Eric (raven) PIECES FOR PIANISTS



Volume Two

PERFORMED AND REALISED BY

MARY DULLEA



Eric (raven) PIECES FOR PIANISTS

Volume Two (2017-19)

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MARY DULLEA

Total playing time: 60:48

THE MUSIC-

"In most cases, the meaning of a word is its use." Ludwig Wittgenstein's pointed observation on language might also serve as a cipher or, from one accommodating angle at least, as a motto for Eric Craven's *Pieces for Pianists*.

Note the title. Its matter of factness conceals the discretely radical agenda that threads through and binds together Craven's 50 variegated, concisely conceived, compactly executed miniatures. This second volume completes the multifaceted sequence with another compendium of 25 works, each as precisely meticulous and deliberately mercurial as its earlier siblings.

Part pedagogic, part philosophical, part purely musical in intent, they function as musical stepping stones that invite the pianist to regard each as a provocation for their own explorations, rather than as an obligation to intuit and express any authorial imperative of the composer's.

Craven's *Pieces for Pianists* are, literally, pieces for pianists, the composer willingly surrendering exclusive claim to authorial ownership in deference to the interpretative inclinations of the performer. In that alone they represent a radical addition to the piano repertoire. They also deliver a valuable bulwark and incitement to the encouragement of pianists to be more than the mere conduits of another's voice. Virtuosity here, however deftly disguised, lies not in the individuality of the composer's initial idea or in the performer's ability to realise it. Rather, it is in the communion between each, with both also acknowledging the role of the listener in determining the rightness of intent and execution in any interpretation.

The *Pieces for Pianists* function as invitations to the pianist to treat Craven's music as a starting point from which to set out – in whatever direction they feel drawn to travel – on their own individual journey, rather than to regard them as moving towards a prescribed destination along the trajectory of which various stopping-off points have already been plotted and locked in to the itinerary.

The only assumptions on Craven's part here are that his music is the beginning rather than the end of a dialogue, and that whatever meaning it accrues in performance derives from and belongs as much, if not more, to the instincts and abilities of the interpreter as to himself. In essence, the *Pieces* serve as concise, considered meditations on the relationships between a composer and his own music, between a performer and the music, and between the audience and the music as apparent simplicity gives way to camouflaged complexity. They are that rarest of examples, for want of a better analogy, of layers being added to a metaphorical onion, rather than being peeled away from it.

Actively seeking to overturn the inherited hierarchies between composer, artist and audience, Craven disguises such seditious aims with a craftsman's attention to detail and an artist's gift for melody. Perhaps his most striking conceit is to provide the pianist with a veritable *tabula rasa*, his scores deliberately omitting titles, key signatures, tempo marking, indications of pedalling, dynamics or any other controlling scripture, preferring instead to simply describe them as an incremental numerical sequence: Nos.1, 2, 3 and so on to No.50.

The result is both delightfully playful and intentionally provocative, inviting, encouraging, daring and, significantly, freeing the performer towards, as Mary Dullea noted in her introduction to Volume 1, "unravelling and building a narrative for your own piece". Happily, the intuitively simpatico Dullea returns to the piano for this second volume, Craven reunited with a musician securely equipped to negotiate and reconcile the defining tension between directness and difficulty in these exquisitely quixotic pieces.

All of the *Pieces for Pianists* are defined by Craven's signature notion of Non-Prescriptive Music, an heretical challenge to the primacy of the composer that assigns equal weight and importance to the role of the pianist. In that respect, the set is both crucible and catalyst. Carefully designed to "reward any pianist with even modest standards of ability with almost immediate success", it also provides the more advanced musician with incentives aplenty to explore the

base material provided as intuition and imagination dictates and technique allows.

There is another, more incendiary, agenda at work, too, one that incites the more accomplished pianist to take Craven at his word and accept his invitation to venture into territory located by the music but left deliberately unexplored and unchartered. To that end, it can claim some intellectual propinquity with Bach's *Goldberg* Variations and Schumann's *Album for the Young*, even as it betrays allegiances to Craven's coeval and like-minded contemporaries such as Howard Skempton, Arvo Pärt and La Monte Young, while, at several steps removed, courting the poetic eloquence and atmospheric elegance of earlier French Impressionists.

The provided route map twitches with all the multi-directional animation of a compass needle atop iron filings. Although Craven provides performers with multiple, open-ended options, he laces his seemingly conventional anchors (and what few signposts there are) with an alchemical mischievousness that incites, as much as it seeks to elicit, a deliberate response from the pianist.

