William Bolcom’s "Twelve New Etudes" (1988): Theoretical and Interpretative Analysis

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WILLIAM BOLCOM’S TWELVE NEW ETUDES (1988): THEORETICAL AND INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

WILLIAM BOLCOM’S TWELVE NEW ETUDES (1988): THEORETICAL AND INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS

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Ever since its naissance, composer William Bolcom’s set of *Twelve New Etudes* has garnered great critical praise, culminating with the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Although much has been written about the background surrounding the creation of these pieces and their technical novelty, no formal analysis of this set of etudes has been published.

This dissertation thoroughly examines the various aspects which hold these pieces together. Each etude is analyzed according to a clearly defined set of criteria: dynamics, compositional language, range, texture, articulation and contour, meter and rhythm, and form. In addition, a more detailed analysis is offered, providing an analytical and descriptive musical narrative of the piece.

The analysis is predicated upon a few assumptions, which the author sets to argue and prove throughout the document. First, is the idea that although Bolcom is boldly
experimental through these compositions, his modus operandi is to leave a few stabilizing elements in each piece. The choice of with which elements to experiment, and which to stabilize, changes from etude to etude, and is partly responsible for the great variety in the set.

Second, is the assumption that Bolcom’s background as a concert pianist greatly informs and guides his musical decisions. This is particularly noticeable through the palpable use of hand positions in his passagework. Lastly, is the assumption that Bolcom’s immensely varied background as a composer, ranging from the application of serial techniques in his early works, to his working knowledge of jazz theory, is responsible for his unique compositional language.
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Lastly, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my dear parents, for whom I know this work meant a great deal, and who were a huge inspiration in finishing this project.
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INTRODUCTION

In his article “Motional Devices in William Bolcom’s Non-Tonal Piano Works,” Luke Dahn argues that “Very little thorough analysis of William Bolcom’s non-tonal music exists at present.” In this succinct sentence lies a real surprise. William Bolcom is arguably one of the most well-known and successful of contemporary American composers, and his works have received substantial acclaim and recognition. Therefore, the fact that Bolcom’s non-tonal works have received little to no comprehensive analysis constitutes a real anomaly.

Mr. Dahn’s explanation for this paucity of analyses consists of various reasons. First, he informs us that “Bolcom is known primarily for his neo-tonal works…” and that “Non-serious neo-tonal music does not lend itself to seriously rigorous analytical methods of non-tonal music.” He further claims in what seems to be a methodologically more tenuous claim that “Further, Bolcom has produced very few non-tonal piano works,” naming the Twelve Etudes, the Twelve New Etudes, and the Nine Bagatelles, as the only pieces that would fit such a criterion. According to Dahn, “There simply does not exist enough music to develop a "Bolcom approach.”

1 Dahn, “Motional Devices in Bolcom’s Piano Works.”
2 Ibid.
3 The inherent methodological problem must lie within the confines of the Sorites Paradox. Can one truly define a body of work which consists of more than a full hour of piano music, and 33 pieces in total, as not sufficient for analysis? Anton Webern, for
The argument which Dahn cites, however, as the most consequential one is that “our standard pitch-dominated analytical methodologies yield little useful information with such music.” Following this claim, he then proceeds to offer his own analysis of Bolcom’s first etude, employing a motions-based system, which he himself had devised.

One can argue how non-efficacious our “standard pitch-dominated analytical methodologies” are. It does seem, however, that Bolcom’s music defies bulk-analysis, in which one system is used in order to explain the compositional processes, structure, and idiomatic language.

The main reason for this “unyieldiness” has gone uncited by Mr. Dahn, and seems to be the most obvious one. Bolcom’s works are notoriously difficult to analyze because of the sheer eclectic nature of his writing, in which Bolcom envelops a truly staggering amount of styles. These styles are all indifferently employed with such masterful craftsmanship, that it seems at times to both performer and listener as if Bolcom must have only been writing in this particular style, and has been thoroughly immersed in the world of that compositional language.

This ability to employ remarkably different compositional styles with equal proficiency is a skill which very few artists possess. In other disciplines, one thinks of real masters such as

example, only left us with one solo piano piece, his variations Op. 27, and it has, obviously, received plentiful analyses.

Dahn, “Motional Devices in Bolcom’s Piano Works.”
as Thomas Mann in literature, or Stanley Kubrick in cinema as creators who feel equally at home in vastly different topics and genres. Mr. Bolcom seems to be of a similar ilk, and his stylistic cornucopia and eclecticism are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his masterpiece, the *Twelve New Etudes*, which were written in the years between 1977 and 1986, and for which Bolcom was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988.

This set of “New Etudes” succeeded an earlier set of etudes entitled *Twelve Etudes*, which was released in 1971. Closely related through name, the differences between the sets are striking, and shed substantial light on the change of direction that Bolcom had undertaken as a composer. In Bolcom’s own words, the first set of etudes was “very much in the Boulez tradition, which I was very much involved with then.”

Its compositional language seems rather familiar for those who have acquainted themselves with the music of the Darmstadt School of the time and its tendency towards experimentation with total serialism. The set seems less reliant on the unique amalgamation that Bolcom is usually associated with, that of the composer who is also versed in American folklore, jazz, etc. Three examples from these etudes are attached below for illustration.

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This kind of “futuristic” compositional language, while still existing in *Twelve New Etudes*, became somewhat marginalized in Bolcom’s later writing. Indeed, in the new opus of etudes, there exists only one work which could be labeled as a true product of serialism, Etude No. 9, “Invention.” Etude No. 3, “Mirrors,” while “written in the Boulez model,” does not seem to employ any twelve-tone writing, and Etude No. 11, ”Hi-Jinks,” has one locus in which Bolcom employs one true twelve-tone row, although in somewhat sardonic fashion (Bolcom inserts the caustic playing directions “*Mechanically, Bêtement.*”)

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This is, by no means, a coincidence. As Dan K. McAlexander has argued in his dissertation from 1994, Bolcom and his peers “began to reject Boulez’s assertion that the future could be won only at the expense of the past,”\(^7\) and that “an essential duty of the composer was to find a way to establish the results of his relentless inquiry in their cultural and historical context, rather than to attempt to create a present which only looked forward and existed in a vacuum.”\(^8\)

Instead, Bolcom began to craft and exhibit his own brand of eclecticism, with such works as the three ghost rags (1970) and the piano concerto No. 1 (1976). Although unique, these pieces received mixed reviews, and it seemed as if this brand of musical horn of plenty had not been fully integrated, yet. It remained for the works of the 80’s to fully assimilate all of the aforementioned ideas into a cohesive whole, and as McAlexander has shown it was with pieces such as *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1986-1987) and the *Twelve New Etudes* that Bolcom was able to both synthesize seemingly disparate ideas and consequently receive critical acclaim, culminating in the 1988 Pulitzer Prize, which was awarded to him for his *Twelve New Etudes*. In the words of Bolcom himself, his music had become “more tonal and even consciously American… much of my music became addressed to the special spiritual needs we have right here.”\(^9\)


\(^8\) Ibid.

The goal of this dissertation is to offer analyses and to shed insight into the compositional processes that hold together the first two books, i.e. six of the *Twelve New Etudes*. Since no stock-analysis can be performed for such varied pieces, every etude will have to be individually accounted for and exhibited according to its uniqueness. The analyses that shall be offered in this dissertation will aim to be comprehensive, and to take into account many musical features. Thus, if the dissertation is to be successful, the analyses should prove helpful to both performers and scholars.

One working assumption that this dissertation will try to evaluate is the idea that, as a whole, Bolcom appears to employ a particular modus operandi in these etudes. This *modus operandi* is to choose a few facets, with which he shall experiment, and to leave others rather constant. For example, Bolcom might concentrate on creating many articulation and dynamic changes in one of the etudes, while leaving the meter and rhythms rather steady and conventional. In this way, Bolcom seems to be able to provide his audience with some elements onto which they could latch, rather than to create a feeling of complete discombobulation. If true, then our proverbial gaze will have to be shifted, as Bolcom’s compositional emphases change as well.

It is also worth noting that this modus operandi does not necessarily relate to the pedagogical goals of the etude. Indeed, the idea of focusing on one particular *technical* element is a hallmark of almost every etude set (Liszt’s *Transcendental Etudes* excepted), but the notion of diversifying different *compositional* elements is not an integral part of this system.
Another idea which shall be argued throughout the dissertation is that part of the reason because of which Bolcom is able to retain accessibility, even at times when his actual compositional language might seem quite avant-garde to the average listener (highly dissonant idioms, complicated meters and rhythms, etc.) is that he always endeavors to retain certain connections to conservative classical writing. Examples for that could be dynamic schemes which follow more traditional phrase-related conventions, or simple meters in compositions which feature other more experimental elements.

Lastly, one more characteristic which shall make common reappearance throughout this dissertation, and seems to be a real trait of Bolcom’s writing in these pieces, is the use of a compositional language which, although not serial or based on any apparent twelve-tone row, evokes nonetheless a very similar sound world and “aroma.” This language is obviously an offspring of Bolcom’s extensive study of twelve-tone and serialist compositional techniques, and his later rejection of what he considered to be rigid, synthetic musical constructs. This new language, which has some of the characteristics of twelve-tone music such as rapid aggregate-completion rate, but is not based on strict twelve-tone writing premises, is similar to the one used by Schoenberg in his “atonal” phase, which preceded his formal twelve-tone compositions.

These etudes, although fairly well-known and critically acclaimed, have not received complete and detailed analysis. Some initial work has been done, nonetheless. In her 2002 dissertation, “A Performance Guide to William Bolcom’s Twelve Etudes (1971) and Twelve New Etudes (1988),” Andria Rachel Fennig examines both interpretive elements and performing challenges in Bolcom’s two sets. After a quick survey of Bolcom’s
biography as a composer, educator, and performer, Fennig examines some of the different facets of Bolcom’s etudes (dynamics, articulation, etc.) and creates for the reader what she refers to as a “comprehensive, yet practical performance guide for performers and educators.” The strength of this work is in its juxtaposition of the two sets, and its ability to draw comparisons between these disparate bodies of work. This dissertation, however, does not include any thorough analysis of the etudes, and looks to provide instead some general performance guidelines.

In her 2001 dissertation, “Revolutionary Etudes: the Expansion of Piano Technique Exploited in the Twelve New Etudes of William Bolcom”, Ji Sun Lee attempted to locate the Twelve New Etudes within the tradition of etude writing, and to explain the etudes as an extension of a preexisting genre. Particular attention was paid to the parallels between this set of etudes and the ones by Chopin, and to the concept of an ever-expanding piano technique. The author also established some connections with Debussy’s preludes as possible sources of inspiration. The author focuses mostly on background elements and possible influences, and spent relatively little time examining Bolcom’s set in depth. Nonetheless, this dissertation does give a good framework for an understanding of the etude genre and the general philosophy of Bolcom, which must have played a role in the creation of these etudes.

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In his 1994 dissertation entitled “William Bolcom's Twelve New Etudes for Piano”, Henry Jones examines the etudes, for the most part, from a technical standpoint. Jones provides ample comparisons with many other etudes written by other composers, both from the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Mr. Jones also provides commentaries about the etudes. His dissertation, though not without interesting insights, does not substantially enrich the existing literature.

In his dissertation from 1994, Dan McAlexander attempts to trace Bolcom’s development as a composer through a careful look at the solo piano pieces. He further endeavors to position Bolcom within the postmodernist movement, and compare him with some other primary exponents of this movement. McAlexander provides us with some excellent notes, though not quite full-fledged analyses, to a select few of the etudes. His, nonetheless, makes a strong case for Bolcom’s place amongst other postmodern composers.

In her 2010 dissertation, “Late Twentieth-Century Piano Concert Etudes: A Style Study,” Eun Young Kang attempts to position the etudes of Cage, Bolcom, Corigliano, and Ligeti within the etude genre, not unlike in Lee’s dissertation. Her chapter on Bolcom is dedicated to the Twelve New Etudes, but focuses on the comparison of these etudes with those of Chopin, Liszt, etc.

In his paper, “Motional Devices in William Bolcom’s Non-Tonal Works,” composer Luke Dahn proposes several possible analytical methods that could prove useful for understanding these etudes. Dahn’s premise is that motion holds primary place— above pitch content—in these etudes. It certainly seems true that pitch-class analysis seems less
effective with the music of Bolcom than with some other composers, and that a contour-based system could yield some interesting results.

This concludes the main body of work that has been done on this set of etudes. As one can glean from this list, no detailed, thorough attempt has been made to examine these pieces from a theoretical and analytical point of view.

By ways of methodology, every etude shall be given a separate subchapter in this dissertation, and will be assessed, to the extent possible, in terms of title, compositional language, dynamics, range, texture, meter and rhythm, articulation and contour, special extended techniques (if applicable), and form. This categorical analysis will then be followed by a closer detailed analysis, providing a more specific analytical narrative to the etude. Thus, at the end of the dissertation, the aim is to provide an extensive body of knowledge about every etude. The last chapter will attempt to find, in the midst of Bolcom’s eclecticism, some overall tendencies and ideas that help create the language of these etudes as a whole.
Chapter 1: Historical and Biographical Background

The American composer and pianist William Elden Bolcom was born in 1938 in Seattle, Washington. He first started studying composition at the age of eleven with John Verrall and George Frederick McKay at the University of Washington, from which he also received his Bachelor of Music in 1958. Following the completion of a Bachelor of Music degree, Bolcom began working with the renowned French composer Darius Milhaud at Mills College, where he earned a Master’s of Music degree. Bolcom then completed a D.M.A. at Stanford University working under the tutelage of Leland Smith, and decided to pursue further studies in France at the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied with Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen.

A notable pedagogue, Bolcom joined the faculty of the University of Michigan in 1973 and taught there until his retirement in 2008. Amongst his students are composers Gabriela Lena Frank, Carter Pann, and Derek Bermel.

Bolcom’s list of accolades and awards include the Pulitzer Prize (for the *Twelve New Etudes*), two Grammy awards, and Musical America’s Composer of the Year award in 2007. While in Paris, he also received the 2ème Prix de Composition at the Paris Conservatoire. He has performed extensively with his wife, mezzo soprano Joan Morris, in a wide range of repertoire, which often includes cabaret songs, parlour, and repertoire from what has become known as the “American Songbook.”
Bolcom’s early compositional style was influenced by the Darmstadt School and featured serial techniques. Little by little, however, he started embracing a wider variety of musical idioms, with a strong, eclectic fascination with more popular musical genres. He is frequently cited as one of the main exponents of ragtime music, and is considered one of the figures most prominent in its revival.¹¹

Indeed, the topic of Bolcom’s compositional language will be much discussed throughout this dissertation. Nonetheless, it would probably prove fruitful here to pay special attention to Bolcom’s extensive training, which included strict twelve-tone writing, Messiaenic neumes, and even some jazz experimentations. This Ausbildung, coupled with Bolcom’s own musical sensibilities and pianistic intuition, formed his unique amalgaming compositional language(s) and served as the base for the idiom of these etudes.

The Twelve New Etudes

The story of the composition of the Twelve New Etudes is one which strings together both tragedy and serendipity.

Bolcom started working on the etudes in 1977 at the request of the American pianist, Paul Jacobs. Bolcom had written nine etudes when Jacobs, who had become very ill, passed

¹¹ Steven Johnson, “Bolcom, William.”
away in 1983. Bolcom, feeling “blocked” due to the death of his friend, ceased work on the etudes and believed that these etudes had come to an end.\textsuperscript{12}

A pair of occurrences rescued Bolcom from this compositional “writer’s block” and convinced him to resume work on these etudes: the first, a performance of three of the etudes by pianist and composer, John Musto; the second was a subsequence performance of all nine by the then-young Canadian pianist, Marc-André Hamelin. These two performances “broke the spell” and gave Bolcom the impetus to sit and write the last three etudes in the set, which were written, per Bolcom’s words, in “white heat”\textsuperscript{13} in the summer of 1986. The completed set, dubbed the “Twelve New Etudes” (for Bolcom had written an earlier set of twelve etudes between the years 1959 and 1966) was then dedicated to the memory of Mr. Jacobs, alongside the two other pianists so prominent in its revival process, Mr. Musto and Mr. Hamelin. Bolcom was then consequently awarded the Pulitzer prize for these etudes in 1988.

