

JAMES DILLON

# The Book of Elements

Volumes I–V

Solo Piano

EIGENTUM DES VERLEGERS · ALLE RECHTE VORBEHALTEN  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

EDITION PETERS

LONDON · FRANKFURT/M. · LEIPZIG · NEW YORK

Preview File Only

風

# THE BOOK OF ELEMENTS

The Book of Elements is a cycle of piano works in five volumes, each between 15–17 minutes in duration, with a varying number of pieces to each volume. Volume I consists of 11 brief works, a reference to the '11 new Bagatelles' Op. 119 of Beethoven. An arbitrary number perhaps, chosen because of both its connection to a genre of musical miniatures and as the beginning of a sequence of diminishing primary numbers:

		PAGE
VOLUME I: .....	11 works	1
VOLUME II: .....	7 works	34
VOLUME III: .....	5 works	91
VOLUME IV: .....	3 works	145
VOLUME V: .....	1 work	165

The elements of the title refers to a double reading of the term: first (as in chemistry) an 'irresoluble substance' and secondly (as in the ancient belief) in the elements as the 'foundation' of everything. The prime numbers have been described as the elements of arithmetic. In many traditional cultures 'zero dimensionality' is implicit in the cardinal directions. From ancient Celtic mythology to modern day Chinese language, there are five dimensions – north, south, east, west plus the centre, the place where one is. Oriental cosmology accounts for 5 elements – air, water, earth, fire and the 'void' – a pregnant emptiness, the negation of a fixed essence. I should point out that it was never part of my intention to either 'represent' or 'illustrate' these elements; rather they function as a kind of metaphor for different forms of energy.

The initial plan was to create a set of musical elements (*idée fixe*) – motivic material from which I could construct a number of works of varying scale and character. Assigning a volume to each of the five elements I by definition attach a set of extra-musical images to the construction, but this will always remain secondary and derivative. In fact it would be more accurate to say that all five elemental characteristics run across and through all five volumes. In the first volume the 'aphoristic' it forms the scale, and these elements are exposed to a kind of intertextual and naked playfulness – a confrontation with style (see below) perhaps - which traces the lineage of a particular conceptualization of (keyboard) transparency. Within the eleven brief, elliptical miniatures that make up Volume I there are a number of symmetries, pairings and ratio crossings which are arranged to maintain unity within an epigrammatic and heterogeneous constellation of works. Movement through the five volumes from a set of 'miniatures' in Volume I to the single movement of Volume V not only outlines an expansion of scale but also suggests a narrative (Mallarmé proposed that the aim of the universe is the creation of 'Le Livre'). All of the elements are outlined in the first volume and since all five volumes are approximately of the same duration (containing fewer works as the cycle progresses), the movement here has something to do with continuity.

The musical 'miniature' holds a particular fascination since it occludes manners, expresses without preparation. The question of form and how it might exist across a multi-movement work is interesting; it is a space where 19<sup>th</sup>-Century notions of 'organicity' begin to collapse. The musical miniature is first and foremost melancholic; a beginning, an everlasting beginning, a miraculous spontaneity. The Bagatelles of Beethoven, the piano suites of Schumann, late Brahms and Schoenberg follow a lineage which in some ways may be traceable to the 'character' or 'mood' suites of the English virginalists (Gibbons, Byrd, Bull etc.). Questions of connection arise: does the mere grouping together of apparently individual pieces for example establish a connection beyond their proximity? The musical miniature, with little time to develop, compresses the space for action and traces a gesture that contains its own 'cut'. The ambiguity and fragility that form a constituent of this lineage will perhaps always carry some of that pleasing sadness associated with abandoned spaces; ruptures exist where the ear might expect coherence. Style (from the Latin *stylus*, that pointed tool for writing on wax) as 'character' refers to a manner or mode of expression (reminding us of the relationship between modality and manner). The word 'character' itself comes from the Greek 'to engrave' or 'cut', an act that involves an element of violence. Character in part emerges from the interaction of events within a musical space; the type of movement, repetition, inflection and duration mark one event in relation to another.

The five volumes began with a commission from Roger Woodward and the Sydney Spring Festival in 1997 and collectively they are dedicated with respect and admiration to his restless creativity.

Volume I may be seen as a meditation for and an opening to Volumes II–V which expand on these ‘genetic’ fragments in various ways; the intention being to weave a group of independent yet interrelated works, where the initial material is filtered through some symbolic re-conceptualization and where the interrelations are a question of heterogeneity. This conceptualization exploits the ancient symbolism of the elements, whereby Volume I is associated here with the air or wind. It is given ‘air time’, an allusive breeze; a work which gathers in the folds of rhythm, silence and resonance. The Chinese character for ‘wind’ can also be read as ‘style’, which draws attention to a double theme (see above).

