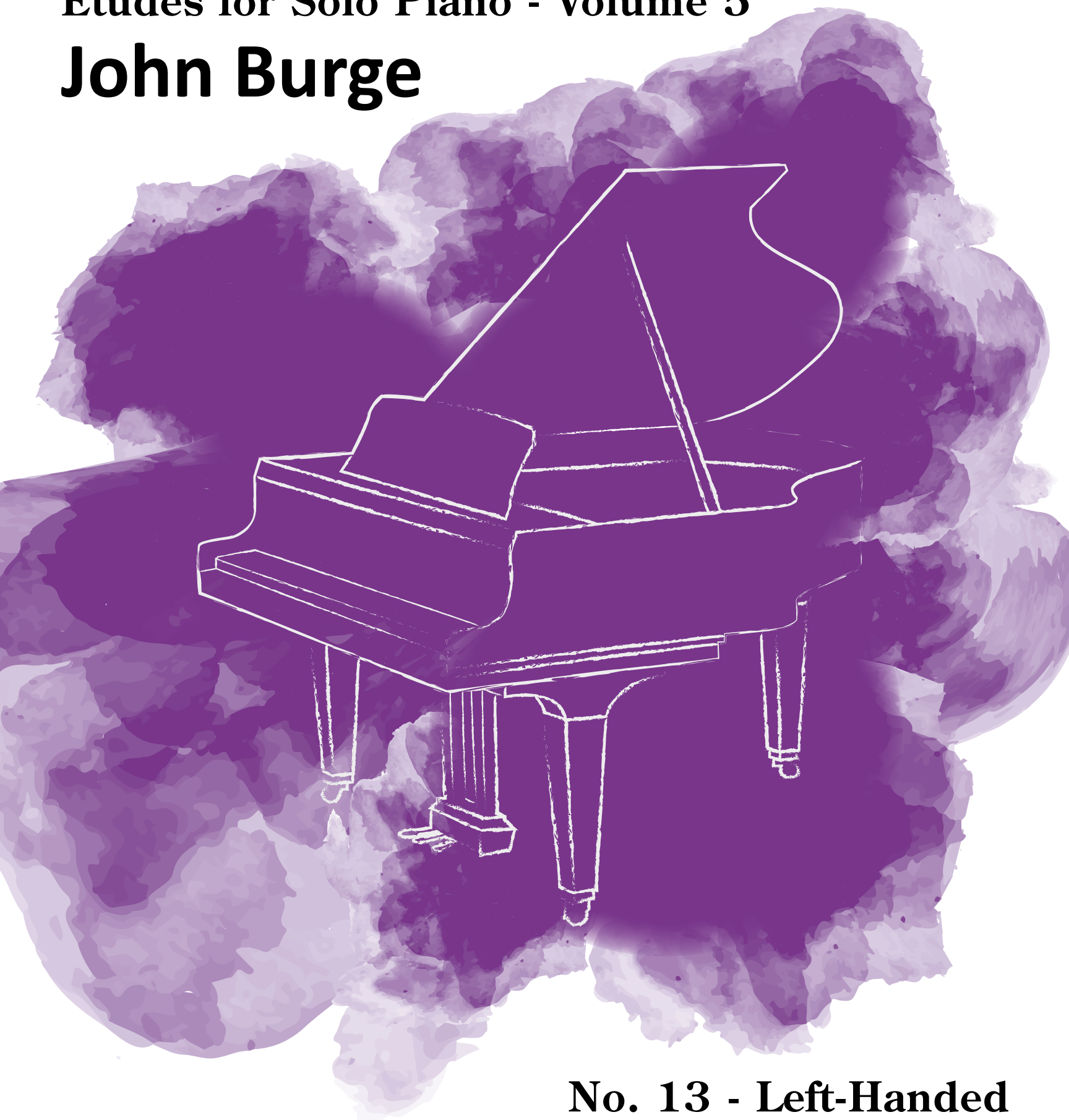


# ***STUDIES IN POETRY***

**Etudes for Solo Piano - Volume 5**

**John Burge**



**No. 13 - Left-Handed  
No. 14 - Ripple Effect  
No. 15 - Grief Sequence**

*Study in Poetry No. 13 – Left-Handed* was inspired by a book of poetry with the same title [Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 2012] written by the American poet Jonathan Galassi (b. 1949). For thirty years of his career he worked at Farrar, Straus & Giroux Publishers, where he held the positions of editor-in-chief, president, and publisher. In addition to his own three books of poetry, Galassi has also translated for publication the poetic works of Italian poets, Giacomo Leopardi and Eugenio Montale.

Galassi's poetry reveals a deep understanding and modern-day approach to classical verse. His sonnets are particularly impressive in this regard. His poems incorporating rhyme schemes, often reveal a clever imagination for originality and memorable turns of phrases. With specific regards to *Left-Handed*, the dust jacket is completely correct when it states, "These poems—decisive, wrenching, exquisite—show an overpowering force, at once disruptive and creative, invading a settled existence".

Because most people are right-handed and most piano pieces seem to place higher technical demands on the right hand, there are numerous piano pieces simply written for the left hand alone as a kind of opportunity to force the left hand to gain its own independent strength and control. As the first twelve *Studies in Poetry* form their own self-contained set given the systematic use of all twelve chromatic pitches as tonics for these pieces, *Study in Poetry No. 13 – Left-Handed*, starts the process all over again in C Major. The limitation of the pianist to just one hand, further emphasizes this break from the previous studies. This piece is quite monothematic in the way that the opening melody is continually repeated in different registers of the piano, always surrounded by ever changing textures. The damper pedal is often used to sustain low bass notes that provide harmonic support to the melodic line.

*Study in Poetry No. 14 – Ripple Effect* draws its subtitle from a poetry collection of the same title [Coffee House Press: Minneapolis, 2007] by the American poet, Elaine Equi (b. 1953). Since 1988 she has lived in New York City with her husband, poet Jerome Sala, teaching creative writing at City College and The New School.

This book was shortlisted for the International Griffin Poetry Prize in 2008 and is subtitled, "New and Selected Poems". With over 150 poems, the book is a superb introduction to Equi's unique brand of expansive minimalism, often generating an emotional response that lingers in the mind, long after putting the book down. "Etudes" is a particularly brilliant poem, revealing great craft and a true appreciation for the changing of the seasons. This poem is worth specifically mentioning given that the entire *Studies in Poetry* series is really a collection of concert etudes for solo piano.

