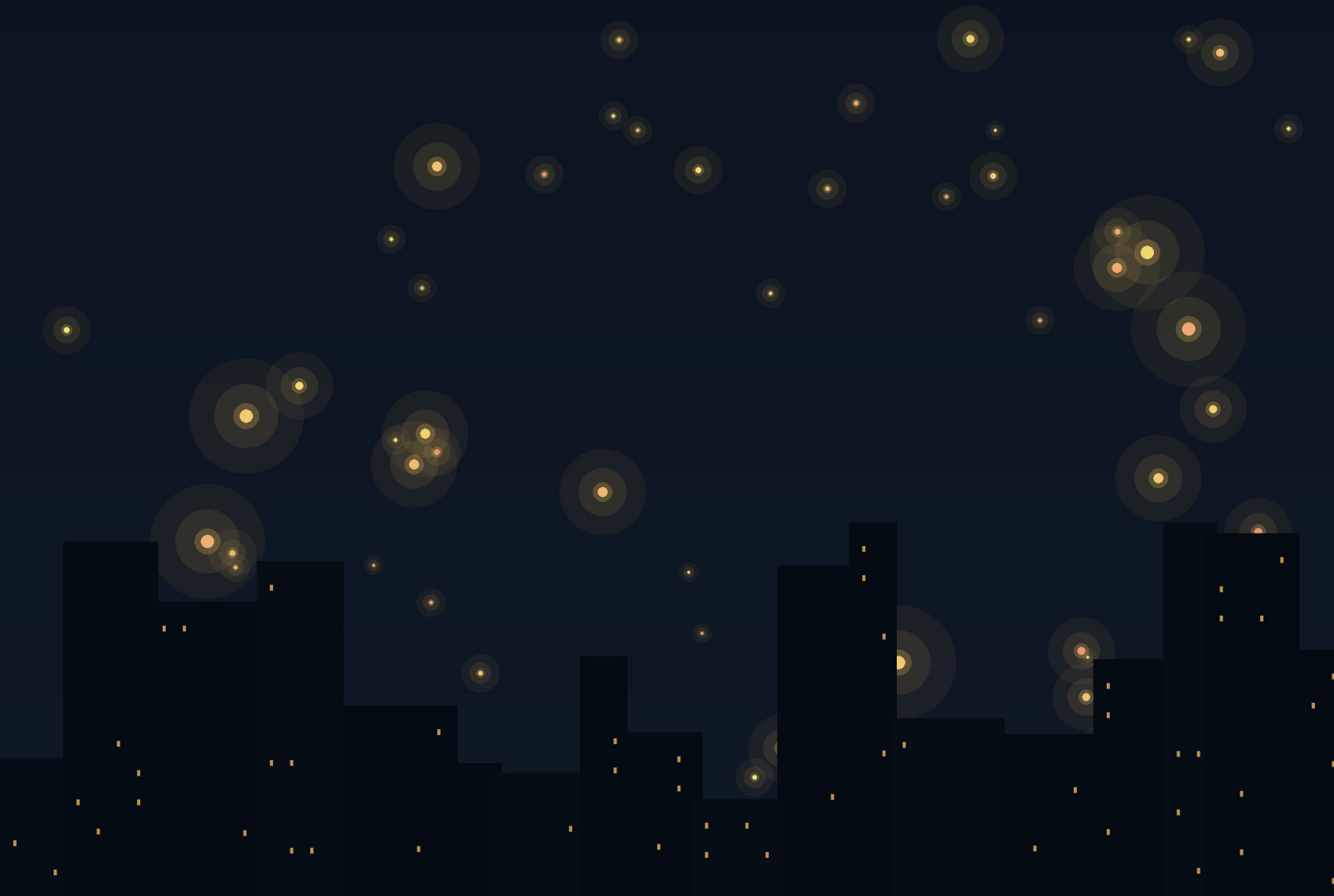


AMERICAN PIANO SERIES / VOLUME 3

NEW YORK LIGHTS

Twenty-One Works by Seven American Composers



CORTE SWEARINGEN / PIANO

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Twenty-one pieces by seven American composers

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American Piano Series - Volume 3

About the Album

New York Lights, the third volume of the American Piano Series, brings together twenty-one works by seven composers whose music spans more than a century of American musical life:

William Bolcom b. 1938

Edward MacDowell 1860-1908

Tom Brier b. 1971

Frances Marion Ralston 1875-1952

Ulric Cole 1905-1992

Harry T. Burleigh 1866-1949

George Winston 1949-2023

What interests me about these composers is not how much they have in common, but how differently each of them approaches the piano. Edward MacDowell writes in the poetic language of nineteenth-century Romanticism. Harry Burleigh draws upon the musical heritage of African American spirituals. William Bolcom moves effortlessly between the concert hall, ragtime, popular song, and opera. Ulric Cole combines classical craftsmanship with the rhythms and harmonies of urban America. George Winston developed an immediately recognizable style of melodic "folk piano," while Tom Brier carried the ragtime tradition into the twenty-first century with remarkable imagination. Frances Marion Ralston represents another side of American music history: a gifted composer whose music was published and performed during her lifetime but has since largely disappeared from the repertoire.

I chose three works by each composer. Most are interwoven throughout the album rather than grouped together, allowing different periods and musical traditions to speak to one another. Two suites are kept intact: Ulric Cole's *Metropolitones* and Frances Marion Ralston's *Three Little Waltzes*, since in both cases the individual movements form a natural dramatic sequence.

The title *New York Lights* comes from William Bolcom's hauntingly beautiful piece at the center of the album, but it also seems appropriate for the collection as a whole. Much of this music is concerned with places, memories, landscapes, and imagined scenes - from Harlem and Manhattan to deserted farms, winter forests, open ranges, and the American South.

Together, these twenty-one pieces offer a small glimpse of just how broad the American piano tradition really is.

Corte Swearingen

Notes on the Music

Track-by-track commentary

01

Graceful Ghost Rag

William Bolcom

Few modern rags have achieved the stature of William Bolcom's *Graceful Ghost Rag*. Written in 1970 as a remembrance of his father, it helped demonstrate that ragtime could be far more than a historical style or nostalgic novelty. In Bolcom's hands, its familiar syncopated language becomes something deeply personal.

The piece has the outward structure and rhythmic profile of a traditional rag, yet its emotional world is altogether different. The opening melody seems to hover between affection and sorrow, moving with an elegance that never becomes sentimental. Even the brighter passages retain a faint sense of distance, as though the music were recalling someone who can only be reached through memory.

That combination of rhythmic vitality and quiet melancholy is what makes *Graceful Ghost* so remarkable. It looks backward toward classic ragtime while speaking in an unmistakably modern and intimate voice. Bolcom wrote the piece in memory of his father, and it remains perhaps the most eloquent example of his lifelong ability to erase the boundary between American popular traditions and concert music.

02

Metropolitones: I. Harlem Meander

Ulric Cole

Ulric Cole was born in New York City in 1905 and studied at the Institute of Musical Arts - later the Juilliard School - as well as in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. Her music ranged from solo piano works to chamber and orchestral compositions, yet today much of it remains surprisingly unfamiliar.

Her 1943 suite *Metropolitones* is one of her most immediately appealing works. Its three movements offer sharply drawn impressions of metropolitan life, beginning with *Harlem Meander*.

The piece unmistakably belongs to the world of early jazz and stride piano. Its syncopations, swaggering rhythms, and sharply accented figures suggest the musical culture associated with Harlem pianists such as James P. Johnson, but Cole does not simply imitate jazz. She absorbs its language into a tightly constructed concert piece.

There is an appealing looseness to the music - as though the pianist were wandering without any particular destination - yet beneath that surface spontaneity is considerable compositional control. *Harlem Meander* opens the suite with movement, personality, and unmistakable urban energy.

03

Metropolitones: II. Lullaby in the Park

Ulric Cole

After the bustling rhythms of *Harlem Meander*, Cole abruptly changes the atmosphere.

Lullaby in the Park unfolds in a gently rocking 12/8 meter, creating an almost suspended sense of time. The city has not disappeared, but for a few moments its noise seems to have receded into the distance.

What makes the piece especially beautiful is its restraint. Cole does not burden the simple lullaby character with unnecessary complexity. The melody unfolds naturally over softly shifting harmonies, creating a mood that is tender without becoming overly sentimental.

Placed between the extroverted outer movements of *Metropolitones*, it functions almost like a quiet scene observed in passing: a small private moment taking place within an enormous city.

04

Metropolitones: III. Man-About-Town

Ulric Cole

Man-About-Town brings *Metropolitones* to a wonderfully stylish conclusion.

Where Harlem Meander strolls, this music strides. The rhythms are crisp, the harmonies sophisticated, and the entire piece carries itself with an almost theatrical confidence. One can easily imagine its unnamed protagonist moving through Manhattan with impeccable clothes, somewhere to be, and no doubt complete confidence that everyone has noticed his arrival.

