



Burge
Studies in Poetry
 Études for Solo Piano,
 Volumes 1-5
Red Leaf Pianoworks
www.redleafpianoworks.com

The distinguished Canadian composer John Burge (born 1961) has written prolifically for the piano over many decades. His music marries originality and boldness of conception with accessibility and immediacy to a most impressive degree. His compositional approach varies between passages that take traditional tonality as a springboard to writing that is cutting-edge and iconoclastic.



John Burge has composed prolifically for the piano

But throughout, Burge is never less than consistently practical: pianists will surely appreciate his craftsmanship and emphasis on presenting music that works well at the keyboard, usually affording a gratifying sense of tactile pleasure.

Burge's most recent series of some 15 concert études brings together solo piano studies that were written between 2001 and 2022. These were directly inspired by the work of vibrant but vividly contrasted poets that the composer clearly found intensely moving on a personal level. The result is a most impressive bravura cycle that could prove hugely attractive

to performers seeking substantial yet approachable contemporary repertoire. On the one hand there are quasi-minimalistic numbers such as 'Loop' (Étude No 4, inspired by the poetry of Anne Simpson) or ferociously percussive essays such as 'Til my fingers bleed' (Étude No 1, after Charles Bukowski) and 'Ballistics' (Étude No 12, after Billy Collins). On the other hand

there is touching poetry, even a hint of sentimentality, in the likes of 'Anthem' (Étude No 8, after Helen Humphreys) as well as a hint towards jazz in 'Riffs' (Étude No 3, after Dennis Lee). In terms of duration, Burge's études vary considerably. Several are quite substantial, almost outgrowing the title of 'study', but at 365 bars long perhaps the Bach Chaconne-influenced 'Grief Sequence' (Étude No 15, after Prageeta Sharma) dwarfs all the others. This is a quasi-symphonic work – a moving essay in concentrated power, a tone poem without orchestra rather than a conventional étude. It was written during the isolated days of the Covid lockdowns and its powerfully austere characterisation reflects the loneliness of that time.

These studies could well be presented collectively – indeed, numbers 1-12 form a convincing cycle in their own right – but the individual études equally stand alone as strongly characterised independent pieces.



Davidson
The Music Box: nine beautiful and original pieces for piano

Kevin Mayhew 3612640

Brian Davidson is a Scottish pedagogue, pianist and composer based near Edinburgh who has had vast experience not only as a teacher, but also as an

ABRSM examiner. Clearly his wide-ranging educational endeavours have had a positive effect on the music presented in this cycle, which leaps off the page in terms of its pianistic layout, characterisation and melodic memorability. I am especially impressed by the central three elegies, which opt for contrasted tessituras and pitch centres, with the second elegy melodically exploiting the tenor range of the instrument while the left hand crosses over the right with some enticing pianism, all in only 20 bars. This is an outstanding miniature with orchestral overtones that adds considerably to the music's intensity. 'The Music Box' proves to be a worthy Celtic counterpart to Liadov's famous 'A Musical Snuffbox' from Imperial Russia.

There is much humour here, as well as many useful pianistic workouts, such as in the staccatos, tremolandos and double-note figurations in 'The Mischievous Mosquito'. By contrast, 'Lullaby for Lara' floats away serenely and exquisitely with an inner right-hand melody and gentle extended accompanimental arpeggios. Davidson is a stickler for details on the score, providing elegant and thoughtful articulation marks and directions on a macro and micro scale in persuasive numbers such as 'Perfect Story' and the opening 'Morris Dance' (a 21st-century homage to Percy Grainger, perhaps?). All told, this is a most varied, persuasive and approachable mini-anthology of intermediate-level pieces that will be of value to many players. I think adult players returning to the piano in particular should find this collection inspiring and rewarding.

BY MURRAY McLACHLAN