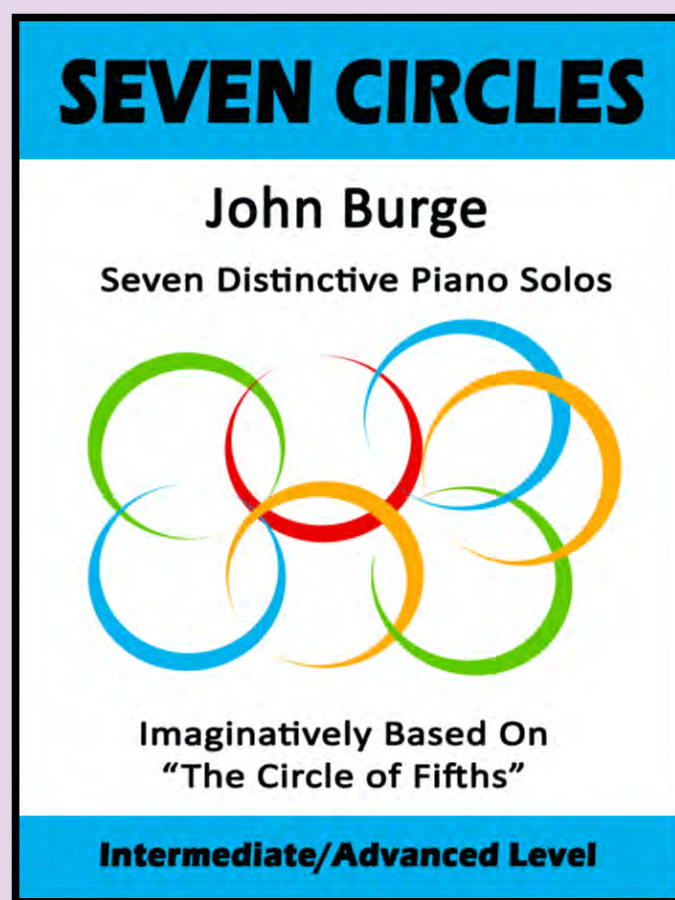
As a composition, *Ripple Effect* opens with four-note groupings of repeated sixteenth-note patterns, often moving in contrary motion in both hands. It should be easy to hear in these patterns an aural image of ripples moving outwards through water. The emphasis on a G tonic at the beginning, is balanced by a shift to a D pitch centre when this opening material returns after the more dramatic middle section. This middle section changes the opening sixteenth-note pattern to six-note groupings without really slowing the tempo down, a process that greatly increases the music's intensity. Further heightening the B section are the addition of chords climbing up the keyboard, while a melodic bass line presents a minor-tinged melody in octaves that constantly gets louder. After the reworking of the opening A section's return, the work ends with a coda that builds to a triumphant G Major conclusion — a more optimistic response to the angst heard in the middle portion of the piece.

*Study in Poetry No. 15 – Grief Sequence* pays tribute to a volume of poetry of the same title [Wave Books: United States of America, 2019] by the American poet, Prageeta Sharma (b. 1972). This must be one of the most moving books of poetry ever penned considering the ways it captures with vivid honesty, many deeply moving perspectives concerning the death of her husband, Dale Edwin Sherrard, in 2015, after his fight with esophageal cancer. Running throughout the book are many narrative-like poems that include the word “sequence” in their title. In an endnote, this word is given several definitions, but the two that resonate with particular appropriateness to this composition are “an extended series of poems united by a single theme”, and “a succession of repetitions of a melodic phrase or harmonic pattern, each in a new position”.

One of the most famous “sequences” in classical music is undoubtedly Johanne Sebastian Bach’s *Chaconne in D Minor* for solo violin, which also exists in very famous transcriptions for the piano by Brahms (left-hand alone) and Busoni. When hearing performances of all three versions, there is an overpowering sense of inevitability in the way that the harmonic progression keeps repeating while the single performer must deal with the difficulties of ever-increasing figuration and counterpoint.

The composition, *Grief Sequence*, certainly owes much to the Bach model, from the triple meter that emphasizes beat two, to the three-part design that shifts to a more reflective middle section in a major tonality. Additionally, both works share a prominent pitch center of “D” although the basic harmonic progression of *Grief Sequence* is often reinterpreted in different keys by adding accidentals to the notes of the repeated harmonic progression, at times even becoming quite polytonal or dissonant.

It is worth adding that this piece was composed and polished during 2021, while the composer was primarily isolating at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Playing and thinking about this piece every day became a kind of spiritual touchstone. One important characteristic of the piece is the way that additional bars are added to the basic harmonic progression until eventually reaching a climax in 4/4 time that explores chords beyond the overall harmonic design as a kind of climactic interjection. It is because of these expansions that the work stretches to 365 bars long which, matching with obvious numerical significance, the number of days in a year, reflects in miniature how enforced time spent alone can seem to last forever.



**SEVEN CIRCLES**

**John Burge**  
**Seven Distinctive Piano Solos**

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

**Intermediate/Advanced Level**

*Seven Circles*, for solo piano [JB-Comps 006], was composed at the same time as *Grief Sequence* but is much more optimistic in mood, and contains many pieces that are both shorter and easier to play than any of the *Studies in Poetry* compositions.

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by

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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.**

JBComps-011

ISMN: 979-0-706129-05-1



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

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