully indicated in the score for the special effects they will produce. (This is a contrast with early 20th-century composers like Debussy, who left most

pedaling to the discretion of the performer, and who did not have the sostenuto pedal at his disposal.)

The music requires the use of forearms and palms in addition to traditional use of fingers, and occasionally the performer must pluck strings inside the piano. The score specifies that the

instrument Bolcom had in mind when writing these etudes was the Bösendorfer Imperial Grand, which has an extra minor sixth in the bass register. To accommodate performance situations in which a Bösendorfer is not available, Bolcom has included *ossias* in the score.

What unifies this collection? The etudes are not organized by key scheme, nor are they a systematic course in scales, arpeggios, thirds, sixths, and octaves. In the liner notes to the recording by Marc-André Hamelin, Bolcom describes the etudes as "exercises of style." They are explorations of texture and various aspects of piano sonority such as register, articulations, pedal effects, and harmonic colors. They are also explorations of substantial emotional range, from the sorrowful, (#7: *Premonitions*) to the whimsical, (#5: *Butterflies, hummingbirds*). Bolcom arranged the etudes chronologically. Examining one etude from each of the books will offer a tantalizing glimpse into what is in store for the pianist who explores this collection.

Book I: Etude #2, Récitatif

This etude is a study in rubato and shaping a musical line. The title refers to the vocal technique in which a singer imitates the natural inflections of speech (See Example 3). There is no time signature, only bar lines and phrase marks. The tempo marking is "Free, expressive, very frank." Bolcom uses fermatas and arrows indicating *accelerando* and *ritardando* to indicate the free-flowing nature of the music. Such markings serve as a form of musical shorthand between the composer and the performer. Bolcom inserts commas between phrases to indicate pauses. The length of the pause is determined by its shape—comma styles are indicated in the glossary in the front of the volume.

Récitatif is in ternary form. In contrast with the rubato of the "A" section, the "B" section begins with a precise eighth-note pattern emphasizing beats two and three in 3/8. The expressive significance of the moment is further clarified by an inserted quote from Satie, "It is my heart which balances itself thus." When the rubato of the "A" section returns, the time signature is canceled with "0."

Book III
7. Premonitions

"Free-falls" into piano keys; size of tone, without banging. (Inside-piano plucking).

Senza tempo

depress silently *passionate, seeming to rush ahead*

mp *practically no ped.*

sempré *mf* *(1/2 ped.)* *(sim.)*

(no pause) *top line only* *mf* *(accel.)* *(rit.)*

sub. pp *much ped.* *up 1/2 on changes* *with suppressed energy*

* all of these groups are accelerando.

Example 5 *Twelve New Etudes for Piano: Book III, "Premonitions"*

12. Hymne à l'amour

Contrast of timbres, mostly by means of pedal. "Orchestral" sonorities.

Andante amoroso e pastorale ♩ = c. 60

p (absolutely even)

mf bell-like

catch with ped.*

pp

f like brass

mf

sf in the dynamic contrast

mp *pp* *mf*

* Play notes more staccato and depress ped. just before damper hits strings.

Example 6 *Twelve New Etudes for Piano: Book IV, "Hymne à l'amour"*

The gentle harmonies of this etude, hovering around C Major, are reminiscent of the ragtime music of an earlier Bolcom work, *The Graceful Ghost*. The humor of the second etude comes from the juxtaposition of the traditional and the novel. When Bolcom does insert a familiar harmony, V-I (See Example 2, end of measure 1), it stands out humorously, almost winking at the listener.

Book II: Etude #4, Scène d'opéra

Scène d'opéra is built on a ground bass, stated by itself at the start; the figuration in the right hand gets increasingly florid with each restatement of the ground bass as the piece unfolds (See Example 4). The dramatic peak of the etude is the middle, scored triple sforzando, on three staves. Subsequently, the texture gradually becomes more simplified until the final phrase, which is the ground bass again by itself, an octave lower than it was stated at the opening. The scoring of this last phrase uses the rich, low register of the Bösendorfer Imperial Grand. (To accommodate other pianos, Bolcom indicates that the pianist may leave out the lowest notes of the octave.)

Book III: Etude #7, Premonitions

Premonitions is one of the most darkly atmospheric of the etudes. It explores piano sonority with various chord clusters, pedal effects, and some plucking of strings inside the piano. The first pitches, in the bass, are to be depressed slowly and silently, and then held with the sostenuto pedal so that those strings will vibrate sympathetically throughout the piece (See Example 5). Notice the careful half-pedal indications and, in measure six, "much pedal, up 1/2 on changes." The composer has a specific sonority in mind, and he tells the performer exactly how to use the mechanism to achieve it.

