

# ***STUDIES IN POETRY***

**Etudes for Solo Piano - Volume 3**

**John Burge**



**No. 7 - Near Changes**

**No. 8 - Anthem**

**No. 9 - Dancing with the Moon**

*Study in Poetry No. 7 – Near Changes* was inspired by a poetry collection of the same title [Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1990] by American poet, Mona Van Dyun (1921-2004). During her long career, her poetry was recognized with every major U.S. prize for poetry, noting that *Near Changes* received the 1991 Pulitzer Prize.

Mona Van Duyn's poetry combines great technical skill with emotional inspiration, pathos and even wit, often using traditional forms, meters and rhymes with vivid originality. *Near Changes*, is also the title of a poem in this collection that is worth tracking down to find out where this opening sentence leads: "Bob Holt, a 20-year-old Seattle man, was quietly walking on a downtown street, disguised as a mallard duck, when he was—for no apparent reason—attacked by a husky, 6-foot-tall, bearded stranger."

Somewhat like *Study in Poetry No. 4 – Loop*, *Near Changes*, the piano etude, is also a kind of foray into minimalism. However, where *Loop* repeated the same pattern of notes throughout, *Near Changes* generally employs repeated patterns of notes that gradually undergo subtle alterations, until eventually sliding into a completely different pattern. An additional compositional factor utilized in the piece's design is the emphasis on using ever diminishing, shorter rhythmic values, which has the effect of making the music sound like it is getting faster.

One other feature of *Near Changes* that makes it a sonically distinctive listening experience, is the sudden changes in the piano texture created by playing identical passages, first with the damper pedal engaged, and then without the pedal. This effect generates music that sounds quite different, although the notes played are exactly the same. This composition often maintains long pedal points, pulling most strongly towards B Flat at the beginning and end of the composition.

*Study in Poetry No. 8 – Anthem* draws its subtitle from a book of poetry having the same title [Brick Books: London, Ontario, 1999] by Canadian poet and novelist, Helen Humphreys (b. 1961). While this might be a thin volume, every poem is packed with meaning. It should be said that John Burge has long felt a connection to this poet in that they have both spent much of their creative lives living in the same city of Kingston, Ontario and, coincidentally, were born in the same year.

Helen's younger brother, Martin Humphreys, was a wonderful concert pianist and teacher, who died at the age of forty-five, about four months after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Helen wrote a very moving memoir of this time in her life titled, *Nocturne* [Harper Collins Publishers: Toronto, 2013]. The many musical references in her poetry seem to resonate with a truth that comes from music being an important touchstone in her life.

While most of the piano pieces in the *Studies in Poetry* series focus entirely on a musical interpretation of the book's title, this collection's poem entitled, "Variations", had a significant influence on this piano etude. The poem's opening line, "Music comes undone", matches the rhythm heard in the piano's opening melodic gesture. An additional musical allusion can also be observed in the composition's opening bars in the way that the chords, and most of the melodic notes, make reference to *O Canada*, Canada's national anthem.

