11 June 2011

Jems: Journal of Experimental Music Studies - Reprint Series

The Piano Sonatas of John White

Dave Smith

Originally published in Contact *no. 21 (Autumn 1980), pp. 4-11. Reprinted with the kind permission of the author.* Jems *original upload date: 19 March 2004.*

John White was born on April 5, 1936. His works include nine ballet scores, three film scores, two operas, two symphonies (one for organ and six tubas), three concertos and 98 piano sonatas as well as a vast amount of music for the composer/performer ensembles which he has initiated.

His musical experience includes that of: pianist (studied at the Royal College of Music from 1955–58); tuba player (from 1971–72 in the London Gabrieli Brass Ensemble); Musical Director in theatre and ballet (e.g. for Western Theatre Ballet in its early stages from 1958–60 and for Canterbury Tales from 1970–72); session musician; arranger; improviser (with Cornelius Cardew from 1967–69); member of the Scratch Orchestra (1969–72), of the Promenade Theatre Orchestra (1969–72; predominantly four toy pianos and/or reed organs), of a duo with Christopher Hobbs (1972–76; percussion duo, piano duet, piano and tuba, finally multi-instrumental) and of the Garden Furniture Music Ensemble (1977 onwards; multi-instrumental); teacher (of piano and composition to music students at the RCM from 1960–64 and at the Yehudi Menuhin School from 1974 onwards; of drama students at the Drama Centre, London from 1969–77 and at RADA from 1978–79).

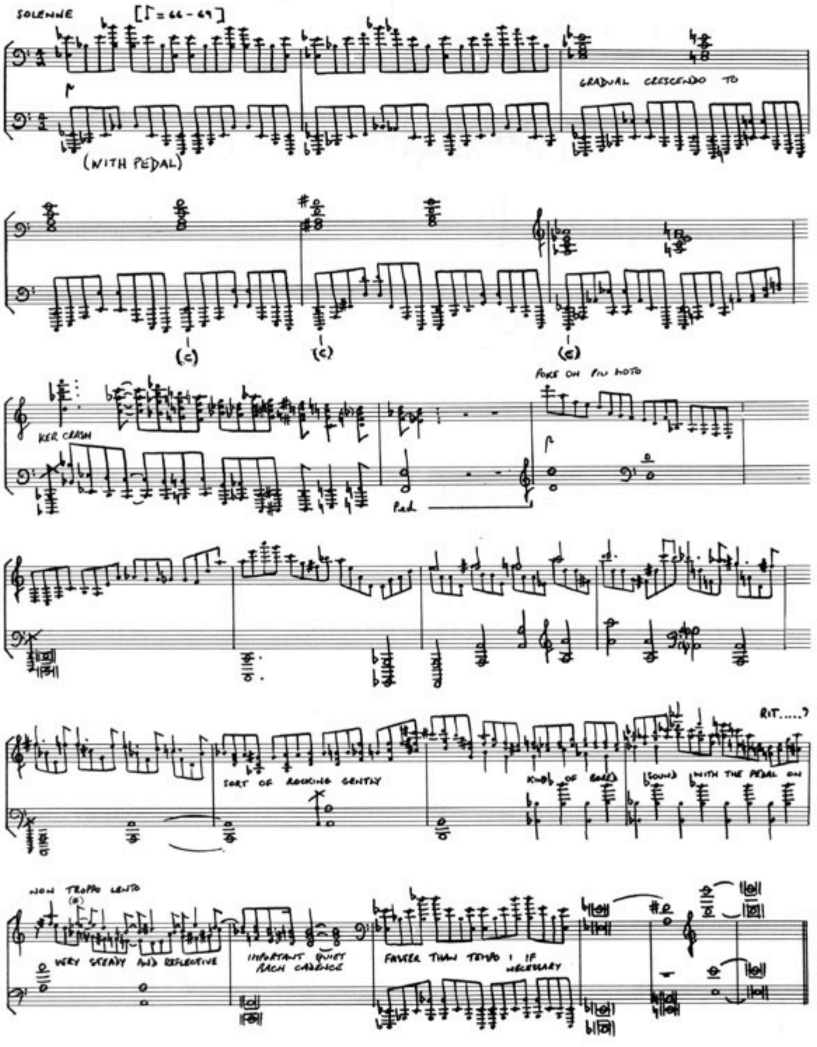
A few words about the piano sonatas in general first of all. Two are published; five are recorded;[1] some are missing; most remain unperformed in public. Colin Kingsley, John Tilbury and Roger Smalley used to play a few, but the only pianist apart from the composer to have performed several is his long-time friend Ian Lake. These days White himself is far happier to assume the responsibilities of an ensemble player rather than those of a soloist. As a result of this, perhaps, he tends to view his solo piano music as being designed for performance at home to friends: a pity, since the cordial and generous nature of the music is communicated particularly well by his own playing.

