

David Rakowski
Études, Vol. 3
Amy Briggs, piano

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No one hundred and first étude for piano is planned or even contemplated, says David Rakowski, who would be that étude's composer if he were so inclined.

He is not—at least not at the moment. For over twenty years now, beginning in 1988 with *E-Machines*, Rakowski has been amassing an enormous and breathtakingly brilliant collection of piano études, gathered into volumes of ten each, a veritable catalog within his catalog. At this writing, ninety such pieces (Books I-IX) exist. This disc completes the recording of the first seven books, and includes the previously unrecorded études from Book V, as well as the entirety of Books VI and VII. David's stated aim is to complete one more volume's worth, bringing the grand total to one hundred, and this chapter of his compositional career to a fitting conclusion with a nice round number.

It should be noted that when he first embarked upon the writing of études he certainly had no inkling that they would

come to occupy such a major portion of his oeuvre. In fact he believed he was done with the genre after composing the first three of them. As it turned out, those three—*E-Machines*, *BAM!* and *Nocturnal* (Bridge CD9157)—, stunning as they are in their own right, opened the floodgates to increasingly brilliant conceits, ingeniously innovative twists on and extensions of the sorts of ideas, techniques and materials appropriate for études, and of course ever more outrageous titles. Initially Rakowski found writing his études to be therapeutic, a respite from an impasse in a larger work or a break between major projects. Over time, however, he has also found them to be a means of refreshing his technique and expanding his expressive horizons, introducing a welcome note of spontaneity and fluency that complements his rigorous training and formidable skills. They are of course a perfect outlet for the evocation and encapsulation of myriad emotions and states of mind; among these can be numbered the multiple facets of David's unique sense of humor, which ranges from the whimsical to the ironic to the

charmingly warped. More recently the études have taken on another function, proving to be a wellspring for generating larger-scale compositions, in particular his Piano Concerto (2005-2006), composed for Marilyn Nonken and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project. Featured on a new recording of Rakowski's orchestral music conducted by Gil Rose (BMOP/Sound 1009), the Concerto is one of David's most beautiful, exquisitely wrought and dynamic works to date, and draws upon several of the études either associated with or specifically composed for Ms. Nonken, including *E-Machines*, *Corrente*, *The Third*, *Man*, and *Sliding Scales* (Bridge CD9157), as well as *Plucking A* and *Twelve-Step Program* (Bridge CD9121).

Rakowski's rules for étude composition are as follows: 1) he must start at the beginning and compose from "left to right," with no preconceived notion of how the piece will unfold; 2) the composition of an étude cannot take longer than six days (the length of time it took him to compose *E-Machines*);

and 3) he can never revise an étude, not ever; he can only start over. In keeping with the succinctness of the genre, as well as with David's aesthetic preferences, formal elegance and clarity are prized; most of these works can be understood as embodying, in one way or another, traditional notions of exposition, development and recapitulation. (One other rule that was in effect for most of the project but has recently been abrogated, was that every étude whose number ended with a zero would employ the quasi-triplet figure known to jazzers as "swing eighths.")

The études may be divided loosely into three categories, which can and often do overlap: 1) those that deal primarily with specific musical materials such as chord types, rhythmic figures, dynamic contrasts, intervals or even a single pitch that is obsessively sustained or repeated; 2) those concerned with specific playing techniques (right hand or left hand only, inside the piano, a middle voice played by the nose, tone clusters, pedaling, staccato/legato); and 3) those that explore

particular styles or genres (boogie-woogie, rock and roll, funk, progressive rock, ragtime, tango, stride). A possible subcategory has lately opened up that includes pieces employing doublings or alternative keyboard instruments. No. 71, *Chase*, requires the pianist to play celesta, *Berceuse* (No. 87) can be performed on piano, toy piano or both, and No. 88, *Toyed Together*, is for piano and toy piano. There is even an étude for a talking pianist (No. 74, *Not*), composed for Adam Marks, which employs a text by David's friend, the author Rick Moody.

Harmonic lucidity, consistency and—very importantly—careful control of the rate at which harmonies change are paramount in Rakowski's music generally, and the études duly reflect these concerns as well. One of David's greatest gifts as a composer is his unerring sense of harmonic rightness, which is as evident in virtually every bar of the études as it is in his other music. This flawless harmonic instinct, animated by his contrapuntal mastery, allows him to draw connections between the popular

musical influences of his youth (jazz, pop, rock and funk) and the modern masterworks of Schoenberg, Berg, Bartók, Stravinsky, Babbitt and Boulez that also engaged him at a formative age. His lexicon of "cool chords" includes but is not limited to harmonic complexes like the "7th-sharp-9th chord" (e.g. C-E-G-B-flat-E-flat) and its derivatives, beloved not only of blues, jazz and rock artists, but also of many of the twentieth century composers named above. As you shall hear, it turns out that major triads can also qualify as cool chords (No. 65, Rick's Mood).