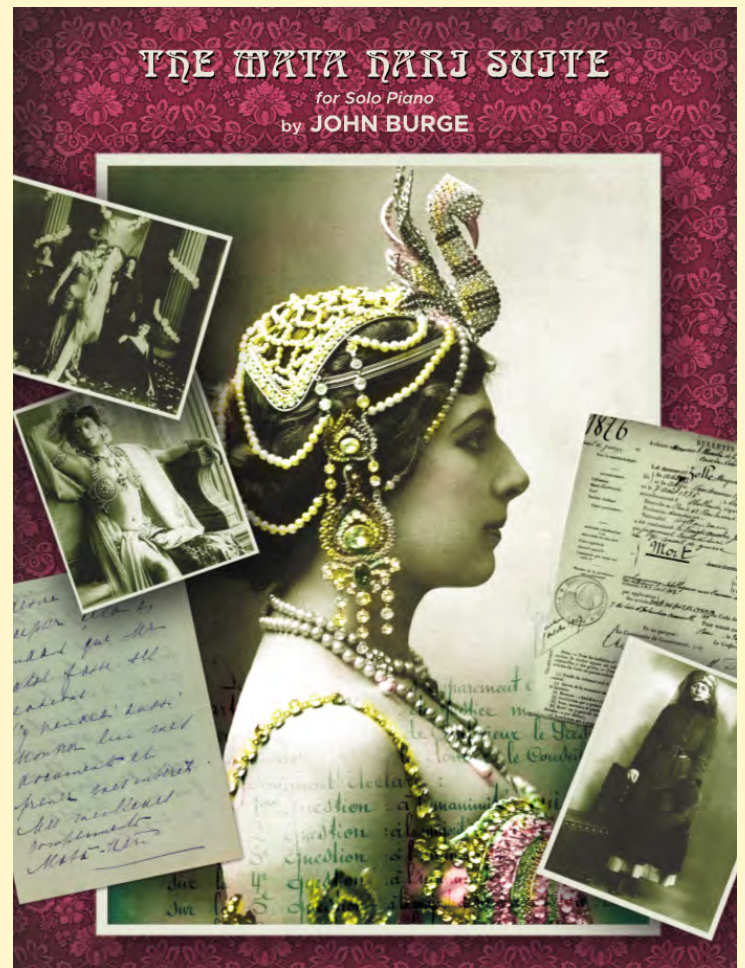
With its clear anchor in E Flat Major, this etude is certainly the most tonal composition of the series to date. The simple four-part counterpoint gives the entire opening twelve-bar theme a hymn-like quality. This theme is given a single variation treatment in the character of a Rachmaninoff-style elaboration that continually increases the technical and textural complexity, eventually ending in an expansive coda.

*Study in Poetry No. 9 – Dancing with the Moon* pays tribute to a poetry collection of the same title [Fox Editions: Kingston, Ontario, 1993] by Canadian poet, Linda Frewin. Linda Frewin (1961-1989) is probably unfamiliar to most people as this was her only book of poetry, published posthumously by her family and friends after her death at the age of 28.

The composer found this book in one of Kingston's many used bookstores and was drawn to the tenderness of the verse and the fact that the composer and poet shared the same year of birth and both ended up working at Queen's University. But for the unpredictability of fate, they might well have met as John Burge moved to Kingston a few years before Linda's death. This thought seems like a personal reminder to be thankful for the time we have been allotted.

The musical language of this etude captures the book's title in an extended exploration of waltz figures that stylistically connect a line from Chopin through Ravel to Burge. Typical of this kind of waltz, there is an introduction that serves as a "call to the dance floor". Additionally, the introduction harmonically prepares for the arrival of the main theme in A Flat Major, a theme that will continually reappear as a springboard for excursions that head off in different and unexpected directions.

Structured in a ternary design with a cascading coda, the more reflective quality of the middle section perhaps best mirrors the shimmer of a moonlit dance, but in the key of G Minor. As with most ABA compositions, it is the join to the final A section that generates the most tension, as the chromatic passages slide back to the key of A Flat Major. This struggle between the keys of G and A Flat generates much of the music's harmonic tension, often occurring simultaneously as heard in the last few bars.



*The Mata Hari Suite* [JBCComps-004: 2016] is a collection of six pieces written to provide background music to a one-woman, cabaret-style musical (with acting male pianist), titled, *One Last Night With Mata Hari*. Craig Walker researched and wrote the book and lyrics for the show with John Burge providing the music.

The overall style of the show's musical language emphasizes early 19th-century dance music and the piano suite, similar in character, even includes melodies that Mata Hari sings in the show. Two of the suite's movements have similarities to Volume 3 of *Studies in Poetry*. The suite ends with "The Abandoned Waltz", a similar dance pastiche to *Study in Poetry No. 9 – Dancing with the Moon*, and the suite's penultimate movement is titled, "Avec Amour", which presents a simple duet that is repeated with an elaborate variation, akin to the process followed in *Study in Poetry No. 8 – Anthem*.

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**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.**

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

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