For their composer, White's 98 piano sonatas represent a diary, more or less continuous since 1956 when he was 19 years old, which not only records musical obsessions of the moment but also reflects his 'enthusiastic absorption with aspects of 19th [and early 20th] century music'.[2]

> ALKAN: The exposition of mysterious order
> SCHUMANN: The wealth of inner life half concealed behind the engaging and mobile nature of the musical patterns (Kreisleriana!)
> BUSONI: The masterful containing of a wide range of musical vocabulary, structure and resonance
> SATIE: The arcane charm of apparently simple musical statement
> REGER: The sympathetic ability to be simultaneously serious and lost

SCRIABIN: The volatile and winged nature of the musical thought and its manifestation
MEDTNER: The tactile fluency of piano layout and the intellectual fluency of thematic and structural organisation
BRUCKNER: The dignity and magnificence of diatonic chord-progressions and unswerving metre[3]

White's remarks have little to do with musical 'language' as such and his sonatas are never concerned with intentional nostalgia, pastiche, satire or quotation. There are fleeting references of style, colour or gesture which, particularly in the more withdrawn world of the earlier sonatas, effectively conjure up an imaginary musical seance at which 'friends' of the composer make brief appearances. In the slow, mysterious finale of the 15th Sonata (1962), for instance, the ghosts of Bruckner, Sorabji, Busoni, Reger, Satie and even Feldman seem to flash by, although the original inspriation was a Poulenc nocturne. But, as in Satie's music, what sounds familiar or reminiscent does so in an often fresh context. White leads the listener away from what might have been thought of as the work's premises at its outset through areas which he would not have thought possible: the result is a surprising range of material within the movement's 23 bars (see Example 1).



Example 1: John White, Sonata No. 15, third movement

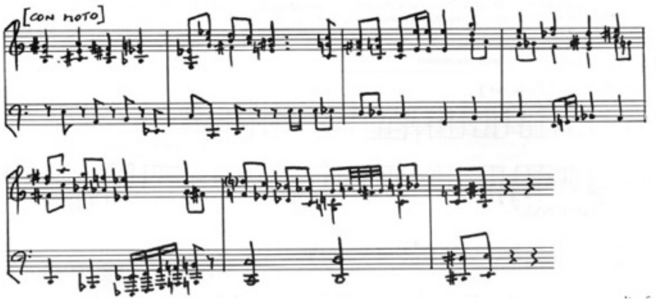
Other 'friends' of long standing include van Dieren, Fauré, Godowsky, Liszt, Frank Martin, Rakhmaninov, Sorabji and Szymanowski in addition to those listed above in White's programme note. Questioned about this apparently disparate collection of composers from the world of 'alternative' musical history, White pointed to various common denominators: the economic and concentrated way of viewing musical material, for instance, but also 'a practically physical predilection for a particular kind of sound and the extension and development of that sound. Whereas the Greats had a very objective way of extending or developing a theme or just one aspect of music, the composers I'm interested in had a way of patrolling the area they live in to make sure everything's all right. There's a particularly strong feeling of this in [Satie's] *Danses gothiques*'. And much British experimental music of recent years reflects similar concerns: perhaps one reason why the composers in question are united both in their support for Satie and (with the exception of Michael Nyman) in their indifference to Brahms.

