David Rakowski

Études, Volume 2

from Books I, IV and V

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Amy Dissanayake, piano

 Total Time: 76:00

In January of 1988, on a lark, David Rakowski boarded a plane for Phoenix, where he rented a small apartment in order to concentrate on writing a piece. Being in a warm climate in winter for the first time proved an enjoyable and stimulating experience, and Rakowski found himself completing his project a week sooner than expected. He decided to write "a silly piece, probably worthless," for his friend, the English composer Martin Butler, who had been pestering him for a solo piano work for some time. Uncertain of his ability to write effectively for the piano, what Rakowski most assuredly did not want to write was what he felt he saw too many of in those days: "big, Romantic, slurpy, heavy, loud, overdramatic and self-important pieces." He based his piece on Butler's amazing ability to play rapid repeated notes with the fingers of only one hand, a feat that had become something of a running joke between them over the years. In six days, Rakowski had composed what he would come to call *E-Machines*, which was premiered not by Butler but by the pianist Lyn Reyna, who later also played BAM!, the second étude, and requested and premiered *Étude # 3, Nocturnal*. To his surprise, when he first heard her perform *E-Machines*, which he had feared was unplayable, he actually found that it in fact sounded very good. Far from unplayable, it has actually turned out to be his most performed work. It was Ms. Reyna who first observed that these three pieces—*E-Machines*, *BAM!* and *Nocturnal*—could be classified as études. Deep down, he knew she was right, but he also thought he knew that he would not return to the genre any time soon. "Now with a nice suite of pieces that worked together," he observed, "I was pretty much sure I was done with études."

He was not.

At last tally, David Rakowski has completed six books of ten études each and two from a projected seventh book, comprising a total of sixty-two. They run the gamut from the fastest tempi to the slowest, from études based on specific intervals or chords to those based on specific playing techniques, including but not limited to an étude for the inside of the piano (*#13, Plucking A*, from Book II) and one that requires the pianist to play certain notes with the nose (*#22, Schnozzage*, Book III). To these possibilities have been added the notion of études built on specific styles, such as stride piano (*#40, Strident*, Book IV) and bop (*#41, Bop It*, Book V), as well as tango and rock and roll in Book VI.

As recounted in the notes to the previous CD release (Bridge 9121) of Books II and III as well as *#35, Luceole*, and *#36, Purple*, from Book IV, Rakowski came to view the writing of études as a kind of compositional respite; when he found himself at an impasse while writing a large-scale "serious" piece, he could take a break from it and compose an étude. (Book V is the one exception to the idea of études as respites from larger pieces, having been written in sequence, in response to a commission from the Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard.) In addition to being able to return to the larger project refreshed, he began to see that the process of writing these tightly focused and single minded shorter pieces was also a means of refreshing his technique in a more general way. The rules he set for himself—that an étude must be written from "left to right," with no a priori notions of how the piece should go, that he could not take more than six days to compose one, and that once composed, it could not be revised—helped to foster a greater spontaneity to counterbalance the compositional rigor and discipline he had cultivated during his years of study. It also encouraged a much more fluent, "long-breathed" approach to phrasing as well as an increased sensitivity to the rate of harmonic change, and taught him how to write genuinely fast music. Perhaps most liberating of all, composing the études has fused his genuine wit and quirky (to say the least) sense of humor with his formidable skill and unwavering seriousness of purpose as an artist, allowing him, as he says, to "have more joy in the simple act

of invention."

Confronting the panoply of emotional, technical, musical and expressive demands made by these études requires a pianist of uncommon gifts, sensitivity and dedication, and Rakowski, who has been most fortunate in persuading some of today's finest pianists to perform the études, has found in Amy Dissanayake an artist whose fearlessness, self-assurance, seemingly illimitable technical prowess, musicality and sheer relish in meeting every challenge make her an ideal advocate for these works, which collectively constitute one of the most significant new contributions to the contemporary piano repertory.

The present compilation includes Book I in its entirety, most of Book IV (minus the two previously released études mentioned above), and a little over half of Book V.