*Volume I was commissioned and premiered by Roger Woodward during the 1997 Sydney Spring Festival.*

Volume II takes the element of water as its (metaphoric) generator. In the 7 works of Volume II an exchange between isolated motives from the first volume and a variation of gestural patterns, make an attempt at continuity. When we isolate something we cannot expect it to remain the same, the fluid relationship between sound, structure and gesture maintains a fragility. The attempt to ‘inform’ heterogeneous elements has both a childlike stubbornness and a melancholic air, and perhaps draws us towards that ‘magic depth’ that Schumann spoke of in relation to his *Kinderzenen*. The aggregation of figural material into compound structures, for example, or the conflation of differing gestural patterns at once ‘combines’ and ‘separates’. An interflow between motivic material makes for different ‘types’ of continuity. Questions of identity and difference, of mood and character, exchange position. A primary feature of sound is its transience; the ordering of sound creates a certain resistance to this feature, this resistance approximates to a form.

*Volume II was commissioned by the WestDeutscherRundfunk for the 2001 Westfalian MusikFest, Hagen for Noriko Kawai, who gave the premiere during the festival.*

Volume III consists of 5 works, of proportionally (in clock time) 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 minutes in duration, (although not in this order) and is associated with earth, here imagined as crystal (or ‘solidified light’). The regular arrangement of equal (semitone) divisions of the octave of the piano is here conceptualized as a ‘potential’ analogue to the regular atomic arrangement of crystals. An imposed order, the chromatic scale, becomes the inherent structurally dominant pattern; all material tends towards the grid, crystallized by the very design of the piano keyboard. The sad news of the passing of Iannis Xenakis reached me just as I was finishing Volume III and this volume is dedicated to his memory.

*Volume III was commissioned by the 2001 Berlin Biennale for Ian Pace, who gave the premiere during the festival.*

Volume IV: The three works of the fourth volume are arranged symmetrically. The opening work begins with distant bell-like chords and gradually opens out, only returning briefly towards the end to the bell sounds of the opening (this time, however, now reduced to single notes). A recursive and static central composition is built around three simple musical elements. These elements divide equally between ‘gesture’ and ‘figure’. The plaintive repetition of this material takes on a mechanical, teasing melancholy and slants any notion of form. The final work of this triptych of pieces opens (again) with bell-like sonorities but soon begins to display a playful quality in its recollection of material from previous volumes and its anticipation of the final volume.

*Volume IV was commissioned by the 2002 MUSICA Festival, Strasbourg for Rolf Hind, who gave the premiere during the festival.*

Volume V: Cast as a single movement the final volume trembles with the pressure of finality. The vision of fragility, of disappearances, of strange attractions, of thematic oscillation, where elements turn and return with lonely detachment, may describe the atmosphere of *The Book of Elements* in general.

Volume V has the time to progress without interruption and yet the tension between continuity and change becomes heightened. One feature common to this set of piano works is a feeling of spontaneity. By spontaneity I mean an ever-changing process, an impermanence, a flux. In this final volume a single movement of interdependent chains of momentary and fleeting memories of previous musical states weaves around new material. The fragility of each musical moment with its promise of continuity falls in the gaps between collective perception and a promise that cannot be kept. In the pregnant emptiness only the delicacy beneath all things remains.

*Volume V was co-commissioned by the Britten-Pears Foundation and private sponsors for Nicolas Hodges, who gave the premiere on 1st December 2002 at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. Volume V was awarded the 2003 Royal Philharmonic Society Award for Chamber-scale Composition.*

# THE BOOK OF ELEMENTS

## VOLUME I

to Roger Woodward

James Dillon

$\text{♩} = 40$   
Con strano solenne

1. *f* sempre

*p*

*Red. (Ad lib.)*

*p*

*p*

*p*

The first system of music consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of chords with a 5-finger fingering indicated above. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of chords with a 7-finger fingering indicated above. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/8.

The second system of music consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of chords with a 5-finger fingering indicated above. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of chords with 5, 7, and 6 fingerings indicated above. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/8.

The third system of music consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of chords with a 6-finger fingering indicated above. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a sequence of chords with a 5-finger fingering indicated above. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/8.

♩ = 90

2. *pp* tranquillo

subito  $\text{♩} = 72$   
*piu animato*

cresc. sempre.....

5 7 5 7

(cresc.).....

5 5 5 5 5

*ff* *sub. p*

System 1: Treble clef, 4/8 time signature. The right hand features a melodic line with a slur and a fermata, marked *mf* and *p*. The left hand has a bass line with a triplet of eighth notes. A large slur spans across both staves.

System 2: Treble clef, 4/8 time signature. The right hand has a complex texture with triplets and slurs, marked *f* and *pp*. The left hand has a bass line with a slur and a fermata. A 9/16 time signature change is indicated.

System 3: Treble clef, 4/8 time signature. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur and a fermata, marked *f*. The left hand has a bass line with a slur and a fermata, marked *ff*. A 5/8 time signature change is indicated.

System 4: Treble clef, 4/8 time signature. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur and a fermata, marked *p* and *ff*. The left hand has a bass line with a slur and a fermata, marked *mp* and *p*. A 9/16 time signature change is indicated.