



ERIC CRAVEN

SET TWO FOR PIANO

Performed and Realised by
MARY DULLEA, piano

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DISC A

1. ONE	12:39
2. TWO	14:11
3. THREE	8:23
4. FOUR	8:35
5. FIVE	8:38
6. SIX	11:26

Total Playing Time 63:57

DISC B

1. SEVEN	7:58
2. EIGHT	9:29
3. NINE (A)	11:24
4. NINE (B)	8:59
5. TEN	8:54
6. ELEVEN	13:41
7. TWELVE	7:42

Total playing time 68:13

AT THE EDGE OF THE SCORE

Realising Craven's Set Two for Piano

by Mary Dullea

My collaborations and journey of discovery with Eric Craven began through his (first) Set for Piano in 2011, followed by a much larger scale project in 2013 of Sonatas 7, 8 and 9. The realisation (Eric's favoured term) of Sonata No. 8 resulted in an almost 50-minute, one-movement work, realised from his middle-order non-prescriptive notation. *Entangled States* recorded in 2017 is a set of forty-eight pieces ranging from less than one minute to three and a half minutes in duration of low-, middle- and high-order scores, with two realisations of all the middle- and high-order scores. *Pieces for Pianists* recorded in 2019 is a collection of pieces intended to present more immediately accessible scores to a wider audience of pianists. And here we are, in what feels like a full circle, with this Set Two for Piano which we recorded in 2025.

This world of non-prescriptive notation that Eric has made his artistic quest for many years has been a journey for me too, in its many forms and resultant performances. My agency as the performer has been put right at the centre, developing approaches to practice, constant questioning and riding a wave of perpetual interaction with the notation that he has 'non' prescribed at various levels. These scores are the starting point of the process for me but the product of many years of distillation for him. I then spend the time absorbing the 'data' (again a preferred term of Eric's) visually and at the piano: I have to continually evaluate the preparation and practice strategies I employ; I need to be open to how my own performance history is tapped into, questioning if a hidden reference (to something pre-existent) is what I actually want or even if it is something that Eric has codified, when something sounds just a little familiar yet different; I need to feel all this in an embodied sense as well as embedded in my own performance history. Each project can create varying levels of anticipation too as there is a day when the recording must be made with that version of the piece committed to a presence in the world for others to hear! Essentially I am pushed to make decisions about the performances at every moment; one might say that this is part of the spontaneity of the act of performance anyway but what is particular to this is that, apart from pitches and rhythms if present in low-order passages or entire pieces, I always have the choice to do something else. So, the journey from first receiving a score to defining one interpretation is a combination of experimentation and control.

Eric's own definition of low-, middle- and high-order non-prescriptive notation refers to the level of non-prescription with which he presents the score: low-order referring

to music that appears with pitch and rhythm plus bar-lines; high-order is only pitches; and middle-order somewhere in between. There are no other details such as tempo, time-signatures, dynamics, articulation, character, or duration. As respected writers have so lucidly detailed in the liner notes for previous albums, Eric's own musical history (into which he allows us some glimpses when, for example, describing the wonderful genesis for the cover art work on *Pieces for Pianists*) is one that has core piano repertoire under the fingers, a backbone of jazz and a thirst for pushing experimental boundaries. Bringing these echoes of piano 'histories' together with his strivings for development and distillation mean that, regardless of the 'order', every pitch on the page is part of the identity of that work. This new Set Two for Piano offers pieces that are more expansive, taking their time (but not too much) for the pianist to truly travel through the essences of the ideas. It feels as though the exploratory parameters take that element into account more obviously and there are little memories of other moments from other pieces in this Set dotted around. Again, it is up to me whether or how to lean into these clues that he offers, to keep pushing and ride that wave of instinct and control.

Having worked with Eric for many years now on this repertoire I have learnt so much through the experiences of realising his music. From the preparation phases right through to complete performances of high-order works where form and structure become paramount. And where does this construction of structure come from? Again, instinct and/or control? I often wonder. I can of course, as can most listeners, discern some influences, be it in the use of certain intervals (almost like a 'study') or in the implications of some harmonies, or the textural writing. But I also have kernels of information around Eric's interests in subjects such as quantum theory (one such phenomenon being of particles reacting to each others' changed state at whatever distance apart, and thinking about humans' brains acting as mechanisms for this 'Entanglement' when composing *Entangled States*) and there is of course his own musical history. How much I might or might not consider these elements of his compositional voice is up to me and that is one of the most rewarding and constantly challenging aspects of bringing this music to life. This paring away and as already mentioned, distillation, of the material presented to the pianist hands one both freedom and a sense of responsibility, to oneself and the instrument that is mine and Eric's, the piano.