To that end, and with Craven's base line of "any pianist with even modest standards of ability" always in mind, *Pieces for Pianists* frames each piece in what he describes as "low-order format".

"Which might sound formidable, but it really isn't. What it means is that for each piece the parameters of tempo, dynamics, phrasing, pedalling and instructions, re the articulation of the notes. are omitted from the scores."

Even the delineations of bars, Craven adds, "is solely for convenience, to facilitate reading rhythm in manageable bar lengths. They have no function as metric accentuation".

Which is not to imply some sort of anarchic free-for-all at the point of performance. As I wrote in the notes for Volume 1, "the central challenge Craven posits is not the absence of indicative markings, but the mirage-like appearance of the score as a blank canvas".

That illusion is underscored by his employment of two other sorcerer's elements in his Non-Prescriptive design: "middle order" and "higher order" formats. The former is characterised by short fragments of data – or "events" – that can be presented in either "low" or "higher" systems of notation. Each event serves as both an invitation and provocation to the performer to assemble their own structure from, and find their own journey through the available material.

"The events can be realised in any order and may be repeated, omitted or played partially. Together they constitute a sonic jigsaw of endless permutations."

The application of "higher order" is achieved by the stripping away of all defining parameters except for pitch. As before, it is posited on the notion of offering and accommodating whatever licence a performer may require in order to realise a particular piece in a particular moment. The result radically positions Craven not as the sole determinant of a performance, but, crucially, as the enabler of the performer.

It is pertinent to note Craven's fascination with science, particularly with the daunting scalic contrasts between the micro- and macro-perspectives of quantum physics and cosmological magnitude. Although it risks sounding glib to suggest that *Pieces for Pianists* is artfully positioned somewhere between the two polarities – ready to be pulled in either direction, towards the miniature or the massive, at the whim of the pianist – it is nonetheless a useful point from which to start.

Asked what he had learned as the first director of the deep-sky scanning radio telescope of the Jodrell Bank Observatory, the physicist Sir Bernard Lovell thought for a moment before replying "that we are all at the centre of immensities". A similar sentiment can be felt in the humility with which Craven marshals and manages the gravitational ebb and flow between the less and the more that laces, shapes and defines both the impetus and intent of *Pieces for Pianists*.

"If there is any reference in my Non-Prescriptive techniques to 'Difficult Science', I have always been inspired by the quantum phenomenon of Entanglement, where one particle reacts mysteriously, unpredictably, to a change in an entangled particle."

That fascination found its fullest expression in the Byzantine intricacies of Craven's *Entangled States* in 2018, a through the looking glass/over the event horizon experience, the 48 parts of which for solo piano (also available on Métier, performed by Dullea) chime with the intentions behind a much earlier experimentation in form.

"Bach in his 48 [Preludes and Fugues of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*] was trying to prove and establish something new. So was I."

But where that work was "the ultimate exploration" for Craven of his prescriptively Non-Prescriptive credo (a contradiction easily accommodated within the shape-shifting pluralities of quantum physics), *Pieces for Pianists* is decidedly less extreme in ambition and execution.

"I am of the opinion that it is quite easy to make art and many other things complex but so often little is gained by this siren-like temptation. But some of the pieces of Volume 2 are in several ways more complex than some of the first 25, which is frustrating as I was determined to apply my self-imposed discipline of simplicity."

The first Piece of Volume 2, No.1, picks up where Volume 1 left off with a questive, unresolved hint of what is to come. The held-over mood of uncertainty is ameliorated by a sweet, high-voiced four-note phrase offering the promise of release from, or into, another, less fraught mood or dimension. That it ultimately fractures into smaller elements, like a shooting star breaking up in the atmosphere before fading away into nothingness and silence, betrays a telling tone.

There's something of the plaintive fragility of Satie in No.2, a somewhat baleful, half-remembered echo of its predecessor cut adrift in a lonely, liquid landscape lit up by far-off night stars. Already, we are "at the centre of immensities."

No surprise then to find more than a hint of vertigo in No.3, a peristaltic attempt to regain some semblance of equilibrium, its delirium an urgent reminder to the pianist that it is they who are in control. No.4 foregrounds technique in a deft sleight of hand even as it tempts individuality of expression with now pointillist, now elasticated collisions of notes and phrases – like sub-atomic particles fusing and forming into waves of latent energy.

