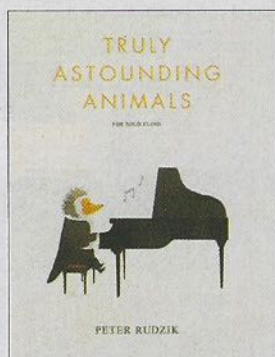


Closer Look

Visit the Menagerie



(S4) Truly Astounding Animals, by Peter Rudzik.

Canadian composer Peter Rudzik's collection of twelve short piano solos for intermediate-to-advancing pianists takes us on a delightful, creative romp through the animal world. Reminiscent in spirit to Camille Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals*, and in style to Wil-

liam Gillock's best piano compositions, this collection has much to offer pianists eager for creative new works to study and perform.

Imaginative characterizations are at the forefront here. Rudzik paints amusing, intriguing portraits of various creatures—insects and mammals—with well-informed musical taste and stylistic flair. The pieces are tonal, with notable harmonic and chromatic twists for color, and each creature's musical portrait is imbued with lighthearted humor and sensitive insight. Most of the solos are in ABA form and stay within easy key signatures and meters, but Rudzik's expert use of altered chords and excursions into modal keys make the pieces sound fresh and unique.

What is especially worth noting is that, without devolving into mere technical studies, each solo presents the performer with specific coordinative and technical challenges; the difficulties are always in service to the musical intent of the piece and the characterization of the animal. Nonetheless, these demands are focused, kinesthetic puzzles that avid performers will enjoy mastering.

Additionally, Rudzik is clearly a fine pianist who understands pianistic gestures. For example, in "The Annoying Fly," musical motives are built from short, simultaneous finger patterns in contrary motion. The composer has added

very helpful fingerings throughout. "The Happy Grasshopper" is an excellent study in double notes—seconds through sixths—quite similar in its lively inventiveness to Gillock's masterful one-page solos.

Rudzik's music stays firmly within traditional stylistic and tonal bounds. The solos here are in romantic, impressionist, or mildly contemporary styles, but he uses those styles inventively, with imaginative craftsmanship. In fact, the more unusual animals in his *animalia* seemed to have inspired Rudzik to reach out of the box a bit more to paint their musical characters, and these pieces are among this reviewer's favorites. "Hedgehogs at Night," for one, is a harmonically adventurous, curious-sounding piece in D-flat Lydian mode. Numerous melodic chromatic twists and turns and a bouncing, eighth-note *ostinato* accompaniment keep ears and fingers on high alert.

"The Thoughtful Rhino" moves steadily and deliberately along in D major; the rhino has a sense of seriousness and dignity. Despite the easy key, Rudzik's harmonic choices sound rather exotic. For example, the first chord progression is B-flat to D7, and the notes used in the first chord encompass *all* the notes between D and B-flat. Thus the piece has a rich, almost muddy feeling, and all the while the tonic is somewhat concealed in the seventh chord. This progression, which repeats several times, greatly enhances the overall character of the piece. The piece is through-composed in an arch form, climbing gradually higher until the chords reach a dominant plateau, before falling downward to the final measure.

"March of the Centipedes" is a terrific little solo with a well-defined character. It's a sturdy, no-nonsense march that unexpectedly breaks into a lighter vein, lending a comic air to a military-style centipede parade. These are determined centipedes, for sure, channeling Darth Vader's storm troopers

in miniature! For the relentless, martial left-hand accompaniment, Rudzik effectively juxtaposes C-major and A-flat major chords (and sometimes C and G-flat minor). The right hand has the melody, a jaunty, articulate affair in triplets and quarter notes. "Annoying Fly," another insect portrait, effectively uses chromatic, contrary-motion sixteenth notes in bursts of frenzied energy.

If the collection contains one standout solo, it is "Whale Song," a fluid, fanciful solo in 6/8 meter. An undulating accompaniment in steady eighths calls to mind the hypnotic movement of deep ocean. The A section's haunting and mysterious melody is accompanied by an intriguing harmonic structure. Rudzik has chosen A-flat and C-major chords, but here he hovers between the two, producing a moody progression that contributes to an atmosphere of mysterious beauty. The flowing melodic line rises and modulates to E major before falling back to C major. A second statement of the A section then culminates with a rise to the higher registers of the piano. When the melody unfolds once more, it is punctuated by short splashes of upper-register notes that alternate with a repetitive sustained note in the bass—the result is very much like a whale's call.

This more intense section leads to a slippery cascade of chromatic passages in broken thirds, set against the unchanging, undulating left-hand part. As the piece ends in a whisper, Rudzik has beautifully captured the monumental grace of a giant whale riding the ocean's currents.

There are a few notational choices in the book that make reading a bit more difficult and could decrease reading fluency for some students. For example, in "Silly Little Squirrel," half-step motives are notated in a way that hampers efficient

sight-reading. Here, Rudzik notates the up-and-down motion of half steps by using the same pitch name (E \flat - E \natural - E \flat - E \natural), rather than changing note names (D \sharp - E - D \sharp - E). Seeing the pitch names change would enable readers to identify the notes more readily, and engender a quicker kinesthetic response. Because pianists read so many notes at once, a notation that engenders rapid visual recognition is important.

Nonetheless, this is not your usual student collection, and it is not in the least bit formulaic. Student performers will learn much about subtle melodic inflections and color chords when they venture into these concise, charming scores. Rudzik's titles describe specific animal personalities that require specific musical handling (after all, it is not just a rhino, but a *thoughtful* rhino who earns a place of honor in this charming set). The collection is a delight, and it deserves a place in every teacher's studio.

—Peggy Otwell

Avondale Press has made available a free, downloadable CD recording (by the composer) with purchase of the score. (Available at <https://www.peterrudzik.com>, \$11.50 USD).

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