It was not until he attended the British premiere of Messiaen's *Turangalîla* Symphony in 1956 that White felt compelled to start composing:

> All the arduous and scholarly aspects of composition which had been apparent to me before were swept away by the immediate delights of work within the chromatic modes (with their inbuilt choice of paranormal melody and harmony, or a more fragmented musical texture in which the most diverse elements could become related through modal exclusivity). Messiaen's rhythmic apparatus seemed infinitely liberating in that it contained the creative possibilities of the squarest of repetitive figures and the control of great rhythmic fluidity.

It is no surprise, then, to find that the three movements of White's First Sonata (a startlingly assured Opus 1 dating from the same year and the only composition for which he has ever written sketches) are heavily saturated with Messiaen-inspired rhythms and harmonies. But he quickly freed himself from the modes as a result of becoming attracted to Schumann's 'disorientating diatonicism'. The Third (1958), Fourth and Fifth Sonatas (both 1959) adopt such a varied outlook that one would not guess they were by the same composer. These early sonatas indicate an increasing desire to establish musical continuity without relying on traditional ideas of design, contrast or even stylistic unity. The Fifth Sonata, a predominantly dark, introspective one-movement work, sounds like a succession of unrelated events, though White manages to maintain a high degree of surprise without resorting to rhetoric.

These early works seem much more private, distant and tonally confusing than those written in the 1970s. The intervening period witnessed neither a development in musical language nor an inclination towards more involved, technically complex works of greater length,[4] but what Brian Dennis has called 'a unique regression, a kind of anti-development...a gradual withdrawal from the world of accepted innovation. Gloomy bass lines, deadpan harmonies and obsessive ostinatos [replace] the richness of early works'.[5] The anti-formal Fifth Sonata created an early landmark with its quantity of unlikely solutions, although White now views it as one of his more bewildering works. A more important landmark in terms of economy was No. 15, the opening of which presents a dry, arresting statement absolutely devoid of decoration or colour. Bars 4-10 (see Example 2) spotlight a deliberate tonal confusion of which Reger would have been proud.



Ex. 2: Sonata No. 15, first movement, bars 4-10

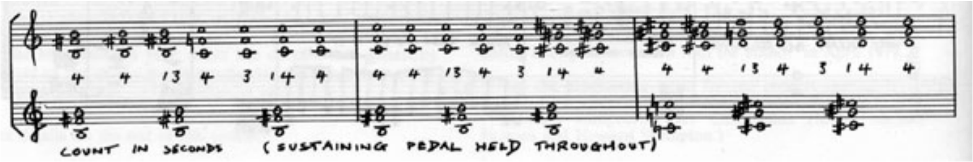
The 15th Sonata becomes musically more obscure and elliptical as it progresses, each of its three movements slower than the previous one and as a consequence increasingly concerned with subtlety of resonance. The first movement exhibits a rather macabre revival of Busoni's 'renewed classicism'; the second, mysteriously subtitled 'Traumatic rural rape', features an obsessive 6/8 dotted rhythm and, fittingly, the only climax in the whole sonata; the spectral qualities of the third movement have already been commented upon.

After the 15th, an altogether more communicative work than the Fifth, the sonatas tended to become shorter and more compressed, a number of them consisting only of single movements. Leafing through White's manuscripts, my attention was drawn to the brief single movement of No. 26 (1965) which contains, surprisingly enough, an optional part for alto trombone. But the 'regression' referred to by Dennis was shortly to produce a work such as the 34th Sonata (1967), an astonishingly terse single movement characterised by motifs revolving around a few notes or up and down a scale or arpeggio, set against a bleak accompaniment often consisting of repeated notes or chords. The parts for each hand are often well differentiated in both rhythm and register: this reinforces the generally severe feel, as does the colourless harmony which displays a preference for diatonic discords and bare fourths and fifths.

It was around this time that White was working with Cornelius Cardew. This association provoked a considerable extension of White's 'lateral thinking': such works as the Cello and Tuba Machine of 1968, a kind of enormously long, slow-motion Bruckner, quickly established him as a leading light in experimental music — a position he has held ever since.

About ten sonatas (c. Nos. 42-52) reflect White's initial involvement with systemic music. At the time of writing, all but one are missing: the exception being No. 51 (1970) which has been reconstructed from a tape by Michael Parsons. All these sonatas were based on a numerical series derived from a chess knight's move across a square of numbers; the object was to come up with something satisfyingly unpredictable but with the possibility of involuntary repetition within it, thus avoiding the pitfall of serialism in which 'the quality of predictable change was predictable'.