Cole's jazz vocabulary is particularly striking here. Syncopations collide with sharply voiced chords and sudden rhythmic gestures, giving the piece a distinctly metropolitan polish.

The result is witty, urbane, and remarkably concise. In only a few minutes, Cole creates an entire character - and perhaps an entire evening in New York.

05

Winter

Edward MacDowell

Edward MacDowell was one of the first American composers to achieve an international reputation in concert music, and his finest piano miniatures have an extraordinary ability to suggest an entire landscape within only a few pages.

Winter comes from his *Four Little Poems*, Op. 32, composed around 1888. MacDowell associated the piece with Percy Bysshe Shelley's bleak image of a bird mourning on a frozen branch above a frozen stream.

The music captures that atmosphere perfectly. This is not the sparkling, picturesque winter of sleigh bells and falling snow. It is winter as stillness and isolation. The melodic line seems almost reluctant to move, while the dark harmony gives the music a profound sense of loneliness.

MacDowell could be wonderfully economical in pieces like this. He needs no grand climax or elaborate virtuosity. A few carefully chosen harmonies and a haunting melodic gesture are enough to create a miniature tone poem of remarkable emotional depth.

06

A Jubilee

Harry T. Burleigh

Harry T. Burleigh occupies an important place in American musical history. A student at New York's National Conservatory of Music during Antonin Dvorak's tenure there, Burleigh sang African American spirituals for the Czech composer and helped introduce him to musical traditions that profoundly shaped Dvorak's thinking about what an American school of composition might become.

Burleigh would later become one of the most important arrangers of spirituals for the concert stage.

His 1910 collection *From the Southland* offers a rare opportunity to hear Burleigh writing directly for solo piano. *A Jubilee*, the fourth of its six movements, is among the most exuberant.

There is an irresistible sense of communal celebration in the piece. Rhythmic figures answer one another, the music dances across the keyboard, and Burleigh creates the impression of voices and movement without quoting a familiar spiritual outright.

Beneath its classical construction is a distinctly American rhythmic vitality. It is music filled with life, celebration, and forward motion.

Breadline Blues

Tom Brier

Tom Brier is best known as one of the most gifted ragtime pianists and composers of the modern era, but *Breadline Blues*, written in 2001, reveals another side of his musical personality.

The piece is unapologetically steeped in the blues. Its language is earthy and direct, moving between heavy bass figures, blues-inflected harmonies, and melodic ideas that seem to emerge spontaneously from the keyboard.

What I especially like about the piece is that Brier never treats the blues as a stylistic exercise. The music feels lived-in. There is humor in it, but also weariness and grit - qualities perfectly suited to the title.

Brier's music often contains an enormous amount of rhythmic energy, and *Breadline Blues* is no exception. Yet here that energy is tempered by something darker and more reflective. It is a reminder that Brier's musical world extends well beyond ragtime.

Lullaby

George Winston

George Winston resisted the "New Age" label frequently attached to his music, preferring to describe his principal melodic style as folk piano or rural folk piano. That description makes sense when listening to *Lullaby*, from his 1991 album *Summer*.

The piece begins with extraordinary simplicity. A quiet melody appears over an equally understated accompaniment, and for a time it seems that very little needs to happen.

But Winston understood the expressive possibilities of repetition. Rather than continually introducing new ideas, he allows familiar ones to return in slightly altered surroundings. Harmonies deepen, registers widen, and the piano gradually seems to breathe more freely.

The beauty of *Lullaby* lies in this patience. Winston never forces the music toward a dramatic destination. Instead, he allows a small musical idea to accumulate meaning through repetition, resonance, and silence.

New York Lights

William Bolcom

The title track began life not as a piano piece but as an aria in William Bolcom's opera *A View from the Bridge*, based on Arthur Miller's play and premiered by Lyric Opera of Chicago in 1999.

In the opera, *New York Lights* belongs to Rodolpho, a young Italian immigrant newly arrived in Brooklyn. He looks toward the city with a mixture of wonder, possibility, and longing. Removed from its words and transformed into a piano solo, the music takes on an even more universal quality.

The melody rises with an almost cinematic expansiveness, while Bolcom's harmonies give it a distinctly American warmth. There is grandeur in the piece, but also vulnerability. These are not simply the glittering lights of a great city; they represent aspiration - the distant promise of another life.

That mixture of hope and wistfulness is what drew me to the piece and ultimately gave this album its title.