In terms of sheer volume David Rakowski has now produced many more piano études than the most venerable and celebrated composers who contributed to the genre (Chopin, Liszt, Scriabin, Rakhmaninov, Debussy and Ligeti), this despite the fact that he himself is not a pianist. It therefore speaks especially well of his efforts in this area that some of the finest performers specializing in the performance of new piano music have enthusiastically embraced these pieces.

Amy Briggs has been a particularly stalwart champion of the Rakowski études for a number of years now, and her seemingly inexhaustible pianistic prowess, which encompasses every degree of power and nuance required by this music, render her the most persuasive advocate any composer could desire. In her hands, David's compositional virtuosity and her pianistic virtuosity become indissolubly wedded.

Not only do Rakowski's études comprise one of the most significant recent contributions to contemporary solo piano literature, they also provide an excellent point of entry into the musical universe of one of the most gifted, accomplished and original American composers of his generation, presenting the basic elements of his musical language in a clear and distilled form. Even if he holds fast to his resolve to end his exploration of piano études with the completion of Book X, and resists the temptation to go to XI, David Rakowski has with this collection already bestowed a substantial boon upon at least three distinct constituencies:

pianists, who can strive to master this music, composers, who can profit from studying it and attempting to mine its secrets, and listeners, who, along with the previous two groups, can marvel at and revel in its manifold delights.

From Book VII:

#70 STUTTER STAB, Étude on sharp dynamic contrasts (2006)

The title, conferred by the composer Beth Wiemann, who is married to Rakowski, is a variation on the expression "stutter step," a term that has been used both in tennis and in basketball. In tennis it denotes running forward with small steps in a squatting position with the racquet raised in the front, often in preparation for a volley, and the expression sometimes has been appropriated to suggest cautious or uncertain steps in performing a task or reaching a decision. In basketball it refers to a common warm-up drill involving quick shuffling of the feet across a length of flooring, the object being to keep the players alert and on point as they defend

their teammates in the actual game. Both usages make a certain amount of sense in the context of this étude, with its nervous energy, skittish, bebop-inspired rhythms and the unpredictability of its dynamics, with their “stabbing” accents, enhanced by the delicious crunchiness of the harmonies. The composer observes that, “in the middle of the piece the chords slow down and get sustained while a line in the middle of the texture emerges and disappears.” Composed in 2006 at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, this is also the first étude with a number ending in zero that is completely devoid of swing eighths.

From Book VI:

#51 ZIPPER TANGO Tango étude on grace notes (2003)

Written for Amy Briggs' Tango Project, this étude explores the distinction that David drew between the “slow, sultry tango” and the “faster, more headlong march-like tango.” The outer sections exemplify the former and the middle section the latter, featuring sinuous lines,

luscious harmonies and grace notes alternately sidling up to and mashing up against the main melodic line. Rakowski also appropriated a double grace note figure that he noticed in many of the “sultry” tangos he listened to, which to his ears imparted a special heaviness to the bass. That figure in the low register elicited what ultimately became the title of the piece from Rick Moody, who upon hearing the MIDI realization of the piece, opined that those grace notes sounded like zippers.

#54 PEDAL TO THE METAL Pedaling etude (2003)

One of six études written in four weeks during a residency at Yaddo, this one (along with several others, it turns out) owes its concept as well as its title to Rick Moody. David describes it as “a piece in which all three pedals are used a lot, and specifically.” Traditionally the damper or sustaining pedal is the most often used of the three, helping to blend harmonies together and aid in producing the illusion of legato. The next most

frequently employed is the *una corda* or soft pedal, which creates a more muted effect, both in terms of actual volume as well as in timbre. The *sostenuto* pedal catches a pitch (or chord or interval) when it is depressed immediately after having been struck, enabling it to be sustained independently while other notes are played detached or with selective use of the damper pedal; it also allows notes that are depressed silently to be caught and to create a kind of eerily beautiful vapor trail of overtone resonance as other notes are attacked. As long as the *sostenuto* pedal remains depressed, this resonance will linger for quite a while after the pianist stops playing. Rakowski makes fine use of this device in this étude by means of carefully timed rests. (Listening with headphones is recommended in order to gain the full effect.) The composer notes that the piece “has a two-part structure, with the first dominated by the soft pedal and the second by the *sostenuto* pedal.” He also makes interesting use of the soft pedal in tandem with the *sostenuto* pedal, a combination not as frequently encountered even in modern piano

literature. It is also noteworthy that many pieces that exploit pedal resonance do so in the context of a slow tempo, which this one, in keeping with its moniker, emphatically does not.

