

THE BELL ÉTUDES

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|-----|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. | Lilt | <i>for a quiet ostinato</i> |
| 2. | Sharp Focus | <i>for canons</i> |
| 3. | Wide Bells | <i>for contrasting material</i> |
| 4. | Crosswise | <i>for interlocking hands</i> |
| 5. | Sarabande | <i>for an idée fixe</i> |
| 6. | Far but More Space | <i>for a descending line</i> |
| 7. | Big B Energy | <i>for a drone</i> |
| 8. | Teacher-Student | <i>for educational purposes</i> |
| 9. | Oxford, April 2019 | <i>for a constant texture</i> |
| 10. | Now Honey | <i>for clef-reading</i> |
| 11. | Close Bells | <i>for voicing</i> |
| 12. | Berceuse | <i>for delicate accents</i> |
| 13. | In Equal Measure | <i>for opposite materials</i> |
| 14. | If All Thi Body Be Bryt | <i>for perpetual motion</i> |

[General performance notes here]

[Although each movement can be played individually or programmed in any combination or context, the relationship between N°1 and N°14 is such that a performance of N°14 without N°1 might leave the listener without context.]

The Bell Études is a set of fourteen short pieces for solo piano. Each one has a technical function, something to be worked out and fussed over. As a set, the études have a shared set of large-scale musical references, all the result of long conversations with Conor Hanick, their dedicatee. I kept a running list of things we both liked, and it started to function as a giant shopping list for the études — “inner voices” was underlined, “Britten sea interludes” thrice underlined, emphatically; “Messiaen” circled, but then struck-through (I could never compete!), and so on.

I wanted to write music which has a specific pedagogic function, but whose reference points are broader and more abstract. For instance, a sense of chiming, tolling, and crystalline chords pervades the set, whence comes the title; a few imply specific physical movement (*Sarabande*, *Berceuse*), and others are heavily specific about what techniques they’ll challenge (*Wide Bells*).

N° 1, *Lilt*, is the simplest of the set. A rising fourth (F to B-flat) appears in each bar of the piece save the final bar; the interpreter’s job is to make this line distinct, ever-present, but never unwelcome, like a distant lighthouse spinning. Keeping the chorale-like inner voices smooth requires precisely calibrated voicing.

N°2, *Sharp Focus*, is a two-layered image moving in and out of focus. It consists of very fast and jagged patterns, sometimes played in unison between the hands, and sometimes displaced by just a fraction of a second. After a short middle section alternating between little motivic fragments and jagged chords, it ends with a rapid reiteration of the original canons.

N° 3, *Wide Bells*, is all to do with chiming and ringing. The consistency of the bells is undercut by abstracted birdsong, and towards the end, a cacophonous peal.

N° 4, *Crosswise*, is a perpetual-motion machine with shifting pulses and upside-down hand positions. It's often unclear where the "real" downbeats of the piece occur, a result of the criss-crossed hands playing displaced figurations where up is down and down is up.

N° 5, *Sarabande*, does what it says on the tin; it's a little dance piece in triple meter with a slight stress on the second beat. This dance has its occasional hiccoughs though; a bar of three is truncated, a fleeting asymmetrical accent, or barely concealed stumble.

N° 6, *Far but More Space* asks the pianist to follow a descending chromatic scale through a thicket of polyrhythms. The result should be both obviously linear and intensely stylised.

N° 7, *Big B Energy*, is a meditation on a single pitch: a loud, tolling B. This pitch shades and antagonises and resolves the stately chorale around it, which requires the pianist to maintain several metric and dynamic contours simultaneously.

N° 8, *Teacher/Student*, is designed for the parts to be played by any two individuals who have, have had, or will have a pedagogical relationship to one another. It does not matter who plays which part, as the meter, asymmetrical stresses, phantom downbeats, and interlocking rhythms require a mutual trust between players bordering on telepathic coordination. Occasional phrases nod to Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*.