At an Old Trysting Place

Edward MacDowell

MacDowell's *Woodland Sketches* remains his best-known collection of piano miniatures, and *At an Old Trysting Place* is one of its most intimate movements.

The title refers to a meeting place associated with love - a spot once shared by two people and revisited later through memory. MacDowell does not give us a literal story, and that ambiguity is part of the piece's beauty.

The principal melody has the character of something remembered rather than something presently happening. Its broad phrases unfold over warm, gently shifting harmonies, while the music's brevity makes the moment seem even more fleeting.

There is no dramatic conclusion. The piece simply appears, speaks quietly, and disappears.

Like many of MacDowell's finest miniatures, it demonstrates how little music is required to suggest an entire emotional history.

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Three Little Waltzes: I. Avowal

Frances Marion Ralston

Frances Marion Ralston was born in St. Louis in 1875 and pursued a substantial career as a composer, pianist, teacher, and writer. She studied at the New England Conservatory and held several residencies at the MacDowell Colony, yet her music eventually slipped almost entirely from the standard repertoire.

Her Three Little Waltzes deserve rediscovery.

The titles - Avowal, Estrangement, and Reconciliation - suggest a miniature relationship drama told without words.

Avowal begins the story with warmth and optimism. Its graceful melody has an open, affectionate quality, but Ralston continually introduces small harmonic surprises that keep the music from becoming merely decorative.

There is something wonderfully personal about the piece. It has the elegance of a salon waltz but also the feeling of a private declaration - the musical equivalent of saying something important for the first time.

12

Three Little Waltzes: II. Estrangement

Frances Marion Ralston

The emotional landscape darkens considerably in Estrangement.

The graceful triple meter remains, but the certainty of the first waltz has vanished. Harmonies become more unsettled, phrases seem to hesitate, and moments of dissonance disturb the music's surface.

Ralston never exaggerates the drama. There are no violent outbursts or grand gestures. Instead, she creates distance through subtle means: a harmony that does not quite resolve as expected, a phrase that turns inward, a melody that suddenly seems less secure.

That restraint is precisely what makes Estrangement effective. The sadness is not theatrical; it feels private.

Heard between Avowal and Reconciliation, it becomes the emotional center of a remarkably concise three-part narrative.

13

Three Little Waltzes: III. Reconciliation

Frances Marion Ralston

With Reconciliation, the emotional tension of the preceding waltz finally begins to loosen.

The music is brighter and more expansive, but Ralston wisely does not simply return to the innocent world of Avowal. Something has changed. The melodies seem more confident, the gestures broader, and the warmth of the music feels earned rather than assumed.

This is perhaps the most outwardly brilliant of the three waltzes, yet its appeal lies less in display than in the sense of emotional resolution.

Together, Ralston's three pieces accomplish something surprisingly ambitious within a very small space: affection, separation, and reunion, all expressed through the changing character of a waltz.

It is a lovely example of how much overlooked American piano music still waits to be rediscovered.

A New Hidin' Place

Harry T. Burleigh

A New Hidin' Place closes Burleigh's six-movement *From the Southland*, and it inhabits a very different world from the exuberant *A Jubilee* heard earlier on this album.

The title immediately suggests refuge, concealment, and safety. Burleigh's musical language reinforces that feeling through a restrained, inward character and melodic writing that often seems close to the expressive world of the spiritual.

The piece is not based on spectacle. Its power comes from simplicity and the feeling that something deeper exists beneath the notes.

Burleigh spent much of his career bringing African American spiritual traditions into the concert hall without stripping them of their dignity or emotional force. *A New Hidin' Place* demonstrates how naturally that sensibility could also inhabit instrumental music.

It is an understated but deeply affecting conclusion to *From the Southland*.

Carmine

Tom Brier

Carmine, composed in 2010, reveals a side of Tom Brier quite different from the high-energy ragtime for which he became famous.

The piece unfolds slowly and expansively, with long melodic lines and rich harmonies that seem to linger in the air. Brier allows the piano to resonate, giving the music an almost nocturnal atmosphere.

What is particularly striking is the patience of the writing. The composer who could produce astonishing rhythmic complexity and explosive keyboard textures is equally comfortable letting a melody unfold without hurry.

There is a quiet melancholy running through *Carmine*, but the piece never becomes bleak. Its darker colors are balanced by passages of warmth and tenderness.

For me, it is one of the most beautiful examples of Brier's range as a composer - and evidence that his musical imagination extended far beyond the boundaries of ragtime.