The construction of this set harks back to composers such as Chopin, and his own arrangement of the etudes in two groups of twelve etudes (Op. 10 and Op. 25.) This set of twelve etudes, however, is further divided into four groups of “books,” thus subdividing the collection into groups of three etudes each. In addition, it is worth noting that while it might be tempting to juxtapose Chopin’s 24 etudes with Bolcom’s 24 (i.e. both the “Twelve Etudes” and the “Twelve New Etudes” put together), nothing in Bolcom’s writings gives

\textsuperscript{12} Kozinn, “RECORDINGS; How the Spell Was Broken for Bolcom’s ‘Etudes.’”

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
the impression that such pairing should be made. In fact, these two sets of etudes are so vastly different in compositional style (possibly due to them being composed at very different stages of Bolcom's compositional development), that any kind of true uniformity could not be achieved by the merging of the two sets.

Even more important is the strong impression that the *Twelve New Etudes* construct a compelling narrative, one that is whole within itself and does not seem to allow for any further additions. Indeed, although Bolcom himself had indicated that any combination of etudes can be used for performance, the very fact that Bolcom indicates pause lengths in between books must signify that he at least entertained a notion and had a vision of a performance of the whole set.

Having studied and lived in Paris, the influence of French composition and Bolcom’s mentors is palpable throughout the set. The titles alternate between the two languages, English and French, and some of the compositions owe a great deal to French culture, manifested through allusions (the Satie quote in Etude no. 2), homages (titles such as “Vers le silence,” which is conceivably an homage to Alexander Scriabin’s work “Vers la flamme,”) and compositional language (most noticeably in Etudes no. 10 and 12, which are heavily influenced by the musical idiom of Olivier Messiaen.)

The set itself is conventional in its premise and follows the traditional roots of the etude genre that had been laid by 19th century pianist-composers such as Chopin, Liszt, Alkan, and then followed by 20th century composers such as Bartok, Scriabin, Cage, and, of course, Messiaen. Most noticeable is the set’s pedagogical purpose: each etude is designed to target a certain set of difficulties, which range from pure technical difficulties
such as in Etude No. 8 (large leaps played in great speed), the acquisition of musical styles (Etude No. 2 and the recitative style), the overcoming of rhythmic hurdles (Etude No. 4, amongst others), and control of tone and dynamics (prevalent throughout the set.) The difficulties targeted are announced at the beginning of each etude, and the variety of obstacles encountered throughout the set make it into a veritable compendium of technical and musical challenges.

Bolcom, however, made sure to remind us that these are not exercises for the sake of exercises. Indeed, for Bolcom “the major goal is the creation and execution of pieces of music,”¹⁴ and it would behoove any prospective performer, pedagogue, or theorist to approach the work in such a manner.

¹⁴ Bolcom, Preface to Twelve New Etudes, 4.
Chapter 2: Etude No. 1

This is the very first etude in the set, and as in other sets, such as those by Chopin, Liszt, Prokofiev, etc. the set starts off in vigorous, energetic fashion. The title of the etude, “fast, furious,” is descriptive, yet arguably less evocative than some of the titles in the set, such as “premonitions.”

The title is further supplemented by the two mood indications at the beginning of the piece: “Headlong, but controlled.” Of these two, the first would seem to be an extension in lexis of the original title, whereas the second one almost appears to be paradoxical, since headlong is usually connoted with reckless haste. This apparent paradox is solved with a quick look at the OED, which, alongside other definitions, provides us with the following: “With reference to forward motion: at breakneck speed; with great impetus or force.”

Thus, Bolcom seems to refer to the tempo itself, which ought to be as fast as possible, so long as it is controlled.

DYNAMICS

The dynamics in the piece are mostly characterized by swift swells, rather than constant, or strikingly contrasting ones. As Fennig had noticed, these “continuous dynamic shifts superimposed with rapidly executed passagework result in heightened agitation

15 “Headlong, Adv. and Adj.”
throughout these etudes.”¹⁶ And although the title of the etude bespeaks of an incredible force and momentum and is marked “furious,” the etude is somewhat conservatively marked, dynamically speaking, and utilizes a surprising degree of soft dynamics, especially in the beginning and concluding sections of the etude. Thus, the etude is essentially in an expanding and then contracting wedge form, with the most furious moments occurring in the middle, which, in turn, subside as we move closer to the end. Although employed in a more subtle and less apparent fashion, this sort of dynamic scheme is somewhat reminiscent of the more obvious dynamic schemes we can witness in the etudes of Györgi Ligeti (Etude No. 7, “Galamb Borong,” Etude No. 9, “Vertige,” and Etude No. 12, “Entrelacs,”) come immediately to mind.

The dynamics in this etude also seem to be phrase-related, in a rather conservative way. In this case, it is this rather simple connection of the correlation of direction of phrase (up vs. down) with general dynamic markings (loud vs. soft) that connects the writing in this piece with more conventional classical phrases. This would place Bolcom more in line with composers such as Schoenberg and Berg, who used their dynamic markings in a more traditional fashion, than with composers such as Boulez or Stockhausen.

The real dynamic (and textural) surprises come in form of the palm clusters and forearm glissandi. The palm clusters provide extra interest by creating an sudden cluster of sound,¹⁷ and can easily be accounted as some of the most furious elements in the etude.


¹⁷ Ibid., 66.
Forearm glissandi, which, according to Lee, were introduced by Bolcom in his first set of etudes, are noted by Fennig as compositional instruments which heighten the compositional drama through their loud dynamic intensity and heavy accents.

![FIGURE 2-1. FOREARM CLUSTERS IN ETUDE NO.1, P. 6.](image)

COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE

The compositional language of this etude features Bolcom’s pseudo-twelve-tone writing, which features a fast aggregate-completion rate and similar compositional tropes, but lacks the strictness of true twelve-tone writing.

One can see this trait from the very first two phrases of the piece.

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The first phrase employs exactly twelve notes. Out of these, only two are repeated. This phenomenon is even more striking in the second phrase, in which out of the ten notes which comprise the passage, only one is repeated, the F. This second F♯ is also sufficiently distanced from its first iteration so that it becomes much harder to perceive as a repeated note. And indeed, it is this kind of writing which can very easily be confused with twelve-tone writing, or at the very least, endows the music with a similar flavor. This will be
further demonstrated in the succeeding etudes, and in the concluding overall summary of the etudes stylistics’ traits.

In his writing in these etudes, Bolcom seems to often think in hand positions. The shift from one hand position to the next is fluid and allows for idiomatic, arpeggiated piano passagework writing. Jones has compared the passagework writing in this etude to Ruth Crawford's In Mixed Accents and Szymanowski's Twelve Etudes, Op. 33, no. 1, whereas another comparison can be drawn between these passages and the passagework in Chopin’s Etude Op. 10 No. 1.

FIGURE 2-4. ARPEGGIATED PASSAGEWORK UTILIZING HANDPOSITIONS IN ETUDE NO. 1, P. 6.

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As in some of the other études, Bolcom makes full use of the complete registral range of the keyboard. As Dahn has noticed, “The lowest A is struck four times, three of which end a phrase. The highest C is struck five times, all five times occurring near the piece’s climax.”

The étude, and consequently, the whole cycle, begins with a single line of music. This monophonic beginning notwithstanding, the predominant texture of the piece is polyphonic,

21 Dahn, “Motional Devices in Bolcom’s Piano Works.”

22 It is outside the scope of this work to truly assess this thesis, but it seems, at the very least, of great interest that this cycle seems to mirror developments in Western music by beginning with the most ancient of textures, monophony, continuing with all the different types of polyphony and homophony, and ending with the most majestic super-chords (a
employing mostly two lines of independent material in a non-imitative fashion. Far from predictable, however, Bolcom cleverly switches between polyphony and monophony, in order to create greater textural complexity.

FIGURE 2-6. TEXTURAL CHANGE FROM POLYPHONY TO MONOPHONY, AND BACK IN ETUDE NO. 1, P. 6.

ARTICULATION AND CONTOUR

The overall topography of the writing reflects musical waves, contours which are predominated by precipitous upward and downward motions. These serpentine motions, compositied of quicksilver changes of direction, contribute to this vertiginous, roller-coaster like piece. Intervals are contained within the octave until the end of the first page. Following the first page, there is an expansion in reach, and the interval of the ninth is quite common.

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term I have coined in order to describe chords which are so large that they must be split multiple times, even though they form one harmony.) It is almost as if Bolcom would like to describe with this cycle the whole creation of Western music.
Following his usual modus operandi in these etudes, Bolcom experiments with certain facets of the piece, while leaving the rest quite stable. In this etude, one of the stable elements is articulation, which is kept almost solely to legato, with the exception of a very short passage in the first phrase of page 7.

In addition, as Fennig has indicated, Bolcom also uses descriptive performance commentary with score indications such as “non legato,” “piu legato,” and “glass smooth” score indications.\(^\text{23}\)

**METER AND RHYTHM**

The second element which Bolcom chooses to stabilize in this piece is the rhythm. The piece is saturated with thirty-second notes, which, alongside the articulatory and contour qualities that were described in the previous section, enhances the creepy-crawly quality of

this etude’s effect. It is worth noting that the moments in which notes-values are incorporated which are shorter than 32\textsuperscript{nd} notes, they constitute some of the highpoints of the musical drama.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{FIGURE 2-8: INTENSIFICATION CORROLATING WITH FASTER NOTE VALUES, P. 6.}
\end{figure}

The etude is written without barlines, but is given the indication “in ♩”, so that although the etude does not have a clearly distinguished pattern of weak and strong beats, Bolcom does provide us with a clear pulse. This pulse should prove helpful, both for performer and listener, with keeping their sense of musical orientation.

**FORM**

As adumbrated above, the piece has an overall double-wedge shape. This form denotes an overall increase in intensity, which peaks around two-thirds of the way through, and then subsides until the end, which constitutes a low-point. Figure 1-18 below exhibits the climax of the etude. This climax is a combination of various facets which reach an acme: the aforementioned intensification due to the diminution in note-values, the registral peak
which was demonstrated above as well, and an enormous crescendo which results in the
dynamic zenith of the piece, peaking at three consecutive, separate \textit{fff} markings.

The end, on the other hand, is the complete antipode of this moment. We see a
decrease both in dynamics, which drops to \textit{pp} and then to \textit{ppp} in the very last phrase, and a
registral descent, plummeting all the way down to the lowest note of the keyboard.
Adhering to the menacing tone of the piece, Bolcom uses some sforzandi in this last
phrase, but these sforzandi do not diminish the overall collapsing effect.

In the detailed analysis below, the piece is divided into four sections: Introduction, Section
A, Section B, and Concluding Material.

\textsc{Detailed Analysis}

\textbf{Introduction}

The piece starts with a “wake up” call with ascending grace notes leading towards the
quarter-tone note Ab, a note which is not only one of the only three long notes in the piece,
but turns out to be the longest note in it.
The first passage is mostly a descending passage, but the second one, which follows immediately, is a more typical one for the piece, with its serpentine quality, and figurations which go up and down.
This murmuring passage is then followed by a longer, more complicated passage, which features a substantial rise and descent, rising all the way to a dynamic of $f$ only to descend back to $pp$, with a final note of D. Lastly, this passage is then followed by a short one, which descends all the way to the bottommost note of the piano, a low A.

This A demarcates the conclusion of the opening section, which serves as an introduction. A couple of reasons seem to demarcate this section:

a) Although the note which succeeds it arrives almost instantaneously, Bolcom seems to use the extremes of the keyboard as marker points. Thus, the fact that we have descended all the way to the bottommost note of the keyboard seems significant.
b) The section which succeeds it features a new concept of ascent, rather than descent, and new texture of polyphony.

Section A

The new section begins with the note F# in fz, and features an intensification of the previous material. A few factors contribute to this sense of intensification:

a) The texture becomes polyphonic, at least in a partial way (the texture oscillates at times between that and the monophonic texture which characterized the first section).

b) Bolcom uses, for the very first time, note-values quicker than thirty-second notes, an element which further enhances the sense of acceleration.

FIGURE 2-12: POLYPHONY AND RHYTHMIC DIMINUTION IN THE SECOND SECTION OF ETUDE NO. 1, P. 5.
c) Bolcom employs the use of the forearm glissando, and palm clusters. Both of these means endow the passage with a jolting quality.


This section concludes with another evanescent figuration and two eighth-note rests.

Section B

The next section offers new material combined alongside some of the material from Section A. The texture is still mostly polyphonic with interjections in forms of a monophonic interruption, but in it we can find a distinctly new melodic pattern in the right hand.

These whimsical arpeggiated figurations are at odds with the melodic material that has been presented so far for various reasons:

a) They contrast with the aggregate completion language that has been featured so far.

b) There is a more distinct separation between the hands, with each hand playing a designated role.

c) These new arpeggiated figurations have a few distinguishing characteristics: they generally span the overall interval of a ninth, built from a combination of a perfect fifth and a diminished fifth; they are organized in groups of three notes. All of these traits are new to the piece and constitute contrasting material.

This section features a substantial intensification of material as well, albeit in a different manner. The first phrase, which introduces this new material, employs the three note figuration in a chopped, fleeting manner, which is then interrupted with a fz-p interjection:

This first statement is then reiterated but altered significantly. It begins with an inversion of the concluding interruption material, and employs the arpeggiated figuration without rests, reaching higher to the note of F. This statement also concludes with a pitch-space and order variation of the pitches Eb, F, E, C#.

![FIGURE 2-17: THE SECOND ITERATION OF THE FIRST PHRASE OF THE THIRD SECTION IN ETUDE NO. 1, P. 6.](image)

This second iteration then gives way to a third one, in which the arpeggiated figuration is identically repeated three times, the third time reaching all the way to the uppermost note of the piano, C8. Whereas the first two iterations were marked with no crescendo, this last iteration features a tremendous crescendo and an explosion, culminating in the dynamic and dramatic peak of the piece with brutal barrage of clusters marked “wild”, followed by a salvo of forearm glissandi:
It is interesting to note that the arm glissandi incorporate the same interval class as the first set of glissandi (Major 7th and Minor 9th chords, both an [01] interval class) and that the glissandi are once again followed by the palm cluster which features a tritone and a held middle note.

Concluding Material

Another rest demarcates a new stage in the piece. The concluding section which then follows is an interesting amalgamation of a few ideas that were introduced in the B section.
of the piece: the use of repeated figurations and intervals (something that was avoided in the serpentine opening material), this time combined with an inversion of the three note arpeggiated figuration in the left hand instead of the right hand. A new sense of descent now imbues the piece with its imminent scent of impending closure:

![Figure 2-19: The first phrase of the concluding section of Etude No. 1, P. 7.](image)

The last phrase of the piece features further descent, both registrally and dynamically, with a final return of the serpentine twelve-tone like movement:
Thus we can see that although furious and bold in nature, Bolcom crafts this etude meticulously and endows the piece with a clear, logical, and coherent structure, which superbly holds the different material together.
Chapter 3: Etude No. 2

The second etude, titled “Récitatif,” has for its goal the study of the recitative idiom. In his subtitle for this etude, Bolcom provides us with an explanation for the pedagogical and technical focal points for this etude, which are: “rubato, finger-changes for smoothness’ sake; smooth passage of the line between hands.” However, as explicated in his preface, it seems that the study of style, rather than sheer technical exercise is at the core of this etude, and indeed, all of the etudes.