From ÉTUDES, Books I, IV and V:

Book IV: *Étude #40, Strident* (2002); stride piano étude

Amy Dissanayake begins her latest recorded traversal of Rakowski études with one whose composition she instigated. *Strident* is particularly significant by virtue of marking the first time in the collection that an étude has taken a musical style, as opposed to a playing technique or an interval, as its point of departure, and Rakowski was initially somewhat wary of taking that plunge. To prepare, he steeped himself in the œuvres of two of the greatest masters of the style, James P. Johnson and "Fats" Waller. A tune of Johnson's from the 1920s called *Jingles* was perhaps the most direct influence on *Strident*. Rakowski came to understand stride as being " like ragtime (oompah in the left hand, with fast stuff in the right hand), except that it swings, and the bass line is a little more melodic than in ragtime." Fittingly, the basic shape of the étude is that of a traditional march or rag, with an introduction, two repeated strains, a trio that is also repeated, and an elaborate coda. As in other Rakowski études, the repeats afford welcome opportunities for the listener to more fully absorb and savor the manifold delights of following the composer's musical train—or roller coaster—of thought. As in *Twelve-Step Program*, (#21, Book II) and the later *Boogie Ninths* (#32, Book IV) the repeats are varied dynamically (if the first time is loud, the second is soft and vice versa) for maximum effect.

Rakowski's études, as well as much of his other music, as often as not have a definite pitch center or centers, and sometimes, as in *Strident*, certain traditional functionally tonal relationships are alluded to without being acted upon, for example the apparent dominant seventh chord that immediately precedes the trio, as well as the pseudo V-I final cadence in B-flat.

Étude #37, Taking the Fifths (2002); étude on perfect fifths
Étude #39, Sixth Appeal (2002); étude on sixths

The next two works return to the subcategory of études built on a single type of interval, and present the greatest possible gestural and affective contrast with the rollicking virtuosity of *Strident*. Additionally, *Taking the Fifths* and *Sixth Appeal* further explore Rakowski's ability to refresh, enrich and refine his essentially non-tonal language by seamlessly integrating with it harmonic and melodic gestures that are readily found in tonal music. During the past several decades it was common for composers of Rakowski's age and older to consciously eschew such sonorities as being somehow too cliched, as though the chasm between tonality

and so-called atonality were too wide to be bridged, with an implied—or occasionally even directly stated—attitude of "never the twain shall meet." Similarly, a strong, clear sense of pulse was often (inexplicably) viewed with suspicion as being somehow too obvious or square, though, like most other things in music, in the hands of a skilled composer it certainly need not be. This listener connects Rakowski's interest in the expansion of his tonal resources with a strong early influence of Alban Berg, whose works often give the impression of being poised perfectly between the tonal and non-tonal realms; this is of course because tonality and atonality are not two separate worlds with distinct and unbreachable boundaries but rather a continuum along which there can be many subtle points of contact. Rakowski's profound understanding of this legacy of Berg, together with his equal embrace of Stravinsky's rhythmic dynamism and a concomitant insistence that a perceivable beat can be a valuable compositional resource, one to which composers of any stylistic persuasion can legitimately lay claim, imparts to Rakowski's music richness and variety as well as structural clarity and directness of communication.

Perfect fifths of course have strong tonal associations, but in *Taking the Fifths* Rakowski employs them in his own language in a completely natural, unselfconscious and personal manner. He traces the inspiration for his opening neighbor note motive, stated in parallel perfect fifths, to the first sung music in Stravinsky's *Renard*. Cast as a straightforward tripartite structure, with the outer sections faster in tempo than the middle one, the first inversion triad of D major acts as a referential harmony (though not a traditionally functional one) that opens and closes the first part, and returns at the beginning of the final part. Fifths are taken to the next level in the beautiful central section, stacked atop one another to form a stunningly varied array of lush six-voiced block harmonies by means of exquisite voice leading and spacing.

