

Repertoire Analysis

10 Colors for Piano was written in 1987, when Mellits was a college student at Eastman. 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 a “crazy 21-year-old banging on the piano.”³² Perhaps this also contributes to the way Mellits perceives *10 Colors for Piano*, calling it “almost drug-influenced” and “just nuts.”³³

This fourteen-minute piece is a set of ten short movements, each characterizing a specific color. There are no existing reference recordings or mentions in scholarship of this composition. While there are many similarities between *10 Colors for Piano* and Mellits’s later works – such as his use of constantly changing meters and rhythms – 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.

The high-powered first movement “Purple” is marked as “aggressive” and at approximately 192 beats per minute. It is often “fortissimo” or “triple forte” with the two hands in octaves, alternating back and forth violently. It is also very dissonant featuring these octaves

³²Marc Mellits, interview by Neil Krzeski, July 2024.

³³Marc Mellits, interview.

in half steps and minor ninth chords. “Purple” is a perfect example of Mellits’s use of quickly changing meters, as the meter changes five times in the first five measures (5/4, 7/4, 5/4, 6/4, and 7/8). The movement is relentless in its aggression, never letting up until the final chord; the beginning is shown in Figure 1.

♩ = approx. 192 +/-; aggressive

Figure 1: Mellits, *10 Colors for Piano*, “Purple,” mm. 1–3.

The next movement “Yellow” is similarly labeled “aggressive,” with a tempo of 172 beats per minute. It shares some characteristics with the preceding movement such as the constantly changing meters, syncopations, and loud dynamic markings. One big difference, however, is that “Yellow” has contrapuntal features, often containing two independent voices. Its lines are periodically interrupted with fermatas as seen in Figure 2.

♩ = approx. 172 +/-; aggressive

Figure 2: Mellits, *10 Colors for Piano*, “Yellow,” mm. 1–3.

The third movement is “Green” which almost seems to be a combination of the previous two. It begins with a homophonic texture, but by the second half of the piece, the hands are in rhythmic unison. The second half of this piece in particular strongly recalls the music of Bartok with its intense rhythmic unisons. These are demonstrated in Figure 3 and Figure 4, respectively.



Figure 3: Mellits, *10 Colors for Piano*, “Green,” mm. 1–3.



Figure 4: Mellits, *10 Colors for Piano*, “Green,” mm. 25–28.

The overall character of “Green” is spontaneous, alternating between driving, violent sections, whimsical moments, and a more nonchalant opening.

The next movement is called “Silver.” This is one of the few slower movements in the collection, marked as “dream-like and free.” There are many softer sections marked “piano,” “pianissimo,” or even “triple piano.” Throughout “Silver,” Mellits employs major seventh intervals, played simultaneously by both hands. These chords are constantly changing, resulting

in shifting harmonies which occur slowly but rhythmically and contribute to the dream state and ethereal atmosphere. A melody later emerges at the top of these harmonies.

The fifth movement “Red” is a study in subito dynamics. In the first two lines of music, there are twenty-two dynamic changes. It is another very quick movement written at 192 beats per minute (no other expressive or tempo marking given). In addition to dynamic control, it is also an exercise in maintaining a steady tempo and pulse.

“Red” is followed by the even shorter movement of eight measures entitled “Blue.” Unlike the surrounding movements, “Blue” features consonant harmonies, creating the impression that it does not belong with the others. Mellits imitates a walking bassline in the left hand while the right hand could be imagined as a trumpet or other melodic instrument interjecting bluesy licks and figures. This gives the entire piece a jazzy flavor.

After the smooth and cool “Blue,” we get “White.” This movement is 120 beats per minute, and Mellits indicates that it should be played “Percussive, yet ‘easy’; fast.” It features several rhythmic open fourths and fifths, and once again contains several changing meters. Mellits clearly marks the groupings of eighth notes by his use of slurs (e.g., 2+3+2 or 2+2+3), as shown in Figure 5.

Percussive, yet "easy"; fast; ♩ = approx. 120 +/-

ff

Figure 5: Mellits, *10 Colors for Piano*, “White,” mm. 1–3.

“Orange” is another slower movement at 92 beats per minute which deals exclusively with moving through the circle of fifths. It begins with snippets of broken fifths in triplets which become gradually louder with increasing motion. By the end, it is essentially a series of fifths, traversing the entire keyboard from bottom to top.

The ninth movement is called “Brown.” It bears many similarities to the first few movements in its loudness, rhythmic intensity, and changing meters. It is particularly similar to “Green,” although it is less polyphonic.