#53 CELL DIVISION Treble étude on arpeggios (2003)

The arpeggios that generated this étude are rising and falling ones spelling out a C major 7th chord; in many cell phones, including, apparently, David's at the time he came up with the idea for this piece, these are heard when the phone is turned on (ascending arpeggio) or off (descending arpeggio). Not quite ready yet to begin work on a piece for the New England String Ensemble (the *Dream Symphony*, 2003), Rakowski thought these figures well-suited to a light and airy étude that remains confined to the upper half of the keyboard; its lowest note is the G below middle C and, fittingly, G is the lowest note of the opening upward arpeggio. After the initial turning-on sound, the “make call” sound (3 notes) is heard, and the piece concludes with

the turning-off sound and the “end call” sound (the “make call” sound in reverse). These simple diatonic materials are gradually chromaticized by the accretion of new pitches. Later in the *étude*, several passages in broken octaves spell out the opening chord, over a longer time span and with interruptions, in its original ordering (G-B-C-E).

#52 MOODY'S BLUES, Rock and roll *étude* on repeated chords (2003)

Rick Moody, having just viewed a camcorder movie of Amy Briggs performing *Étude No. 40, Strident* (Bridge CD9157), found it to be a fascinating mix of genuine stride piano and Rakowski's personal brand of modernism. This intriguing combination, and Amy's powerful pianism, convinced Moody that Rakowski should write her an *étude à la Jerry Lee Lewis*, replete with his signature glissandos. (The pianist, however, is not required to stand up while playing, kick away the piano bench or place his or her feet on the keyboard.) “The suggestion was so outrageous that I couldn't resist

trying it,” the composer recalled, “and naturally it came about via an *étude* in right hand repeated chords.” He came to view it as a modernist piano piece that gradually discovers its inner rock and roll tune. David further points out that the opening harmony, which, with its major-minor, almost bluesy quality, is common currency in modernist composition and eventually morphs—merely by altering one note—into “the chord that Jerry Lee Lewis would pound at if his blues were in C.”

#57 CHORD SHARK, Slow *étude* on thick chords (2003)

Rakowski's whimsical titles occasionally belie the lyrical intensity and emotional weight of some of his works. One of two *études* composed for Corey Hamm for performance in a competition, the concept for *Chord Shark*, a slow-tempo “cool chord” *étude*, was suggested by its dedicatee. While Hamm had the C minor prelude of Chopin in mind as a model, David turned for inspiration to the late piano works of Brahms—particular

favorites of his—, choosing to base this *étude* on the *Intermezzo*, Op. 116, No. 6. Rakowski begins by changing the bass note of Brahms' opening E major chord to an F natural; he then recontextualizes some of the German master's own dissonant yet always sonorous harmonies. With painstaking attention to subtleties of voice leading, David simultaneously gives an object lesson in how late nineteenth century Romantic harmony evolved seamlessly into the hyper-Romantic atonal language that he inherited from Schoenberg and Berg, and pays homage to both Romantic and Modernist traditions in his own beautiful, highly personal and ultimately moving manner.

#56 CRAZY EIGHTS, Fast octave and black/white key *étude* (2003)

To say the very least, there is much for the pianist to keep track of in this *étude*.

The tempo is extremely rapid, both hands are entirely in octaves throughout its duration, and each hand is restricted

to only the black keys or the white keys. Whichever hand has the black keys is given a key signature of five flats. At first it is the right hand plays the white keys while the left plays the black, but the hand distributions reverse at the climax of the piece. One especially tricky technical aspect is that the two hands are dealing with mutually exclusive pitch collections, but at the same time they often come perilously close together. In terms of register, shape and rhythm the recapitulation is identical to the opening, except with the hand assignments flipped. Rakowski describes it as sounding a little like “a conversation between two crazy people (high register, low register) that gets a little heated, and one of them mumbles and walks away.”

**#60 ACCENTS OF MALICE
Accent *étude* (2003)**

As mentioned in the opening of these notes, this is the last *étude* whose number ends in zero that will employ swing eighths. So, in much the same way that a beloved character gets killed off in a

television series, Rakowski engineers the demise both of that rhythm and the rule that ordained its use. After the swing eighths pattern is set up and acted upon, some of the measures introduce much faster note values that eventually obliterate not only the swing eighth figures but also any clear sense of pulse. Precedent exists for this kind of treatment in an earlier swing eighths étude, No. 50, *No Stranger to Our Planet* (Bridge CD9157), but it is carried out more ruthlessly here. This being an “accent” étude, Rakowski usually directs the stress to be placed on the weak part of the swing rhythm, the way any self-respecting jazzer would play them. The accenting becomes more challenging once the swing eighths have succumbed to their fate. David adds, “This was written while I had a particularly intense summer cold, so some of the sudden flurries of accents represent the coughing jags I was getting.”