Sixth Appeal, an homage to the wistful, autumnal melancholy of Brahms' late piano music, takes its cue from an intervallic and textural usage especially beloved of that master, parallel sixths. The piece begins by suggesting, without actually being in, the key of B minor, particularly by virtue of its insistence on a figure consisting of a major sixth oscillation between C-sharp and A-sharp. These two notes, together exerting a strong pull toward B, are used obsessively in nearly every octave of the piano, accompanied by variants of the opening bars. Indeed, register plays a significant role in this piece, as in a great many of the other études: the piece begins in the low middle part of the keyboard (a typically Brahmsian center of operations) and gradually works its way up to the very top of the range, before moving down to the depths of the bass of the piano. The appearance of the motive (now spelled as D-flat and B-flat) in the piano's lowest register coincides with the recapitulation of the opening material, and gives the temporary impression of the tonal center's having moved from B to B-flat. The fluid nature of the featured intervals seems to have influenced Rakowski's metric notation in this piece—continually shifting bar lengths without actual time signatures.

Book I: *Étude #1, E-Machines* (1988); repeated note étude

This celebration of Martin Butler's extraordinary capacity to rapidly execute repeated notes with one hand has a symmetrical formal structure: A-B-C-B-A. The letters also refer to three distinct types of hexachords (collections of six notes) that alternate as principal pitch material for each section. Additionally, the symmetry is played out in terms of register, with the A sections focusing on the high register, the B sections on the low, and C encompassing all of the registers. *E-*

Machines is the first instance of several in the entire étude collection of a climactic moment occurring as an explosion of multiple octaves of the same note. In this case that note is E-natural, culminating in an outrageous and hilarious quote from, of all things, Beethoven's *Für Elise*, the initial notes of which are conveniently contained within hexachord A. Hexachord C is the source of an earlier, more fleeting (but no less funny) Beethoven reference, from the opening of the *Sixth Symphony*. *Caveat auditor*: if you blink (or whatever the aural equivalent of blinking is), you'll miss it.

Book IV: *Étude #33, Sliding Scales* (2001); gonzo étude on scales

The term "gonzo," often used in a journalistic context to refer to a particularly exaggerated or extreme style, describes well the almost comically obsessive quality of this étude—scales gone wild, as it were. They are unfolded in multifarious ways and at varying rates of speed, beginning with the first six notes of a diatonic (Phrygian) scale on E, which continues, via intrusions of accidentals, to morph into various other scales over the next several bars. The slower-moving melody in the right hand begins a gradual scalar ascent of its own, interrupted by repeated notes and groups of notes. This is followed by an overall descent of the various voices and an ascent to an even higher point. At one point as many as four distinct contrapuntal strands of scales moving in various directions and durations are heard at once. Sometimes it seems that the scales are chasing each other—or perhaps chasing their own tails. A curious and intriguing reminiscence of *E-Machines* occurs when the various lines converge on a unison E-natural, which splits apart into multi-octave E's spanning virtually the entire keyboard. These broken octaves, divided between the hands, begin unfolding scales of their own in opposite directions. Among many challenges for the performer are preserving the independence of the individual voices while maintaining the effortless flow implied by the unequal bars, once again, as in *Sixth Appeal*, notated without meter signatures.

Book I: *Étude #3, Nocturna*l (1991); étude on slow repeated notes

Written at the request of Lyn Reyna, who was planning a concert tour and sought a contrasting third piece to form a group with *E-Machines* and *BAM!*, this is the first of the études to explore a lyrical style in a slow tempo. The clear link between *Nocturnal* and *E-Machines* is not merely the fact that both center on F-sharp, but, more important, that the same sequence of repeated pitches employed in *E-Machines* is recycled at a much more deliberate pace and in a vastly different musical and expressive context. These repetitions, unlike those of the first étude, are dreamy, even hypnotic in character, and much less rhythmically regular. In keeping with the languorous mood, as well as the composer's propensity for quotation, the central section contains an embedded quote from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.

Étude #6, Mano à mano (1995); étude on alternating hands

Lisa Moore, now the pianist of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, often performed on student composers' concerts at Columbia University when Rakowski taught there. *Mano à mano* focuses on a detail he remembered from a performance she gave of Mario Davidovsky's *Synchronisms No. 6*: a tremolo chord executed by the alternation of the hands. Rakowski marveled at the sheer speed and altitude of

her hands in this passage, which he described as "wild" in appearance, and decided that he would base the étude she had requested from him on this particular technique, which is applied to single notes as well as to dyads and chords at an extremely fast tempo, lending an almost demonic quality to the music. The notes of the actual Davidovsky chord are occasionally employed as a melody. In the fourth measure of the piece, there is a sudden sforzando intrusion of the notes A-sharp and C-sharp in the right hand and the lowest D on the keyboard in the left, a gesture that keeps returning throughout the piece. Also recurring throughout is a melody based on the letters of Lisa Moore's name, rendered into musical notation by mapping them onto the chromatic scale. This is a favorite device of Rakowski's, and occurs in several of the études as well as in other pieces.