Early Morning Range

George Winston

Few composers could suggest landscape at the piano as naturally as George Winston.

Early Morning Range, from his 1991 album *Summer*, seems to open onto an enormous space. The music has the stillness of the hours just after sunrise, when the world is illuminated but not yet fully awake.

Winston grew up largely in Montana, and the vast landscapes of the American West became deeply associated with his musical personality. His melodies often feel less like formal themes than observations - clouds passing, light changing, a distant horizon slowly becoming visible.

That quality is especially strong here.

The piece never needs to announce its subject. Through widely spaced sonorities, gentle repetition, and an unhurried melodic line, Winston creates the sensation of openness itself.

A Deserted Farm

Edward MacDowell

A Deserted Farm is the eighth movement of MacDowell's *Woodland Sketches* and one of the most haunting pieces in the collection.

MacDowell was inspired by an abandoned farmstead near his New Hampshire home. The outer sections are dark and spare, suggesting a place from which human activity has vanished.

Then something extraordinary happens.

The music moves into a distant major-key passage marked as though heard from far away. It is easy to imagine an echo of the farm's earlier life - a dance, perhaps, or some fragment of happiness surviving only in memory.

The darker opening eventually returns, and the vision disappears.

Music critic Lawrence Gilman once called *A Deserted Farm* the "quintessence" of MacDowell's style, and it is easy to understand why. In only a few pages, he turns a physical landscape into a meditation on memory, absence, and the passage of time.

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The Eternal Feminine

William Bolcom

The *Eternal Feminine* belongs to William Bolcom's four-rag suite *The Garden of Eden*, in which the biblical story of the Fall is retold through a succession of American ragtime styles.

It is an idea that could easily become a musical joke, and there is certainly humor in the suite. But Bolcom's writing is far too sophisticated to remain simple parody.

The *Eternal Feminine* takes the form of a slow drag, its syncopations unfolding with an almost seductive leisure. The melody is graceful, but beneath it the harmony continually shifts in unexpected directions. Bolcom described one of its later strains as harmonically "devious," and that quality gives the piece much of its character.

The result is elegant, witty, and slightly mysterious - a rag that seems continually to smile while keeping something hidden.

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Through Moanin' Pines

Harry T. Burleigh

Through Moanin' Pines opens Burleigh's *From the Southland* and immediately establishes the suite's distinctive atmosphere.

The title itself is wonderfully evocative. One can almost hear wind moving through trees, but Burleigh's landscape is as emotional as it is physical. The melodic writing carries the inflection and gravity of the spiritual tradition without relying on a familiar quoted tune.

This was an important part of Burleigh's achievement as a composer. He understood that the musical characteristics of African American song - the shape of a phrase, the expressive bend of a melody, the relationship between sorrow and hope - could become the foundation for new concert music.

Through Moanin' Pines feels suspended between landscape and memory. Its quiet melancholy makes it one of the most atmospheric pieces in the suite.

20

Peace

George Winston

Peace closes George Winston's landmark 1982 album *December*, and it is difficult to imagine a more appropriate title.

The music is spacious and contemplative, built from a modest amount of melodic material. Winston allows each phrase to resonate before moving onward, giving silence almost as much importance as sound.

There is something prayer-like about the piece, though not necessarily in a religious sense. It creates the feeling of reaching stillness after a long journey.

Winston's great strength was his ability to write music that sounded immediately accessible without being emotionally superficial. *Peace* is a perfect example. Its harmonies are uncomplicated, its melody direct, yet the cumulative effect can be remarkably powerful.

Nothing is forced. The music simply settles.

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Just Peachy

Tom Brier

The album ends with Tom Brier doing what Tom Brier did exceptionally well: taking the language of ragtime and driving it with tremendous energy.

Written in 1992, *Just Peachy* belongs unmistakably to the classic ragtime tradition, but Brier's personality is everywhere. The left hand is muscular and relentless, the syncopations snap sharply into place, and the music seems to gather momentum almost faster than it can contain.

Yet beneath all that exuberance is a carefully constructed rag. Brier understood the architecture of the early masters and knew how to write memorable strains, build contrast, and create the satisfying sense of arrival that makes a great rag work.

After the introspection of *Peace*, *Just Peachy* makes an ideal finale.

The album begins with Bolcom transforming ragtime into memory and ends with Brier celebrating ragtime as something vibrantly alive. Between them lies more than a century of American piano music - and twenty-one very different answers to the question of what an American piano piece can be.

AMERICAN PIANO MUSIC

New York Lights - American Piano Series, Volume 3