Lee mentions in her dissertation that this is one of four “generic titles” which Bolcom uses in these etudes; and while there is little doubt that this title is not as programmatic and/or evocative as a title such as “Vers le silence,” it nonetheless is not completely generic, due to the fact that recitatives do not, by definition, comprise a genre of piano music, and thus invoke a simulation rather than a concrete realization of a preexisting genre.


25 “The pedagogical and technical purpose of these New Etudes is similar to that of the first set... as in the first set, however, the major goal is the creation and execution of pieces of music, which happen to be exercises of style.” Ibid., 4.


27 Although not a piano genre per se, it is worth noting that representations of recitatives have been used in solo piano works by Beethoven, Liszt, etc.
This etude is also the first of several in the set that incorporate a quote. The quote, which appears at the beginning of the waltz portion of the piece, is from Erik Satie’s “the Swing”, a miniature from his collection entitled “sports et divertissements.”

**FORM**

The piece is written in a clear ABA’ form. The first A section of the piece includes the first four bars, and constitutes the first recitative portion of the etude. This recitative portion is characterized by a lack of meter, free-flowing rhythms, and four nearly monophonic lines, which give way to cadential chords. It is marked with the mood indicator “Free, expressive, very frank.”

The B section measures twenty four bars, and is contrasting in almost every way. Marked “Shyly, \( \text{\textbullet} = 92 \)” it has a slow waltz-like feel, in 3/8 time (with the exception of two single bars of 2/8), and it casts an almost hypnotic spell on the listener. As McAlexander points out, this distorted waltz “evokes the feigned innocence of the Satie miniature… and indirectly recalls some of its gestures.”

This section is also comprised of four phrases. It begins with two short four-bar phrases, which follow a question and answer paradigm. These two phrases are followed by a long, ten-bar phrase, elaborating and adding upon the material presented in the first two

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phrases. The section concludes with a short two-bar phrase, which fluidly leads into the A’ section.

The A’ section is marked “as before, but simpler,” and offers a lot of the ideas put forward in the A section. One conspicuous difference is that it is made up of only one extremely long bar, and thus has a more “one-breath” scope.

METER AND RHYTHM

If one were to listen to the etude without looking at the score, the overall effect of the vocal line, which precedes the cadential chords in all four phrases of the A section, would be of complete rhythmic freedom. This ostensibly freewheeling rubato, which is part and parcel of an authentic recitative performance, is achieved here by means of an interesting, almost paradoxical way: the combination of highly precise written-out rhythms alongside the tempo indication of “free.” Figure 2-1 presents this written-out rhythmic freedom. It is interesting to notice that this “rubato” includes an initial accelerando, some equal-duration notes, and then a concluding ritardando.

FIGURE 3-1. WRITTEN-OUT RUBATO IN ETUDE NO.2, P. 8.
As stated above, rhythmic variety plays a substantial role in the formation of this faux-spontaneous rhythmic feeling. This entails not only variety within the phrase, but rhythmic variations and differences between the phrases. Figure 2-2 shows the fourth phrase, which is the most similar to the first in terms of rhythms. This figure should be juxtaposed with figure 2-1 in order to see the rhythmic variations at work.

![Figure 3-2](image)

FIGURE 3-2. RHYTHMIC VARIATIONS IN THE FOURTH PHRASE OF ETUDE NO.2, P. 8.

It is also worth noting that alongside the precise writing of rhythms, Bolcom also leaves the performer with some elements which are more personally interpretable, i.e. the directional arrows, which are, of course, non-measurable.

The cadential chords that conclude every phrase in the first section are more freely notated, with a relative time notation that is further supplemented by the directional arrows. In addition, fermata markings are added in some instances.
The rhythmic element changes markedly in the B section. The unmetered rhythmic freedom gives way to precise rhythms, predominated by the triple meter of 3/8. One particularly interesting trait of this pseudo-waltz is that while the second and third beats are usually present, there is a ubiquitous absence of downbeats, which are instead replaced with anticipating upbeats.

This lack of downbeats gives the section its floaty, dream-like feeling, and adds an ethereal dimension to this homage to Satie’s Swing.
COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE

The striking contrast between the A and B sections provides an insight into Bolcom’s compositional language. As McAlexander noted, Bolcom employs three disparate compositional styles: an unmetered, rhapsodic monody; jazz-influenced chordal cadences, and a waltz which clearly takes its cues from Erik Satie’s “The Swing.”

For the melodic solo lines, Bolcom utilizes unpredictable changes of direction and pitch selection, which seems to imply some concept of centricity. This idea of preeminence of certain tones emanates at times from the passagework’s circuitous contour (which seems to imply some center), and at other times from repetition of certain notes.

In Figure 2-5 we see a spinning motion around the notes F, C#, E, and D. Two readings of this passage seem particularly plausible:

1) This revolution could be seen as creating a concept of centricity that would imply a centric tone of Eb.

2) In a more tonal-referencing reading, one could see these pitches as revolving around the note of D, with strong implications of a D minor collection (with the C# and E acting as a double neighbor to the D.)

29 Ibid.
Although the note E\textsubscript{b} does not appear in the first phrase and is only implied, it is interesting to notice that a similarly implied tone of A\textsubscript{b} in the second phrase is not only present, but is unambiguously a structurally imperious note.\footnote{The tonal reading of this passage would insinuate a G minor collection.}
As stated above, in other cases notes receive their status of predominance through repetition. Figure 2-7 exemplifies such case. In this phrase the note E receives some priority over other notes as a consequence of repetition.

FIGURE 3-7. PREDOMINANCE OF THE NOTE E THROUGH MEANS OF REPTITION IN ETUDE NO. 2, P. 8.

As noted by previous writers, the harmonic language of the cadential chords at the end of each phrase seems to be jazz-influenced. These chords, which constitute for the most part simple dominant to tonic harmonic progressions, are given jazz flavor by means of the addition of the ninth scale degree, and, perhaps more crucially, the addition of “blue notes,” which are either written either as sixteenth notes, or as grace notes. These chord
progressions also feature jazz-inspired voice leading,\textsuperscript{31} and as Kang has argued, might even resemble the tonal language of Gershwin.\textsuperscript{32}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure3-8.png}
\caption{Jazz-inflected cadential chords in Etude No. 2, p. 8.}
\end{figure}

The arpeggiated chord that concludes the first section and leads into the second is also clearly jazz-inspired, as it features a dominant seventh chord with a 13\textsuperscript{th} added.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure3-9.png}
\caption{Jazz-inflected cadential chord in Etude No. 2, p. 8.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{31} There are two characteristics that should lead us in this direction: the large leap in the resolution, which in traditional classical voice-leading would probably be replaced by a smoother resolution, such as resolving the A to a G; and the open-spaced voicing and preference towards a two-note harmony in the right hand, which in traditional classical voice-leading would lean more often toward a more uneven voice-distribution and three-note chords in the right hand.

\textsuperscript{32} Kang, “Late Twentieth-Century Piano Concert Etudes: A Style Study,” 44.
The second section serves as a true contrast, and thus employs a completely different compositional language. The melody in the waltz portion uses, as in the first etude, the device of rapid aggregate completion. The chords that accompany this melody showcase the relative futility of using a pitch-content based analysis. The table below lists the first four chords, alongside their Forte numbers and interval vectors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chord’s prime form</th>
<th>Forte Number</th>
<th>Interval Vector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[0,2,3,4,6,8,9]</td>
<td>7-28B</td>
<td>&lt;3,4,4,4,3,3&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[0,2,3,4,6,7]</td>
<td>6-z10B</td>
<td>&lt;3,3,3,3,2,1&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[0,1,3,5,6,9]</td>
<td>6-z28</td>
<td>&lt;2,2,4,3,2,2&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[0,1,2,6,7]</td>
<td>5-7A</td>
<td>&lt;3,1,0,1,3,2&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There are some things to be gleaned from this table, to be sure. The first two chords seem to be linked, and, indeed, these two chords alternate between one another during the beginning of this waltz. Nonetheless, the overall compositional language and Bolcom’s method for picking his pitches does not seem to be revealed by such analysis.

What can be gleaned from this passage is Bolcom’s ever-present penchant for variety. No two chords are alike, and between them, these four chords encompass an incredible variety of all possible intervals. Indeed, with the exception of the interval of a minor 3rd in the last chord, no interval class is missing from any of the chords. This richness seems to be one of Bolcom’s main ideas regarding pitch-content selection.
One element that should not be disregarded is Bolcom’s idiomatic writing for the piano. It could be contended that, just as in the first etude, pianistic hand positions and idiomatic chords seem to play a substantial part in Bolcom’s pitch selection.

RANGE

In comparison with some of the other etudes, the range of this etude is more limited, and most of the writing is concentrated within a three to four-octaves span.

The range is particularly smaller in the A section, aptly depicting a more vocal range. The range is then increased for the more instrumental B section.

TEXTURE

The texture is remarkably varied, employing all three types of texture at different times. The first section alternates mostly between monophonic lines, and homophonic chordal cadences. However, even these monophonic lines are “peppered” with some bits of broken polyphony. Figure 2-10 shows such example.
The B section is mostly homophonic, with some polyphony in its midst.

DYNAMICS

As this etude is mostly introspective in nature, the dynamic range is, like its pitch range, relatively modest.

This dynamic introversion is particularly noticeable in the B section. This Satie-inspired waltz is aptly patient, and obviously inspired by the dynamic marking of the original piece.

**Sports et Divertissements**

_2. La Balançoire_

_Erik Satie (1866–1925)_

*C'est mon cœur qui se balance ainsi. Il n'a pas vertige. Comme il a de petits pieds.*

*Voudra-t'il revenir dans ma poitrine?*

**FIGURE 3-12. DYNAMIC EQUANIMITY IN SATIE’S “THE SWING” FROM “SPORTS ET DIVERTISSEMENTS.”**
ARTICULATION AND CONTOUR

Since the main pedagogical goal of this etude is to learn and properly perform in the “recitative style,” it seems hardly surprising that the greatly predominant articulation would be legato. This legato is even preserved in the waltz portion of the etude, in which the legato is mostly confined to the melody line. This melody line is the one which requires the most control over the “finger-changes for smoothness-sake” which Bolcom states as a pedagogical element of this etude. The other element, i.e. “smooth passage of the line between hands” is mostly applicable to the A section of the piece.


FIGURE 3-14. MELODY LINE REQUIRING SMOOTH PASSAGE OF LINE BETWEEN THE HANDS IN ETUDE NO. 2, P. 8.
The contour is filled with changes of directions, with intervals dramatically increasing in the B section, as opposed to the A section.

**DETAILED ANALYSIS**

The piece starts with a long note, which acts as a musical outburst. This long note is then followed by a free-flowing recitative-like line with a gradual written-out accelerando. The written-out accelerando is followed by a written-out ritenuto, which leads in turn into a held moment of harmonic tension, further sustained by a fermata. The harmonic tension is resolved with a simple, somewhat facetiously laconic V-I cadential sequence.

![Figure 3-15. The first phrase of Etude No. 2, p. 8.](image)

Four such passages occur, out of which the first section of the piece is comprised, all featuring variations on this rhythmic concept of an accelerando and ritenuto, and the concept of the buildup into the harmonic tension and ensuing resolution. Out of these four phrases, only the second phrase exhibits some discrepancies from this pattern. In it, not
only that we do not have the harmonically suspenseful moment held with a fermata, but instead of offering a resolution, Bolcom opts to follow it with yet another ambiguous harmony, one that sounds very much like a question:

![Musical notation](image)

**FIGURE 3-16. THE SECOND PHRASE OF ETUDE NO. 2, P. 8.**

Throughout this passage, Bolcom exhibits a trait that we shall be able to trace through many of his other etudes: his tendency to change little details in passages that are otherwise alike, thus creating constant variety.33

In order to give an example of this trait, it would probably suffice to juxtapose the three cadential sequences which conclude their respective passages.

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33 One unfortunate side-effect for the performer to this compositional technique is that these pieces become infinitely more difficult to memorize.
The section ends with a longer, slightly more involved, though still simple cadential sequence, which in turn is then followed by another question like passage, mysterious in nature:

FIGURE 3-17. THREE CADENTIAL ENDINGS EXEMPLIFYING BOLCOM’S VARIATIONS IN ETUDE NO. 2, P. 8.

This question mark ends with two iterations of the note of C#, a note which functions as an augmented 9th within the dominant harmony underneath it. The first C# is marked with a pizz. indication, instructing the player to pluck the note inside the piano. This sound-effect completes the question mark, and endows it with an other-worldly quality.

The second iteration of the C# is marked to be played normally, and this note functions as both the end of the A section, and the beginning of the next, the B section.

McAlexander points out in his dissertation how the two minor seconds in the last chord of the A section connect it with its brethren chords which begin the B section. And while a condensed version of the chord would indeed constitute of two minor second intervals, it is worth noting the spacing of the last chord of the A section. This spacing substantially mollifies the harmonic tension arising from these intervals, and creates a much jazzier, rather than a dissonant effect. Thus, although the chords are linked through some interval

content, there is also an immediate and distinct change in sound-world which occurs at the beginning of the B section.

The B section of this ABA’ form serves as a subtle contrast to the A section, with its moving tempo of $\frac{\text{♩}}{\text{♩}} = 92$ (marked “Shyly,”) and its delicate waltz-like lilt. Bolcom’s quote of Satie sets up the mood for this dream-like, enigmatic B section, which, as McAlexander points out, “evokes the feigned innocence of the Satie miniature… and indirectly recalls some of its gestures.”

Enigmatic seems to be a keyword for this section, for it distinctly offers more questions than resolutions with phrases which end with unexpected silences, and intervals which defy traditional expectations. The texture of this section is no longer monophonic, and alternates between homophony, which was partly present in the A section, and polyphony, which is unique to this section.

This section features a melody carried out by sustained notes marked both cantabile and molto legato, accompanied by two gentle, assuaging slurred chords, which occupy the second and third beats of the 3/8 measure, respectively.

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35 Ibid., 73.
This first phrase of the placid, dance-like figuration has a few striking features. First, it is a conventional four-bar phrase, thus, establishing Bolcom’s tendency towards preservation of traditional elements. Secondly, the passage receives its floaty, dreamy quality not only from its hushed dynamics (which are reinforced by the use of the una corda), but also from the lack of any notes on the downbeats of the measures. Thus, instead of placing the melody notes on the downbeat, Bolcom places them just ahead of the downbeat, as a gentle, yet insistent short pickup. Last but not least is the fact that the statement from the first bar is reiterated in turn two more times ere changing into a mirror-like fourth bar, in which the descending sigh motive of the first three bars is replaced by a similar, yet not identical ascending two-note figuration. This repetition lends a hypnotic, spell-binding quality to the beginning of the passage, taking us away from the free-form expression of the A section, into the more predictable, rhythmically-stable B section.
The second phrase is another four-bar phrase, which answers the first. The answer, however, is hardly unambiguous, as it ends with an interval of a tritone and yet another silence:

![FIGURE 3-20. THE SECOND PHRASE OF THE B SECTION OF ETUDE NO. 2, P. 9.](image)

The third phrase is the most complicated one in the section. It seems at the beginning as if it is to be of a similar mold, with waltz-like patterns and a four-bar length. At the end of the four bars, however, the phrase continues and morphs into a polyphonic excerpt of an additional six bars length, which contains, in part, some of the waltz elements, but also features smooth longer lines, which do not seem to adhere to the 3/8 pattern. The distinction between the different elements becomes vague, with homophonic features appearing almost haphazardly out of the polyphonic mist. This phrase also serves as the dramatic highpoint of the section, with a marking of *mf* and *espressivo* which are coupled with the highest notes of the piece, a B₃ and a Bb. This B₃ is of consequence and shall come back at the very end of the piece.

