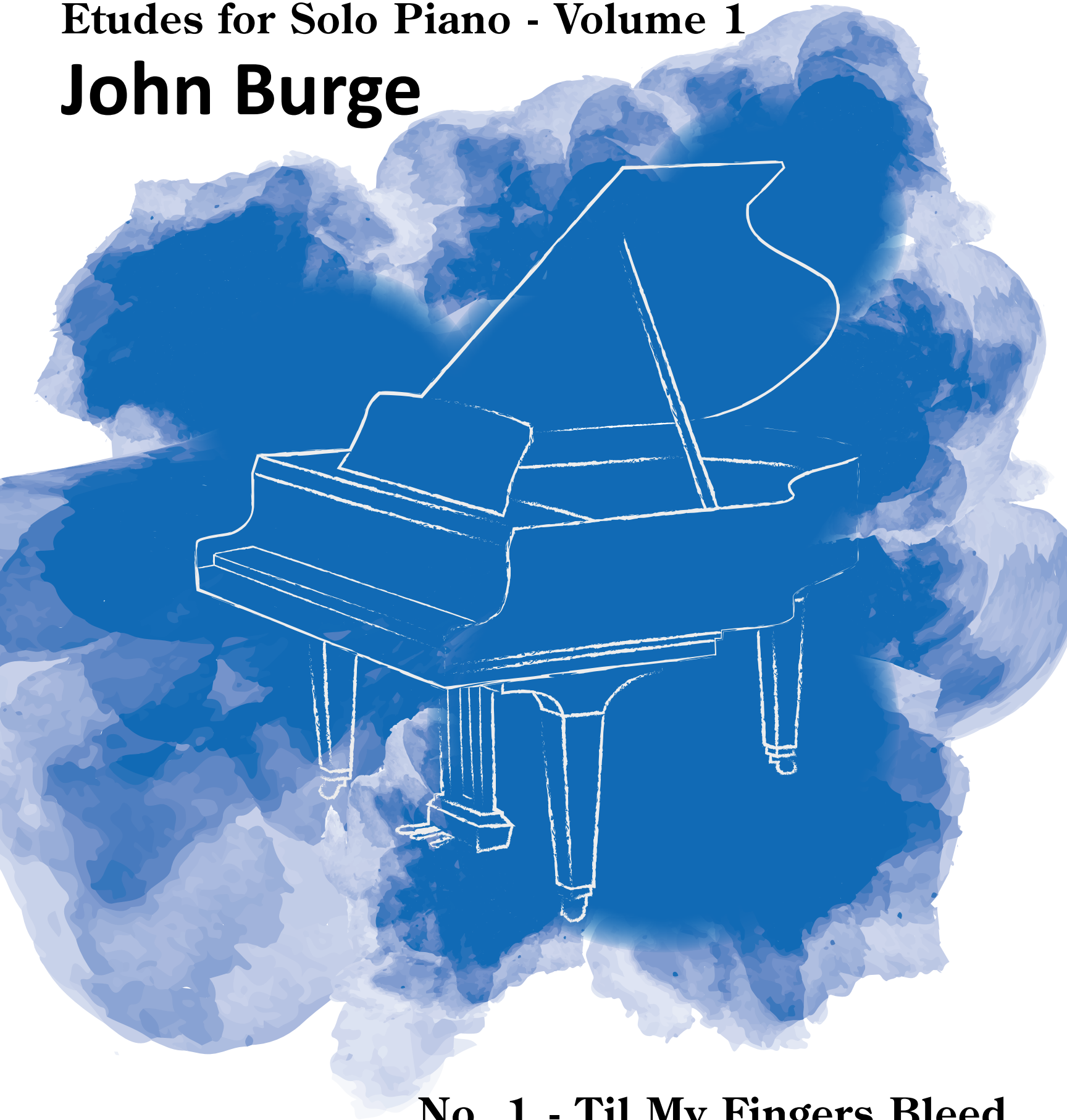


# ***STUDIES IN POETRY***

**Etudes for Solo Piano - Volume 1**

**John Burge**



**No. 1 - Til My Fingers Bleed**

**No. 2 - No Time**

**No. 3 - Riffs**

### *Study in Poetry No. 1 – Til My Fingers Bleed*

was inspired by a book of poetry written by the American author, Charles Bukowski (1920-1994). The complete title of this poetry collection is, *Play the Piano Drunk Like a Percussion Instrument Until the Fingers Begin to Bleed a Bit* [Black Sparrow Press: Santa Rosa 1979]. Knowing the book's complete title should go a long way to prepare a performer or listener for the barrage of sound heard in the music. While shortening the book's full title, the diminutive form of "until" was used to create a title that flowed more fluidly off the tongue.