In common with other systemic works of White's at this time (for instance, *Gothic Chord Machine* for four reed organs of 1969 and *Humming and Ah-ing Machine* of 1970), the 51st Sonata is based on an ascending progression of bare fourth and fifth chords, but 'these sonatas had some continuation of material that was more or less independent of the system so that one never got into the area of describing a number by means of pitch or duration'. In No. 51 (see Example 3) only the number of repetitions of each chord is governed by the system.



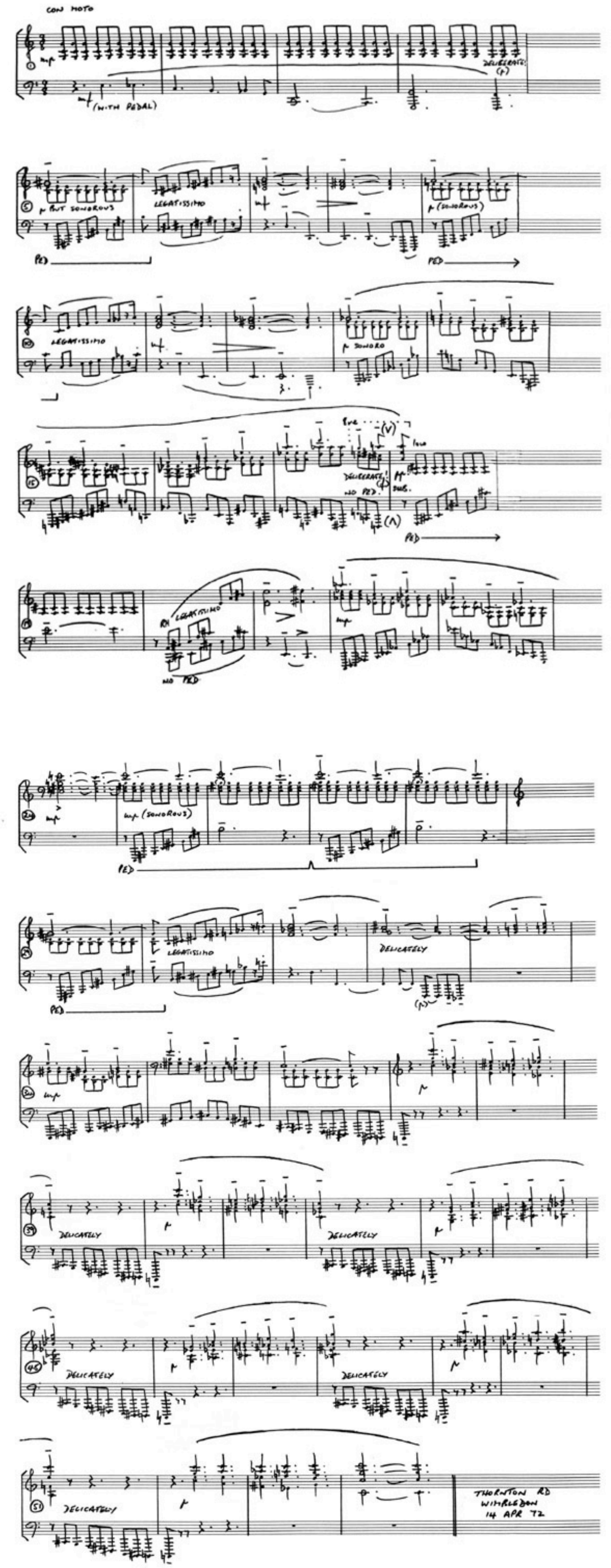
Ex. 3: Sonata No. 51, bars 1-3 (reconstructed by Michael Parsons)

Although the range of historical reference to be found in many of his other works is largely absent from White's systemic music (apart from the pieces based on 'ready- made' material written for the PTO), the fondness in these sonatas for long sounds featuring bare fourths and fifths relates to Bruckner (rather than to La Monte Young): 'Hitting a resonance of primary colours — interest in that primary colour rather than in, say, contrapuntal felicities'. Similarly an attraction to the whole area of repetition in White's innumerable 'Machine' pieces derives more from Schumann and Alkan than from Steve Reich.