One last enigmatic rest ensues, before the fourth phrase of the section (a phrase which is very much a return to the hypnotic spell of the first phrase in terms of its repetitions of
rhythm and pitches) concludes the B section in hushed tones, with a transition that is, once again, both an end and a beginning.

It is quite astonishing to observe the study in material-in-context that this transitional passage brings. The pitches F# and A, which carried no tonal references at the end of the B section, are gradually brought back to tonality-based context through two ascending semitone transpositions, an addition of the original F (which started the piece and functions as part of this suddenly-formed diminished chord), and then a resolution. This beautiful passage, which brings us, the listeners, back to tonality, is incredibly powerful precisely because of this play on context.

The A’ section, although its marking as “as before, but simpler,” is in fact a compact and more intense version of the A section. The loss of the bar-divisions (which morphs into one continuous long bar), the more harmonically involved jazzy chords, and, most importantly, the third phrase, which forms a blues-like outburst—all make this into a more emotionally complex musical occurrence.
The section ends after three phrases, contrasting with the four which made up the A section. At the end of the cadence, in which we saw a simple $V \rightarrow I$ in the A section, Bolcom adds a couple of mysterious notes which are to be played pizzicato. These two notes, C# and a high B, serve as a musical flashback to two of the most memorable moments in the piece: the C# which ended the A section and lead into the B section, and the high B which served as a climactic point in the B section (and was marked espressivo, which gives it greater weight), and remained lingering in our inner ear.

The piece then concludes with a similar chord to the one which ended the A section, only with the two high C#’s now in opposite order of execution. The pizz. note is now to be played last, leaving us, the listeners, with a mystical, question-inducing end.
CHAPTER 4: ETUDE NO. 3

Etude No. 3, entitled “Mirrors,” is the third in the collection of three etudes in Book I. It features another bold stylistic departure, and presents both the performer and the listener with different compositional and conceptual ideas than those which they have encountered so far.

The title, “Mirrors,” is at once evocative and descriptive. It is evocative for both the performer and listener, as the signifier “Mirrors” signifies an extra-musical object, with which both performer and listener try to align the musical occurrences. It is descriptive, since it outlines the general texture and compositional technique around which the etude is built.

The etude is pointillistic in nature, and is structured around the compositional technique of inversional axes. Lee points out in her dissertation that the mirror technique employed in this etude has been used by other composers of the twentieth century. Moreover, as Lee indicates, one composer, namely Vincent Persichetti, has written a full set of etudes, all based on this concept.\(^\text{36}\)

Thus, this etude should probably be examined not as a novelty, but instead as a Bolcom nod towards a preexisting genre. This understanding of Bolcom’s proverbial tip of the hat

would also allow the interpreter to try and examine what is unique, rather than only looking at what is common about this etude.

In terms of character, this etude could be seen as bearing some similarities to Ravel’s Scarbo. There seems to be a mischievous spirit behind the creation of this etude, and the piece furnishes us with many dynamic surprises, juxtaposition of whispering passages with tremendous climaxes, and vertiginous register shifts. These are all subsumed under a constant fleeting feeling, a will-o’-the-wispian character which permeates the etude.

COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE

Whereas in the two other etudes examined so far one of the primary analytical hurdles was the identification of a broad compositional concept or technique, this etude clearly features such a concept, and is, thus, the most obvious candidate for the employment of post-tonal analysis.

Throughout most of the etude we see the employment of the concept of inversional axes, a concept defined by Joseph Straus as a “midpoint around which all of the notes balance.” Furthermore, Straus explains that an axis of symmetry can function either as a pitch or a pitch class center.\(^{37}\)

As seen in the previous chapter, Bolcom hints at the use of such a technique in a few isolated places in Etude no. 2. It is, however, in Etude no. 3, that we see an unambiguous,

\(^{37}\) Straus, *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, 133.
fleshed-out utilization of the concept. With the exception of the first page, which serves almost as a “tease” to the concept, the choice of notes in the piece is done in a rigorous fashion, with no notes deviating from the pattern. Furthermore, it is worth noting that while composers can opt to “modulate” from one inversional axis to another during the piece, Bolcom adheres to only one axis, thus creating a profoundly strict piece in this regard.

In fact, it is only through the use of other parameters that Bolcom is able to avoid an academic and pedantic exercise. This could account for one of the reasons because of which Bolcom decided to forego serialization and a thorough pointillistic dynamic scheme, as seen below, and opt for a looser, and less strict dynamic writing.

As Straus points out, there exist twelve pairs of inversional axes, all identifiable according to the sum of the balancing pairs. In the case of this etude, the inversional sum which predominates the etude is 7, and remains the same throughout the entire etude. This means that the inversional axis runs theoretically between the notes 3-4 and 9-10.

The following graph, taken from Joseph Straus’ book on post-tonal theory, should prove helpful for understanding the layout for the inversional axis which underlies the pitches in this etude:

38 Ibid., 137.

39 The above is true in a standard Mod 12 system.
Any passage taken from the second page and onwards would be suitable as an example for this compositional technique. The following few bars, taken from the last page of the etude, were chosen for the sake of brevity due to the relative sparseness of notes:

In the example above we can see this concept at work. All of the notes played simultaneously add up to one numerical value, the sum of 7. The notes E and Eb, equal to a 3 and 4 in a mod 12 system, add up to 7; the notes F-sharp and Db, equal to a 6 and a 1
add up to 7, etc. The last two notes, although separated by the entire length of the keyboard, still add up to the sum of 7 through the combination of the pitches A and B♭, which equal to pitch classes of 9 and 10, respectively, which in turn give us the sum of 19, or a 7 in a Mod 12 system.

One of the more fascinating aspects of this etude is the sheer number of textural variations that Bolcom is able to create using this strict mechanism. From contracting and expanding “wedge” shapes, using a plethora of different notes (as in the example above), to the employment of only a select few different notes in an entire passage (as in example 3-3)— Bolcom is able to create ever-evolving and changing note patterns, which belie the rigorous application at the heart of this technique.

FIGURE 4-3. PASSAGES EMPLOYING THE USE OF A SELECT GROUP OF NOTES IN ETUDE NO. 3, P. 14.
DYNAMICS

The dynamic scheme can be separated into two clear divisions: pointillistic dynamics, and conventional dynamics.

The pointillistic dynamic scheme is the scheme most prevalent in the beginning of the piece, and is characterized by a few traits. First, it is marked by a tremendous range, with markings spanning from the rarely-indicated, wispy $pppp$ which ends the piece, to $fff$ which marks the highpoint of the etude.

![Figure 4-4. Rare dynamic marking of $pppp$ in the last chord of Etude No. 3, p. 15.](image)

Secondly, and possibly most strikingly, most notes are endowed with an individual dynamic, register, and timbre, etc. This particular compositional technique was named in after the painting technique of Georges Seurat, and appeared frequently in the works of the composers of the Darmstadt School. Figure 3-5 and 3-6 feature examples from Stockhausen’s Klavierstück II, and Bolcom’s Etude No. 3, respectively. Both feature the characteristics that have been discussed above.

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40 Latham, “Pointillism.”
Unlike many of the pointillistic works, however, Bolcom’s dynamic markings are not serialized, and exhibit no systematic selection of values. This is, as we have seen before,
very much in accordance with Bolcom’s regular tendency towards the creation of a musical language which defies simple analysis.

The second kind of dynamic scheme is a more conventional one, and presides mostly in the later part of the etude. It is important to emphasize that this change does not mean that the dynamic markings become predictable, or, indeed, less wild; moreover, the dynamic markings are always meticulously written. However, the lack of radically different dynamic marking per every note precludes these passages from being qualified as pointillistic in style. Figure 3-7 shows an example for such a passage.

![Figure 4-7: Non-Pointillistic Writing in Bolcom's Etude No. 3, P. 13](image-url)
The writing in this etude, as in Etude no. 1, encompasses and utilizes the entire range of the keyboard. However, there exists a substantial difference. In Etude no. 1, the passagework swings up and down in a dramatic, sweeping fashion, and some of the phrases begin on very low notes, indeed the lowest register of the piano, and ascend all the way up, or vice versa. However, there is very little use of large intervals and the employment of different registers at the same time. This very effect, in which a very low note is paired with an extremely high note was most famously used by Beethoven in pieces such as his Fourth Piano Concerto, and the piano sonata Op. 111, and although Bolcom’s etude does not store the emotional and metaphysical implications of these pieces, some of the sense of awe that intervals such as these can inspire, remains.

FIGURE 4-8. LARGE INTERVALS IN BEETHOVEN’S SONATA OP. 111, 2ND MOVEMENT, M. 118.
TEXTURE

The texture in this etude is predominantly polyphonic, with notes appearing in a relatively sparse nature. Moreover, the use of rests and pauses is particularly pronounced, and helps identify the pointillistic tendencies of this piece.

As noted by McAlexander, the use of polyphony permeates more than one layer of the composition. Through the registral and dynamic distinctions Bolcom creates different layers of voices that separate musical lines. As McAlexander demonstrates, this is most salient at the beginning of the piece, in which the different registers and dynamics assigned to each note delineate separate diminished chords. McAlexander identifies this technique as Webernian.⁴¹

An additional important textural observation can be made regarding the nature of the use of simultaneity and non-simultaneity of the hands. Fennig touches upon the subject while discussing dynamics, correctly noticing that there is a shift towards the end of the etude from a non-simultaneous use of the hands, to a simultaneous one, and considers it to be the reason for the levelling of the dynamic discrepancies between the hands. In effect, this process of growing simultaneity of the hands seems to be an integral part of the *dramatic* narrative of the piece, a point to which we will come back at the detailed analysis section.

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ARTICULATION AND CONTOUR

As examined before, Bolcom’s wont in these etudes is to stabilize a few isolated compositional aspects, thus minimizing the fluctuations within them, and to compensate for this relative rigidity with freedom and variety in other compositional features. This is not only true for this etude, but is expressed more markedly and pronouncedly than in any other etude examined so far. And this freedom, and most importantly, variety is nowhere more pronounced than in the cornucopia we can witness in Bolcom’s treatment of the articulations and contours.

The etude is marked with the instruction *practically no pedal*. With this limiting factor in mind, Bolcom put forward a veritable exhibition of the compositional possibilities for articulations and contours. There are passages with staccato, legato, non-legato, marcato, or with all of the above; there are tremendous leaps, a dizzying array of intervals within passages, movements in all directions, and passages in which one or more fingers are holding a note while the rest of the fingers play different articulations. All of these create this constant feeling of change and mitigate the potential rigidity expressed within such a strict compositional system.

However, one of the most important characteristics of this etude, and, without a doubt, the other main reason because of which this etude is entitled “mirrors” (outside the inversional symmetry) is the salient use of contrary motions. These motions mimic each
other, indeed, mirror each other, and thus present us with a representation of the concept of a mirror. Figure 3-10 presents an example of such a passage.

Indeed, such contrary motions are usually associated with mirroring effect. When paired with the inversional symmetry, they create a powerful conceptual illusion of mirrors.

METER AND RHYTHM

As appropriate for a piece which conveys such a feeling of strictness, and demands absolute precision in terms of execution of rhythms, this etude is the first to feature traditionally metered bars. This sense of metrical cohesion is further strengthened by the continuation of the meter of the piece, 2/8, throughout the whole piece.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{43} The only exception to this rule is bar no. 4 in the second system of page no. 14. For one bar only Bolcom gives a temporal rather than a metered notation to the bar.
The rhythms are varied, but are relatively not complicated in terms of performance and conceptual challenges. This trait would come in great contrast with the succeeding etude, in which irregular, gradually more complex rhythms are introduced, and form the main hurdle for the performers and listeners.

FORM

A more detailed view of the dramatic arch will be explored in the detailed analysis section. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that even though the etude does not present us with any concrete, tangible traditional form, there is a distinct narrative within its construction. In general terms, one can view the piece as divided into three main sections:

A) Measures 1-16. This section functions as the introduction to the etude.

B) Measures 17-73. This composites the main section of the etude. It presents a gradual, though non-linear, buildup, which leads to the climax of the etude in the first system of page 15.

C) Measures 74-end. Following the buildup, we see a dramatic relief, and a coda in hushed tones.

As mentioned, this is more of a narrative than a true form. Nonetheless, it is very doubtlessly effective in its results.
DETAILED ANALYSIS

As explored above, the main premise of the etude is to present “mirrors” — an allegorical name for a compositional technique known as inversional symmetry.

The etude begins with a section which functions as an introduction. This introduction, which lasts until the antepenultimate bar of the first page, measure 16, features a few characteristics and is demarcated by a few features which distinguish it from the rest of the piece:

1) It is mysterious in nature.

2) This sense of mystery is further enhanced by extensive use of rests and silences.

3) It features asimultaneity of the hands. This lack of simultaneity, which is only broken in one instance (the E-D interval on measure 11), substantially adds to the sense of drama and exploration.

4) It is the only consistently pointillistic section of the etude.

5) It gradually exposes the listener to the inversional symmetry that is going to be so crucial to the construction of this etude.
The fifth point is perhaps the most striking one, and requires elaboration. As suggested above, the basic building-blocks for the pitch-classes in this etude all correspond to the inversional sum of 7. In the beginning of the etude, however, this inversional sum appears to be missing. Indeed, if taken as a unit by itself, it exhibits no tendencies for inversional symmetry.

Instead, Bolcom uses short phrases in this introduction which become progressively more complicated with the addition of notes. The first phrase, which consists of measure 1,
is four notes long. The second phrase (mm. 5-6) features six notes, the third (mm. 8-9), nine, and the fourth (mm. 10-12) twelve, with an addendum of three more notes.

These measures also introduce us to our pattern. In the first measure, Bolcom introduces 4 tones: F, D, Bb, and F#. As mentioned, these notes by themselves do not exhibit an inversional symmetry.

This phrase is then followed, after a 3-bar rest, by a similar statement, which, in turn, adds two more notes at the beginning of the passage, those of C# and of A. The rest of the notes, though exhibiting a slight rhythmic variation, are in the exact same order and register as in the first bar.

By supplying us with the two additional notes, Bolcom has now solved our puzzle, and given us all the pieces for the inversional symmetry which were lacking in the first bar. A simple chart, using numerical values in mod 12 for note values will be used to illustrate the point:

![Figure 4-13. Numerical Values of the Notes in the First Measure Bolcom’s Etude No. 3, P. 11, Showing No Inversional Symmetry.](image-url)
Thus Bolcom teases us with the first bar, which could be seen as the only bar in the piece which does not feature this inversional symmetry at all. By adding the bars of silence which follow, Bolcom further adds to this feeling of asymmetry and inquietness; he then reiterates the statement with the addition of the two notes, this time, introducing the symmetry which will function as the cornerstone of this etude.

It is worth noting that while the inversional symmetry is clearly there, it is presented in a “rainbow” presentation, i.e. the first note belongs with the last, the second with the penultimate, etc. This presentation turns the task of perceiving the inversional symmetry substantially more difficult for both listener and performer, and further contributes to the feeling of obfuscation and mystery which characterizes the beginning of the piece. As we will see, this “rainbow presentation” will gradually change into a simpler, adjacent notes presentation, which, in turn, will add to the feeling of order.
Another notable trait of these pitches is that when this hexachord is put in its prime form (0,1,4,5,8,9), it features three degrees of both transpositional and inversional symmetries—indicative of the many mirroring possibilities inherent within this set of pitches.

Phrase 3, i.e. measures 8-9, reiterates five of the notes which were present before. The first two notes, Bb and A, which equal the numerical values of 10 and 9, respectively, combine (in mod 12) to the sum of 7. Thus we can see that some of the scattered distribution of the notes is already giving way to what can be called an adjacent notes presentation.

Since there are 9 notes in this phrase, it is obvious that one of the notes would be without a pair, and in this case it is the note of C#, which requires the F# in order to complete its pairing to the sum of 7. This note will make its reappearance in phrase 4, a phrase which also forgoes the pointillistic dynamic markings in favor of an explosive ff.
Two noteworthy attributes of this passage are the introduction, for the first time, of two notes which occur simultaneously, and the little appendix of three notes, which functions as a gentle echo. This echo repeats notes which we have already heard, this time in the dynamic of *pp* and has an almost facetious effect.