Each piece in Set Two for Piano is plainly numbered ONE, TWO, etc. and the Set begins with a toccata-like study in fourths, thematic material that keeps reappearing during the piece, sometimes given more scope than at others. There are extensive passages that are hearkening more to Eric's jazz harmonies as well as some wonderfully serene

moments of contrast. The coda brings all these elements together with a more rhapsodic and questioning finish.

TWO demands that we listen immediately to two voices that are slowly emerging but instantly gripping in a purity of material that becomes the kernel of the entire piece with the opening fifth and falling second in the right hand. A piece with extremely long phrases, there is an honest beauty to the first few phrases that set the tone. That is not to say that this almost 15-minute duration does not also have phrases of depth and deep chordal sonority. And the end brings us the opening material, fully recognisable but transformed somehow.

THREE opens boldly and perhaps a little enigmatically. Yet when following through the energy of this piece, that opening motif again forms the basis for so much of the material, in the contour of the phrases. This is interspersed with passages exploring pairs of chords, an idea with which it returns to finish.

FOUR has a more lilting feel to its opening, similar to TWO with single notes in its two parts, and with an ebb to the varying bar lengths. This rather gentle opening does not necessarily prepare one for how the movement proceeds with long episodes exploring registers of the instrument as well as more improvisatory 'solo' sounding sections. The little semiquaver four-note motif at the end of the first long phrase proves its potential for development and indeed makes the finishing gesture.

FIVE is almost at the centre of the Set, presenting a high-order notation movement. The score consists of six pages of pitches, in single notes, dyads, chords, octaves; carefully distilled material for the performer to treat with no adherence to rules.

SIX opens with a wrought tension in the sonority, and the main thematic idea of chords composed of major triads in the right hand juxtaposed with minor seconds in the left. There are perhaps three ideas in this piece, which is contemplative as well as exploratory.

SEVEN brings more of the obvious piano lexicon that Eric likes to exploit to the fore, most noticeable here in the persistent presence of octaves. Another movement that is buoyant but explores the opening right and left hand elements to full depth. And not unlike FOUR we are also taken on short diversions but never straying too far.

By the time we reach EIGHT there are perhaps a few more memories or hints of ideas from other music heard up to this point which peek out at us. Recognisable in the scale

like motifs heard at more expansive tempi, a more obvious enjoyment of sonorous chords and at just over the halfway point where we think it might end we hear that little rising four note motif. But we are instead taken back to what sounds like the beginning again, for another viewing through a turn of the kaleidoscope.

NINE presents the middle-order non-prescriptive piece in the Set and what jumps off the page here is the suggestion of some held notes, simply indicated with arrows. They are not specific directions and can indeed be implied harmony, pedal notes, drones, bass sonorities. But that apparently simple suggestion appearing to greater and lesser extents on nine of the ten pages adds another dimension to the realisation. On this recording there are two versions, recorded in succession; having recorded the first realisation, I wanted to immediately do another, different one, as absolutely can be the case in these intense and concentrated performances.

TEN is not dissimilar to EIGHT in sounding a little familiar but one is not entirely sure why at the very outset.

ELEVEN is a substantial reading of almost fourteen minutes, again with a backbone of intense, almost Messiaen-like chords. This intensity is offset with more lyrical and introspective music too. Its expansiveness as the penultimate piece feels necessary for reflection and absorption before the jaunty waltz that is TWELVE. And crafted into this finale are melodic and harmonic elements from previous pieces but hardly ever diverting from the feel and swagger of the waltz throughout. Full of joy and exuberance, the carefree abandon of this final piece is both liberating and conclusive.

Set Two for Piano is a collection of pieces that stands testament to Eric Craven's long-term commitment to the interrogation and refinement of his non-prescriptive techniques of notation, and positioning that notation on a frontier for the performer that is probably quite unlike anything one would otherwise play from. But this does not imply that his experimentation and work is finished or unchanging. It is a two-way conduit between composer and performer and every project channels new territory. This most recent Set offers twelve pieces of not insignificant length. There is a confidence to this occupation of time, in each piece and in the subtle cross referencing between pieces as the Set progresses. The scale of each piece allows and encourages the pianist to also take their time in working with the 'data', sculpting the lower-order constructs and taking the opportunity to put these particular explorations of high- and middle-order pieces right at the centre of the journey that is this Set Two for Piano.

