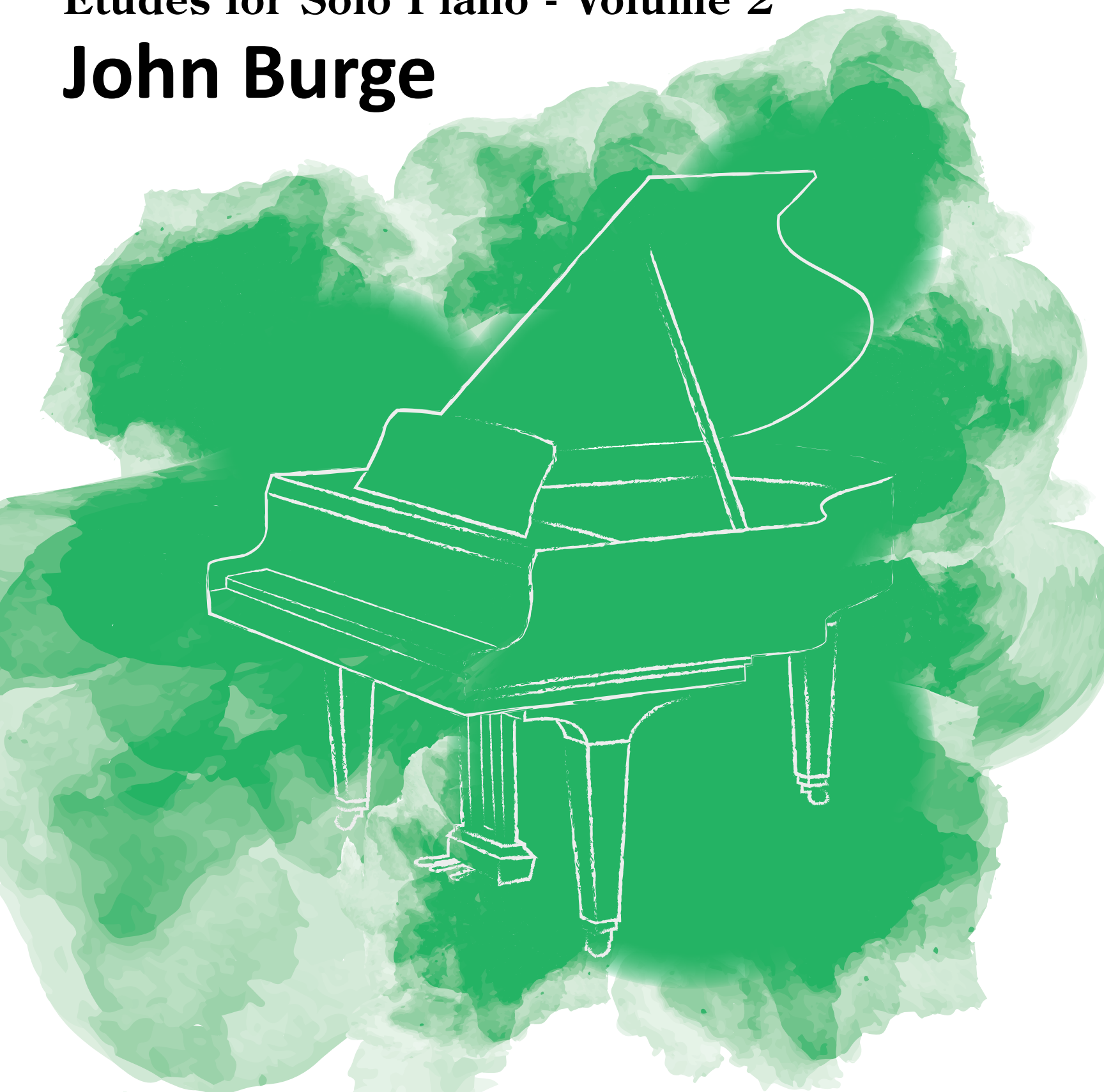


# ***STUDIES IN POETRY***

**Etudes for Solo Piano - Volume 2**

**John Burge**



**No. 4 - Loop**  
**No. 5 - War Music**  
**No. 6 - Escape Velocity**

*Study in Poetry No. 4 – Loop* was inspired by a poetry collection of the same title by Canadian author, Anne Simpson [McClelland & Stewart Ltd: Toronto, 2003]. A writer of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, Simpson has published five books of poetry, many of which have received national and international recognition. *Loop* was awarded the 2004 Griffin Poetry Prize and contains an impressive variety of poems, ranging from a moving set of sonnets inspired by the shock and grief of the Twin Towers' destruction in New York City, to a remarkable poem titled, "Möbius Strip", that really does double back on itself in a most ingenious fashion.