A sum of the notes which have appeared so far aggregates to nine unique notes, which will be presented from now on, both for the sake of convenience, and in order to avoid confusion with enharmonic equivalences, in note values: 1,2,3,4,5,6,9,10,11. In this numerical system the only notes that have not appeared so far are thus 0, 7, and 8, (or C, G, and G#.)

The next phrase in measures 14-15 is fragmentary, and is made up of three separate micro statements. In them we get, in order, the following notes: 3, 8, 11, 11, 2, 8, 3. Out of these, 8 and 11 form our inversional symmetry, while the first note, 3, is used in order to complete an unresolved pair from the previous phrase (3 and 4.) Two notes remain missing in order to complete all 12, those of 0, and 7.

These notes, in turn, show up in the most emphatic way in the next phrase, a phrase which must be seen as a turning point in the piece.

A few reasons demarcate this passage as a substantially different, and one that marks a turnaround in the piece:

1) For the first time, the main texture is one in which both hands play at the same time. This marks a real change and allows for various new factors to come into play, which shall be described below.
2) This section marks the introduction of the contrary motion, which, as discussed in the contour section above, lies at the heart of the mirroring concept of this etude.

3) From this section onwards the inversional symmetry is retained whether the two hands play in unison, parallel, or contrary motion. Moreover, if until this section the “mirror” effect of the piece had been difficult to grasp, the inversional symmetry, especially when coupled with the contrary motion, becomes substantially easier to hear and comprehend.

4) This section also marks a significant departure in terms of the dynamic scheme. The pointillistic, register based, note-per-note dynamic changes make way for a more traditional dynamics scheme—one that is based more on highly dramatic contrasts, and a general buildup towards the climax of the etude, which will mark the end of this section.

![Figure 4-16](image)

**FIGURE 4-16. THE BEGINNING OF THE MIDDLE SECTION IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 3, P. 11.**

Another intriguing change occurs in the second system of page 13 from measure 42. Whereas until this moment our inventory of notes per phrase and gesture has been vast, in
measure 42 the music seems to come into a kinetic halt in which the constant change in pitches ceases, and Bolcom uses utilizes fixed pitches, which obstinately repeat.

Moments like this can be repeatedly found in this set, and were noted by Dahn, who refers to them as “pitch constellations.” And whereas Dahn generally referred to larger structures of pitches, there is no doubt that a similar event occurs here, which is designed to slow down the pace of changes, stabilize the pitch material, and create a sense as if the piece is almost “stuck.”

![Figure 4-17. “STUCK” PITCHES IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 3, P. 13.](image)

This technique is consistently employed for a relatively long passage, until finally coming to an abrupt ending in measure 59, when the minor 3rd/major 6th intervals (IC3) collapse into an intensely dissonant interval of a minor 2nd marked sffz in the very center

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44 Dahn, “Motional Devices in Bolcom’s Piano Works.”
of the keyboard. This long, held note seems to unlock the fetters with which the music has been shackled, and is followed by a conflagration of notes, coming in three sequencing passages, each more intense and explosive.

These passages lead to the etude’s dramatic climax in the first system of page 15, which is then followed by two measures of silence.


FIGURE 4-19. THE CLIMAX IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 3, P. 15.
After yet another dramatic silence, the etude concludes with a hushed, almost incorporeal coda, in which both the mirroring motions and the inversional symmetry are once again clearly heard. It also presents the large interval, the Beethovenian “Heaven and Earth,” that had been discussed earlier. The last sound heard in the etude is a mirroring double chord in the right and left hand with the dynamic marking of ppppp.

The etude seals the first book of etudes, and it seems obvious that Bolcom wanted to leave us with a sense of mystery that will entice both the listener and performer to further pursue the rest of the books.

FIGURE 4-20. THE CONCLUSION OF BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 3, P. 15.
CHAPTER 5: ETUDE NO. 4

The fourth etude, entitled, “Scène d’opéra,” was written at the request of the pianist and dedicatee Paul Jacobs for an etude which pairs rigorous left hand writing, set against “irrational” right hand rhythms.  

The concept of the piece is easily recognizable, and emanates from its basic premise: a repeating, unchanging, basso ostinato in the left hand, above which lies an increasingly complex right hand. The etude is theatrical in nature, and due to its clear construction and premise is one of the most easily-accessible and directly communicative of all the etudes in the set.

The operatic quality of the work is seen in part in the ground bass, which is in line with an operatic ostinato, and radiates solemnity and drama. McAlexander notes that the etude is suffused with “the spirit of Berg” and believes that the “expressionistic quality of the upper voices and the use of a passacaglia recall Wozzeck,” thus connecting this etude with the style of the Second Viennese School. There exists a second reading, however. When looked upon as a hark unto a different period of time, one can also perceive the descending, Phrygian, dotted nature of this ostinato as connoting in fact with the Renaissance and Baroque so-called “Lament Bass,” which in turn would imply certain

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gravitas at the very least, and perhaps even illness and morbidity. Indeed, it might not be entirely out of the question that Bolcom even intended to insinuate some connection with Purcell’s “Dido and Aeneas” in this piece, arguably the most well-known descending ostinato in the entire operatic repertoire.

Its operatic provenance notwithstanding, the piece in fact sounds less operatic and more like an instrumental theatre piece, since the material in the right hand is mostly intricate, contrapuntal, and instrumentally virtuosic in idiosyncratic ways that would belie traditional vocal lines (with the exception of the placido section, as Lee noted.) Be it as it may, whether theatrical, operatic, or both, this is a piece of great dramatic flair, and its almost tragic nature bespeaks of real substance and emotional heft.

COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE

One can divide the compositional language of this etude into three main elements:

1) The ostinato figure: this monolithic, monophonic figuration is obviously taken from the tonal world, and features a Phrygian, mostly-descending scale. As discussed before, this ostinato harks back mainly to Baroque, and even Renaissance origins, but could also be easily imagined being employed in a 19th century bel-canto opera.

2) The main bulk of the right hand writing: contrapuntal in nature, with the material becoming increasingly complex. In the beginning of the etude the voice-leading

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writing mimics more traditional counterpoint practices, such as the use of stepwise motions in the melodic material in the different voices.

As the etude progresses and the intricacy level rises, each voice becomes more tortuous in nature, and large intervals and leaps are increasingly added. The writing then abandons at times the two-voice setting, and presents chordal figurations, which seem to be more sonority-based and grounded more upon hand positions rather than voice-leading precepts. These chordal figurations are almost Ivesian in nature, and resonate well with the language of the “Concord” sonata, or the five “Take-Offs.”

FIGURE 5-1: STEPWISE MOTION BASED COUNTERPOINT IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 4, P. 16

FIGURE 5-2: SONORITY AND HAND POSITIONS BASED CHORDAL FIGURATIONS IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 4, P. 16.
In the climax of the piece, the texture expands into three staves, which add another voice into the already-complex right hand material. This voice needs to be divided between the two hands in order to be executed.

![Figure 5-3: Augmentation into three staves in Bolcom's Etude No. 4, p. 18.](image)

3) The *placido* section: this section features right hand material which is unequivocally more tonal-referential in nature. Its key, if one indeed exists, could be analyzed as belonging to the ostinato, i.e. F# Phrygian. Key identification notwithstanding, it certainly marks a departure in compositional language.

![Figure 5-4: The placido section in Bolcom’s Etude No. 4, p. 19.](image)
The dynamics in this etude are mostly traditional in nature, and seem to be derived from 18th and mostly 19th centuries performance practices. Most phrases follow a dynamic trajectory in which the upward motion is paired with an increase in volume and intensity, and an opposite phenomenon when the line is descending.

Moreover, the piece builds dynamically towards a substantial climax, which designates the dramatic culmination of the etude as well. And while the range of dynamics is certainly large, spanning all the way from pp to fff and sfffz, it is not as extreme as in some of the other etudes in the set, such as no. 3 and no. 10. This aligns well, once more, with the feeling of a piece that takes some of its cues from the writing prevalent in the 19th century.
One challenging element for the performer is the dynamic markings of the ostinato, which do not change throughout the piece (with the exception of one measure which marks the climax of the piece, the first measure in page 18.) As the drama unfolds, and the piece approaches the climax via a substantial crescendo, the ostinato pattern remains unchanged, almost stoic in nature. And while both Fennig and Jones mention the rhythmic hurdle that the etude’s cross rhythms present,\(^{48}\)\(^{49}\) neither one mentions the equally formidable challenge that must be overcome by the performer, which is derived from Bolcom’s instructions to keep the ostinato without a change throughout the whole piece, the right hand’s vicissitudes notwithstanding.


When examining the pitch range of this etude one must take into account two facts:

1) Due to its referential nature, the etude in general, as we have discussed, exhibits many traits reminiscent of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century practices. Thus, it is not a surprise to note that the range of this etude seems and feels less great than some of the other etudes, such as Etude no. 3. That is simply due to the fact that the rises and falls in the contour are a lot more gradual, and align well with more traditional phraseological precepts.

2) That being said, the *actual* range of pitches is one of the greatest in the entire set. The reason for that is that in this etude, as in Etude no. 8, Bolcom instructs the performer to utilize whenever possible the extra notes which one can find on an Bösendorfer Imperial Grand. Thus the overall range which the piece encompasses is only matched and surpassed by Etude no. 8.

![Figure 5-7: The last system in Bolcom’s Etude No. 4, p. 19, instructing the performer to employ the lower notes of the Bösendorfer Imperial Grand, if possible.](image-url)
TEXTURE

The texture in this etude is mostly polyphonic, and coincides with the partition that was made regarding compositional language. It features a monophonic ostinato, which in turn is joined by the polyphonic, contrapuntal textures of the right hand. The right hand texture, as mentioned above, is mostly in two voices, but veers at times towards full chordal figurations, and even a combination of the two, especially during the piece’s climax.

Towards the end of the piece, in the *placido* section, the texture in the right hand becomes homophonic, and after the dissipation of the right hand all together, the listener is left with the monophonic ostinato, which seals the piece.

ARTICULATION AND CONTOUR

As in most of the other etudes, Bolcom is specific and detailed about his articulation markings. These, however, seem to serve in this piece mostly an expressive goal, not unlike the detailed instructions with which Bolcom furnishes his interpreter in the second etude.

Once again, the discrepancy between the directions for the right and the left hand pose a challenge for the performer. The ostinato is to be played in detailed rests, accents, and tenuto markings, which do not coincide with markings in the right hand. The right hand material is marked with an indication to be played legato throughout, intensely, and into the keys. The indication for legato playing is perhaps the most difficult one, considering the virtuosic nature of the polyphonic writing, which includes changes of directions, large spans, large chords, and substantial leaps. This in turn is made even more challenging by
Bolcom’s indication to play the whole etude with very little pedal, an indication that is, doubtlessly, both in order to preserve the clarity of the polyphonic writing, and allow the rests, especially in the ostinato figure, to be honored.

One more note should be made regarding the placido section, in which we see, for the first time, a long slur which lasts for almost six bars. This seems to indicate both a change in articulation (perhaps a movement towards an even finer form of legato) and in sense of phrasing, and should be duly fulfilled.

The contour has already been partially discussed. To a degree substantially more apparent than in most of the other etudes, the contour of the phrases seems to be derived from earlier music, mostly from romantic period music. The undulating rises and falls of each phrase are truly sweeping in nature, and carry the listener through this etude in relative ease, especially when compared with some other etudes, such as no. 3. The lines, however tortuous in nature they might be, feature strong directional tendencies, and generally follow the simple pattern of one ascent and one descent per phrase.

METER AND RHYTHM

As seen before, one of Bolcom’s main compositional “strategies” in these etudes is to experiment with certain facets of a piece, while stabilizing different aspects of it, thus leaving both the performer and the listener with something palpable to latch onto.

In this particular etude, the meter would come to exemplify the stable element, while the specific rhythms would represent the opposite—the heart of the experimental thought.
The meter in this etude is 4/4. This meter does not change throughout the entire piece, and remains the most stable building block behind the composition alongside the ostinato.

The meter seems to be derived from the ostinato itself. Whereas it is not uncommon for the phrases in the right hand to not coincide with the strong-weak pattern of beats dictated by the common time meter, the ostinato pattern fully aligns with it and steadies the occurrences in an otherwise tumultuous unfolding.

The rhythms, on the other hand, are the very raison d’être of this etude, and the main technical challenge which the etude targets. These begin with relative simplicity, but reach a substantial level of entanglement in the climactic sections. Jones asserts that the rhythms in Etude no. 9, “Invention,” are more complex since there is a passage involving a 5 against 4 against 3 polyrhythm. And while this is true, I would argue that it is, in fact, Etude no. 4 which poses the greater temporal obstacles for the performer, due to its constant fluctuations in rhythms used, its more often use of irrational rhythms (such as septuplets, decatuplets, etc.) the more frequent use of tied notes, and the sheer amount of notes that have to be negotiated at once.

FORM

The general form of this etude depicts an expanding and then contracting wedge form. All aspect of intensity, i.e. dynamics, density of notes, large leaps, etc. increase throughout the etude until they reach a climax at the separation of staves at the beginning of page 18.

50 Ibid., 23.
This climax lasts for four bars before a substantial drop-off in intensity occurs. From this point and onwards, the piece winds down, until its last note, which ends in pp, and, if instrumentally available, at the lowest note of the piece. Thus the shape has a clear form, exhibiting a rise and fall, not unlike similar forms one can witness in some of the etudes of Ligeti (“Fanfares” comes to mind.)

**DETAILED ANALYSIS**

The piece begins with an initial iteration of the ostinato pattern—the ground bass that will be present, immovable and unflappable, throughout the entire etude. This ostinato has a grave character and projects both a sense of solemnity and theatricality. The writing is monophonic, with the theme presented in octaves in the left hand.

The ostinato itself begins with an initial declamation of a long note of F♯—an initial impulse which propels further a motion in dotted rhythms in descending patterns, which remind the listener of a traditional Baroque sigh affectation.

![Figure 5-8: The ostinato pattern Bolcom’s Etude No. 4, P. 16.](image)
The rests are of particular import, and are wholly expressive in nature. As mentioned before, the ability to honor these rests is one of the main factors because of which Bolcom might have indicated to play this etude with very little pedal.

The construction of the ostinato features a long descent all the way down to the note of A, before leaping back up a major seventh and circling back to the note of F#. This leap is important for two reasons:

a) It allows for the ostinato to be repeated *ad infinitum* in a seamless circle.

b) This leap remains constant until the very end of the etude, in which it will finally be replaced by its inversional equivalence of a descending minor second—a event which shall be both noteworthy and effective.

Another curious detail regarding this ostinato is that it is to be repeated “at least once”, as per Bolcom’s instructions. The instructions to be repeated “at least once”, are quite fascinating. In my own performances, I have only once opted to play the first ostinato more than once, and in that case, I performed it twice. But this pattern could be, theoretically speaking, be repeated ten, twenty, or a hundred times, of course. However, this direction seems to me to be almost tongue-in-cheek, and I would argue that it would seems highly stylistically incorrect to perform the first ostinato many times over. Bolcom, his experimental nature notwithstanding, seems to veer towards relative conservatism in his writing in these etudes, and is very far away from the highly experimental compositions that some of the postwar European avant-garde composers, for example, employ.

The right hand material appears after the initial iterations of the ostinato, and appears not on the downbeat, but on the third beat of the 5th bar. It is the beginning of a polyphonic
setting in this hand, and Bolcom announces the entrance of the two voices by the use of a \( fz \).

