



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF MUSIC

UTNMF:
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO NEW MUSIC FESTIVAL

UTNMF: John Burge plays John Burge

Marjan Mozetich, *Roger D. Moore Distinguished visitor*, Norbert Palej, *festival coordinator*
John Burge, *piano*

Monday, January 29, 2024 at 12:00 pm | Walter Hall, 80 Queen's Park

PROGRAM

Studies in Poetry, Vol.5

other new works by John Burge

BIOGRAPHY

Was born in Dryden, Ontario in 1961. While still in high school, he received his Associate Diploma from the Royal Conservatory of Toronto in Piano Performance. He also holds degrees in Composition and Theory from the University of Toronto and the University of British Columbia. Since 1987 he has been teaching at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, where he currently holds the position of Full Professor and has served as Director of the School of Music. In recognition of his very successful career as a composer, John Burge was awarded a Queen's University Excellence in Research and Scholarship Prize in 2013. In 2014 he was inducted as a Fellow into the Royal Society of Canada.

John Burge has written a large body of vocal, chamber, and orchestral compositions. In addition to his large output of piano music, he is particularly well known for his choral works, many of which are published by Boosey and Hawkes Music Publishers. His composition, *Angels' Voices*, for choir and orchestra, received the 2006 Outstanding New Choral Composition Award from the Association of Canadian Choral Conductors and was performed at Carnegie Hall in 2005. Burge also has a strong affinity in writing for string instruments, having composed over a dozen works for string orchestra. Sinfonia Toronto's recording of his composition, *Flanders Fields Reflections*, received the 2009 Juno Award for the Best Canadian Classical Composition. Continued Juno recognition was received in 2015 with a nomination of his Piano Quartet, as recorded by Ensemble Made In Canada, in the same category.

His orchestral compositions include a number of concertos and two symphonies. With titles like *Snowdrift*, *Rocky Mountain Overture*, *Upper Canada Fiddle Suite*, and *The Canadian Shield*, it is obvious that many of his works for large ensemble draw their influence from a distinctively Canadian perspective. The most recent addition to this collection, *Four Seasons of the*

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

As part of the Faculty's commitment to improving Indigenous inclusion, we call upon all members of our community to start/continue their personal journeys towards understanding and acknowledging Indigenous peoples' histories, truths and cultures. Visit indigenous.utoronto.ca to learn more.

Canadian Flag, is a work commissioned and performed in 2017 by three Canadian orchestras in recognition of the 150th anniversary of the confederation of Canada.

A passionate advocate for Canadian music, Burge was a member of the executive council of the Canadian League of Composers from 1993-2007, serving as President from 1998-2006. Since 2010, he has been a board member of the SOCAN Foundation. An active music festival adjudicator and clinician, John Burge enjoys working with musicians young and old, greatly enjoying the opportunity to share musical ideas and insights.

Everything Waits for the Lilacs was commissioned in 1996 by PIANO SIX, a group of Canadian concert pianists that included at the time: Angela Cheng, Janina Fialkowska, Marc André Hamelin, Angela Hewitt, André Laplante and Jon Kimura Parker. Individually these artists had dedicated a ten-day period in their annual calendar to present a series of recitals, school concerts and master classes in communities that would otherwise not have an opportunity, or at least only rarely, to interact with international concert artists. This group has also endeavored to promote Canadian music by actively performing and commissioning music written by a wide selection of Canadian composers.

Everything Waits for the Lilacs is a brief, evocative work that captures the anticipation of spring. The title is a line borrowed from the Margaret Avison poem, "Thaws," which is found in her collection of poetry entitled, sunblue. The Canadian climate is such that it seems possible to define the moment when winter releases it grasps and the first blossoms unfold. Or perhaps it is simply that the Canadian psyche reaches the point when it cannot bear the snow-bound landscape any longer and the awareness of the shifting season becomes heightened. In this case the music echoes appropriately with a strong sense of longing and desire ending with a repeated chord that just yet, can't seem to break free of the fading grasp of winter. The piece was gratefully dedicated to Dorothy Hare (1911-2002), a piano teacher in Calgary who was influential in the development of the composer's musicianship and training. The work was given its premiere performances by Janina Fialkowska during her fall tour of British Columbia in 1997.

ABOUT THE STUDIES IN POETRY SERIES

The series of piano etudes titled, Studies in Poetry, was started in 2000 while John Burge was on a sabbatical leave from teaching at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. This leave coincided with the purchase of a grand piano and the etudes were a way of breaking in the new keyboard and investigating some personal explorations in composition. An avid reader of poetry, with this series the composer has paid tribute to both the poets and the titles of some of his favorite books of English poetry by providing a musical response to the book's title. Over the years, John Burge has continued to add other installments, always released in volumes consisting of three new etudes, and always making it a goal to premiere the new works himself, thereby ensuring that all the notes are as well edited as possible and have been tested in a performance situation. Do check out the composer's website or Red Leaf Pianoworks, for more information.

Study in poetry no. 13 – left-handed

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 three books of his own poetry, Galassi has also translated for publication the poetic works of Italian poets, Giacomo Leopardi and Eugenio Montale. Galassi's poetry reveals an understanding and modern-day approach to classical verse and 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 kind of 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 and limiting the pianist to just one hand, 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

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

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 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 time alone can seem to last forever.