Bukowski published more than forty-five books of poetry (the exact figure is hard to pin down given the number of collections that were brought out after his death), six novels, and numerous short story collections and nonfiction books. He worked on and off for the Los Angeles Post Office until, at the age of 49, he accepted an offer from Black Sparrow Press to quit his post office job to devote himself full-time to writing. His first novel, published shortly thereafter, was titled, *Post Office*, and is one of many examples of autobiographical elements making their way into his writing. Bukowski's reputation for excessive drinking coupled with numerous love affairs and one-night trysts, is reflected in the accolade that *Time* magazine used in 1986 to describe his stature as "the laureate of American lowlife". Still, often revealed in his poems is a genuine appreciation of the human spirit with all its contradictions.

In making the piano sound more like a percussion instrument, the music utilizes the extreme ranges of the keyboard, often employing highly accented patterns and an excessive amount of pedal to increase the volume level to the fullest. Although the music is certainly dissonant at times, there is a strong tonal pull towards a C Major tonic which can be heard most clearly on the final page.

*Study in Poetry No. 2 – No Time* draws its subtitle from a poetry collection of the same name by Canadian poet, Margaret Avison (1918-2007) [Lancelot Press Limited: Hantsport, Nova Scotia, 1989]. Northrup Frye, the great Canadian literary critic, wrote of Margaret Avison, that she was one of Canada's first truly distinctive poets writing in the English language, citing specifically the way that her poems often echo the Canadian landscape in a spiritual fashion.

John Burge has long been a fan of Avison's poetry and was the first composer to set her words to music in his choral work, *Sunblue-Three Images of Canadian Spring* (1987). Other settings of her poetry include, *That we may not Lose Loss* (1994), for soprano soloist, choir and orchestra and *Winter Sun* (2001), for choir and percussion ensemble. Instrumental compositions inspired by Avison's poetry, but used in an abstract fashion similar to that of the *No Time* study include, *One Sail* (1993), for solo cello and string orchestra, and the solo piano pieces, *Everything Waits for the Lilacs* (1996), and "Prelude No. 23 in F Major – Spring Thaw", from *Twenty-Four Preludes* (2015).

The composition, *No Time*, attempts to capture the title's meaning in two musical ways. First, the piece has no bar lines and as such, lacks an obvious pulse or meter, a factor which is especially noticeable in the long phrases that unfold at a slow tempo. The second way that the music reflects the title is through the complicated contrapuntal textures that use fairly unusual subdivisions of the beats played simultaneously between the two hands. This is apparent from the first line where the five-note groupings of the right hand are played against the left hand's three-note groupings. These groupings become increasingly more difficult to perform as the music proceeds. This composition is firmly fixed in key of D Major, using exclusively the pitches found in this key.

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*Study in Poetry No. 3 – Riffs* pays tribute to a volume of poetry of the same title by poet Dennis Lee (b. 1939). Lee is a highly celebrated and prolific English language poet in Canada, having published almost forty volumes of poetry for both adults and children. His collection, *Riffs* [Brick Books: London, Ontario, 1993], contains 88 poems that follow the arc of a passionate love affair that ends badly. The composer has often thought that the number 88 seems like an implied connection to the 88 different white and black keys found on most pianos.

In jazz, the term, “riffs”, commonly refers to a brief melodic figure that a soloist uses as an improvisational building block and by extension, this element of spontaneity is apparent in many of the poems. The jazz influences on the actual composition, such as the swinging triplet figures and stride piano in the left hand with the low octave strong beats and higher-placed chords on weak beats, will be immediately apparent to the listener. Performers are encouraged to make the most out of these jazz-like gestures to really capture the music’s energy and humour.

Unlike the previous two studies in this volume, which are both decidedly through-composed in a process of continuous variation, the piano piece, *Riffs*, utilizes a very clear phrase design and is organized into an audible ABA structure. The two A sections have a strong pull towards E Major while the middle section’s music-box-like repetition of a small pattern, is firmly situated in E Flat Major. The use of two keys a semitone apart comes up a great deal in Burge’s music, sometimes occurring simultaneously to generate a clashing polytonal colour.

Subsequent to composing *Riffs*, Burge wrote two works that actually set Dennis Lee’s poetry to music: *Simple Songs* (1998), for children’s choir and orchestra (or piano duet) and *Blue Psalm* (1999) for low voice and piano.