The material in the right hand throughout the beginning of the etude is not only polyphonic, but also polychronic. The two voices showcase no synchronicity, and any coincidental events seem to be almost arbitrary in nature. In addition, the bass line seems to operate in its own time zone, ticking away undisturbed by any of the manifold occurrences in the right hand. When aggregated, this polychronicity creates a striking effect, not unlike the one one could witness in the works of Ligeti.

However much the two voices seem to be at odds with one another, the overall phraseological facets of the right hand material on the other hand still seem to adhere to the general concept of a downbeat, and most of the phrases tend to lead towards the downbeat and end on one as well. This would be in accordance with traditional romantic music that is written in common time.
The meter seems to be in sync with the phrases’ peaks as well, and it is not uncommon that the highest note will fall on the downbeat. An even more common occurrence is the arrival to the highest pitch just before the downbeat, in which case Bolcom usually ties the note and continues with it over the bar line. I suspect that the reason for this practice would be both the creation of tension through this anticipation, and the ability to better hear the ostinato line, which always falls on the strong beats. In either case, this adherence, or semi-adherence to the meter and barlines helps creates the communicative element of the piece.

The right hand plays the lion’s share of the notes in the piece, and these increasingly aggregate. Disregarding the very first bar of the right hand, in which only one note, that of D occurs, the next bars feature 5 struck notes, 9, and 13, respectively. The phrase ends with bars of 11, and 3 notes, respectively, before continuing into the next phrase. This increase and then decrease in the number of notes as a correlation of the phrase structure seems to be somewhat consistent, and helps Bolcom establish phrase direction as a result of notes density.
Thus, the phrases have a clearer structure, which is further aided and validated by its dynamic markings and phrase contour, which usually entail either a dynamic resolution in form of a diminuendo or a softer dynamic marking, a descending pattern (such as in measure 15), or any combination of the abovementioned.

On the macro level it seems obvious as well that the phrases feature an overall increase in intensity—one which is crucial to the dramatic arc of the piece. If, once again, the number of notes in a passage is taken as an indicator of intensity, then measures 11-13 feature bars of 16 notes, 24, and 26 notes. From this point and onwards, the texture becomes even harder to define, as the pure two-voice counterpoint in the right hand is replaced with polyphonic chordal texture, which switches between chord-based gestures, and purer three-voice polyphony. Be that as it may, the next two bars feature 35, and 30 notes, yet another increase, and if we compare both of these 5-bar phrases (measures 6-10, and measures 11-15) we discover that on note count alone we have an increase from an overall number of 41 notes to a 131 notes, an almost threefold increase in the number of notes.

Yet another ascending passage follows, beginning in measure 16, and this one features yet another rise in intensity level. Three elements contribute to this rise:

1) The level of rhythmic intricacy is increased again, featuring smaller note values and more irrational rhythms.

2) In the beginning of the third page, and what is undoubtedly the beginning of the piece’s climax, the music becomes so intricate that the score needs to be split into
three staves, thus creating another entirely independent polyphonic and polychronic level.

3) This new middle line is one of the most intense melodies in the piece. Indeed, through its syncopated nature, the large intervals in it, its markedly atonal language, and its marcato indication it greatly augments the musical drama.

Measure 16 also begins what is, arguably, the longest phrase in the whole piece. It features the climax of the piece, and it continues all the way until the second beat of measure 24. From here and onwards there is a substantial decrease in the dramatic element, which manifests itself in all of the aspects that were mentioned above: dynamics markings, complexity of contour and counterpoint, rhythmic complexity, and note density.

Measure 23 also seems to mark a significant change from the texture of polyphony to homophony in the right hand. Whereas until measure 23 there seemed to have been a clash between these two textures, measure 23 features chordal texture which remains predominant until the end of the piece.

![Figure 5-11: The End of the Climax in Etude No. 4, P. 18.](image-url)
Nowhere is this newly-instated texture more salient than in the *placido* phrase, which can also be viewed as the beginning of the coda section of this etude. This phrase, which has been discussed quite extensively before, is easily one of the most memorable and touching places in the etude. A few aspects change quite dramatically in this section:

1) The top voice in the right hand assumes first importance. Thus the texture becomes truly homophonic.

2) Bolcom marks this phrase with a long legato slur, the only such one in the entire etude. Thus Bolcom invests this phrase with a lyrical quality not present in any of the other phrases of the etude.

3) The harmonies in the right hand now become tonal, or tonal-referential in nature. The harmonic language is no longer that of atonality but closer to that of romantic period music, or even jazz. In addition, the harmonies no longer create dissonances with the left hand, but could in fact be interpreted as in the key of F-sharp Phrygian.

FIGURE 5-12: THE “PLACIDO” PHRASE IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 4, P. 19.
The *placido* section ends somewhat abruptly, as Bolcom does not allow for the phrase to end on a tonal chord. Instead, in the very last chord of the phrase, we have an atonal chord of G, C, and Ab which brings the listener back to the atonal world of the etude.

One more truncated statement follows in measure 34, but one which features a truly momentous change: the beginning of the final descent of the ostinato, which replaces its upward leap with a descending major second, and thus avoids the circularity of the ostinato.

This change inaugurates the final statement, which, after an evanescent gesture in the right hand which marks its final appearance, then features a lone iteration of the ostinato pattern, which then descends, inasmuch the instruments allows for it, all the way down to the lowest F# with a final dynamic of *pp*.

![Figure 5-13: The Final Phrases in Bolcom's Etude No. 4, p. 19.](image-url)
Etude no. 5 entitled “butterflies, hummingbirds” is another imaginative piece, reminiscent of a short tone poem both in title and concept. The etude is clearly programmatic, and the music is both graphic and vivid in its ability to present concrete images through various musical gestures. McAlexander acutely notes that one of the possible influences for this piece could have been Ravel’s *Miroirs*, particularly the first two pieces in the cycle, “Noctuelles” and “Oiseaux Tristes.” The similarities are striking and amongst them are the use of lateral motion in order to represent the motion of the wings of the winged creatures, the final gestures of the piece, and the subject matter which bears obvious semblance.\(^5\)

Two pedagogical goals are set by Bolcom in this etude: the study of a technique which Bolcom terms “the lateral tremolo” and the mastery of “mercurial changes in color, attack, and rhythm.”\(^6\)

The lateral tremolo is Bolcom’s own invention and shows up from the beginning of the middle section in measure 11. Its goal is obviously to assign a musical gesture to the flutter


of the wings of the hummingbirds and butterflies, and Lee maintains that this technique is one that could have been inspired by stride piano.\textsuperscript{53}

The second goal, which pertains to the quicksilver changes that the performer is required to master, shows up ubiquitously and will be examined using the categories that have been in use so far in this dissertation.

On top of all of these stands tall Bolcom’s uncanny ability to construct a compelling musical representation of these animate creatures, indeed of biological entities. This is done not through the use of one element, but a combination of many different compositional techniques and ideas which are strung together in order to create a musical version of a natural phenomenon.

\textbf{COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE}

As in the first etude, one can witness in this etude Bolcom’s distinctive compositional language, in which the melodic material seems to eschew repetitions of the same notes. Twelve-tone writing seems to be avoided, but the very \textit{flavor} of the writing remains similar. Once again we can see a demonstration of Bolcom’s utter internalization of the twelve-tone system which arose, amongst other things, in order to liberate music from the normal note-attraction and tonality based system, but which carries within it the potential

caveat of being used pedantically. By creating this special language, Bolcom is able to avoid the potential pitfalls of twelve-tone writing, yet still reap the benefits of that very writing. I.e., he is able to write music in which the notes feel independent, without being systematized in a wholly mathematical way.

Figure 5-1 might assist in explaining Bolcom’s modus operandi. The left hand melodic line cannot be viewed, of course, as a pure twelve-tone row, due to the obvious repetitions at the beginning of both the notes B# and C#. Nonetheless, if one follows the continuation of the line, it should be easily noticed that Bolcom purposely avoids repetition of notes in a way that would set them as tonal, or even atonal centers. In addition, Bolcom usually uses all the twelve notes of the scale in an almost impartial way, a way that is closely reminiscent to that of twelve-tone technique.

Indeed, if one were to play or hear the left hand flourish which begins on the second beat of bar 3 from the note F, one could easily confuse this with a twelve-tone row, since Bolcom uses ten out of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale in quick succession with only one repetition, that of the note of C, which is separated by no less than seven notes (F, C, Db, E, Bb, D, B, Eb, G, C, Ab.) Indeed, as a practitioner of modern music and a performer of these etudes, I can attest to the fact that some of these passages are so close to actual twelve-tone writing that I had to go back and resort to note counting in order to make sure that the passage was not indeed written in true dodecaphony.
A second element that should be considered is the distinction in writing between what seems to be the representation of the butterflies and that of the hummingbirds. The butterflies, which open the piece, are presented in the music by the use of short gestures, almost micro phrases. These fleeting, whimsical gestures, which employ effective uses of rests, beautifully encapsulate the image of a fluttering butterfly.
In opposition, but not in full contrast, stand the musical images of the hummingbirds. These are more despondent in nature, and employ the right hand tremolos, which are interconnected with the left hand birdsong, which, as Lee has noted, could have been influenced by his teacher in Paris, Olivier Messiaen.\textsuperscript{54} Bolcom’s birdsong appears in bar 12, the beginning of the middle section of the piece:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{birdsong.png}
\caption{BIRDSONG IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 5, P. 21.}
\end{figure}

The third, and most salient element of Bolcom’s compositional language in the piece is, of course, the tremolos themselves. This gesture, which graces the whole piece is, in the hands of Bolcom, incredibly versatile and expressive, and is brought to new heights in terms of imagination of use.

The tremolo is, in fact, not quite an inherent and idiomatic gesture for the piano, and is usually used in order to imitate orchestral effects. Bolcom’s tendency, however, is to not to

use the tremolos in octaves or, indeed, in a single interval of two notes, as it usually appears when adapted from orchestral origins, but instead in clusters of sounds, employing the entire rotational mechanism of the hand in various combinations.

This unique approach to the tremolo technique creates not only a different sound world, but also an idiomatic gesture for the piano, one that assimilates the tremolo and makes it into a unique piano sound, thus enriching the instrumental gestural repertoire.

**DYNAMICS**

Since one of the main pedagogical goals of this etude is to master extreme immediate changes in “color, attack and rhythm,” it follows suit that dynamics are utilized with great variety. This is in sharp contrast with the previous etude, Etude no. 4, in which dynamics were used as a stabilizing element.

And indeed, the changes in the dynamic markings are, as Bolcom indicated in his title, “mercurial.” The following is an example of these quicksilver changes in a passage from a later section in the piece:
In these four bars, which ought to take just a little over six seconds to play based on the tempo indication and the meter, Bolcom has the dynamics rise from \( ppp \) to \( fz \), back again to \( ppp \), then to \( ffz \), only to start again, this time from \( mf \) and rise to \( ff \), and end the passage with a subito \( ppp \).

This is, without a doubt, a tremendous amount of dynamic change. It is different than the pointillistic dynamic contrasts that were exhibited in Etude no. 3, but is no less extreme in its context, exactly because the etude does not exhibit this type of “radical” style of composition, but seems, on the surface, to be more conservative in nature.

These rapid, yet fluid dynamic changes are one aspect out of many which Bolcom utilizes in order to create this illusion of butterflies and hummingbirds—organic, fleeting, and devoid of the pointillistic tendencies that would have rendered this depiction unrealistic.

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55 Given three bars in tempo of \( j=84–90 \), plus an extra bar of 18/64.
As part of Bolcom’s attempts in creating the fluidity of a biological entity, as has been discussed before, Bolcom needed to make sure that the rhythmic element, which constitutes so much of our understanding and recognition in music, is truly representative of his image. For that purpose, Bolcom has decided that the etude be written without meter, and instead, the indication is given with a general pulse of the music, which is in quarter notes. Thus, bar lines do exist, with every bar containing a certain number of multiplications of quarter note beats.

However, even this general constraint of the music, in which the bars can be divided into quarter note beats, is violated whenever Bolcom sees fit through the addition of additional note values, whenever necessary, as in measure 5.
Nor does Bolcom feel beholden to a quarter note based bar. Not only that Bolcom changes it a few times, as in measure 15, the 38/64 bar:

But measure 14 seems to ignore the meter all together, even though Bolcom announces a 4/4 section.
There are two different tempi in the piece, and they are used in order to signify different sections. In fact, they are the most obvious indicator of this sectional change, and thus the most discernible element in the process of analyzing the form, as shall be discussed later. The tempi are not contrasting, and the difference is, in fact, quite subtle (♩= 84-90, and ♩=70.) But they are consequential for the piece, and important enough for Bolcom to designate them as *Tempo I* and *Tempo II*.

**ARTICULATION AND CONTOUR**

As was the case with dynamics, articulation changes seem to be at the very heart of this etude, and constitute a main part not only in the musical substance, but in its pedagogical aspect as well.
As in most etudes, Bolcom is very much “hands-on” with his approach to articulation, and supplies most every note with some articulation direction.

Bolcom uses two distinctly different styles of articulation markings for his two main sections, i.e. *Tempo I* and *Tempo II*, which would represent the butterflies and the hummingbirds, respectively.

In the *Tempo I* section the most prominent form of articulation (and the one which makes the most sense in regards to the subject matter) is legato, and through its use Bolcom aims to encapsulate the fluid flight movements of the butterflies.

However, it would be a mistake to think that these legato markings are Chopinesque, or romantic in nature. Rather than using long phrases with extended slurs, Bolcom parses out the gestures into micro gestures, with inserted rests in between. This general legato marking is complemented by gentle accents, alongside the whimsical dynamic markings that have been discussed before. In this way, Bolcom beautifully sketches out an image of a fluttering butterfly—fleeting, ephemeral, fluid, and capricious in its movement, at least to the humans observing it.

In the second, slower section, we see a complicated set of articulations, the main purpose of which is to accentuate and deepen the expressive nature of the birdsong.
The articulation marks in the left hand, which go hand in hand alongside the phrase directions and dynamic instructions all bespeak of an extreme level of expressiveness and care for details.

One last element that has a tremendous effect on the overall perception of the articulation in this etude is the use of pedal. In general, Bolcom seems to gravitate towards the lesser use of the pedal spectrum, and, indeed, four out of the six etudes examined in this dissertation bear an indication to employ very little pedal. In Etude no. 2, Bolcom gives no specific general pedal indication (only precise local ones) and it is only in Etude no. 5 that the general comment about pedal use is “smooth pedal in touches.” This special use of the pedal, when combined with the second indication of una corda, endows the etude with an unruffled, lustrous quality that is not found in any of the other etudes in the first two books.

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The contour, likewise, features great and rapid movements and changes, with particularly daunting changes of direction. In this sense the etude is reminiscent of the very first etude.

TEXTURE

Out of all of the different musical aspects of this piece, the texture is the most difficult to define. Bolcom’s use of texture is so malleable and quick-changing (just like its subject matter) that any one definition seems to be insufficient.

On the face of it, it seems as if the texture is mainly polyphonic. The two hands start with two separate, independent lines, and both lines seem to be almost equally important:

FIGURE 6-10. COMPLEX TEXTURE IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 5, P. 20.

The texture is, of course, not strictly polyphonic, in light of at least two factors:
1) While the importance of both lines is indisputable, the left hand plays the more melodic part, the one that should be heard more decisively in this texture.

2) In many of the phrases the lines in both of the two hands can also combine, creating a new texture, which is at times polyphonic, and at time even monophonic. The end of measure 3 from example 5-10 showcases an occurrence of the former, whereas measure 10 in example 5-11 showcases full transition into a monophonic texture:

![Figure 6-11. Line merging in Bolcom’s Etude No. 5, p. 21.](image_url)

The only sections in which the texture appears to be easier to define are the Tempo II sections, in which the texture becomes more traditionally homophonic. Although the two hands alternate between the parts, there exists a clear differentiation between the birdsong, which is the obvious melodic material, and the tremoli, which serve as nature-describing background.

