

## Writing for the Piano

Justin Henry Rubin

There have been some periods of my life dominated by keyboard composition, others that seem almost devoid of it. When I first began to compose, I tried tirelessly to turn my attention to as many genres as possible, all incorporating numerous studies in imitative counterpoint. However, although few of the compositions survived, most were tried out first in piano scores, of which some remain.

By my late teens my interests swung resolutely towards the Second Viennese School in earnest, and I learned many piano pieces by these masters and their many influences. However, no matter how much effort I put into it, I rarely could myself accept more than a handful of bars for the instrument coming from my own hand. From this point until my late twenties, piano composition figured rarely into my output, and even the little that did was summarily dismissed soon afterwards.

Nonetheless, as performance became more a part of my musical concerns, so did performing my own work - at first some large scale organ compositions centering around sustained, shifting sounds were composed, next smaller works for organ supporting voices or instruments, then chorale based pieces. Regardless, the category of piano music remained mostly barren.

As a doctoral student at the University of Arizona, it slowly began to take more precedence, beginning with a set of variations on *Nun komm*, which were only finalized years later, and then as part of a larger set of works. But as my attention towards performing on piano as well as organ came to the fore, so did my interest return in writing for the instrument. By the time I completed my doctoral studies, I still had no representative works for piano, and certainly composition for the instrument in a solo role remained sporadic.

This pattern changed when I came to Duluth in 1998 as an Assistant Professor in Theory. It was at this juncture in my life that I composed my *24 Preludes* in little over the course of a year, interspersed with other instrumental works of larger dimension. At first I thought of the pieces as separate, in the form of formal etudes; the piano as a place to study my way of working out musical ideas in an austere and abstract medium. They began with a few pieces that I composed in anticipation of the curious situation of the additional responsibility of having to maintain a piano studio as part of my new responsibilities. When I composed pieces like *A Waltz through the Vapor*, I'd write it in a couple of hours as a process of thought and improvisation, a manner of composing which I had found success with in the past but stubbornly never allowed to take hold in my process overall. Now, I began to realize that these pieces were becoming representative of my work and I began to allow them to exist as more than studies. Not only were they excellent sources for musical ideas that would be developed in other pieces (including my first true steps into the orchestral genre), but they would sometimes exist simultaneously as independent pieces that I now accepted as part of my oeuvre.

As well, the experiences in composing and playing these pieces publicly heightened my sensitivity towards performance and my desire to love writing for the piano in and of itself, something that eluded me for most of my previous composing life, was coming into being. Now piano pieces began to suddenly gush from my pen, and I found myself wanting to put a stop to it, but with the coda of each piece seemed to be followed all too quickly by the opening bars of a new work.

On the other hand, while the organ had become of paramount importance to the development of my writing during my years in Arizona, my increasing confidence in my piano writing led to an equal focus and enabled me to broaden my scope in search for a true musical home. As my style matured, between 1993 and 1998, there was a steady flow of pieces for the organ in varying genres: thirty or more chorale based pieces, two trio sonatas, two free form large scale works, and others. Subsequently the *5 Preludes* for organ I wrote while practicing for my November 1999 recital in Duluth (my first full recital on the instrument in more than a year and a half) represented my first strides

towards the goal of balancing my output for keyboard instruments. It has always been important to put my own works on my solo programs. As such, writing for piano and organ consistently becomes more important as my approach to composition overall becomes more refined, and changes character.

One thing is for certain though, I find my harmonic profile strongest in large and complex sonorities, though tonally anchored, but filled with tweaks that allow me to express the nuances in the emotional progression that I need. I've called it "getting into the cracks" with friends and colleagues. That's why I turn to small ensemble writing, or keyboard writing limiting myself to two or three voices at most, in essence to see if I can in fact accomplish something successful with fewer voices and maintain a sonorous world that I can abide with. An artist must squeeze himself into different spaces to make himself flexible...and allow himself to fall deeper into "the cracks".

In the following years, keyboard writing has become an ongoing project for me. Whereas once one could count only a handful of works for organ or piano, by 2003, there were literally hundreds.