This etude, which was completed in September of 1982, closes with the Latin phrase, *Tuba mirum spargens sonum*. The continuing text, from the Catholic Requiem Mass, translates: "The trumpet, scattering a wondrous sound through the tombs of all lands, shall drive all unto the throne." The original dedicatée of *Twelve New Etudes for Piano* was the pianist Paul Jacobs,

who died of AIDS in 1983. The loss of his much-admired colleague brought Bolcom's work on the etudes to a halt in April of 1983. Bolcom resumed writing the last book of the set in 1986 at the urging of pianists John Musto and Marc-André Hamelin. (It was Hamelin who ultimately premiered the completed set.) Elsewhere in the collection, Bolcom includes another elegiac reference: Etude #10, the first piece of Book IV, is inscribed at the end with another quote from the Requiem Mass, *Rex tremendae majestatis*: "King of awful majesty, who freely saves the redeemed, Save me, O fount of mercy."

Book IV: Etude #12, Hymne à l'amour
The final etude of the set is the most complex and, at approximately seven minutes, the longest. The piece unfolds in binary form, A-B-A-B. The score has no time signature or barlines for much of the work, yet the effect is wholly steady and assured. The music of the "A" section is built around a charming eighth-note ostinato, perhaps symbolic of the enduring, steadying power of love, something one might expect in a hymn (See Example 6). The "B" section is built on a steady quarter-note chord progression, richly flavored by the influence of jazz. *Hymne à l'amour* builds to a full, ringing conclu-

sion. Scored on four staves, the climax looks more like an orchestral score than a piano etude. It is the expressive summit of the collection.

Although the writing throughout *Twelve New Etudes for Piano* is difficult, it is very pianistic. One senses that Bolcom doesn't ask a performer to attempt anything he himself couldn't realize at the keyboard. In his two collections of piano etudes, Bolcom truly maximizes the physical resources of the piano in refreshingly creative, dramatically powerful ways. His music is a moving and enriching addition to contemporary piano repertoire. ♪

PIANO MUSIC OF WILLIAM BOLCOM

Piano Solo/Duo/Duet:

(Music published by Edward B. Marks unless otherwise noted.)

Brass Knuckles (1968), Editions Jobert c/o Merion Music, Inc.

Dedicace: A Small Measure of Affection (1992) for piano four-hands

Dream Music No. 1 (1965)

Twelve Etudes (1959-60), Merion Music, Inc.

Twelve New Etudes (1977-86) [won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize]

Fantasy-Sonata No. 1 (1961)

Fields of Flowers (1978)

Frescoes (1971) for two keyboard players

Garden of Eden (Suite) (1968)

Interlude (1963) for two pianos

Monsterpieces (1980), children's pieces

Raggin' Rudi (1972)

Rag Tango (1972)

Recuerdos (1991) for two pianos

Romantic Pieces (1959)

Seabiscuits Rag (1970)

Sonata for Two Pianos (1993)

Three Dance Portraits (1986)

Three Ghost Rags (1970)

Piano with Orchestra:

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (1976)

Fives for Solo Violin, Piano and Three Orchestras (1966), Merion Music, Inc.

Gaea, for Two Pianos Left Hand and Orchestra (1996)

Selected Chamber Music:

Afternoon-Rag Suite (1979), for clarinet, violin, and piano

Cabaret Songs (1977-85), for medium voice and piano

Capriccio (1985) for cello and piano

Five Fold Five (1987) for wind quintet and piano

Fourth Sonata (1995) for violin and piano

I Will Breathe A Mountain (1990), song cycle for medium voice and piano

Let Evening Come (1994), song cycle for soprano, viola, and piano

Piano Quartet (1976)

Second Sonata (1978), for violin and piano

Second Piano Quartet (1996)

Sonata for Violoncello and Piano (1989)

Spring Trio (1996)

Third Sonata (1992), for violin and piano

Trio for Clarinet, Violin, and Piano (1994)

Recordings of Bolcom's piano music are available on a number of labels, including Jazzology, Nonesuch, Advance, CRI, Pantheon, and New World. Further information may be obtained by accessing Bolcom's internet home page:

<http://web-bern.music.umich.edu/Index/Fac-staffHP/HPs/BolcomHP.html>