

Extended Liner Notes

The piano music of Marc Mellits spans over 30 years. Though the composer has published only five works for solo piano to date, there is an incredible amount of variety presented in this music. These five pieces feature varying structures, styles, and even different harmonic languages. While the quintessential compositional elements that Mellits has become known for can be traced through almost every measure, namely his rhythmic relentlessness and fascination with syncopations and mixed meters, each piece is undeniably unique.

10 Colors for Piano was written in 1987, when Mellits was a college student. He explains that the piece was his attempt at reconciling the two types of music he was writing at this point – that which he was composing for himself in secret and that which he would present to his teachers. Though he was afraid that the former was not “real music,” he decided to show his professors. He did not receive the abrasive feedback he had anticipated and instead found that everyone was accepting of his work. Mellits attributes part of this acceptance to the decade he was composing in. He admits that there was less restriction in the 1980s, and that it was okay that he was “this crazy 21-year-old banging on the piano.” Perhaps this also contributes to the way Mellits perceives *10 Colors for Piano*, calling it “almost drug-influenced” and “just nuts.”

This fourteen-minute piece is a set of ten short movements, each characterizing a specific color. While there are many similarities between *10 Colors for Piano* and Mellits’s later works, one substantial difference is that this piece operates outside of common tonal practice. Some of the movements are less dissonant than others, but one would be hard-pressed to find Mellits working with similar harmonic languages in his later compositions.

Many of the movements are very fast and loud with aggressive rhythms and syncopations in the manner of Bartok or Prokofiev, and Mellits often takes these musical elements to the extreme. It is these more fiery movements where one gets a sense of Mellits's aforementioned colorful descriptions of the pieces. The best example of the pianist "banging on the piano" is the tenth and final color "Black." It features several clusters notated as a "handslap" with an entire measure dedicated to a series of these clusters, notated "ffffff." There are more contemplative movements such as "Silver" and "Orange" which are slower, more ethereal, and contain lush harmonies. "Blue" is also similar in this regard, although it is unique in that it evokes characteristics of jazz like a walking bassline and a bluesy melody. This movement is also the only one with a key signature (Mellits attributes a lack of writing pieces with key signatures to the 1980s as well).

Nearly twenty years later, Mellits wrote *Agu* – a twelve-minute, three-movement work published in 2004. The piece was written for pianist Andrew Russo, an early champion of Mellits's piano music. Mellits wrote *Agu* just after his daughter Mara was born (the title is her first word), and he would compose the piece with her sleeping in his lap; thus, the two outer movements are very gentle. This piece starkly differs from the extreme dissonance found in *10 Colors for Piano*. Each movement is named after a poem by Romanian author Ioana Ieronim. Mellits knows Ieronim personally and has a strong connection with Romania as his wife is Romanian and they visit there frequently.

The first movement of *Agu* is entitled "Audio." Ieronim's poem of the same name begins, "Sheep bells and the cathedral chimes of Chartres." Mellits evokes these sounds with a series of bright chords and lush harmonies in the high register of the piano. These chords change very

slowly and eventually migrate to the warmer middle part of the keyboard, creating an overall affect that is tranquil and pastoral.

Movement two is the tempestuous and fiery “The Triumph of the Water Witch.” Ieronim’s poem comes from a collection acting as a political commentary on communism, and it certainly sparks the imagination as one line reads, “A drumroll at the end of the street announced the Triumph of the Water Witch: the demon’s hair permed into wire, her snout smeared with chemical rouge, a pistol in her boot, a train station clock on her wrist.”

The final movement “You’re a Fake!” revisits the serene atmosphere of the first. It also reflects the introspective and enigmatic text of the poem which includes phrases such as “too late, it’s all in vain – all stores are closed” and “...the Event takes place a long way off, maybe never.” The music is similar to “Audio” in its slow-moving, rich harmonies, though this movement is much longer.