#58 WOUND TIGHT
Fast chords étude (2003)

Wound Tight, the second of two études

written for Corey Hamm to play in a competition (along with *Chord Shark*), is another “cool chord” étude, but this time at a much faster clip. Most of the piece is comprised of very rapidly moving chords, with both hands moving in perfect rhythmic unison, occasionally interrupted by a brief passage in slow chords. Once again, as with *Crazy Eights*, Rakowski invokes the image of two insane people engaged in conversation. This time he describes their exchange as animated, adding that at some point they “stop listening to each other and scream a little bit.”

#55 EIGHT MISBEHAVIN’
Slow octave étude (2003)

Composed as a wedding present to Rick Moody and Amy Osborn, this étude was written on the day of their nuptials, and was designed to be simple enough for Amy—and, by extension, David—to play. In contrast to some of the other octave-based études, this piece is quite restrained and gentle in character. The first two bars are taken from the opening

of the slow movement of Brahms’ F minor Clarinet Sonata, Op. 120, No. 1, and the entire étude is spun out seamlessly from this beginning.

#59 ZECCATELLA
Staccato-legato étude (2003)

“Zecca” is Italian for “tick,” one of which attached itself to David while he was composing this étude. Geoffrey Bursleson, another wonderful pianist for whom several Rakowski piano études have been written, suggested the title be a variation on tarantella, a whirling dance traditionally said to be caused by a tarantula bite; “zeccatella” would therefore be a dance resulting from a tick bite. Written for Amy Briggs, the impetus for this piece was her suggestion that David compose a staccato-legato étude – a legato line surrounded by staccato figuration. The melody is first presented in triple octaves, with the upper voice legato and the lower one staccato; the lower part then takes on more of the character of a true bass line. David’s initial characterization of the staccato figuration

was that of “a seasick samba,” which is not altogether an inaccurate description. Gradually the texture is taken over by a 32nd note figure first heard in bar 14, and the piece becomes—similarly to the tarantella—more of a whirling dance.

From Book V:

#42 MADAM I’M ADAM
Little palindrome étude (2002)

The challenge Rakowski has set himself here is that of constructing a piece solely out of phrases that are palindromes (consisting of the same notes forwards and backwards, converging on a central pitch, dyad or chord). In fact, the entire étude is itself a large palindrome, the center of which comprises the highest and lowest pitches in the whole piece, with no other notes in between. In order to counteract the stasis inherent in this extreme degree of symmetry, sufficient variety in the phrase lengths is crucial, and David takes great pains to ensure that variety. He begins the piece with a very short, three-note palindromic

phrase, follows it with others of varying lengths, and continues to expand and contract these component modules as necessary to maintain a sense of direction and lyrical flow. Additionally, he often has overlapping palindromes occurring between the two hands. The second half adds other simple palindromes against the playing out of the large-scale one. With these subtle adjustments, Rakowski ensures that rigor never becomes rigidity, and that the essential poetry of the piece comes through unimpeded.

#44 TRIADDLED Étude on triads (2002)

Only triads—major, minor, diminished and augmented—are to be found in this étude. Here, however, rather than being savored for themselves alone they are constantly being combined and recombined to form polychords (chords made up of two or more simple harmonies, e.g. triads). It is well known to composers that where two or more chords are gathered together they can be combined to create what is amazingly similar to a

chemical reaction, much like what happens when the tastes of two different foods interact. Some chords blend almost seamlessly, while others seem mutually repellent. Many flavors of polychords are thus available, depending upon how discerning a palate the composer possesses. They can be crunchy, or sweet-and-sour, or cloying, or tart, or warm, or ... crunchy. (The fact that each chord contains at least one note that is foreign to the other virtually guarantees a certain amount of crispiness.) Fortunately, David is a very fine cook and nearly as dedicated to ferreting out new gastronomic delights as he is to composing, so he is perhaps at an advantage when it comes to serving up aural deliciousness. He describes the work as a fantasia, essentially a free form, but it seems to have four basic sections, the last of which is a kind of abbreviated return of the opening material. After the opening there is a slower, somewhat mysterious sounding section, with a prominent pedal point on A in the bass. This pedal point returns in the fast music that follows, this time irregularly repeated in the treble register of

the piano. Rakowski says that the rising triads from the first fast music of Copland's Appalachian Spring Suite—which themselves form a polychord—were the inspiration for the upward arpeggiations in this passage.