ERIC CRAVEN

COMPOSER

Manchester born Eric Craven has left little musical footprint. He has composed since his teenage years but has rarely sought to introduce his music to a wider audience through performance or publication.

His initial album, a cycle of pieces, "SET", was recorded only after Craven was persuaded by leading/eminent pianists to make his work available.

He does, however, maintain a blog hosted by Wordpress which is included in a compilation of the "20 Best Music Composition Blogs and News Websites in 2025" by FeedSpot. The blog also chronicles his eventual successful treatment for cancer and a thrilling adventurous high altitude flight as a microlight pilot.

Amongst the many reviews of his works are the following:

Fanfare: "a wealth of intriguing stimulating and inspired music making by both Craven and Dullea" who Craven refers to as his "long time advocate and collaborator".

American Record Guide: "the result of this artistic input from these two musicians (Craven and Dullea) is of true artistic alchemy".

MusicWeb International, reviewing Entangled States: "like having cocktails with Bill Evans, Count Basie, Claude Debussy and Igor Stravinsky".

In The Journal of Music, Michael Quinn finds "allegiances to Craven's coeval and like minded contemporaries such as Skempton, Ave, Part and La Monte Young".

Stephen Sutton, former C.E.O. emeritus of Divine Art Records: "his Non-Prescriptive compositional technique is not like any other aleatory system...Craven deserves to be feted as one of the most individual and creative composers of the day".

MARY DULLEA

PIANO

As soloist and chamber musician, Irish pianist Mary Dullea leads a diverse performance career internationally. She has appeared at prestigious venues around the globe such as: Wigmore Hall, Shanghai Oriental Art Center, Hong Kong Chamber Music Society; cities including Singapore, Bangkok, Porto, Paris, Venice, Florence, Johannesburg, Harare, New York City, San Francisco and Boston; and at festivals including Beijing Modern Music Festival, Spitalfields, Cheltenham, St. Magnus, Huddersfield and TRANSIT (Leuven). Recent appearances include *Dark Music Days* Iceland, an extensive USA tour including *National Sawdust* Brooklyn and *Music on the Edge* Pittsburgh, Cayman International Arts Festival and Little Missenden Festival. She is broadcast frequently on BBC Radio 3, RTÉ Lyric FM and WQXR. Concerto appearances include RTÉ Concert Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland and KZN Philharmonic Orchestra. Mary's CD releases feature on labels 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, a double CD release of John McLachlan's solo piano output on Farpoint Recordings and with her piano trio, Fidelio Trio, a Gerald Barry portrait CD of premiere recordings on Mode Records and Chamber Music by Ernest Moeran on Resonus Classics which was Gramophone Magazine's Editor's and Critics' Choice for 2022. She has collaborated with Eric Craven for many years, with a number of releases on Divine Art Métier.

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 awarded Gramophone Magazine Editor's Choice for several of their recordings. Constantly commissioning new works, composers with whom the Trio have worked closely include Anna Clyne, Donnacha Dennehy, Joe Cutler, Judith Weir, Piers Hellawell, Ann Cleare, Richard Causton, Kevin Volans, Linda Buckley and Gerald Barry to name but a few.

Mary is the curator of Soundings (an annual UK/Austrian collaborative music festival) at the Austrian Cultural Forum London since 2008. 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. She has given masterclasses at Peabody

Conservatory, Curtis Institute, NYU, Central Conservatory Beijing, and Stellenbosch Conservatorium South Africa. She has been artist-in-residence at University of Iowa, St. Patrick's College Dublin City University, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, the State University of New York and Tufts University, Boston.

Mary was on the piano faculty of Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama for 9 years. She has previously held the position of Director of Performance at University of Sheffield and since 2015 she has held this position at Royal Holloway, University of London where she is also a Professor in Music.

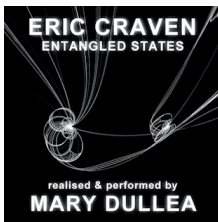
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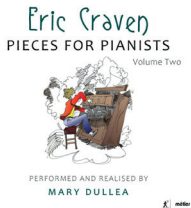
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Mary Dullea, piano
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**Eric Craven:
Piano Sonatas 7, 8 & 9**
Mary Dullea, piano
MSV 28544

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