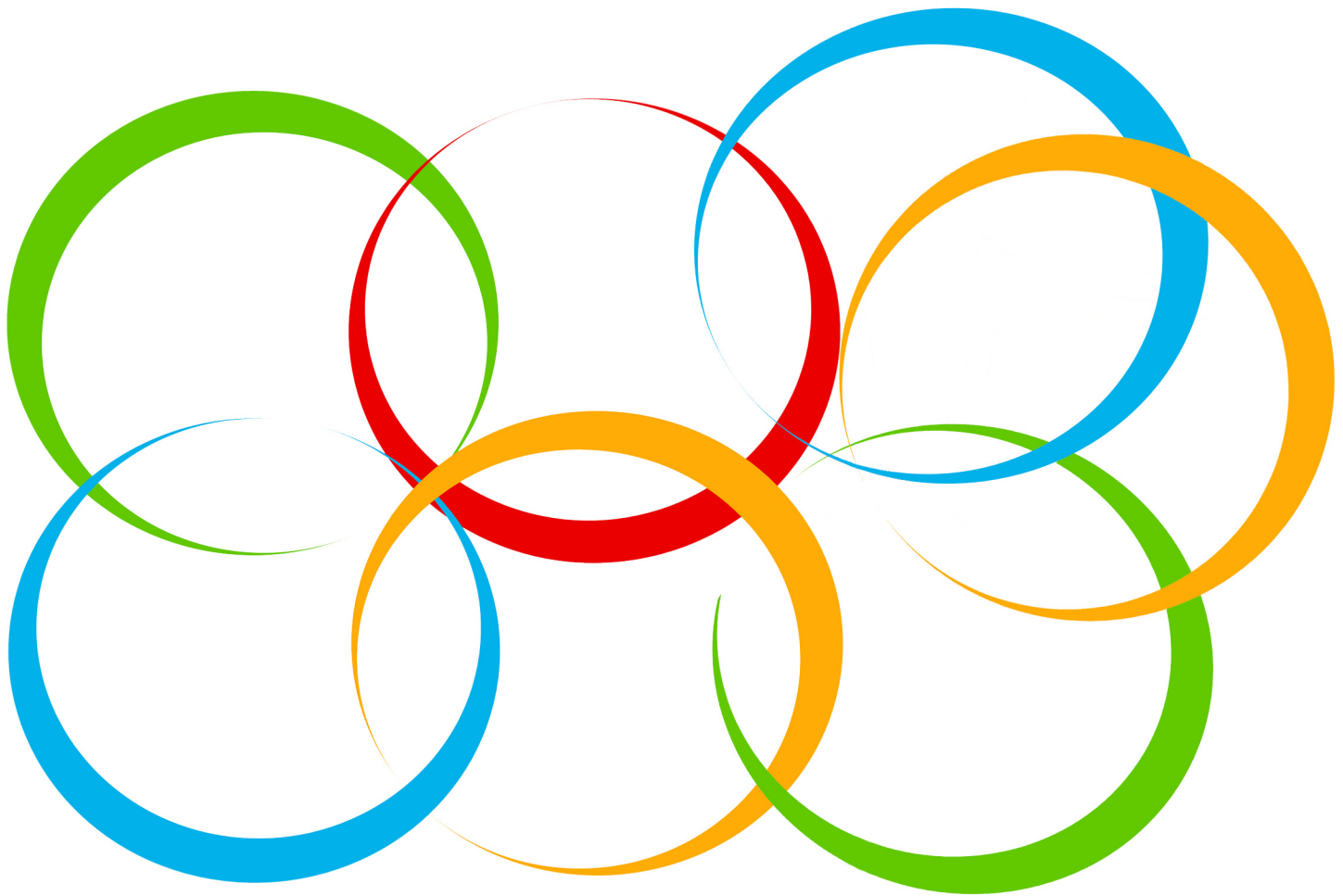


# **SEVEN CIRCLES**

**John Burge**

**Seven Distinctive Piano Solos**

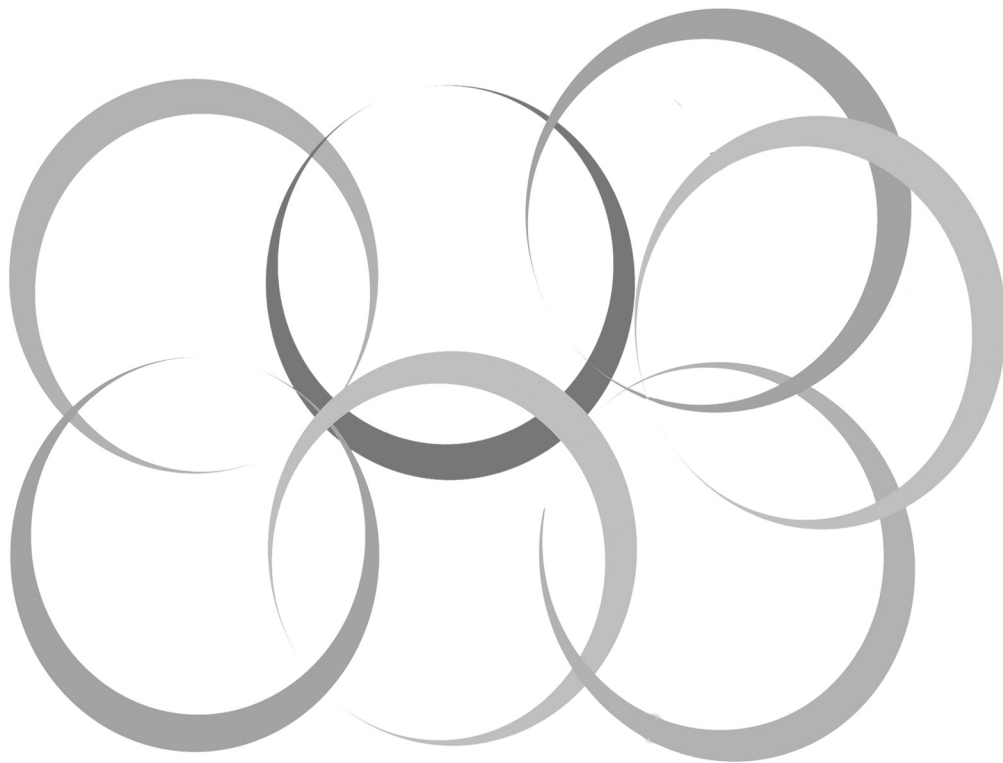


**Imaginatively Based On  
“The Circle of Fifths”**

**Intermediate/Advanced Level**

# **SEVEN CIRCLES**

**Seven Distinctive Piano Solos  
Imaginatively Based On “The Circle of Fifths”**



by **John Burge**

**Intermediate/Advanced Level**

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**Seven Circles** is a set of seven solo piano pieces, all based in some fashion on the sequential pattern referred to as “the circle-of-fifths”. Simply put, the harmonic design or broader tonal structure of each individual piece progresses by descending perfect fifth intervals, moving through the complete chromatic set of all twelve possible pitches, until arriving back at the opening key. In some of the shorter pieces, this underlying basis is clearly displayed on the surface of the music, but in the longer pieces, the circle-of-fifth points of arrival can be somewhat hidden (perhaps as an extended pedal point or even as a distinctive key area for an expanded passage). Probably the most important aspect of **Seven Circles** is that each of the pieces is highly distinctive, thereby emphasizing different approaches one can use when employing this sequence.

All of these pieces began as improvisations with the composer first writing down the best ideas and then going back and polishing the material to a satisfying veneer. This emphasis on improvisation is an important aspect for a performer to consider when playing the music, noting especially that spontaneity and expressive shaping are often highly appropriate. Additionally, it is hoped that these pieces will inspire the more creative pianists to try their own hand at improvisation, perhaps by using a different sequential pattern for their explorations.

There is a deliberate tonal design and order to the keys used in this collection such that all the white notes are utilized in the descending fifth arrangement of: B, E, A, D, G, C and F. The broader movement through these keys generates a certain sense of flow when moving on to the next piece. The placement of the most technically difficult pieces in the fourth and seventh positions, creates a satisfying overall design when the complete set is performed in entirety. However, it is assumed that in most instances just one piece, or a small sampling, would be performed. This is perfectly acceptable.