#45 PINK TAB Accelerando-ritenuto étude (2002)

Its seeming pharmaceutical reference notwithstanding, the title of this étude has nothing to do either with drugs of any kind, or with phrases that speed up and slow down, which is ostensibly Rakowski's preoccupation here. David modeled the piece on Countess Geschwitz's music in Berg's opera *Lulu*, in which speeding up and slowing down becomes a leitmotif for that character. Adding to the technical gauntlet he threw down—and subsequently took up—is the fact that the accelerando-ritenuto phrases vary in length and speed, at times overlapping into as many as four parts. There are noteworthy pedal points, particularly one on D that drops out of earshot from time to time but ultimately

always resurfaces. Though the title really can't be explained at all, this is what David had to say about it: "*Pink Tab* is actually nonsense. More than fifteen years ago, when my friend Ross Bauer was writing a large ensemble piece, I dreamed about its premiere, at which it was entitled *Pink Tab*. Ross thought this was so funny that he told Bruce Taub, his editor at C.F. Peters, that he was submitting a piece with that name, and Bruce was unamused. Therefore, I used it instead." Nonsense or no, the closing harmonies are among the most beautiful in the entire étude collection.

#49 SALTIMMANO Finger-pedaling étude (2002)

Finger-pedaling of course does not involve pedaling at all. It is defined as the careful use of fingering to create legato without the use of the pedal, in order to allow staccato and other figuration to surround a long sustained line without unwanted blurring of the harmonies, and to foster contrapuntal clarity. Finger-pedaling is particularly prized in per-

forming J. S. Bach's keyboard works on the modern piano, as there is still strong disapproval in many quarters of using any pedal at all in his music. The development of a dependable finger-pedaling technique removes this temptation and probably also builds character. The composer describes *Saltimanno* thusly: "It's got a long line surrounded by jumpy, jittery atonal figuration and a surprise chorale in the middle that emerges as the contrapuntal lines slow down. The title means 'jumps in hand', a pun on the famous Italian dish *saltimbocca*, which means 'jumps in your mouth.'"

From Book VII:

#61 MÉNAGE À DROIT Right hand étude (2004)

Graced with another gem of a title from Rick Moody, this étude for right hand alone was composed to help cheer up Amy Briggs, who was suffering from tendonitis in her left hand. The trajectory of the piece begins with light, fast figuration in the treble, notated in small

notes—à la Chopin—to differentiate it from the main tune in the lower voice, gradually transforms rhythmically into a bit of a swing eighths groove, moves into the bass, and works its way back to the opening texture. A pedal D in the middle register, with the aid of the sostenuto pedal, is held and repeated, eventually moving down to C and signaling the beginning of the transition back to the opening music, before another brief excursion to the bass prepares the way for the final bar, in which a luminous chord is built up that covers the entire registral spectrum, with one final nod to the initial figuration near the very top of the keyboard.

#62 NAME THAT TURN Étude on turns (2004)

This étude bears the distinction of the longest hiatus between its completion and the granting of its title, which was provided by the composer Hillary Zipper over brunch about a week and a half after David finished it. The initial impetus came from his having heard some Haydn

songs at a student recital at Brandeis. The word "turn" refers to an embellishing figure that consists of two descending steps followed by an ascending one (or its inversion), and many of the phrases in the piano part began with turns. He soon wondered "what a piece with a LOT of turns would sound like," and realized that it would of course be incumbent upon him to write such a piece and find out, which he of course did. About midway through he indulges in a couple of proper Hindemith-style fugatos in three voices, and adds an extra pianistic hurdle near the end as fast broken octaves—a signature move in quite a number of the Rakowski études—are piled on top of the turns.

#64 A THIRD IN THE HAND Étude on arpeggiated thirds (2004)

Marked "Swift and Airy" and described by its composer as "a very simple piece on arpeggiated ('melodic') thirds," this is actually a rather sneaky little piece. The thirds begin in the right hand, making use of the aforementioned (as in *Pedal to the Metal*) old trick of silently depressing

a cluster in the bass and holding it with the sostenuto pedal, to obtain that lovely left over resonance. In addition, the phrasing works against the meter, giving no inkling of the true gigue-like pulse. Lulled into complacency, the listener at first might not realize that a second voice has entered. The two voices gambol about and tumble over one another, until yet a third voice arrives, infecting the gigue rhythm with suspiciously "swing eighths" style gestures, which, in the New World Order (post-*Accents of Malice*), we can now surmise are still fair game as long as the étude's number doesn't end with zero. As is often the case, all registers are eventually brought into play and the texture thins out significantly as the music returns to a mostly treble realm. At the conclusion, an octave is repeated in the right hand filled in with alternating major and minor thirds, and the ending sonority is the not-so-surprising G-sharp minor.