Thus one can, once again, witness how Bolcom skillfully weaves together all the different musical elements in order to facilitate both his musical illusion and his musical allusion.
The range of this etude is large, but less so than in some of the other etudes. Of particular importance is the fact that Bolcom makes extensive use of the upper registers of the piano, and the fact that, for the most part, the hands play a large part of the passages in relative close proximity, avoiding many of the larger gaps and intervals that were apparent in some of the other etudes.

The question of form is also intricate. On the one hand, the etude is divided into five sections, clearly marked by the tempo changes and the melodic material in them. The A sections mark the “butterflies” material, and the B sections mark the “Hummingbirds.” The coda uses the material from the “Butterflies” section.

1) Section A: measures 1-10.
2) Section B: measures 11-21
3) Section A\1: measures 22-29
4) Section B\1: measures 30-34
5) Coda: measures 35-37

Thus we can see that the division between the two sections is quite equal, with section A and its permutations garnering 21 bars, and section B and its permutation equaling 16 bars.
Furthermore, sections with similar subject material are, in fact, very different. In addition, the etude actually exhibits a sense of a piece that has been *through-composed*, rather than a piece with actual repetitions, and the continuity and *lack* of formal repetitions is one of the main contributors to the organic nature of the etude. Thus, even though it might be convenient and informative to label these sections as seen above, one must not take this sectional distribution as absolute, but consider the piece also as an organic whole— one with constant change and narrative.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

The etude begins *in medias res*, without any clear definition, with the left hand holding the more melodic material, while the right hand plays out the “butterfly” figurations. These figurations are composed of short ascending gestures, alternating between single notes and various intervals.

In general, one can notice from the very beginning that the phrases are of fluctuating length, with a three-bar first phrase (ending with an evanescent upward arpeggio) which is in turn followed by an interrupting replying two-bar phrase in measures 4-5.
One trait that binds together all of the phrases in the first section (which ends in measure 10) is dynamic structure. Whether starting in a soft dynamic marking or a startling \textit{fz}, they all end with a noticeable dynamic decrease, diminishing into thin air as they dissipate. One common characteristic is the disappearance of all but one of the voices, leaving the listener with a lingering, despondent reaction.
As mentioned above, the distribution of roles between the two hands is complicated and resists simple definition. In general, the melodic role seems to pertain more often to the left hand (as in measures 1 and 6), but is of such fleeting quality that it often morphs into mimicking gestures (end of measure 7) or simply merges with the right hand in order to create one line of music (end of measure 3, measure 9.)

In addition, the “fluttering” material usually exhibits these mimicking tremolo gestures, and in these instances it is of little doubt that the right hand should be heard above the left.
The first section ends with another diminishing gesture—one that once again sees the disappearance of the right hand altogether, and focuses the listener’s attention on the melodic material that is about to commence in the second section, which emanates from the held note of F#.

![Figure 6-15: The transition from the first to the second section through the note of F# in Bolcom’s Etude No. 5, p. 21.](image)

The second section, which begins in measure 11, features the birdsong in the left hand, accompanied by the ambient noises produced by the right hand tremoli. The left hand is characterized by directional changes with complicated articulation marks. As part of Bolcom’s attempt at creating an expressive line, Bolcom employs swells, f’s, accents, tenuto marks, and exact slurs. This passage contains some of the most detailed and varied articulations in all of the etudes, and in it every single note receives a specific marking.

The right hand, by contrast, moves smoothly between the tremolo figurations, ascending and descending through the passage. It is interesting to note that the tremolo switches do not align with the left hand melody and seem to represent an independent sense of time.
The passage gradually builds in intensity, and reaches a climax in, measures 20-21 with an ascending pattern of tremoli paired with a crescendo:

This climax is abruptly brought to a halt with a rest and a subito *pp* in measure 22, which brings the listener back to the sound world of the butterflies through the use of all the gestures that marked the first section. This time, however, this section is changed, and features a more directional tendency, with more volatile dynamic changes and virtuosic figurations, which all culminate in yet another tremendous crescendo, this time in the elongated measure of 29:
This bar features an element which had been observed before in Etude no. 3— the moments in Bolcom’s writing when pitches obstinately repeat, almost as if the piece were “stuck.” These moments are memorable, particularly due to the contrast with the large variety of pitches which are usually employed, and are mostly used by Bolcom in order to create a moment of crescendo or diminuendo. Thus Bolcom is able to halt most of the pitch activity and to concentrate the listeners’ ears on the actual dynamic shift as it occurs, in a manner not completely unlike that of the famed Mannheim Crescendo.

Measure 30 brings about another sectional change, as foreboding tremoli in pp alternate between the hands, which, in turn, employ gestures and figurations that, although quite different in sound world, are all taken from the “hummingbirds” section. This passage ominously ascends (although with the conspicuous and intentional avoidance of a crescendo) and ends in measure 34 with a flourish which seems to parallel (and mirror) that of measure 15.

This ascent, which does not culminate dynamically, signals the beginning of the end, as the listener is immediately drawn back, for the last time, into the gestural world of the butterflies. This mini coda shows us the final ascent of the butterfly which culminates in a \textit{mf} and a held note of E\#, a half step resolution from the held note of F\# which opened the gate to the middle section in bar 10, and an enharmonic equivalent note to a held note in yet another substantial flourish in measure 24. This E\# is held as the last vanishing chords of the piece are sounded, once again seemingly “stuck.”

This etude is able to demonstrate, perhaps more than any other etude in the set, Bolcom’s suggestive power—his ability to create an image through novel uses of pure, abstract musical concepts. It remains one of the most imaginative etudes in the set, and, in many ways, one of the set’s most effective ones.
CHAPTER 7: ETUDE NO. 6

Whereas etudes such as no. 3, 5, 8, and 9 have gotten considerable scholarly attention, Etude no. 6, entitled simply “Nocturne,” is perhaps the set’s least discussed. Its title, nocturne, refers to a specific genre of pieces defined by the Oxford Companion to Music as “A 19th-century, Romantic piano piece of a slow and dreamy nature in which a graceful, highly embellished melody in the right hand is accompanied by a broken-chord pattern in the left… in the 20th century the term was also applied to pieces that depicted musically the sounds of night…”\textsuperscript{57}

The most famous exemplars in this genre remain the nocturnes of John Field, and even more so, the ones of Frederic Chopin, with the latter being a professed influence over the conceptualization of this set of etudes.\textsuperscript{58} In addition, Bellingham cites Bartok’s “\textit{Musiques Nocturnes}” from the “Out of Doors” suite as the most prominent example for a 20\textsuperscript{th} century nocturne.\textsuperscript{59}

By way of contrast, Kang claims in her dissertation that this etude “invokes the quality of 1960s-era popular tune. The syncopated rhythms … create the impression of a pop tune.”\textsuperscript{60} Bolcom’s interest in popular music is well documented, and such a source of influence seem entirely possible.

\textsuperscript{57} Bellingham, “Nocturne.”

\textsuperscript{58} Lee, “Revolutionary Etudes,” 20.

\textsuperscript{59} Bellingham, “Nocturne.”

\textsuperscript{60} Kang, “Late Twentieth-Century Piano Concert Etudes: A Style Study,” 45.
But more than any other source, the concept of the etude seems to be predicated on its original, etymological definition: a piece of the night. For this etude does not conform to any of the generic definitions mentioned above, and retains from its title mostly an image and atmospheric feeling.

The pedagogical goal of this etude is stated as “absolute control in dynamics and tone.”\textsuperscript{61} The element of control is then further emphasized through the tempo marking, which Bolcom asserts should feature “very controlled, strict rhythm.”\textsuperscript{62} However, as in so many of Bolcom’s pieces, this control is not rehearsed for the sake for technical goals only, but is there in order to bring to life a musical goal, namely, the ability to sustain a singing line above an accompanimental figure, with clear differentiation between the two. In addition, as in many of the other Bolcom etudes, special attention is paid to the legato articulation, and the requirement to sustain the melody, however uncomfortable the combination with the accompanimental figure is, is certainly one of the etude’s greatest challenges. This challenge is made all the more formidable when paired with Bolcom’s direction, “very little pedal.”

The stabilization of certain compositional elements is very much apparent in this etude with much of the score featuring patterns and relative repetition; other elements, though much fewer (such as dynamics), feature great variety; yet there is no doubt that it is the

\textsuperscript{61} Bolcom, \textit{Twelve New Etudes}, 25.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
abundance of stabilized elements which creates the hypnotic, spell-binding effect achieved in this piece.

DYNAMICS

Dynamics play an important part in this etude. Indeed, the use of dynamics is easily the most experimental and extreme element of this etude, and the one which jumps out at the reader the most when perusing the musical score.

As Jones has noted, the dynamic markings are wholly dichotomized, based on the clear distinction between the accompaniment and the melody line, and range between \textit{pppp} and for the accompanimental material, and the melody between \textit{mf} and \textit{fffz}. Bolcom’s markings might seem extreme, and, indeed, would not fit a traditional melodic piece from the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. However, it is possible that these dynamic markings should be seen as having been written and gauged not \textit{against} conventions but rather \textit{with} them. In other words, it is possible that Bolcom created a precise dynamic scheme which does not look like a traditional phrase, yet is, in fact, designed in order to instruct the performer how to achieve more “traditional” phrasing.

In order to better understand this point, it could prove useful to imagine what this passage might have looked like in the hands of a 19\textsuperscript{th} century composer such as Franz Liszt. The following is a possible rendition of two lines starting from measure 5 and ending in measure 15. Bolcom’s original passage is first supplied, followed by the author’s own

\footnote{With the exception of the end of the piece, in which the melody gradually diminishes (bar 41-end.)}

\footnote{Jones, “William Bolcom’s Twelve New Etudes for Piano,” 27.}
imagining of a similar trope in a pseudo-19th century schematic.

FIGURE 7-1. THE FIRST MELODIC PHRASE IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 6, P. 25.

FIGURE 7-2. THE FIRST MELODIC PHRASE IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 6, P. 25 REIMAGINED WITH 19TH CENTURY ROMANTIC DYNAMIC MARKINGS.
There are three main reasons that might compel the performer to interpret the passage in such way:

1) It is common practice in piano playing, and especially of music of homophonic texture and an extreme expressive and melodic nature, to greatly emphasize the dynamic difference between the melody and accompaniment. Thus a passage which would have been written in an overall dynamic marking of a $p$, when marked espressivo, would very often entail accompaniment which should be played in a dynamic marking lower than $p$, and a melody line which ought to be played in a dynamic marking higher than $p$, thus achieving both the differentiation in layers and balancing the texture to an overall level of $p$.

2) Since the pace with which the melody unfolds is extremely slow, the initial accent necessary in order to sustain these notes must be substantial (due to the natural decay of the sound.)

3) It seems to me that the marking $ma\ cantabile$ is of the essence in the interpretation of this etude. The direction $ffz\ ma\ cantabile$ can seem almost oxymoronic, unless the $ffz$ is taken not at face value (since it could only register as a shocking note as such) but context-related with the $cantabile$ altering it quite significantly. In this way, if viewed as simply a melody note that should be brought out significantly above the texture, one arrives at a possible solution for the problematic indication $ffz\ ma\ cantabile$.

There is a second possible reading, of course, which accounts for the extremity of the dynamics. If one reads the dynamic markings more at face value, then one arrives at quite a startling interpretation, in which the melody notes, especially those that are marked with
fffz, become quite shockingly loud, especially when taken in relation with the accompaniment part in ppp. In this case, the piece becomes less of a traditional nocturne—a title which in the case of such an interpretation appears more as tongue-in-cheek.

Be that as it may, it appears obvious that the dynamic markings take a crucial role in the construction of the piece, and that some interpretational decisions need to be made regarding them, which could drastically alter the outlook of the piece.

COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE

In great contrast with the other etudes in the set, which exhibit, at most, only references to tonality, this etude is the first and only one in the set that could be looked at as tonal.

This is obviously not tonality as one would find in the 18th and early 19th century, but it is an extended sense of tonality, in which the listener can identify a possible key signature, tonal attractions and centers, modulations, resolutions, and regular harmonic functions as dominant, subdominant, and tonic. At times, this sense of tonality is influenced by jazz harmony, while at others, by pop music; and at times jarring non-tonal notes are inserted into the mixture, which are jarring exactly because the piece is mostly tonal. Thus, this is not pure Straus-defined tonality, but its references and functionality are so strong that it cannot be dismissed as purely referential.

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The question of key is an intriguing one. Kang asserts that the first phrase features the chord progression V — (IV/V) — (IV/V) — IV — V, and suggests that the piece could be influenced by 1960’s pop tunes. If that is the case, then the key of the piece would have to be G major. Kang does not elaborate, but one assumes that the main reason for her choice of key is the key signature, which features only one sharp—a key signature which traditionally refers to either the key of G major or E minor.

The main problem with this interpretation seems to be that the first page of the piece, and a lot of the succeeding material, simply does not function in the key of G major, but rather has a tonal center of D. In fact, the only real resolution which occurs between these

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two tonal centers in the first page appears measure 9, in which the obviously dissonant and
tense note of the melodic C resolves into the D “major” chord. This tonality of D is then,
just as in the beginning, reaffirmed through the use of an identical chord progression which
begins the piece.

The fact that the piece does not begin in G major, does not preclude the piece from
being in fact in G major, and there exist various examples in the literature for pieces which
begin in a tonality which is different from the ending one. In these cases, some of these
pieces are regarded as being in the latter tonality, although by no means always.

Thus, one needs to arrive at a different solution, at the very minimum, for the tonality
of the first couple of pages of the piece. Two solutions seem equally plausible:

1) One solution might be that the piece is in fact written in the D Mixolydian Mode—
a mode which is quite rare in traditional classical music, but is common in other
genres of music, especially jazz and pop (in which we know Bolcom was highly
interested.) Thus, the first four bars of the piece would, once again, not feature the
somewhat cumbersome harmonic progression of V— (IV/V) — (IV/V) —IV—V,
but rather the more straightforward progression of I—VII\textsuperscript{6}—I—VII\textsuperscript{6}—IV—
VII\textsuperscript{6}—IV—VII\textsuperscript{6}—I. This interpretation has a distinct advantage, not only due to
the application of Ockham’s Razor, but because it also accounts for the short
harmonic progression in which Bolcom establishes the tonal center of D, which is
otherwise inexplicable in a G major interpretation. It also accounts for the blues-
like suspension chord in measure 7, which is, in turn, resolved to the note of D in
measure 9, bringing us back to the tonality of D Mixolydian.
2) A second reading could be that the beginning is, in fact, in D major, and that the
cadential motion between the chords of D major and C major is one of $\flat$VII — I, a
chord progression which is highly common in the idiom of pop music. The
combination of the harmonic language, which predominantly employs triads,
alongside the shuffling ostinato rhythm, makes this reading quite compelling.

In this analysis I have chosen to assume the note of D as the tonal center and the mode
of D Mixolydian as the piece’s primary tonality, and, thus, the piece will be accordingly
discussed in the detailed analysis section. But the piece can be, doubtlessly, equally
successfully analyzed according to the parameters of the second reading.

The amount of jazz-influenced harmonies used in this piece is substantial. Many of the
chords used in this piece could seem less indigenous to the “classical music” idiom, but
they seem commonplace in standard jazz harmony. Examples are the Bb seventh chord on
the upbeat to measure 20 (with the added #9, #11, and later #13 scale degrees) and the A7
(#9) chord at the beginning of measure 23.

This fusion of worlds is, as noted before, very much aligned with Bolcom’s
compositional tendencies and tastes, and is a further demonstration of a trait that had
already been witnessed in etudes such as no. 2.