As mentioned in the comments earlier about *Study in Poetry No. 2 – No Time*, the solo piano composition, *Everything Waits for the Lilacs* (1996), was also inspired by the poetry of Margaret Avison. This title, though, is an actual line borrowed from the poem, “Thaws”, that is found in her collection, *Sunblue*. Burge had previously set this entire poem to music in the unaccompanied choral work, *Sunblue – Three Images of Canadian Spring* (1987).

The composition of *Everything Waits for the Lilacs* came about at the request of Canadian pianist, Janina Fialkowska, who wanted a short, expressive composition to include on her recital programs that were to be presented in small Canadian towns as part of the Piano Six project. At the time of this request, John Burge had not written any solo piano music for about a decade and this work soon became the go-to piece if he needed to perform a short solo piano work. After playing this piece himself for a few years, it is fair to state that this work provided the model for the *Studies in Poetry* series.

While *Everything Waits for the Lilacs* was available through the Canadian Music Centre for many years, in 2015 the composition was published with Red Leaf Pianoworks (JBComps-002). This work has also appeared on the repertoire list for the Royal Conservatory of Music’s Associate Diploma in Piano Performance.





**John Burge** (b. 1961) is a Canadian composer who has been teaching at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario since 1987. He has produced a large body of instrumental and vocal music including a number of symphonies and concertos as well as a chamber opera. A Juno-winning composer, he has always had a close affinity to the piano and enjoys finding time to present solo piano concerts or lecture/demonstrations of his own music.

At its heart, the ***Studies in Poetry*** series is a collection of concert etudes for the piano that pay tribute to some of the composer's favourite books of poetry in the English language. In all cases, the poetry book's title has been used as a both a point of inspiration and a subtitle for each study. The composition of the first three studies dates from 2000 and coincided with the purchase of a new grand piano. The process of writing these works served to both break in the instrument's stiffness and provide an incentive to practice diligently with the goal of premiering these pieces later that year. As additional studies have been added to the collection and premiered by the composer, the new pieces have always been grouped in sets of three, although the composer notes that it is perfectly acceptable to perform just one or two studies separately.

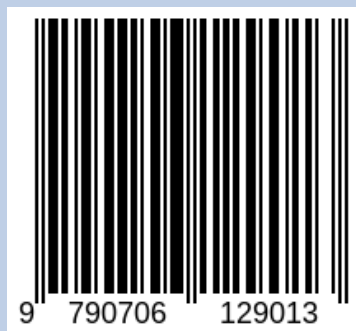
It is fair to state that the technical ability required to perform these works successfully is at the diploma level. Even the shorter pieces in a slower tempo, often demand a level of contrapuntal control and rhythmic independence between hands that can be challenging. As of 2022, five volumes of these works have been published as follows:

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| Volume 1 | Study in Poetry No. 1 – <i>Til My Fingers Bleed</i> (Charles Bukowski)<br>Study in Poetry No. 2 – <i>No Time</i> (Margaret Avison)<br>Study in Poetry No. 3 – <i>Riffs</i> (Dennis Lee)           |
| Volume 2 | Study in Poetry No. 4 – <i>Loop</i> (Anne Simpson)<br>Study in Poetry No. 5 – <i>War Music</i> (Christopher Logue)<br>Study in Poetry No. 6 – <i>Escape Velocity</i> (David Breskin)              |
| Volume 3 | Study in Poetry No. 7 – <i>Near Changes</i> (Mona Van Duyn)<br>Study in Poetry No. 8 – <i>Anthem</i> (Helen Humphreys)<br>Study in Poetry No. 9 – <i>Dancing with the Moon</i> (Linda Frewin)     |
| Volume 4 | Study in Poetry No. 10 – <i>Pulse</i> (Rajinderpal S. Pal)<br>Study in Poetry No. 11 – <i>Why Are You So Sad</i> (David McFadden)<br>Study in Poetry No. 12 – <i>Ballistics</i> (Billy Collins)   |
| Volume 5 | Study in Poetry No. 13 – <i>Left-Handed</i> (Jonathan Galassi)<br>Study in Poetry No. 14 – <i>Ripple Effect</i> (Elaine Equi)<br>Study in Poetry No. 15 – <i>Grief Sequence</i> (Prageeta Sharma) |

**Do check out the websites listed below for more information about John Burge's solo piano music as well as links to recordings and videos.**

JBComps-007

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[www.johnburge.ca](http://www.johnburge.ca)

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