#67 AIN'T GOT NO RIGHT
Left hand étude (2005)

David often invites friends to help him name his études, in what he often refers to as "the title sweepstakes," and in the case of this étude, the competition grew quite heated indeed. Corey Hamm (for whom *Chord Shark* and *Wound Tight* had been written) had contacted Rakowski to say that he had tendonitis in his right hand, and wondered if David had any music for the left hand alone that he might be able to work on, perform or even premiere. Two right-hand études already existed, but nothing as yet for the left-hand, so David replied that, unfortunately, he would be unable to help Corey out this time. But as David remembered that his February vacation at Brandeis was imminent, and after he had thought about it for a while, he realized that he couldn't *not* write it, and set to work. Rakowski recalls, "Besides *Left Out to Dry* and *Sinister Motives*, pressure was heavy to call it *Gauche Busters*. But as I passed Rossini's restaurant in Concord, Mass., on my drive home from work,

the title came to me." We shall likely never know just what, if anything, the restaurant sighting had to do with any of this, but as for the music itself, the composer continues, "A bouncy but terse syncopated opening gives way to a more flowing middle section, which makes its way back to the opening music, and climaxes in a passage that moves from register to register quite quickly." For this listener, *Ain't Got No Right* has a kind of energy that seems somewhat akin to that of the "faster, more headlong march-like tango" referred to earlier in the notes for *Zipper Tango*.

#65 RICK'S MOOD, Chorale-étude
on major triads (2002/4/5)

There is an earlier, non-étude version of this piece, which resulted when Rick Moody challenged David to write a piece employing only major triads. Rakowski, in turn challenged Moody to write a rhyming poem. The first version was written in two and a half days and premiered by Amy Briggs as an encore at Brandeis in March of 2003. Rakowski

did not initially number the piece among the official études, but when Rick Moody asked him why it didn't qualify as an étude, the only answer he could come up with was that it wasn't long enough. Twice, in 2004 and 2005, he revisited it, adding, lengthening and rewriting various phrases, finally inserting it into Book 7 in time to assume its rightful place as Étude No. 65.

Unlike *Triaddled*, this étude sticks with one triad at a time, and only one variety: major. David directs that this work should be played "Like a Protestant Hymn," but also flexibly and expressively." It does sound a bit like an organ improvisation, somewhat reminiscent of Copland's setting of Emily Dickinson's "I've Heard an Organ Talk Sometimes," but with a more placid, less unhinged aspect. At first, the sheer velocity of the harmonic rhythm (not very different from that of many of Rakowski's non-triadic pieces) imparts a surreal quality, almost as though the listener is watching time-lapse photography of clouds passing by, seemingly unrelated one to another,

but gradually taking on certain logical connections supplied by the eye of the beholder and the speed of the images as perceived. The harmonies, similarly, are not connected by anything resembling a traditional tonal progression, but once again Rakowski's superb command of voice leading connections renders them not only logical, but also extraordinarily affecting.

#66 LESS IS, Impatient minimalist
étude on chord-building (2005)

While its title ultimately came from Amy Briggs, the conceit was, yet again, the brainchild of Rick Moody, who wondered aloud one day about what Rakowski might sound like if he were a minimalist after the manner of Phillip Glass, but using dissonant chords instead of consonant ones, and faster chord changes. While perhaps not a question for the ages, in a bygone era it could (though likely would not) have been pondered by the likes of Rich Little. ("What would David Rakowski sound like if he were a minimalist composer

like Phillip Glass? I think it would go something like this.") In his response to Rick's query, David decided to use an upward-moving arpeggio from the last of his just-completed *Sex Songs*, as the main material, an appropriate choice, as this particular song was a setting of a text by Moody. This arpeggio is not a normal one, but more like a chord that builds from the bottom up, one note at a time, with the individual pitches of the arpeggio perceived as the discrete notes of a melody. That establishes itself as the norm for this piece, along with a repeated E, as well as the inversion of the basic gesture, i.e., the chord's being built from the top note down. At the climax of the piece, both versions of the gesture occur, and the harmonies certainly are a far cry from what would be expected in a Phillip Glass work.