Mellits was commissioned to write Bagatelle on a Theme of Beethoven by the International Beethoven Festival in Chicago in 2012. He was tasked to write a bagatelle based on a theme of Beethoven’s, and he settled on the Prometheus theme from the finale of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 3 “Eroica” in E-flat major, Op. 55.

Beethoven’s original theme appears at the beginning almost in its entirety, but it is interrupted by the sounding of three powerful chords. We then hear the tail end of the theme, interspersed with more of the chords. The main material of the piece then commences, taking inspiration mostly from the end of the theme and turning it “funky” (as Mellits indicates in the score). Mellits achieves this effect primarily through rhythm. The left hand maintains a steady bassline of alternating octaves which establishes the harmonic progression. This allows the right

hand to bring out its own syncopated patterns against the bass. The bagatelle concludes with the same sets of sharp chords introduced at the beginning.

The first of Mellits's 3 Etudes was written in 2006 as a gift for Andrew Russo. Mellits explains that he and Russo were both having children at the same time. They found out that a C-section was necessary for their wives, so they had to be induced. Mellits thought that there was something very "medieval" about the idea of a baby being induced, and thus "Medieval Induction" was conceived.

The piece opens with a bombastic introduction at the bottom of the keyboard which settles into a kind of aggressive, off-kilter groove. Following a sudden break of sound, there is a very reflective and slow-moving progression of chords. This, however, is only momentary as we are quickly pulled into a new section that reestablishes the rhythmic intensity from the beginning. This alternation between loud rhythmic patterns and brief respites remains a theme throughout the piece. The material from the beginning reappears at the end of the piece, now in the highest register of the piano.

Mellits explains that the title for the second etude, "Defensive Chili," came to him while watching a soccer game between U.S.A. and Chile. The announcer was perfectly fluent in Spanish, yet whenever he would say the country "Chile," he would pronounce it as "chili." And when Chile was on defense, he called them "defensive chili." Mellits found this idea amusing and could not pass up the opportunity to use it as a title.

Also written in 2006, this etude begins with the right and left hands almost violently alternating back and forth. Mellits often obscures the beat so that it is difficult to tell what meter the music is in. The aggressiveness of the opening leads to a quieter section where the melody is

found in the left hand. These two sections trade back and forth, ending with the alternating motive from the beginning.

The third etude titled “Etude No. 45: Tweets of Orange Fear” was commissioned by pianist Nicholas Phillips in 2018 for his #45miniatures project. Mellits admits that he does not usually write political music, but with this etude, he was inspired by the image of President Donald Trump desperately typing out tweets in the middle of the night.

Thus, the piece begins with a rhythmic, almost frantic, single note. It is then revealed that this morse code-like repeated note is in fact the melody, and it is accompanied by a repeated bassline. This quickly gives way to a drastically slower section, containing fragments of the original melody, and ultimately ending with one final “tweet.”

Mellits’s most recent piece *Izaya* was published in 2018 and co-commissioned by Brianna Matzke and Roger McVey. Mellits was among a group of composers tasked to write a piece in response to a song from Bob Dylan’s album *Highway 61 Revisited*. Mellits writes that *Izaya* is the name of his great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather whom he found through DNA testing and ancestry research. Like Dylan’s songs, Mellits sought to tell a musical story of his family.

Izaya begins very softly and spatially with sparse chords. Mellits explains that the opening represents the slow evolution of his family. The slower section eventually gives way to a much livelier and upbeat section which Mellits says represents the faster paced immigration to the United States. From this, we get the return of the slower introductory material which continues until the end of the piece. Mellits writes, “The faster material eventually gives way to reveal that at its basis, all along, it was a variant of the same material heard at the opening, which then finally culminates, at the very end, when *Izaya* returns.”

This recording was engineered by Shu-Min Alice Chang, mixed and mastered by James Edel, and recorded November 2024 through February 2025 at the Voxman Music Building at the University of Iowa in Iowa City.