

## Liner Notes

The piano music of Marc Mellits spans over 30 years. With five works written to date, the 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. Mellits embraced the unrestricted and experimental style of the 1980s, and consequently, the work reflects the writing of an ambitious 21-year-old banging on the keys. 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.

Mellits wrote *Agu* in 2004, just after his daughter Mara was born (the title is her first word). Mellits would compose the piece with her sleeping in his lap; thus, the two outer movements are very gentle. Each movement is named after a poem by Romanian author Ioana Ieronim. 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. Movement two is the

tempestuous and fiery “The Triumph of the Water Witch” which features rapid repeated chords throughout. The final movement “You’re a Fake!” revisits the serene atmosphere of the first.

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.”

The first of Mellits’s 3 Etudes, “Medieval Induction,” was written in 2006 as a gift for Andrew Russo. Mellits and Russo were both having children at the same time, and Mellits thought that there was something very medieval about the idea of a baby being induced. The piece opens with a bombastic introduction at the bottom of the keyboard which settles into an aggressive, off-kilter groove. Following a sudden break of sound, there is a very reflective and slow-moving progression of chords. This alternation between loud rhythmic patterns and brief respites remains a theme throughout the piece. The title for the second etude, “Defensive Chili,” came to Mellits 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.” Mellits found this idea of a “defensive chili” 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. 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 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. This eventually gives way to a drastically slower section, containing fragments of the original melody, and ultimately ending with one final “tweet.”

*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*. *Izaya* is the name of Mellits’s 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.