#63 KILLER B'S
Étude on a pedal (2004)

As David saw it, the problem was this: in a chromatic idiom with a fast harmonic rhythm like his, is it possible to sustain

the listener's attention with a piece built on a pedal tone? This is his attempt at a solution. He begins the étude by having the pedal tone repeat in a straightforward quarter note pulse. Over time he introduces first the dotted eighth, and then alternations of dotted eighth with eighth, to throw the rhythm off kilter and also to intensify the obsessive quality of the gesture. Contributing to this is the fact that the B starts to move into other registers. Halfway through the piece, the repeated B starts slowly and continues to build up a head of steam, in what the composer says is a veiled tribute to the B'52s's tune "Rock Lobster." Ultimately the B is picked up and placed into the tried and true Rakowski broken octave gambit, used in a particularly ingenious way here. He methodically uses all the B's on the keyboard but the lowest one; every time it seems that that low B will be attained, such hopes are dashed by a landing on the lowest C. The last time this happens the C is sustained, only to resolve downward to the B, just in time for a brief recapitulation. It is interesting to speculate that at least in the back of his

mind Rakowski might have been thinking of the Invention on the note B from Act III of Berg's *Wozzeck*, which culminates in *Wozzeck's* murder of Marie, and, unlike this étude, actually does resolve on C.

#69 PALM DE TERRE
Étude on clusters (2006)

Composed at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and given its title by Beth Wiemann, this piece reflects Rakowski's desire to write "a slow and dreamy kind of étude, where I tried to make soft, pretty clusters and not the vicious pounding ones so often associated with clusters. Not a complicated piece, it sounds a little like Ives in places." A wide ranging, elastic, lyrical line slowly and quietly works its way through the registers, accompanied by the ever-gentle, bell-like clusters, which are played sometimes by only one hand and at others by both. David directs that white-key clusters be played with the palm of the hand and all black-key clusters by the flattened fingers. The clusters are notated in such a way as to provide maximum flexibility for the

performer, allowing him or her to alter the width of the clusters to accommodate that of the player's hand, rendering it as easy as possible to execute the clusters at the requisite soft dynamic level. Besides Ives, a hint of Debussy can be detected in this jewel of an étude as well.

#68 ABSOFUNKINLUTELY
Funk étude (2005)

Rakowski calls this title "the politer version of the last line spoken by Mr. Big in the last episode of *Sex in the City*." Having just been freed from the burden of a music department chairmanship, he was supposed to embark on a new piano trio. Not yet in the frame of mind to tackle that project, he decided instead to write a new étude. Again Rick Moody's counsel was sought, and Rick suggested that David write a piece based on "Tower of Power licks." Though Tower of Power is a favorite of the composer, he was not inclined to take this advice too literally, because he did not relish the thought of having to seek other advice—of a legal nature—down the road, such licks

presumably being under copyright. He instead opted for some generic figures found in many funk tunes, and created a wildly celebratory piece that pays homage to some of his favorite music. The excellent young pianist Adam Marks took up this piece and premiered it in New York, later taking it to the Concours International de Piano d'Orléans in 2006. This étude won a Chevillion-Bonnaud Prize for the best new piano work played in the first round of that competition.

The first two short sections (with markings of, respectively, "Dirty" and "A little less dirty") are repeated, and range all over the keyboard. The long middle section is a long build-up marked—partly in reference to a piece by the composer John Adams, but mostly out of relief over new found liberty from department chair duties—"Dirty (The Not Chairman Dances)". This gradually becomes "Filthy," climaxes on a couple of wide repeated chords, and then a coda ensues ("Still dirty but more respectable"), which includes a figure that can be repeated 3 to 7 times, as the spirit so moves.



David Rakowski is a failed trombonist, and never was much of a pianist. He was born and raised in St. Albans, Vermont, where he played trombone in high school and community bands, and keyboards in a mediocre rock band called the Silver Finger. He received his musical training at New England Conservatory, Princeton, and Tanglewood, where he studied with Robert Ceely, John Heiss, Milton Babbitt, Paul Lansky, Peter Westergaard, and Luciano Berio. He spent the four

years after graduate school not writing his dissertation, holding down dismal part-time word processing jobs and helping to run the Griffin Music Ensemble in Boston. At the end of those four years, he took a running leap into academia with a one-year appointment at Stanford University. Seven years later, he finished his dissertation.

In addition to nine-plus books of piano études, he has written three symphonies, five concertos, three large wind ensemble pieces, several pieces for children, and a sizable collection of chamber and vocal music, as well as incidental music.