Saving the wildest movement for last, the tenth and final color is “Black.” It begins with four notated chord clusters, the fifth labeled as a “handslap.” This movement features several instances of these kinds of “slaps” – in fact, there is an entire measure dedicated to a series of these clusters, notated “ffffff.” The biggest point of emphasis in “Black” is contrast in dynamics, textures, and articulations.

Nearly twenty years after writing *10 Colors for Piano*, Mellits wrote *Agu*, a twelve-minute, three-movement work published in 2004. The piece was written for and dedicated to pianist Andrew Russo, and it was commissioned by the James S. Marcus Foundation.³⁴ The title of the piece comes from Mellits’s daughter’s first word.³⁵ Each movement is named after a poem by Romanian author Ioana Ieronim.³⁶ Mellits knows Ieronim personally and has a strong connection with Romania as his wife is Romanian and they visit there frequently.³⁷ Mellits has stated that he wrote *Agu* just after his first daughter Mara was born, and he would compose the piece with her sleeping in his lap; thus, the two outer movements are gentle, resulting in an

³⁴Marc Mellits, *Agu*, forward to score (Dacia Music, 2004).

³⁵Marc Mellits, interview by Neil Krzeski, July 2024.

³⁶Romanian freelance author and poet born in 1947, <https://www.ioanaieronim.ro>.

³⁷Marc Mellits, interview by Neil Krzeski, July 2024.

unusual slow-fast-slow structure.³⁸ The piece starkly differs from the dissonance and character of *10 Colors for Piano*. Andrew Russo adds, “The overall lyrical nature of *Agu* marked a strong departure from Mellits' pre-2004 work.”³⁹

The first movement of *Agu* is entitled “Audio.” Ieronim’s poem of the same name begins, “Sheep bells and the cathedral chimes of Chartres.”⁴⁰ 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.”⁴¹ This movement is described by Andrew Russo as “a rip-roaring, rock’n’roll piano etude. This study of massive, repeated chords would have set Jerry Lee Lewis’ ‘Great Balls’ on fire.”⁴² An example of these chords can be seen in Figure 6. Written in 5/8 time, this blistering movement is relentless, written at 186 beats per minute and “fortissimo” throughout. It provides substantial contrast to the spatial first and third movements.

³⁸Andrew Russo, liner notes for “*Agu*,” by Marc Mellits, recorded 2005, track 7–9 on *Tight Sweater: Real Quiet Plays the Music of Marc Mellits*, released 2006, Endeavor Classics, compact disc.

³⁹Russo, liner notes for “*Agu*.”

⁴⁰www.ioanaieronim.ro/index.php/en/poems/61-omnivorous-syllables/265-audio.

⁴¹www.ioanaieronim.ro/index.php/en/poems/19-the-triumph-of-the-water-witch.

⁴²Russo, liner notes for “*Agu*.”

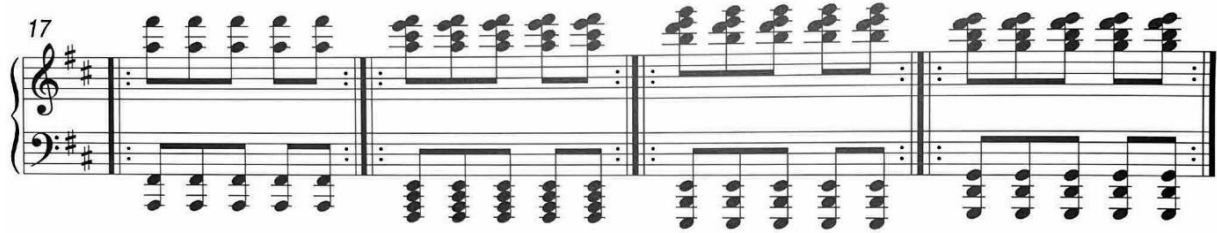


Figure 6: Mellits, Agu, “The Triumph of the Water Witch,” mm. 17–20.

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.”⁴³ The music is similar to “Audio” in its slow-moving, rich harmonies, though this movement is much longer. It frequently veers off from its D major home key yet always finds its way back. Because of the harmony and the tempo flexibility, there is a certain improvisatory quality to the music.

Mellits was commissioned to write Bagatelle on a Theme of Beethoven by the International Beethoven Festival in Chicago in 2012. The piece is two minutes long, and the only existing “recording” is a minute-long sample on Mellits’s website. The theme which the piece is based on was used by Beethoven in a number of his compositions, and it is shown in the right hand of Figure 7. Some of Beethoven’s works with this theme include Variations and Fugue in E-flat major, Op. 35, Contredanse No. 7 in E-flat major, WoO 14, the finale of the ballet “Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus,” Op. 43, and the finale of the “Eroica” Symphony No. 3 in E-flat major, Op. 55.⁴⁴

⁴³Marc Mellits, *Agu* (original version), 8.