Étude #10, Corrente (1996); étude on left hand running notes

The composer attributes the origin of *Corrente* (Italian for "running") to a dream he had while in residence at the American Academy in Rome. He heard very beautiful music in this dream, but as often happens with music heard by composers in dreams, all that he could recall about it upon awakening was the fact that it involved running figures that continually descend to the lowest register of the piano. *Corrente* clearly centers on A, the first and last note of the melody that is accompanied by the running notes, as well as a constantly recurring pitch throughout. In Italian, the word "corrente" can refer to a 16th or 17th century dance, most often in a fast triple meter; it can also refer to electrical current, and is often used in weather reports in talking about the jet stream. All of these possible meanings ran through the composer's mind as he was writing.

Étude #8, Close Enough for Jazz (1995); ostinato étude

The word "jazz" in the title alludes to the fact that the music of the piece's dedicatee, composer and pianist Sandra Sprecher, reminded Rakowski of free jazz of the 1950s, and he tried to capture that feeling by using harmonies that she might have chosen in her own work. The trick to writing an effective ostinato is to come up with an idea that not only has a distinctive, recognizable shape, but that is also just complex enough to bear plenty of repetition. The immediately engaging and rather playful ostinato in this piece, mostly contained within a septuple meter, walks this tightrope with aplomb. It actually does change imperceptibly at times in terms of actual pitches, but by and large the intervals and rhythms remain constant, providing a backdrop for the soloistic fancies of the melodic line, even as the bass register of the piano begins to intrude, the texture grows ever more intricate, and the pianist's path becomes more technically treacherous. This is one of the most beautifully concise and satisfying of all the études.

Étude #9, Pollici e mignoli, or, The Virus That Ate New York (1995)
étude for thumbs and pinkies only

Similarly to the later *Touch Typing* (#11, Book II) this étude, also composed with Sandra Sprecher in mind, places limits on the specific digits to be employed in its execution, though the composer in his performance instructions reluctantly grants permission to those who would use additional fingers. The Italian words in the title can literally be translated as "thumbs and pinkies." (This phrase can also mean "big toes and little toes," though construing that as an alternative mode of performance is emphatically not to be recommended.) The "virus" that

ultimately takes over is a rhythmic one, a rapid triplet thirty-second note figure that appears innocuously enough at first but quickly spreads like wildfire. The original staccato-dominated texture makes a couple of valiant but ultimately vain attempts to resurface, and by the end has been completely engulfed.

Book IV: *Étude #34, Chorale Fantasy* (2002); étude on an embedded melody

Rakowski's title is a play on that of Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy*, but the term "chorale" here really can be said to refer to the melody, initially heard unaccompanied, that subsequently migrates among the various voices of the counterpoint and functions as a kind of floating cantus firmus, somewhat similar to the way an actual chorale tune might be used in a Baroque instrumental prelude or opening choral movement of a cantata, emerging from the general texture. The supreme technical and musical challenge of this delicately nuanced music is to bring to the fore, within an unvarying pianissimo dynamic, the notes of that melody and only those notes, no matter in which polyphonic strand they may occur at any given instant, without disturbing the background texture and inadvertently emphasizing other nearby pitches. To make the desired end result visually clear to the pianist, the composer uses normally sized noteheads for the migrating principal melodic voice and smaller ones for the subsidiary material.

Étude #31, Usurpation (2000); étude on a persistent slow trill

Martin Boykan, one of Rakowski's colleagues at Brandeis and a highly distinguished composer in his own right, had composed a set of five short piano pieces entitled *Usurpations*, each based on small units—a motive or figure, or even simply a chord— culled from pieces by esteemed colleagues. Rakowski was one of the five so honored, and in response to a request for a work for a 70th birthday festschrift for Boykan in Perspectives of New Music, decided to, as he put it, "return the usurpation." Two excerpts from Boykan's *Piano Sonata No. 2*, one stated at the very outset and another near the end, provide the material of the étude. Slow trills occur frequently in Boykan's music, and these excerpts provided a perfect opportunity for a study based on this musical fingerprint. The trill on which this piece is based, between D and the C-sharp below, allows a quotation in the final bars of the étude from the slow movement of Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 23*, a favorite of both Boykan and Rakowski.