This piano study takes the book's title quite literally and continuously repeats a loop of six white notes that lie very easily under the fingers. As four notes of the six-note pattern are found in an F Major triad, the music has a strong pull towards the key of F Major. Throughout the composition, this pattern remains fixed in the same middle register of the piano, but the pattern is doubled in a lower octave near the end to generate more volume for the final climax. Although from this description it might sound like this piece is a bit of an excursion in minimalist music, for much of the composition, complimentary lines and harmonies are added around the six-note pattern in ways that tend to make the pattern somewhat inaudible. Indeed, this work's main performance difficulty is found in voicing the resultant contrapuntal fabric with clarity and balance, while keeping the six-note pattern evenly played, despite the pattern's shifting from one hand to the other.

It is perhaps worth noting that this study also owes a debt of inspiration to Liszt's solo piano arrangement of the famous Schubert Lied, *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (*Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel*) which begins with a similar six-note pattern, but in the key of D Minor.

*Study in Poetry No. 5 – War Music* draws its subtitle from a long book of poetry based on Homer's *The Iliad* by British poet, Christopher Logue (1926-2011). The Logue retelling of sections of *The Iliad* is more a reinvention of the story than a translation. The celebrated British author, Lawrence Durrell, described it as, "a work of great virtuosity, something completely original in style and stance...It is tremendously graphic, full of felicities as well as stark colloquialisms pointing up the drama. It is the perfect introduction to Homer, faithful in tone and spirit to the essential Greekness of the old poem."

Initially published in three separate volumes with the titles, *War Music* [1981], *Kings* [1991] and *The Husbands* [1995], a complete collection of all three volumes was later published under the *War Music* title [Faber and Faber Limited: Italy, 2001]. It is this complete edition that John Burge enjoyed so much, that he followed Durrell's advice and went back and read Robert Fagles' more faithful translations of Homer.

The *War Music* etude consistently makes use of a twelve-tone row that is constructed to emphasize four different triads, often presented in fanfare-like gestures. The initial statement of the row begins with a G Minor triad and the constant returning to this version of the row and other transpositions that prioritize a G Minor triad, center this work clearly in G Minor.

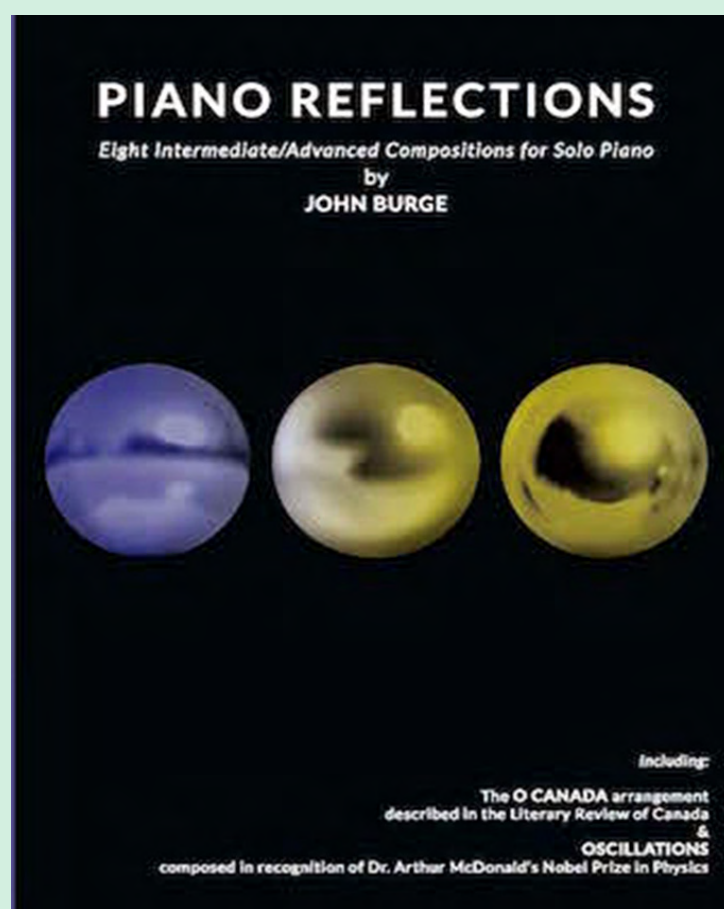
This composition turned out to be one of the longer pieces in the series to date, which is primarily the result of the extended endings that gradually merge into a slow funeral march—a calm response to the earlier percussive and dissonant climaxes. An optional snare drum effect on the final few pages, created by loosely wrapping paper around the lower strings of the piano, underscores the militaristic influences on this piece.