A semblance of balance is reached in No.5, although its surface tranquillity is stretched and tested by Craven's subtle urging on of the pianist. If in Nos.6 and 7 the composer is more conciliatory in requiring less of the pianist – a moment to gather thoughts and assimilate what has been before – No.8 suggests it is time to move on. Couched in diaphanously held pedal notes, it seems a moment on the cusp of revelation.

The short, staggering steps in uncertain, ever-changing directions of No.9 suggests the attraction of one particle to another, strong enough to register but too weak to connect, ultimately sparking into non-existence. An emptiness out of which No.10 brightly emerges to perform a quantum ballet of dancing, darting figures, colliding and ricocheting off each other in gracefully negotiated entanglement.

Energy exhausted, forces conjoined, No.11 stumbles into the inscrutable realm of dark matter and hidden pulsars in a gnomic *pas de deux* between left- and right-hand spurred by Craven's minimalist coaxing of the pianist towards something altogether larger and grander.

If No.12 hints at such, whatever bonds that do form just as readily fracture and break to leave the impression of something phasing in and out of definition before finding sweetly fleeting resolution as all evaporates into silence. Sometimes, it seems, entanglement can lead to less as well as more.

On the cusping, mid-way point of this second volume, No.13 boldly strikes out into new, unpredictable territory as if a foreign, helter-skelter particle has suddenly entered the orbit of another more sedate element. One can almost feel Craven urging on the pianist to ever more atomised extremes.

And suddenly, with quantum abruptness, we are in a different universe in No.14, one unexpectedly inhabited by the ghost of a waltz and the spirits of the salon but rendered with an lyrical economy of expression. Even so, its latent kinetic energy is sufficient to warm and invigorate the bubbling right-hand and dyspeptically punctuating left-hand of No.15 that metamorphoses into a less strained, more mutually adaptive dialogue in No.16.

A more poetic realm is encountered in No.17, a gently hallucinogenic musing on the possibility of particles combining to create something more than the sum of themselves; a brief, lyrically-accented respite hinting at the promise of order even in the quantum world.

No.18 strays further into the paradox of endless possibilities, Craven's Non-Prescriptiveness readily flexing and bending to allow for a moment of (relatively) uncomplicated accord between composer and pianist.

It's worth drawing attention to the occasionally extended pauses between several pieces in this second volume, the periodic moments of silence and stasis serving as punctuation marks separating sudden shifts of mood or perspective. Or, in the instance of No.19, an equally sudden evolutionary progress in which discernible form begins to accrue, particles forming around themselves into rolling waves to create something altogether new. Here, in the most unpredictable of environments, Craven can be found aligning himself most closely with the pianist.

Quantum relativity and Craven's Non-Prescriptive procedures being what they are, No.20 abruptly transports us away from the increasingly interior, reductively self-defining realm of its immediate predecessors to posit the possibility of a less corralled, more free existence, however butterfly-brief it might be.

If No.21 is a fractured lullaby, a lilting longing for resolution all too cognisant of its own slender mortality, and No.22 a lovelorn lament for the inevitability of entropy, No.23 adroitly changes gear; a green shoot after winter barrenness, a sudden flaring of embers into flame. No.24 bristles with its new-found, if short-lived energy, the quantum world simultaneously lasting an eternity and extinguishing itself in the moment. And even as the concluding No.25 coalesces around clusters of notes like filaments fusing into fleeting form, synaptic triggers firing into pirouetting skeins of melody, it, too, comes to a restive halt and silence.

At journey's end of the two volumes, much has been explored in a landscape defined by constantly mutating forms flickering in and out of life, variously leaving no trace of what has been or alerting the pianist to new possibilities and other dimensions. In that respect, the series of paradigmatic shifts – as unpredictable as anything in quantum physics – that are the *Pieces for Pianists* can be seen as a Rabelaisian quest on Craven's part "going in search of the great perhaps" of a new metric and model for how composer and pianist respond to each other.

"I have delved into the genre called The New Complexity and I ask 'Why?' Through simplicity I find truth, I discover the very essence of what I am attempting to say. Therein is a valuable transparency, a nakedness. There is nothing to hide behind."

Taped on the door of Craven's home studio – revealingly dubbed "The Struggle" – are "wonderful, simple mathematical equations that represent the distillation of years of exploration, of research, of testing by the most brilliant contemporary scientific minds. These unfailingly inspire me to try to emulate these pathways of lucidity."

If *Pieces for Pianists* achieve any semblance of that desired lucidity, it is in their kinship with the assertion by Craven's most revered fellow traveller, the American theoretical physicist Richard Feynman, "I a universe of atoms, an atom in the universe".