Book V: *Étude #47, Fra Diabolis* (2002); étude on tritones

Like major sevenths and minor ninths, the tritone has taken on the status of a modernist cliche, but it has throughout the history of music played a significant though at times sinister role. It is unique among intervals in being self-inverting. In other words, whether spelled harmonically as an augmented fourth or a diminished fifth, it retains the same number of half steps (six), whereas, for example, the perfect fifth, a consonance, contains seven and its dissonant inversion, the perfect fourth, five. The harmonic ambiguity of the tritone probably accounts at least in part for the suspicion with which medieval theorists viewed it and the satanic qualities they imputed to it. The first tritone to be recognized, before the widespread use of sharps and flats, was the one spanning B-natural and F-natural. Rakowski uses this "ur-tritone" as an interruption, in the extremes of the keyboard, to articulate the form at several points, and "B-F" is the dual pitch center of the piece. At the very end this same tritone finally "resolves" outward by a half step, one of two possible traditional

moves for this interval. Rakowski also gets the greatest possible mileage out of his initial series of bare tritones in the middle section of the piece by embedding them within more complex harmonies containing other intervals.

Book I: *Étude #4, Trillage* (1993); trill étude

Similarly to the later *Usurpation*, *Trillage* quotes from the work of esteemed colleagues, in this case George Edwards of Columbia University, and Ross Bauer of the University of California at Davis. (The nod to Bauer, a fragment from his *Concertino*, is brief and occurs early in the étude, in its fifth and sixth bars.) Also as in *Usurpation*, the impetus for *Trillage* is, not surprisingly, trills. Rakowski had heard and admired Edwards' *Piano Concerto*, which had recently been premiered by the dedicatee of *Trillage*, Alan Feinberg. Particularly impressive to Rakowski was a written-out cadenza featuring sustained notes in the outer voices and trills in the inner parts. He therefore decided to fulfill Feinberg's request for a new étude with a formal approach unique to his études thus far: *Trillage* is a short set of variations with a decidedly rhapsodic bent, based on the Edwards passage, which appears in its original form at the outset of the sixth variation. A recapitulatory coda concludes the piece. Rakowski conceives the basic melodic gesture of *Trillage* in terms of lines whose content gradually decreases to two notes, which subsequently accelerate into a trill. Rakowski's connection to Berg seems particularly conspicuous in this piece, with its tension between the structural rigor of variation technique and the essential Romanticism of the musical language.

Étude #5, Figure Eight (1994); octave étude

Aptly characterized by the composer as mostly being "a very fast one- or two-part invention," this piece relentlessly explores as many octave textures as possible during its brief but eventful time span and gives the pianist a substantial workout to boot. The textures range from the simplest (the melody in the right hand at the beginning, doubled an octave lower in the left) to the most technically daunting—each hand in octaves, with many sizeable leaps. One of the more interesting variants is one in which the right hand plays a two-voiced texture, with each voice doubled an octave lower in the left hand. The composer especially enjoys the passages in which both hands begin in the middle of the keyboard, each playing widely ranging single note melodies in rhythmic unison that move in opposite directions toward the extremes of the keyboard, but with all simultaneous intervals being single or multiple octaves.

Book IV: *Étude #38, Silent But Deadly* (2002); pianissimo étude

Rakowski (very quietly) throws down the gauntlet in this étude—which might just as easily have been called *Walking on Eggs*—by challenging the pianist to play what would normally be very loud (or at least extremely dynamically varied) and rhythmically active music at a uniformly and extremely soft level. Suffice it to say that the dramatic tension generated by trying to keep a lid on the volume in the midst of such technical and textural complexity is far greater and more compelling than it would be had the piece been allowed to devolve into a more conventional atonal piano piece with constant dynamic fluctuations. This étude is dedicated to the pianist's husband, Shehan B. Dissanayake.