*Study in Poetry No. 6 – Escape Velocity* pays tribute to a volume of poetry of the same title [Soft Skull Press: Brooklyn, NY, 2004] by American poet David Breskin (b. 1958). In addition to being a wonderful poet, Breskin is a provocative essayist, novelist and highly respected record producer. Indeed, as of 2020, he has produced and/or contributed to 40 albums involving artist ranging from Bill Frisell, Nels Cline, Kris Davis to Mary Holvorson.

This collection includes many poems that have a great sense of rhythm often coupled with a biting sense of humour or irony. You really have to be intrigued by a book of poetry that is endorsed on the back cover by U2's Bono, who is quoted as saying, "I have never read anything like it. Breskin has the eye of a great filmmaker and the ear of a great musician". The subject matter is wide-ranging and there are many moments of lyrical beauty as found in the poem, "For Daisy on Her 13th Birthday".

The musical interpretation of the book's title is a virtuosic expansion of a few motives that become increasingly frenetic in an almost cinematic fashion. For those *Star Trek* fans or pretty much any TV show or movie set in space, this etude is the musical equivalent of trying to get "Scotty" to find a bit more warp speed in the Engine Room so that the Enterprise can break free of the over-powering gravitation pull of the black hole (tractor beam, force field, etc.).

Throughout the composition, the music is centered on the tonic of A, or is headed towards an A pitch-center. At the beginning, this key seems more like A minor, primarily the result of all the broken minor thirds. Towards the end, the mode shifts to A major, although the coda has a rather dissonant moment in which white and black note clusters move in contrary motion over a large range of the keyboard during the final increase of intensity.



*Piano Reflections* [JBComps-004: 2016] is a collection of eight compositions by John Burge that are each individually dedicated to people who are in some ways connected to the work that bears their dedication.

The collection's final composition is titled, "Oscillations", and was composed in recognition of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Physics awarded to Dr. Arthur B. McDonald, Professor Emeritus at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, where John Burge also teaches. The complete dedication is to both Arthur and his spouse Janet, who, as a long-time Kingston piano teacher, was also known to John Burge. Given how the playing and teaching of the piano dominates any household, it made sense to pay tribute to Arthur's life-time achievement in science, with a work for piano. "Oscillations" has a similar minimalist sensibility to *Study in Poetry No. 4 – Loop*, and is worth checking out to see how another small pattern can be used to generate a larger composition.

# STUDIES IN POETRY

Etudes for Solo Piano – Volume 2

by

**John Burge**



© Copyright 2022 by John Burge. All Rights Reserved.

Printed in Kingston, Ontario.

ISMN: 979-0-706129-02-0

# STUDIES IN POETRY

Etudes for Solo Piano – Volume 2

by

**John Burge**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>No. 4</b>	<b>Loop</b> (Anne Simpson).....	<b>1</b>
<b>No. 5</b>	<b>War Music</b> (Christopher Logue).....	<b>12</b>
<b>No. 6</b>	<b>Escape Velocity</b> (David Breskin).....	<b>24</b>

© Copyright 2022 by John Burge. All Rights Reserved.

Printed in Kingston, Ontario.

ISMN: 979-0-706129-02-0



**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 – *Til My Fingers Bleed* (Charles Bukowski)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 2 – *No Time* (Margaret Avison)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 3 – *Riffs* (Dennis Lee)
  
- Volume 2     Study in Poetry No. 4 – *Loop* (Anne Simpson)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 5 – *War Music* (Christopher Logue)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 6 – *Escape Velocity* (David Breskin)
  
- Volume 3     Study in Poetry No. 7 – *Near Changes* (Mona Van Duyn)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 8 – *Anthem* (Helen Humphreys)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 9 – *Dancing with the Moon* (Linda Frewin)
  
- Volume 4     Study in Poetry No. 10 – *Pulse* (Rajinderpal S. Pal)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 11 – *Why Are You So Sad* (David McFadden)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 12 – *Ballistics* (Billy Collins)
  
- Volume 5     Study in Poetry No. 13 – *Left-Handed* (Jonathan Galassi)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 14 – *Ripple Effect* (Elaine Equi)  
                  Study in Poetry No. 15 – *Grief Sequence* (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-008  
ISMN: 979-0-706129-02-0

Cover Design: Caroline Kwok  
Photo Credit: Kristen Ritchie



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

  
*Red Leaf Pianoworks*

[www.redleafpianoworks.com](http://www.redleafpianoworks.com)