⁴⁴“Ludwig van Beethoven Twelve Contredanses, WoO 14,” Piano Library, accessed February 28, 2024, <https://www.pianolibrary.org/composers/beethoven/contredanses-wool4/#7>.

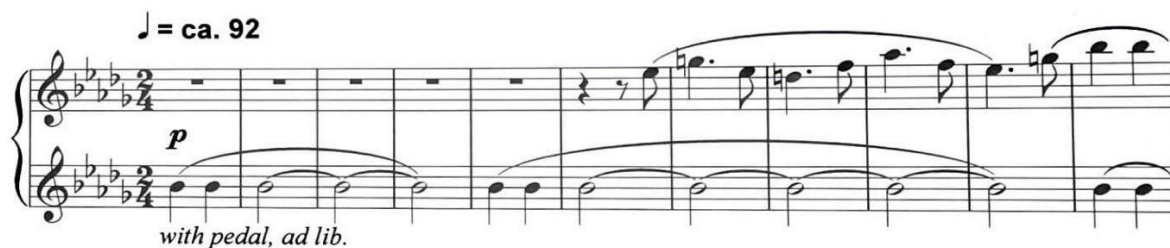


Figure 7: Mellits, *Bagatelle on a Theme of Beethoven*, mm. 1-11.

After a few distant horn calls in the left hand, the piece begins with a statement of Beethoven’s theme verbatim. Following this are a few powerful “punches” – open-fifth chords which are marked “fortissimo.” These chords are interspersed with interruptions from the second half of Beethoven’s theme, all of which make up the introduction of the piece. The main material then begins, taking inspiration mostly from the tail end of the theme and turning it “funky”⁴⁵ (as Mellits indicates in the score). Mellits achieves this primarily through syncopation and rhythmic ambiguity. The left hand starts an ostinato made up of alternating octaves which also establishes the repeated harmonic progression. The right hand introduces the syncopations and suggests a 6/8 time signature while the left firmly remains in 3/4. Mellits also occasionally shifts to 5/4 which further obscures the sense of the beat. Nonetheless, this piece is still all about the “funky” feeling that Mellits creates. It concludes with two sets of sharp chords – the same ones made up of open fifths that were introduced at the beginning.

Mellits has written three piano etudes. The first two were composed in 2006 with the third coming years later in 2018. Though they have never been performed as such to my

⁴⁵Via www.britannica.com, “Musically, *funk* refers to a style of aggressive urban dance music driven by hard syncopated basslines and drumbeats and accented by any number of instruments involved in rhythmic counterplay, all working toward a ‘groove.’”

knowledge, I feel that together, the three pieces make a convincing set of around eleven minutes of music.

The first etude 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.⁴⁶

“Medieval Induction” is comprised of two sections that alternate. One of these is very rhythmic while the other is reflective and contemplative. The piece begins in the low register of the piano with the hands in unison and accents at the beginning of every measure, as shown in Figure 8.

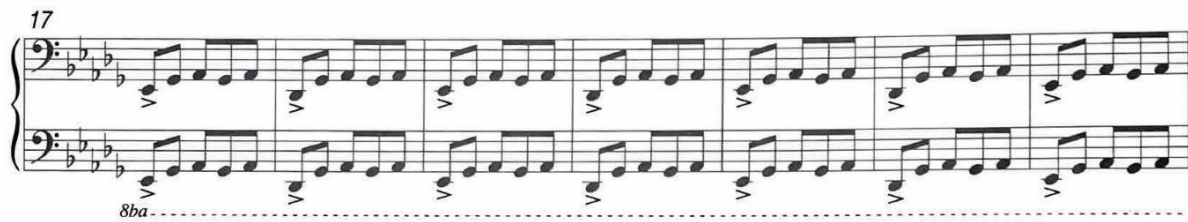


Figure 8: Mellits, *Etude No. 1 “Medieval Induction,”* mm. 17–23.

The next section is meditative for a moment, but Mellits quickly pulls us back into the rhythmic intensity of the first section. The piece continues to travel through many different time signatures without ever losing its steady pulse. Mellits’s fascination with unsteady rhythmic groupings is highlighted in this etude, which can be seen as a study in maintaining a strong rhythmic feel with shifting meters and varying patterns.