Early in 1972 White was touring North America with the London Gabrieli Brass Ensemble. The 53rd Sonata (reproduced in its entirety in Example 4, next page) marked not only the composer's return to Britain after this tour but also a return to writing 'empirical', non-systemic piano sonatas. The next 37 appeared in rapid succession, Nos. 57-90 all dating from 1973. These are all one-movement works of about three minutes' duration. Compared with the earlier sonatas they are shorter, warmer, altogether more direct and a good deal easier to play. Economy is still the order of the day, but the more expansive gestures contrast strikingly with the seclusion of No. 15 and the starkness of Nos. 34 and 51.

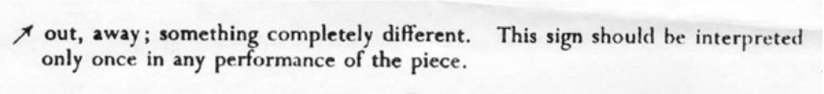
Talking about this group of sonatas. White drew a parallel with TV jingles: 'a very immediate communication in which there's minimal development of the situation. Facts are stated and left to mature in the minds of the audience'. Later he commented on the feeling of private research which composition had for him during the time when he was working in close collaboration with Cardew: a feeling that he had about experimental and systemic music generally. 'The further I got away from this, the less private the nature of the communication and the more necessary it became to account for why I was doing it.' Working in the theatre was another important influence in this respect: 'there's no programme note that's going to persuade the audience that what I'm doing is right or wrong. It's just got to work'.

Technically the 53rd Sonata reveals perennial characteristics. The harmonic progression is deliberately confusing in the early stages. The first 15 bars contain a number of major/minor third relationships between chords which result in unsettled tonality or unlikely modulation. The chords are largely triadic and root-based until the final section is reached: here the harmony becomes more chromatic although the tonality is more settled. Since there is nothing particularly striking melodically, the immediate focus of the sonata is on resonance; this also changes in bar 37, rich, semi-dark sonorities being replaced by 'pure white C major'. Continuity is preserved by consistent smoothness of line, the listener being led gently into an abrupt change of key, texture or, most importantly, colour. Conventional development is absent, but repetition of material often involves transposition and an additional small and unexpected variant: 'leaving areas open is important...otherwise the material restates something that's already been stated by a lot of composers'.


CON MOTO
mp
(WITH PEDAL)
DELIBERATE (f)
p BUT SONOROUS
LEGATISSIMO
p (SONOROUS)
PED
LEGATISSIMO
p SONORO
8va
DELIBERATE
NO PED.
PED
NO PED
mp
mp (SONOROUS)
PED
LEGATISSIMO
DELICATELY
PED
mp
DELICATELY
DELICATELY
DELICATELY
DELICATELY
DELICATELY
THORNTON RD
WIMBLEDON
14 APR 72

Ex. 4: Sonata No. 53

The 'one screw to be turned before the end' brings about a disruptive flattened fifth chord (bar 48). Discussing this chord in relationship to the surrounding material, White referred to the experimental world of Cage and others and in particular to an instruction in Cardew's *Octet '61* (see Example 5).

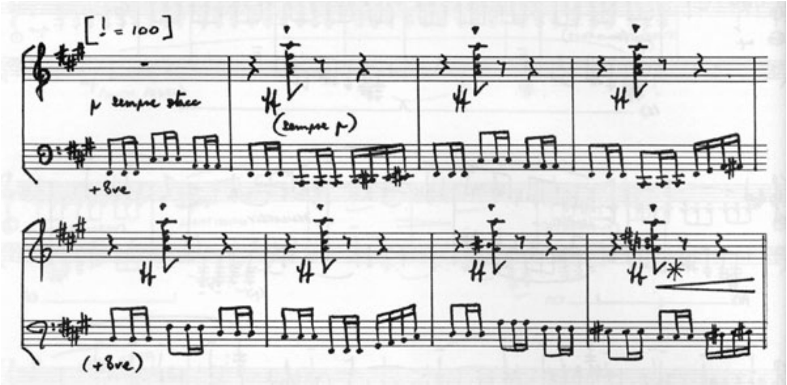


↗ out, away; something completely different. This sign should be interpreted only once in any performance of the piece.