Rakowski's awards include the Rome Prize, an Academy Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Barlow Prize, and the Elise L. Stoeger Prize from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, as well as awards and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the NEA, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Tanglewood Music Center, BMI, Columbia University, the Concours International de Piano Orléans

(the Chevallion-Bonnaud composition prize), the International Horn Society, and various artist colonies. He has been commissioned by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, the U.S. Marine Band, Sequitur, the Kaufman Center, Network for New Music, Sequitur, Koussevitzky Music Foundation (with Ensemble 21 in 1996 and with Boston Modern Orchestra Project in 2006), Collage New Music, the Kaufman Center/Merkin Hall, Boston Musica Viva, the Fromm Foundation (twice), Dinosaur Annex, Speculum Musicae, the Riverside Symphony, Parnassus, Triple Helix, and others. In 1999 his *Persistent Memory*, commissioned by Orpheus, was a Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Music, and in 2002 his *Ten of a Kind*, commissioned by "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band, was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. He has been composer-in-residence at the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival, Guest Composer at the Wellesley Composers Conference, and a Master Artist at the Atlantic Center for the Arts. His music is published by C.F. Peters, is recorded on New World/CRI, Innova, Americus,

Albany, Capstone, and BMOP/Sound as well as on Bridge, and has been performed worldwide.

After his year at Stanford, he taught at Columbia University for six years, and then skipped town to join the faculty of Brandeis University, where he is now the Walter W. Naumburg Professor of Composition. While on the faculty of Brandeis, he has also taken part-time appointments teaching at Harvard University (twice) and New England Conservatory (also twice). He lives in Boston exurbia and in Maine and Vermont with his wife Beth Wiemann and exactly two cats named Sunset and Camden.



Amy Briggs has established herself as a leading interpreter of the music of living composers, while also bringing a fresh perspective to music of the past. Her recordings of David Rakowski's *Piano Etudes* on Bridge 9121 & 9157 have received great critical acclaim. Based in Chicago, she is a featured soloist and chamber musician on the Chicago

Symphony Orchestra's MusicNOW series, where she has worked with composers such as Simon Bainbridge, Pierre Boulez, Oliver Knussen, David Lang, Tania León, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and Augusta Read Thomas. In the 2005-2006 season, she premiered Knussen's *A Fragment from Ophelia's Last Dance* for solo piano. She was awarded a stipend prize at the 2000 Darmstadt Internationale Fereinkurse für Neue Musik.

The *Chicago Tribune* has called "extraordinary" Briggs's "mastery of what lay on the dense, printed page and beyond," and the *Chicago Sun-Times* called her a "ferociously talented pianist." *Classics Today* said of volume one of the Rakowski Etudes project, Briggs "does a splendid job projecting the music's wit, and her unflappable virtuosity makes even the densest writing sound effortless... a marvelous disc that piano fanciers should snap up without hesitation." In addition, the *New York Times* praised her recent recording of Augusta Read Thomas's six *Piano Etudes* as "elegant" and "precisely shaded."

Amy Briggs has appeared as a soloist and chamber musician in the United States, Europe, Asia and Africa. In 1993, she was selected by the United States Information Agency to tour Africa and South Asia as a United States Artistic Ambassador. Her highly acclaimed concerts combined traditional repertoire with contemporary American music. Today, her recital programs connect composers from all eras and nationalities. She has performed with the Callisto Ensemble, the Chicago Contemporary Players, Chicago Pro Musica, the Chicago Chamber Musicians, Klang, and the Empyrean Ensemble, and as an extra keyboardist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She has also been a prizewinner in the Joanna Hodges International Piano Competition and the Frinna Awerbuch International Piano Competition.

Amy Briggs has appeared as soloist with the Chicago Chamber Orchestra, New Hampshire Philharmonic, and the Symphony Orchestra of Sri Lanka, among others, and her live and recorded performances have been featured on

radio stations around the United States and Europe. Recordings soon to be released include a disc of 20th and 21st century tangos for solo piano, a concerto for piano and wind ensemble of George Flynn on Southport Records, and chamber music recordings of Conlon Nancarrow and Erik Oña for Wergo. A graduate of Skidmore College and DePaul University, Ms. Briggs studied with Ursula Oppens at Northwestern University, where she earned her Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Piano Performance. She is a Steinway Artist .

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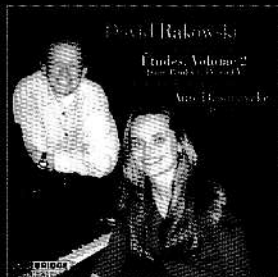
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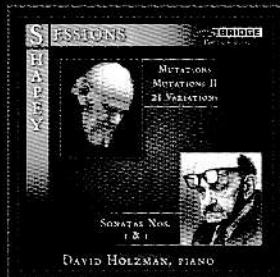
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