AN APPRECIATION

What a treat that Eric has titled this new piano collection 'Pieces for Pianists'. It is open-ended, non-hierarchical, inclusive and, commensurate with his approaches to non-prescriptive notation. It presents simply that – pieces to be played on the piano.

Having worked on Eric's music and notation for many years now, deciphering and divining my own realisations, this collection is one that is intended to be welcoming, stimulating and will prove endlessly rewarding. Previous works of Eric's, such as the sonatas, have involved the construction of enormous structures, and these universes allow for the most miniscule of detail within. The thrill and focus is experienced in how your eye is drawn across the pages, the narratives you create as you become more and more familiar with the designs and the data (because it is information!) on the scores.

But these short pieces are assembled in such a way that, upon familiarity and experimentation, it will be revealed that they gently increase in difficulty as the volume progresses, and within a few pages each.

Now, what might those difficulties be? Is that difficulty the 'amount' of notes or the geographical topography of the keyboard? Answers to these questions are to be found while spending time with them. There might well be a 'realisation' (meaning performed version) that you more or less fix upon or arrive at but within that are the explored parameters of tempo, articulation, dynamic, textural voicing, pedalling and phrasing. And these grow and evolve with practice. In forging a familiarity with the notes on the page, and the decisions taken after much experimentation, your realisations might well combine with previous playing experiences; music heard, music remembered and clues uncovered that unlock a strong possibility for your own path with a piece.

There isn't a right or a wrong way to do this. And how rewarding this process indeed is when you appreciate and recognise a growing confidence in decision-making, improvisation processes and working within the temporal limits of duration. This duration is not only how 'long' a piece is to last but also intersects with the point reached in more conventionally notated music where you might have decided that it has been 'learnt' and 'rehearsed' adequately in order to have confidence in your 'interpretation'.

So these pieces, as well as being full of character and quirks, can realise connections with keyboard literature and styles that are up to you to discern and follow, if you so choose, and allow you to truly evaluate your reading and practising processes and your development as a reflective-practitioner. Realising a notation which only provides pitch and rhythm in the most evident sense allows you opportunities to enrich your experiences, your understanding of your creative processes and your confidence in making decisions, from articulation through to pedalling.

What I hope will be of particular interest for all pianists here, is the opportunity to really discover more about your connections with music and fluidity at the keyboard, as you go many steps further in making all sorts of decisions for yourself. What you see on the page is freed of other notational information so you should, for example try a passage; with and without pedal; fast, slow or in between; legato or staccato, and so on. If you then hear hints of Prokofiev or Ravel, Bach or Bill Evans in your realisation, it is not pastiche; it is unravelling and building a narrative for your own piece.

Go and unlock your own musical past, and future.

MARY DULLEA

As soloist and chamber musician, Irish pianist Mary Dullea leads a diverse performance career internationally. Her frequent broadcasts include BBC Radio 3, Radio 4, RTHK, RTÉ Lyric FM, WQXR, Radio New Zealand and Sky Arts, Irish, French, Austrian and Italian television. Concerto appearances include RTÉ Concert Orchestra, RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra and KZN Philharmonic Orchestra. Mary's CD recordings include releases on labels such as NMC, Delphian Records, Resonus Classics, Altarus, Col Legno, MNR, Naxos, Lorelt and Divine Art/Métier. Recent collaborations include premiere recordings of Philip Glass for Orange Mountain Music, Kevin Volans Piano Trio No. 3 Le Tombeau des Regrets, a second instalment of French piano trios for Resonus Classics, a Gerald Barry portrait CD of solo piano and chamber music and her most recent Métier release, a program of music by Iranian composers Farhat and Tafreshipour.

A sought-after interpreter of new music, Mary's expansive repertoire covers the standard piano literature as well as an ever-increasing amount of 20th- and 21st- century compositions, many of which are dedicated to her. Her piano trio, Fidelio Trio, are passionate advocates for piano trio repertoire around the world. They were shortlisted for the Royal Philharmonic Society Awards Ensemble Prize and have been Gramophone Magazine Editor's Choice for their recordings. The trio have appeared at prestigious venues around the globe including Shanghai Oriental Arts Centre, Wigmore Hall, Purcell Room Southbank Centre, Casa da Musica Porto, Morrison Artist Series San Francisco, Andy Warhol Museum Pittsburgh, National Centre for Performing Arts Mumbai, Beijing Modern Music Festival, National Concert Hall Dublin, Kilkenny Arts Festival, Brighton Festival, Cheltenham Festival and Gümüşlük International Classical Music Festival. They have collaborated with actor Adrian Dunbar, writer Alexander McCall-Smith and poet Sinead Morrissey. Constantly commissioning new works, composers that the Trio have worked closely with include Johannes

Maria Staud, Donnacha Dennehy, Joe Cutler, Judith Weir, Piers Hellawell, Ann Cleare and Charles Wuorinen, to name but a few.