⁴⁶Marc Mellits, interview by Neil Krzeski, July 2024.

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.⁴⁷

“Defensive Chili” is similarly structured to the first etude, with two main contrasting sections. The first section is rhythmically driven while the second is more flowing. In the more rhythmic section, it is rare to go a few measures without a meter change. The melodic material of this initial section is manipulated until it seamlessly evolves into the next. This etude (similar to the previous one) does not include a traditional melody. Instead, the heart of the music lies once again in its rhythmic persistence and percussiveness. An excerpt showing this is presented in Figure 9.



Figure 9: Mellits, Etude No. 2 “Defensive Chili,” mm. 8–12.

⁴⁷Marc Mellits, interview.

The third etude titled Etude No. 45: “Tweets of Orange Fear” was commissioned by Nicholas Phillips⁴⁸ for his #45miniatures project.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ It is the shortest of the set. Despite its brevity, the structure of the piece is actually similar to the other etudes in that there are two distinct sections. The main rhythmic and melodic material is introduced at the very beginning with the right hand playing a repeated rhythmic pattern, consisting only of two notes, while the left hand then introduces the harmony. The momentum builds until we reach the second section, which contains fragments of the original material, ultimately ending with one final “tweet.” In this etude, the harmony remains simple and repetitive, featuring four chords that repeat throughout.

Mellits’s most recent piece *Izaya* was published in 2018 and co-commissioned by Brianna Matzke and Roger McVey.⁵¹ It is the longest of Mellits’s piano works at around twenty minutes. Mellits was among a group of composers tasked to write a piece in response to a particular song from Bob Dylan’s album *Highway 61 Revisited*. Mellits was assigned “Just Like Tom Thumb’s Blues.” He writes,

Izaya is the name of my maternal great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather, born in Lithuania in approximately 1735. Through DNA testing and online research, I recently became fascinated with my ancestry and was able to trace my mother’s family back to Izaya...Like Dylan’s songs, I decided to tell a (musical) story of my family.⁵²

⁴⁸Professor of Piano at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire, <https://www.nicholasphillips.net>.

⁴⁹A “Call for Scores” featuring reactions to the 45th President of the United States of America, <https://www.nicholasphillips.net/45miniatures>.

⁵⁰Marc Mellits, interview with Neil Krzeski, July 2024.

⁵¹Marc Mellits, liner notes for “*Izaya*,” performed by Brianna Matzke, recorded 2020, track 8 on *Something Is Happening Here*, self-published, compact disc.

⁵²Mellits, liner notes for “*Izaya*.”

Izaya begins very spatially with sparse chords alternating between the low and high registers of the piano. Shortly after, a melody begins to appear in octaves. This continues for several minutes with the music gradually getting faster. Mellits explains,

Izaya, and his immediate descendants, appear in the opening chord and melody. The music then progresses patiently, with many slow-moving chords, representing the slow-moving evolution of my family and the places we have lived, including the faster paced move to the United States.⁵³

The slower section eventually gives way to new material marked “not too fast; funky.” This contrasting section starts out with an ostinato bassline outlining octaves, as seen in Figure 10. The right hand then enters with syncopated jabs that further establish the “funk.” The right hand intensifies in its rhythmic complexity and volume until a new section evolves, built on ascending and descending broken major chords in the key of D major. From this, we get the return of the 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.”⁵⁴

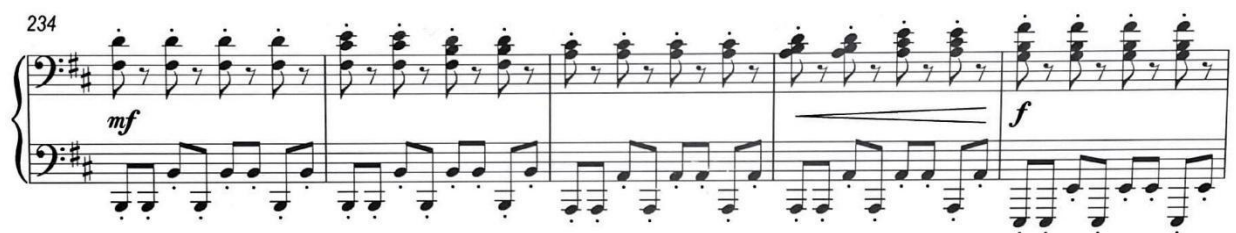


Figure 10: Mellits, *Izaya*, mm. 234–238.

⁵³Mellits, liner notes for “*Izaya*.”

⁵⁴Mellits, liner notes for “*Izaya*.”