Book I: *Étude #7, Les Arbres embués* (1995); étude on melody and thick chords

Martin Butler expressed an interest in having Rakowski compose an étude

for him that would be reminiscent of Debussy, specifying "a simple melody over thick chords." The title, literally translated, means "steaming trees." Rakowski was at the MacDowell Colony, and there, one very sunny morning, after an intense overnight rainstorm, he could literally see steam coming off the wet trees because of the sun's heat. The melody is derived from the letters of Martin Butler's name. Despite its slow tempo and seemingly placid surface, this is one of the most dauntingly difficult to play of all the études, albeit also one of the most truly exquisite to listen to. The performer's challenge comes by way of the notation, which, while presenting initial obstacles, is at the same time the most logical possible representation of the musical idea. The crux of the problem is that often the melody is doubled two octaves lower and notated entirely in the upper staff, while in the lower staff the accompanying chords—often in as many as five voices—contain notes that are actually higher than those in the upper staff. What this overlapping effectively means is that both hands are simultaneously occupied with both the melody and the accompanying texture, instead of a more traditional division of labor in which one hand plays the tune while the other accompanies. As in the case of so many of the other études, however, given the right pianist who truly grasps the long line of the piece, the beauty and subtlety of the music emerges with utter clarity.

Book IV: *Étude #32, Boogie Ninths* (2000); étude on ninths

Quite apart from its undeniable visceral power and excitement, this piece also fascinates and compels because its harmonic language, in part owing to the nature of the intervals on which it is based, stands subtly apart from that of some of the other fast-tempo études as being less readily connected to tonal sonorities. *Boogie Ninths*, while still bearing many of the hallmarks of Rakowski's style, demonstrates in its unique manner the flexibility of his idiom and the harmonic shadings of which it is capable. While the composer designates the three indicated repeats as optional, they truly are helpful to the listener in grasping a barrage of potent, sharply profiled ideas. (In this recording all repeats are observed.) Particularly striking is a declamatory passage in octaves roughly halfway through the étude, played the second time through with contrasting dynamics, leading to a climax in which a fearsomely tricky octave-doubled bass line featuring many jumps of a ninth is pitted against delectably crunchy, constantly mutating four-note chords in the right hand that span a ninth.

Book I: *Étude #2, BAM!* (1991); étude on swirls of notes

BAM! begins where *E-Machines* leaves off—quite literally. The first notes, D-flat and B-flat are the same ones, in the same register, that ended the first étude. This work was composed at the request of Karen Harvey as a companion piece for *E-Machines*, and in many respects behaves in a complementary fashion. Like *E-Machines*, *BAM!* has a symmetrical structure that is articulated by means of register and makes similar use of hexachords. It also quotes *E-Machines*, as well as (fleetingly) Mozart's *Symphony No. 40*. The first two études mirror each other up to a point, at least in terms of the registral scheme. Whereas *E-Machines* begins in a high register and works its way gradually downward, *BAM!* commences by taking the opposite course. As in *Mano à mano*, the letters of Karen Harvey's first name are mapped onto the chromatic scale to generate melodic material. The title derives from a marking Ms. Harvey placed above a sforzando chord in the piano part of Rakowski's *Violin Concerto*, which she played at Tanglewood.

Book V: *Étude #46, Durchrauscht die Luft* (2002); étude on sevenths

Besides being Rakowski's only complete book of études whose pieces were composed in sequence, Book V also bears the distinction of completing the series of études built on intervals. As mentioned earlier, the seventh, particularly the major seventh, has become emblematic of the grittiest and most difficult tendencies of musical modernism. Rakowski's quest for a kinder, gentler seventh led him to the graceful image of a bird in flight, which in turn led him to remember a graceful rhythmic figure from the piano part of the thirteenth of Brahms' *Liebeslieder Waltzes*, the vocal part of which begins with the words "Vögelein, durchrauscht die Luft" ("Little bird darting through the air"). In keeping with that conceit, Rakowski takes a delicate, restrained approach, with the dynamic never rising above mezzo forte, and the piece beginning and concluding in the highest register of the instrument.