Ex. 5: From Cardew's Octet '61

The 'classical' counterpart to this would be Alkan's 'exposition of mysterious order': the surprises which occur in spite of (and because of) the strict discipline imposed, a basic example of which is given in Example 6.

> Brahms would draw things to a satisfactory conclusion: everyone is comforted and made at home by means of the argument. With Alkan everyone goes home highly disturbed by the way the argument has gone.[6]

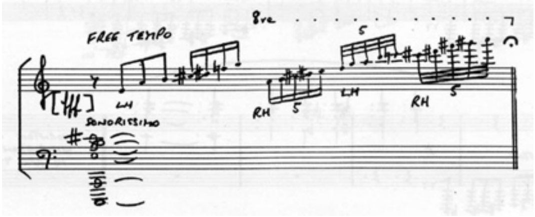


Ex. 6: Alkan: from Concerto for solo piano, Op. 39, No. 10, third movement

Unlike No. 53, many of the sonatas composed in 1972–73 are concerned with the extension of a single area of sound. Typical of these is No. 84, in which the first ten bars (out of a total of 35) are taken up with a left hand accompaniment figure in a warm, sonorous barcarollando. On its repetition it is joined by a high, slow, dreary scale successfully masquerading as a tune.

The techniques involved in the systemically-organised percussion music which White was composing at this time are rarely in evidence in these sonatas. One exception, however, is the 59th Sonata, in which a repeated two-bar phrase gradually builds up, Rzewski-fashion, from a single chord into a sprawling and uncomfortable cadence. New notes and chords are added singly, and each phrase is stated four times before a new addition is heard.

White's experience in both experimental music and in the theatre seems to have encouraged a new confidence without which a work like the 76th Sonata, a punchy Alkanesque affair, would not have been possible. A permanent smile permeates even the quiet, sparse textures of No. 68 and the relaxed, velvety sonorities of No. 78, the latter being 'inspired by an account of the resident trio at the Pump Room, Bath'. These are areas in which an earlier sonata might have sounded secretive or withdrawn. In addition White's non-directional solutions, sometimes tending towards an agreeable cheekiness in previous works, become more capricious: No. 67, for example, has a rather impudent little theme which reappears in several different keys; also many of these sonatas have what White has termed 'daft bugger' endings (another Busoni legacy). The heavy bass-register booming of No. 87 inspires an image of several lumbering, caber-tossing Scotsmen, the largest of whom inexplicably heaves his burden into outer space in the last bar (see Example 7).

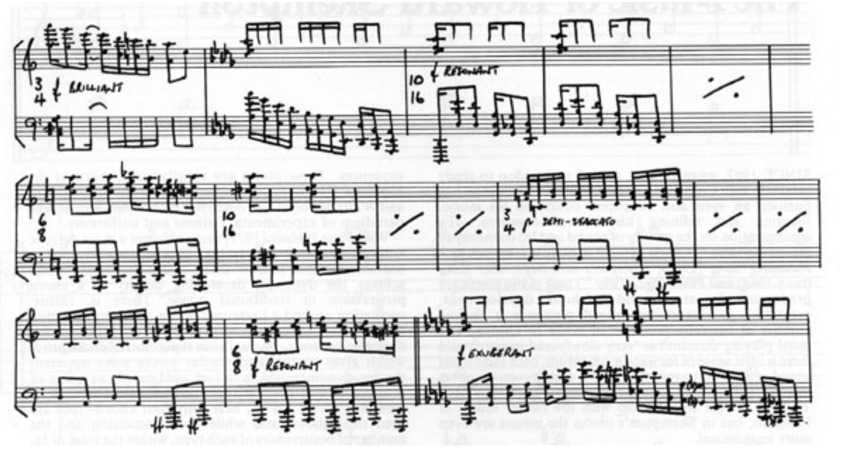


Ex. 7: Sonata No. 87, last bar

The last three sonatas in this group (Nos. 88–90) are rather longer and more involved than the rest. No. 90, one of the most impressive of all, is a breathtaking moto perpetuo: a sparkling, concise evocation of the world of the Gothic horror story, with more than a suggestion of the diabolic.