METER AND RHYTHM

Perhaps the most easily discernible stabilizing element in this piece is the rhythmic
pattern, which serves as a rhythmic ostinato. The rhythm in the right hand is very much
straightforward and simply features chords on the first, third, and fourth beat of every
measure, in the following manner:
The left hand supplies the bass notes for the chords, all played on pickups. Thus the left hand rhythm is the following:

\[ \frac{4}{4} | \frac{4}{4} | \frac{4}{4} \]

When put together, the composite rhythm, which forms the ostinato rhythm for this etude, becomes:

\[ \frac{4}{4} | \frac{4}{4} | \frac{4}{4} | \frac{4}{4} \]

This rhythm remains practically unchanged throughout the piece with the exception of four bars: measures 18, 25, 37, and 38. In three of these said bars the meter changes to 6/4, and in one to 5/4; in all of them the change of meter equates with the addition of additional beat or two of the same pattern encountered in the third and fourth beats of the original rhythm.

This shuffling rhythm functions as the beating pulse of the piece, and casts an almost hypnotic spell on the listener. Thus, it is the very disappearance of this pulse in the last three measures of the piece which contributes to its sense of finality, perhaps even of morbidity.

The melody, on the other hand, features a true sense of rhythmic freedom, and does not seem to be constricted by the rhythmic ostinato. In fact, the only rule which seems to guide the composition of the right hand rhythm is for the melody notes to *never* correlate with the rhythmic ostinato (with a brief exception in measure 23.) In fact, Bolcom seems to
adhere to this principle of separation so strictly that he opts to add a grace note (thus narrowly avoiding the simultaneity) when the melody is finally about to align with one of the strong beats (measure 42.) It is this very rhythmic freedom which “liberates” the piece from becoming an otherwise rhythmically repetitive piece, and creates the feeling of an improvised melody line.

TEXTURE

It is Bolcom’s wont in many of the etudes to create a texture which is not easily identifiable, and, in many cases, one which changes throughout the piece. In this etude, however, the case is quite different, as the texture is undeniably homophonic, with clear division apparent between the accompanimental chordal material and the melody (which is so markedly distinguishable through the use of the radical dynamic contrasts.) This relationship between the melody and the accompaniment is maintained until the very end, and helps the listeners focus on the changing elements in the piece, namely the melodic line and the harmonic progressions.

FORM

Bolcom rarely employs standard forms in this set of etudes, and this etude serves as no exception. It is through-composed, featuring no true sectional repetitions, and offering its narrative through continuous progression. However, it does feature some cadences (or faux cadences) and clear sense of phraseology, which help parse out the musical continuum for both its listener and performer.
In contrast with the other etudes in the set, the range of this etude is limited and does not change much throughout the etude. All the three parts: the melody, the chordal accompaniment, and the basses—all stay within their register and stabilize the compositional material. The only exception to this occurs in the section around measure 31, in which the bass line climbs up an octave, and remains in this octave until the end of the etude. This is not a dramatic change, but does represent a shift, and as a result, a slightly modified musical affect for the last page of the piece.

It is fascinating to notice that the melody line seems to always aspire towards the note A₆, which serves as a *de facto* upper limit in the piece. Only twice is the note of A reached. The first is in measure 19, in quite a surprising fashion, after which the melody immediately descends. The second time is even more consequential and occurs in the very last phrase of the piece. In this phrase the melody struggles to make the ascent to A, and having triumphantly reached it in measure 37, it begins its descent towards the piece’s end. It is also worth mentioning that there exists one exception to this upper limit, the B♭ which is briefly attained with the triplet figure in measure 26. It is, however, only for a brief moment, and the aforementioned gravitational pull seems to bring it down immediately, back to the note of G.
ARTICULATION AND CONTOUR

In terms of articulations and contour, one has to examine the two main parts, the ostinato pattern, and the melodic material, separately. When perusing the rhythmic pattern it is easy to discern that the articulation instructions exhibit extreme uniformity, with the same slurs, dots, and tenuto marking meticulously kept throughout the piece. The melody line, on the other hand, showcases a much greater deal of freedom, but is generally marked with long legato slurs, which are only broken for expressive needs. These slurs become particularly long in the second half of the etude starting from measure 26, and help to further unify the later sections.

DETAILED ANALYSIS

The piece begins with the rhythmic pattern \( \frac{5}{4} \) which is to be the cornerstone for this etude. This rhythmic ostinato is first “dressed” upon a preliminary 4-bar statement, composed of simple a harmonic progression, whose role is, in turn, to establish the tonal center of D through a repeated movement from the tonic to the subdominant and back.
It is fascinating to note how Bolcom uses the Mixolydian key of D, and employs a similar concept of dissonance and resolution as one would have in the major/minor system. Thus, when the very first note of the melody, an accented (both dynamically and metrically as a syncopation) nonchord tone of C, appears as a dissonant note to the G major chord underneath it, it is treated as a $\flat$, and resolves as a regular leading tone in a major/minor system would, upwards to $\flat$.

This phrase also establishes another common trait for phrases in this etude: an initial startling long dissonant tone, from which the phrase is propelled forward.
It is also very easy to follow modulations in this context. For example, the first ten bars are in D Mixolydian, and prolong the tonic. And indeed, there is no doubt that when the listener encounters the foreign note of $F_\flat$ in measure 11, and then, in an even higher sense of acuity, the tone of $Ab$ in measure 12, he/she is sensing:

a) a highly dissonant chord to the key established.

b) a modulatory process, and a change in the music direction.

In fact, the phrase which starts in measure 11 is one of the most dissonant and jarring in the whole etude. Three out of the first four melody notes which are introduced are all completely foreign to the key of Mixolydian D ($F_\flat$, $Ab$, $Eb$) and the fourth one, an $F#$ which is marked as a temporary melodic resolution with a lower dynamic, offers a temporary breather but not a true resolution, since it rests as a nonchord tone upon a $G$ major chord.

It is especially important to notice these nonchord tones in the melody because they do not necessarily align with the chordal progressions. Indeed, if one examines the very same phrase in terms of the harmonic progression, it is easy to identify the move to C major and then to $Bb$ major as significant changes in the phrase, with the shift to $Bb$ the most radical one. However, the right hand notes, as seen before, reach the climax of intensity a little
before, and it is not a coincidence that the dissonant tone of F# on measure 15 is actually marked a resolving f' and not an accented one.

This is to say that, just as seen in Etude no. 4, there seems to be a polychronistic feeling to the etude, which results in intricate phrases and structures.

Measure 17 brings the transformation of the dissonant note of F#, which had not properly resolved in the previous bar, into the tonal world with the familiar harmony of the dominant major 7\(^{th}\) chord. With this transformation we doubtlessly arrive at another pseudo cadence, which sets the stage for a new phrase and a new section. It is important to note that Bolcom establishes again the tonality before embarking on a new set of modulations. This brief but crucial harmonic progression is what allows the listener to take stock of the occurrences so far, and forms as a kind of a tonality “reset” button.

![Figure 7-7. “RESETTING” TONALITY IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 6, P. 26.](image)

The next phrase from measures 18-24 is a long and complicated one and features a few interesting characteristics:

1) It consists of three separate small phrases, which combine together to create a substantial phrase.
2) It begins on the first elongated bar in the piece in the meter of 6/4. These two extra beats are readily noticeable, and immediately alert the listener to the fact that a new section is beginning.

3) Since the tonality that had been established was that of G major (through the use of the dominant seventh chord on D) the modulation is initiated through the use of the tone of F♯.

4) This phrase features more jazz-inspired chords, which sounds less harsh and blatantly dissonant than the ones in the previous phrase.

The phrase ends with a similar dynamic diminution and an identical chord of a dominant seventh on the note of D.

The fourth phrase, which begins on bar 25 with another elongated measure of 6/4, is perhaps the most melodically expressive of all the phrases in the piece. Of chief importance is the use of quarter-note triplets which, in pairing with the expressive accents, practically syllabify the notes, and endow these notes with more emotional content. This phrase also features what is, arguably, the most surprising modulation in the piece—the cadence which leads to the C♯ minor chord in measure 27.

FIGURE 7-8. EXPRESSIVE TRIPLETS IN BOLCOM’S ETUDE NO. 6, P. 26.
The phrase calms down with another dominant seventh chord on the note of D, leading us back (though through a plagal cadence) to the key of G major. Another tonality “reset” occurs, this time clearly establishing the G major key in measure 33, before progressing with a surprising subito ppp to yet another modulation through the re-introduction of the tone of F♯, this time serving as a V chord in C major.

The fifth and last phrase is also the longest one of the piece, beginning in measure 35 and ending only at the end of the piece, and employing two elongated bars along the way (6/4 and 5/4.) Whereas the fourth phrase was the most expressive one, the fifth one is easily the most conjunct, and its melody the most seamless, utilizing mostly whole steps. It is interesting to notice that even though the fourth phrase employed one long slur, its meaning, in the context of the expressiveness of its content, seems to be more of a phrase direction. However, in the case of the fifth phrase, the seamlessness with which the melody progresses seems to indicate a legato slur which is not only a phrase indication, but also an articulation marking, admonishing the pianist to play the melodic material as smoothly as possible. This “smoothness” is also aided by the constant stream of chords that occurs in the two extended bars, creating a longer continuum of constant motion.⁶⁷

In terms of pitches, the peak of the phrase finally exhibits the note of A♯, although this note is not reached without a struggle, with a slow chromatic climb from the note of G. This note of A having been achieved, the phrase, and with it, the piece, then begins to wind down, slowly descending towards its end.

⁶⁷ Measure 38 also exhibits a heavy insinuation of a blues ostinato through the incorporation of the 5-6-7-6-5 line in the right hand chords.
As the etude diminishes dynamically, its motion is halted as well, and the perpetuum mobile of the accompanimental material reaches its end:

Harmonically, the last three bars are perhaps the most intriguing in the piece and deserve special mention. Measure 45 features the note D, which is left alone as the accompanimental material disappears. It is then joined by the chord of C major. This C major ninth chord with an added D seems to be a play on the ambiguity between the two harmonies which made up the accompanimental material at the beginning of the piece. Whereas in the beginning these two harmonies alternated, the chord in measure 45 both insinuates that the two have been merged:
This ambiguity adumbrated, Bolcom adds further confusion, perhaps facetiously, by adding the staccato notes of C# and A, respectively. Thus Bolcom hints that the piece, which has started in the mode of a D Mixolydian key, and has migrated through various modulations, was, perhaps, in fact, in the key of A major after all, with all of its other components functioning as 9th, 13th, 4th, etc. In fact, if analyzed according to standard jazz theory, the last chord of A-C#-C-E-G-D would be marked as an A11(#9), a commonplace chord within this idiom.

And so it is in this secretive, somewhat jocular fashion that Bolcom ends the second book of etudes, requesting a pause before the performance of Book III. As seen at the end of Book I, Bolcom seems to relish in the enigmatic and the question-filled ending, rather
than a decisive, clear one—enticing the listeners to keep attentive to what further surprises will unfold in the etudes to come. It is not until the end of Etude no. 12, which seals the set, that the listener will get to experience a true, cathartic resolution, one that will end the whole cycle on a triumphant note.
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS, INSIGHTS, AND SUMMARY

The goal of this dissertation has been to give a detailed, expansive analysis of the first two books of William Bolcom’s Twelve New Etudes. This analysis will hopefully prove useful not only for theorists and musicologists who are interested in this magnum opus, but also, and perhaps mostly, to performers and pedagogues who would like to deepen their understanding of this remarkable piece, and get a possible glimpse into some of the compositional ideas and processes which make these pieces into what they are.

With this detailed analysis at its conclusion, I would like to offer a few possible insights which could prove useful in the understanding not only of individual etudes, but in the general tendencies of the writing in this work.

There is no question that one of Bolcom’s most salient traits as a composer is his versatility in his writing styles. At times his ability to inherit and digest different musical idioms seems almost sponge-like— an ability that has garnered him not only acclaim, but somewhat surprisingly, also criticism.68

It seems to me, however, that those who criticize Bolcom for not being “serious enough” and for being a “Jack of all trades,” really miss the point. For Bolcom is not only a master of all of these styles, but is able to re-compile them into a synthesized language which is completely his own. In the words of Bolcom himself:

68 “The Unrepentant Eclectic.”
“I now embark on a stylistic and harmonic synthesis no longer involved with any local style—that of a fusion of tonality into non-centered sound… with the growth of skill in the management of this tension, it becomes possible to arrive at a musical speech that is at once coherent and comprehensible and in constant expansion. I have found this more fruitful than the employment of any musical language that depends for its coherence on an a priori eschewing of certain musical elements, a rigid adherence to an equally a priori system of generating notes, or a wholesale rejection of what our century has discovered on the horizons of musical style by turning totally to the past.”

Nowhere is this newly-minted language more apparent than with Bolcom’s purely atonal idiom. His idiosyncratic compositional language is, as has been pointed out many times throughout the dissertation, a true product of a composer who had been fully immersed in the 12-tone system, and that, for a short while, wrote serialist music “by the book.” However, Bolcom has obviously rejected the most rigid tenants of this mathematical system, and instead created a lingua nova, in which both of the basic Schoenbergian premises of the “emancipation of the dissonance” and the equal representation of tones exist, yet neither mathematical nor any other restricting principal impede Bolcom’s compositional freedom. In fact, perhaps more than to any other idiom, this language bears some resemblances to Schoenberg’s “free atonality”—the composer’s pre-12 tone method approach.

Another element which seems so lucid throughout these etudes, and which seems to guide his compositional principles, is his pianistic sense. Bolcom the composer is also a first-rate pianist, and as a result, knows how to maximize the instrument’s potential.

69 Bolcom, Afterword to Twelve New Etudes, 62.

70 We have particularly noted and discussed Bolcom’s proclivity towards the use of nearly complete tonal rows, which are perfectly suited in order to reap the “benefits” from the twelve-tone technique, without the technique’s potential pitfalls.
Indeed, Bolcom is not quite satisfied with the possibilities as were handed down to him through the pianistic lineage, but even expands on the gestural and sonorific capabilities of the instrument in the manner of the true great etudes’ writers of the past and present.

At times, the most obvious explanation for his choice of notes seems to be this very pianistic sense: hand positions, acoustical considerations, and other purely idiomatic concatenations, which prevail over any other more “systematic” approach.

One more point emphasized throughout this work has been Bolcom’s balance between musical experimentation and the art of maintaining a sense of cohesion and communication. In all of the etudes examined, Bolcom experiments with some musical facets of the piece, which then become the “avant-garde” aspects of the each work, while keeping others in relative suspension—always allowing the listener to have something to latch onto. The descriptive titles found in the majority of pieces in the set are also a welcoming feature of his compositions, and allow both the listener and the performer to have a certain preconception of that which they are about to hear, even if this very preconception might turn out to be distorted or contradicted throughout the journey.

Whether it is the scene from the opera, which does not quite sound like any regular opera but has an ostinato bass à la opera, or the nocturne, which does not really fulfill any of the normal expectations of the genre with the exception of being quite soft overall—all of these allow the listener to engage and react to that which he/she is hearing, and as a result, keep them always connected to the musical journey.

One more element which can be gleaned is that a significant portion of Bolcom’s etudes seem to be narrative based, and in this respect, his idea of musical forms in these
etudes appears to be derived from the world of programmatic music rather than the sectional premises of the classical era. That is not to say that Bolcom cannot write music which uses a clear form—Etude no. 2 is proof of the opposite. But it is the general tendency in the etudes to create a fluid, organic composition, rather than a schematic one, bespeaking, once again, of Bolcom’s digestion of those things which he had learned, yet his reluctance to adhere to anything which might be restricting.

One can go on and on, and indeed, so can the analytical process of these masterpieces, which will yield, I am certain, many different analyses. Bolcom’s works, as has been mentioned before, defy clear analysis, and allow for a plethora of interpretations. Nonetheless, it is my hope, that the process of reading this work will prove, at the end, to be as edifying to its reader as it has proven to its author.


http://lukedahn.net/Bolcom.htm.