Étude #41, Bop It (2002); bop étude

Following quickly on the heels of *Strident*, *Bop It* is the second étude to be based on a vernacular style, and its edgy, mercurial temperament and manic energy capture the essence of the idiom. Piano bop, exemplified by such figures as Bud Powell, can be characterized as comprising sharp, stabbing chords in the left hand supporting extremely rapid, virtuosic solo improvisations in the right. Requested by Geoffrey Burleson, who is also the dedicatee of *Fourth of Habit* (#20, Book II), *Bop It* divides into two main sections, each one commencing with what is traditionally referred to as a "head," essentially a setting forth of the basic harmonic progression in block chords, or a kind of "syncopated chorale," as Rakowski describes it, followed by the soloistic flights of the right hand above that progression. For the sake of harmonic variety, the composer begins the second part of the piece with a new set of chord changes, having evidently concluded that two heads are better than one.

Étude #43, Wiggle Room (2002); étude on fast notes moving in parallel

Suggested by Ms. Dissanayake, this étude draws its inspiration, as well as its basic figuration, from the C minor Prelude of Book I of J. S. Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier. The economy of this music is particularly noteworthy, its interest maintained by means of subtly shifting patterns within a steady stream of sixteenth notes in an unvarying tempo. In further homage to Bach (and to the musicality and imagination of the executant), this piece is written without dynamics or articulations, those as well as the pedaling being left to the discretion of the pianist.

Étude #48, What Half-Diminishes One (Half-Diminishes All) (2002); chorale-étude on half-diminished seventh chords

"The late nineteenth century's favorite chord," according to Rakowski, is the sole basis, apart from "a few passing tones, suspensions and arpeggiations," for this poignantly understated piano chorale. Yet again, Martin Butler has had a hand in the genesis of a Rakowski étude. Butler had composed a piano chorale, built entirely on major seventh chords in all possible inversions, which he had played over the telephone to Rakowski, who decided he wanted to try something similar. The present étude, which begins with the same three notes as another famous chorale for piano—Schumann's *Der Dichter spricht*, from *Kinderszenen*—is dedicated to Rakowski's Brandeis colleague Eric Chafe, whose office shares a wall with that of the composer and who teaches a course in late Romantic music, a

course that often necessitates his meeting with students to demonstrate every possible resolution of the half-diminished seventh chords that pervade the works of Wagner, Wolf and so many others.

Étude #50, No Stranger to Our Planet (2002); étude on register shifts

This disc is bounded by études whose number ends in zero, which in Rakowski Étude World is a sure sign that the rhythmic figure known in jazz as "swing eighths" will be featured prominently. (The lone exception to this is #10, *Corrente*.) Here there is a new twist, in that the swing eighths figure is frequently interrupted and the clarity of the pulse momentarily compromised by running sixteenth notes. The principal conceit of this piece, however, is sudden, precipitous changes of register; an idea is begun in one area of the keyboard and interrupted by a new idea in a different area, a kind of perpetual "jump cut" effect, to borrow from film terminology.

The title requires slightly more explanation than some, as it is yet another running gag that Rakowski shares with friends; in this case, the phrase is purported to form part of an imaginary opening sentence of a pretentious composer biography. Since a number of the events in the étude struck Rakowski as seeming to come from another planet, the old running gag became the obvious choice for the title.

Because this étude is the final one of Book V, which was conceived as more of a unity than the other books, the same tritone that resolved outward by semitone at the end of *Fra Diabolis* now resolves inward, deftly completing that book (and this disc).

~ Notes by Hayes Biggs, 2004

David Rakowski was born and raised in St. Albans, Vermont. His early musical training was on trombone, and like so many composers of his generation, he also played keyboards in a bad rock band doing covers that he transcribed from the radio. His first composition was for his high school band, and was specifically written to win the Vermont All-State Festival Composition Competition; it lost. His interest in composition was further spurred by encounters on record with music of Boulez, Ives and Babbitt, and later, the music of Stravinsky, Berg, Martino, and Davidovsky. He studied at New England Conservatory with Robert Ceely and John Heiss, at Princeton with Milton Babbitt, Peter Westergaard and Paul Lansky, and at Tanglewood with Luciano Berio. He has composed three symphonies, four concerti, four song cycles, a children's ballet, and a great deal of chamber and vocal chamber music, as well as sixty-two piano etudes. His music has been performed all over America, in Canada and Mexico, as well as in Europe and China, and has been recorded on CRI, Innova, Albany, and Americus. He has been commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, "The President's Own" US Marine Band, the New England String Ensemble, Speculum Musicae, Sequitur, Network for New Music, Parnassus, Ensemble 21, the Riverside Symphony, the Triple Helix, Boston Musica Viva, the Crosstown Ensemble, the Fromm and Koussevitzky Foundations, and others. He has received a Rome Prize, an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the 2004-6 Elise L. Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and Guggenheim and NEA fellowships. In 1999 his *Persistent Memory*, commissioned by the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust for Orpheus, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and in 2002 his *Ten of Kind*, commissioned by the US Marine Band, was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Rakowski has taught at Stanford, Columbia, and