N° 9, *Oxford, April 2019* is a meditation on an accidental photographic detail; I was trying to capture a particularly fabulous clerestory window in Oxford, and it was a moment when chapel-bells were being rung to indicate the start of evensong — with chapels starting at various intervals between 5:30 and 6:30. I inadvertently took a picture of a choral scholar, clearly about to be late, sprinting down the road so quickly that he appears to be levitating. I love how there is something incredibly fast and also quite static about the image, and this étude reacts to the stillness of this environment in the early evening, with the vague sense of choral music always just out of earshot.

N° 10, *Now Honey*, is dedicated to the memory of Mary Anthony Cox, the legendary aural skills teacher at Juilliard between 1964 and 2013 who taught me, Conor, and countless other musicians. Even though she deployed the friendly and disarming Southern affectation of calling everybody "honey," she was also terrifying, hilarious, and oddly formal. Whilst her methods in the classroom might register now as extreme, or at least bizarre, not a day goes by that I don't think about something she said, a sentiment shared by many of my colleagues. One of the harder exercises featured in her class was clef-reading from

a textbook by Georges Dandelot, the French pedagogue. In this study, his melody is luxuriously slowed down and turned into a *cantus firmus*. If you can't read mezzo-soprano clef, figure it out, honey.

N° 11, *Close Bells*, is a study in harmony and voicing, which is to say, the pianist must apply a specific system of weights and measures to the notes of each chord. The harmony is dense and the player must make a sort of narrative shape of the piece. The composer, in this case, has been purposefully unhelpful, as the score is rather unadorned save for some simple dynamics.

N° 12, *Berceuse*, is a cradle-song. The “rocking” gesture is often disrupted through bell-like *pings* — almost like a smoke alarm nearly out of batteries — or through small rhythmic displacements. Here, the hierarchy of musical information is the challenge: keeping the fundamental feel of the rocking movement whilst maintaining the distinct characteristics of the other material.

N° 13, *In Equal Measure*, is about energy management — I was thinking about doing a project with musicians in New York, Los Angeles, and Sydney and how very different our moods were throughout the day; morning for some, evening for others, middle of the night for the rest. The piece alternates between kinetic material, which takes advantage of the entire range of the keyboard, and slower material, built around widely-spaced tenths in the left hand. The piece alternates between kinetic material which takes advantage of the entire range of the keyboard, and slower material, built around widely-spaced tenths in the left hand.

N° 14, *If All Thi Body be Briyt*, takes as its jumping-off point the famous metaphor in the Gospel of Luke (“the light of thy body is thine eye”), a passage which reveals itself to be quite grammatically complicated across all of its translations, with a fantastic wordplay between light, lighting something, being lit by something, seeing something — and a million other permutations.

*e lanterne of thi bodi is thin iye; if thin iye be symple, al thi bodi schal be liyti;
but if it be weynward, al thi bodi schal be derkful.
erf or se thou, lest the liyt that is in thee, be derknessis.
erf or if al thi bodi be briyt, and haue no part of derknessis,
it schal be al briyt, and as a lanterne of briytnesse it schal yyue liyt to thee.*

Luke 11: 34-36
(Wycliffe)

The 14th-century Wycliffe translation has, for me, the most sonorous possibilities, and the final étude draws on the text's interplay between dark textures, very bright textures, and a sense of total suffusion of light. After a shimmering arrival at the very top of the keyboard, the immutable rising fourth motif from *Lilt* reëmerges and ushers in a quiet coda with distant bells.

These fourteen études were written between 2020 and 2024 and are dedicated to Conor Hanick.

[Première information tk; Music Academy of the West; Guild Hall Easthampton etc.]

[Nos 1-7 commissioning information / MAW / Carnegie Hall / remaining commissioning information
tk]

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space, [etc.]]

And of course, to Conor, for musicality, breadth of vision, and kindness both as an interpreter, musical
citizen, and friend.