Mary was the curator of 'Soundings' (an annual UK/Austrian collaborative new music festival) at the Austrian Cultural Forum London from 2008 to 2016. She has served on the jury of 'Schubert und die Musik der Moderne' International Chamber Music Competition in Graz, Austria. In 2014 she founded 'Chamber Music on Valentia' an annual chamber music festival in Co. Kerry, Ireland, with the aim of bringing chamber music performances of international standing, innovative programming and outreach and engagement programmes to this unique place.

Mary's own studies were at The Royal College of Music, London on the Edith Best Scholarship, Goldsmiths, University of London (M.Mus in Contemporary Music Studies) and her Ph.D in Performance is from Ulster University. Mary was on the piano faculty of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama for 9 years. She previously held the position of Director of Performance at the University of Sheffield and since 2015 she has held this position at Royal Holloway, University of London where she is also Reader in Music.

www.marydullea.com

More recordings by Mary Dullea from Métier include:

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and several recordings with the Fidelio Trio.

ERIC CRAVEN

In the March 2013 edition of *The Wire* Philip Clark includes Eric Craven in an article titled "Composers Anonymous". At that time, he might just as well have added "invisible" to that title. Eric had left very little musical footprint and in his introvert modesty still offers little history, other than he taught music and mathematics in secondary schools in his home town of Manchester. He has composed music since his teenage years but, until recently, rarely sought to introduce his music to a wider audience either through performance or publication. His preference has always been to work in isolation without reference to or connection with any other musicians. In the September 2015 issue of *Gramophone*, Philip Clark gave more than equal consideration to Craven in an article which discusses new ways and innovations by Wolff, Feldman and Finnissy.

In 2011, the late and deeply missed Anthony Goldstone, who had kept in touch with Eric since their college days, introduced him to me and after some encouragement and the addition of magic by Mary Dullea, the first album of Craven's music, SET for piano, was released on Métier, followed in 2014 by a recital of three piano sonatas – to substantial critical praise – and another brilliant and inspired cycle, Entangled States.

For many years, as Michael Quinn describes in his essay, Eric has exclusively focused his attention upon the development of the compositional and performance techniques associated with his Non-Prescriptive style of music which, in essence, seeks to realign the relationship between composer and performer. This new collection of *Pieces*, like *SET* and *Entangled States*, reflects Eric Craven's fascination, which I share, for the wonders of modern quantum physics and its related theories about the underlying and very weird nature of existence – in which he sees a parallel to the relationship between composer and performer. Introvert he may be but his music is the opposite, clear and understandable, bold and extrovert.

Stephen Sutton, CEO, Divine Art Recordings Group

THE COVER ART

It was my final day at a school sited among the tree lined avenues of Wythenshawe. It was my final school assembly. I was leaving bound for greener more elysian pastures. For two years at the behest of the headmaster – a man of conviction – I had sat at a piano and played quiet, introspective rather dull music while the school gathered. But not today. The assembled school and staff were startled by my hammering frenetically, playing loud strident shouty music. Cacophony filled the hall. Soon both pupils and staff were laughing and cheering.

Several hours later Alwyn Eggington, the Art teacher, presented me with a wonderful sketch which fully caught the moment.

Decades later Peter Vodden, my chum, has worked on that original sketch. He has got rid of much of the original picture, including the headmaster's head with a speech bubble saying "Thank you Mr. Craven, that's just what we need to start the day" and has added some colour.

Eric Craven

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PIECES FOR PIANISTS vol. 1



Métier MSV 28601

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Musical Opinion



Piano Sonatas 7, 8 & 9 MSV 28544 "Fascinating & captivating" The Classical Reviewer



Entangled States MSV 28571 "Vital & Delightful" Fanfare

The score of *Pieces for Pianists vol. 2* is available as a PDF download from the Divine Art website (catalogue number EDN 80021) and PDF or print from Naxos Sheet Music Publishing. (Volume 1: EDN 80020)



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