Harvard Universities, at New England Conservatory, and is Professor of Composition at Brandeis University, where he currently Chairs the music department. He was also Composer-in-residence at the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival and Guest Composer at the Wellesley Composers Conference. His music is published by C.F. Peters, BMI. Currently he lives in Massachusetts and Maine with his wife, the composer and clarinetist Beth Wiemann, with whom he shares six computers, two cats, and a canoe.

Though her repertoire ranges from Baroque to contemporary, **Amy Dissanayake** is especially committed to performing music of living composers. She has premièred many solo and chamber works, and has worked with such composers as Pierre Boulez, Esa-Pekka Salonen, George Crumb, Augusta Read Thomas, Joan Tower, David Lang, Simon Bainbridge, John Adams, and David Rakowski. She is the pianist for the Chicago Symphony's highly-acclaimed MusicNOW series, and will perform four new solo piano works during the 2005 season. She has performed with the Chicago Contemporary Players, Chicago Pro Musica, the Chicago Chamber Musicians, Klang, the Pacifica Quartet, and the Empyrean Ensemble. The Chicago Tribune has called her "extraordinary" in her "mastery of what lay on the dense, printed page and beyond"; and the Chicago Sun Times called her a "ferociously talented pianist."

Amy Dissanayake has appeared as a soloist and chamber musician in the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa. Her selection in 1993 as a United States Artistic Ambassador led to a highly acclaimed concert tour of eight countries in Africa and South Asia, where she gave solo recitals, lectures, and master-classes as part of a broad-based cultural exchange program sponsored by the United States Information Agency. Amy Dissanayake has appeared as soloist with numerous orchestras, including the Chicago Chamber Orchestra, New Hampshire Philharmonic, and the Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka, and her live and recorded performances have been featured on radio stations around the United States and abroad. Recent performances included the Rock Hotel Piano Festival in New York City, solo recitals as an artist-in-residence at the University of California at Davis, the Wittener Tage fur Neue Musik in Witten, Germany, and recitals in the People's Republic of China. Upcoming engagements in 2004 and 2005 include a world première of Jeffrey Mumford's new piano quintet with the world-renowned Pacifica Quartet, appearances in Germany and Switzerland, and solo and chamber music performances across the United States. Ms. Dissanayake studied with Ursula Oppens at Northwestern University, where she earned a Doctorate in Piano Performance in 1999. She currently divides her time between San Diego and Chicago.

Producer: Judith Sherman
Engineer: Judith Sherman
Editor: Judith Sherman
Engineering and Editing Assistant: Jeanne Velonis
Cover Photograph: Judith Sherman
Photograph of David Rakowski: Beth Wiemann
Photograph of Amy Dissanayake: David Rakowski
Annotator: Hayes Biggs
Graphic Design: Kelly Ferriter & Alexis Napoliello
Typesetting: Alexis Napoliello
Piano: Steinway D from Steinway and Sons, NY.
David Rakowski's *Études* are published by C.F. Peters Corp. (BMI).
This recording was made possible with assistance from the Aaron Copland Fund for Recorded Music; the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University.
Recorded at the American Academy of Arts and Letters June 4,5, and 6 of 2003.
Executive Producers: David and Becky Starobin

For Bridge Records: Ashley Arrington, Alexis Napoliello, Dan Singer, Becky Starobin, David Starobin, Allegra Starobin and Robert Starobin

Bridge Records, Inc.
200 Clinton Avenue · New Rochelle, NY · 10801

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