

### Spectrum 5: 15 Contemporary Pieces for Piano

Compiled by Thalia Myers  
ABRSM  
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The indefatigable pianist Thalia Myers immediately made a profound impression when she launched the first volume of *Spectrum* pieces back in 1996. Her brilliant and inspirational concept was to invite a collection of the world's leading composers to write miniature pieces that could be rewarding and fulfilling material, not only for professional performers but also for young pianists and players from upper intermediate level (approximately Grade 6) and beyond. With the likes of Graham Fitkin and Karen Tanaka on board, student performances at local festivals and examinations almost immediately featured pieces from *Spectrum*.

Over the past 21 years, Myers has continued with follow-up volumes, including music suitable for the early grades, and other volumes of particular character: there is an international edition, along with others for piano duet, violin, cello and grade-specific anthologies.

This new volume is a treasure trove of fantastic material with a slight bias towards the post-Grade 8 player. Having said that, Tanaka's Khachaturian-influenced 'Masquerade' has already made a big impact via its inclusion in the current ABRSM Grade 6 syllabus, energetically sweeping forth with gusto and character. Also technically accessible for intermediate players is the sparsely textured 'Code' from Fitkin (inspired by Debussy's 'De pas sur la neige') and Chen Yi's 'Bamboo Dance II' (energised rhythms reminiscent of her extremely popular Grade 5 'Staccato Beans').

Elsewhere, it's hard to resist the motoric excitement and thrills evident in Gavin Higgins's 'Awika', the spacious fantasy present in Philip Caskian's rhythmically subtle 'Swale', and the Bartók-like ferocity



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and characterisation which makes 'Commuterland' (Cheryl Frances-Hoad) so persuasive.

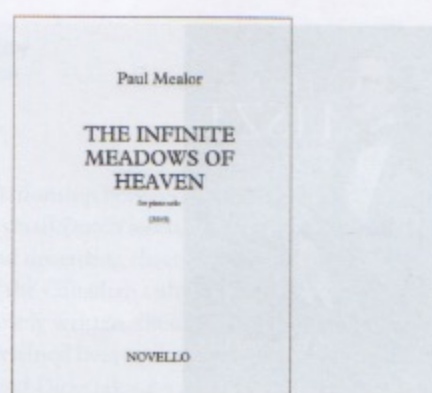
Entirely different is the 'easy listening' aesthetic adopted in Gabriel Jackson's 'Imaginary Birds', which cunningly and characterfully evolves from material reminiscent of Debussy's second *Arabesque*. Poul Ruders' wrong-floating rhythms and ritornelli make 'Schrödinger's Kitten' a challenge, but it's effectiveness in performance could be considerable.

Then we have a quaint neo-Baroque fusion, with gentle jazz in Howard Skempton's 'Aside'; a thrilling kaleidoscope of colour in 'The jig is up' by Harold Meltzer; Huw Watkins' 'Prelude', a wonderful essay in how variety of accentuation can make a piece memorable; and a striking instance of just how terrifying the bass register of the piano can be in 'Angelfield' by Victoria Borisova-Ollas.

The collection is completed by Michael Finnissey's 'Beethoven Robin Adair', which is touching and surprising within a hushed dynamic range; Timothy Salter's exquisitely detailed 'Shimmer' – a real vehicle for touch development; and Helen Grime's sonorous and declaratory 'The Silver Moon'.

In short *Spectrum* has become an ever-expanding series of bagatelles at the cutting edge of live music-making today.

The Canada-based Polish pianist and pedagogue Peter Rudzik has already produced an attractive and beautifully detailed anthology for younger pianists in his *Truly Astounding Animals*. This is another, equally tempting selection of nine miniature tone poems for budding pianists. All the pieces are inspired by magic, which



### Paul Mealor: The Infinite Meadows of Heaven (2015)

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should appeal to young players in our *Harry Potter*-obsessed era.

The level of detail in each piece is impressive, with painstakingly precise articulation marks, creative and sensible fingerings and careful suggestions for pedalling. With an admirable range of mood, tempo and colour (try contrasting the harp-like sonorities in 'Beautiful Fairy' with the woodwind/string alternations of 'Carefree Wizard' or the study-like 'Playful Gnomes'), there is much here that is attractive as sight-reading material for the more advanced, as well as for repertoire-building with younger players firmly in mind. A positive and confidently polished new addition.

In 2011, 2.5 billion listeners enjoyed Paul Mealor's motet *Ubi Caritas* at the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton. Mealor's success and popularity has led to chart-topping hits for his music in the classical and pop charts (including the Military Wives Choir's 2011 Christmas No 1 single *Wherever You Are*).

*The Infinite Meadows of Heaven* is a deeply touching, accessible and potentially popular three-minute miniature dedicated to Yvonne Mathias, the wife of Mealor's mentor and fellow Welsh composer William Mathias. The mood and style of the work immediately reminds one of Arvo Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel*. Only time will tell if Mealor's work will have the same enduring appeal as that of Pärt, but certainly its timeless, quasi-minimalist feel, tranquil simplicity and (most importantly of all perhaps) technical accessibility for pianists of even modest abilities, augurs extremely well. A welcome addition to the catalogue.

MURRAY MCLACHLAN