**No. 1 – Minor Circle in B:** The broken B Minor triad that is constantly maintained in the middle range of the piano creates a minimalistic effect, while expressive lines are sculpted in higher and lower registers. As the music moves to more distant chords, such as B Flat Minor, these new chords are introduced melodically to avoid the excessive dissonance caused by the clashing of chords a semitone apart.

**No. 2 – Shimmering Circle in E:** This piece requires a certain velocity to capture the “shimmering” effect of the title. Almost half of the piece is made up of the expansion of the final E major chord in an extended coda.

**No. 3 – Swinging Circle in A:** The walking bass line provides a kind of jazz-like support to the right-hand melodic fragments. Like most pieces in this set, the opening material returns at the end, implying a miniature a-b-a form.

**No. 4 – Linear Circle in D:** At most moments in this piece there are three or more scalar lines simultaneously moving up or down the keyboard. These scalar lines generally employ different rhythmic values, often generating very satisfying vertical sonorities. Longer pedal points are sometimes used, creating a significant amount of tension that eventually builds to a triumphant climax.

**No. 5 – Major Circle in G:** This was the first piece of the set to be written and the improvisatory character is highly apparent in the leisurely rolled chords and short lyrical melodic gestures. Pianists are encouraged to take as much time as needed to shape phrases and cadences.

**No. 6 – Canonic Circle in C:** The syncopated character of the 7/8 meter is emphasized with accented groups of 3+2+2 eighth notes. The music consistently unfolds in a two-part invention fashion with the added difficulty that each line’s dynamic markings require complete independence between hands.

**No. 7 – Grand Circle in F:** At over 200 bars, this piece provides an expansive realization of the circle-of-fifths in a highly virtuosic fashion. Structurally, entire sections are reworked a semitone higher in the second half of the piece giving the music a stanza-like design. Towards the end, a rising sequential pattern is introduced as a way of balancing the descending emphasis that underlies the circle-of-fifth sequence. The two tempo increases in the coda build the music to a very satisfying conclusion.



# ***SEVEN CIRCLES***

Seven Intermediate/Advanced Compositions for Solo Piano

by  
**JOHN BURGE**

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John Burge (b. 1961, Dryden, Ontario) is a Canadian composer who has been teaching at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario since 1987. A Juno-winning composer, he has produced a large body of instrumental and vocal music including a number of symphonies and concertos as well as a chamber opera. Like many composers, he has a close affinity to the piano and as a solo performer, still tries to find time to present solo piano concerts or lecture/demonstrations of his own music. In 2013 he joined the Red Leaf Pianoworks collective and began releasing new editions of his solo piano music starting with *Parking an Octatonic Truck* (JBComps-001). This earlier set consisted of piano solos ranging from grades 1-8 and was followed in 2016 by *Piano Reflections* (JBComps-004), a set of Intermediate and Advanced compositions for solo piano.

Unlike the earlier collections listed above, *Seven Circles* is a set of entirely new compositions written specifically to fit together around a single over-arching theme, in this case being unified by the "circle-of-fifths". This harmonic pattern basis for *Seven Circles* can be traced to the composer's social isolation at home, as a requirement of the COVID-19, and the resultant remote delivery of all courses at Queen's University during the 2020/21 academic year. In teaching first-year harmony in this fashion, John Burge missed the opportunity to engage with the students in person and to freely improvise at the keyboard during class, something he would often rely upon in teaching harmony, especially in demonstrating sequential progressions like the circle-of-fifths. The compositions found in *Seven Circles* are the result of having taken time during the pandemic to write down and polish different ways of using this pattern of chords.

It is often very subjective to gauge the difficulty level of new compositions until they have been played and taught by a number of pianists and teachers, so it is with caution that the composer suggests the following grade levels for these pieces:

- Grade 7: No. 1 – Minor Circle in B  
No. 3 – Swinging Circle in A
- Grade 8: No. 5 – Major Circle in G
- Grade 9: No. 2 – Shimmering Circle in E  
No. 6 – Canonic Circle in C
- Grade 10: No. 4 – Linear Circle in D
- Diploma: No. 7 – Grand Circle in F

***Do check out the websites listed below for more information and recordings of John Burge's solo piano music.***

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

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