Nos. 91–98, the most recent sonatas, develop the tendencies of the previous three. No. 91 (1975–76), described as ‘a rondo with a finale in the English style’, is an altogether more substantial and pianistically demanding work, easily breaking the five-minute barrier so common among its predecessors. White has, however, made no sacrifices in economy in these latest pieces: the 93rd Sonata (1976) is a miniature sonata allegro containing ‘semiquavers by the handful, an exploding chorale, a cadenza-like development section, a towering recapitulation and a codettina, all in the space of three minutes’.

These most recent sonatas are ‘more to do with presenting a statement if not an argument’: Nos.97 and 98 (both early 1978) in particular are more conversational and pervaded with a breezy optimism worthy of Medtner. The vigour of Scottish loyalties is celebrated in the 96th Sonata (1977), one of White’s most extrovert works to date: the performer is instructed that ‘the general mood...should be one of beefy exuberance’. A brief extract demonstrates how these high spirits are assimilated into the established characteristics of White’s compositional technique (see Example 8).



Ex. 8: Sonata No. 96, bars 38-52

If the rhythms and chord repetitions of the more recent sonatas owe more to jazz and rock than to Messiaen, it is because White’s range of reference has widened considerably since the initial involvements with experimental music and the theatre. (One is reminded of the story about the Japanese monk, a vegetarian for years, who having attained satori eats whatever is put in front of him, even lamb chops.)[7] This seems to have affected the ensemble music more radically. The piano sonatas provide the antidote, appearing at times when group activity is most slack and focusing on interests outside its scope. They are the only part of White’s output for which no fairly immediate performance is envisaged; they therefore represent the least public face of a composer whose music has not, as yet, ‘swamped our culture’.

Publications and recordings of piano sonatas

Nos. 1 and 5 are published by Alphonse Leduc, Paris; the British agents are United Music Publishers.

Nos. 1, 4, 5 and 9 were recorded by Colin Kingsley on Lyrita RCS 18.

No. 15 was recorded by Ian Lake on Music In Our Time MIOT/LP 1 (limited edition).

Publications and recordings of other works

Humming and Ah-ing Machine was published by *The Musical Times* as the Music Supplement to the May 1971 issue which contained Brian Dennis's article on the composer (see footnote 5).

The Experimental Music Catalogue published a number of works including *PT Machine* (1969). (For address see the general introduction to this issue above.)

Several works including *Drinking and Hooting Machine* (1971) are published in Brian Dennis, *Projects in Sound* (London: Universal Edition, 1975).

Air (1973) was recorded by the London Gabrieli Brass Ensemble as part of their 'Four Elements' record on DG 2530032.

Autumn Countdown Machine (1971), *Son of Gothic Chord* (1970), *Jew's Harp Machine* (1972) and *Drinking and Hooting Machine* were recorded by various musicians on Obscure Records OBS 8.

All music examples (except Examples 5 and 6) copyright of the composer and reproduced by kind permission.

Example 5 copyright of Hinrichsen Edition Ltd. and reproduced by kind permission.

Jems update, 2004: The EMC does not currently publish *PT Machine*. It does have several of White's percussion systems works in the *Hobbs-White Duo Percussion Anthology*.

A more recent recording is Roger Smalley, piano, John White: Piano Sonatas (NMC DO38, 2001). Smalley plays Sonatas No. 15, 29, 31, 54, 55, 56, 57, 75, 76, 79, 86, 95, 104, 109, 121, and 124.

In print, there are five volumes of sonatas published by Forward Music:

53–62

90, 91, 95, 96

100–109

110–116

53, 62, 65, 68, 75, 78, 84, 86, 103, 110

Our sincere thanks to John White for allowing *Jems* to reprint his music, and to Forward Music for their kind permission to reprint Sonatas No. 53 and 96.

Jems update, 2011: Sadly, Forward Music is no more. New recordings of White sonatas include the following:

John White: Adventures at the Keyboard, Jonathan Powell, piano. Convivium Records, CRR 006, 2011, http://www.conviviumrecords.co.uk/adventuresatkeyboard.html. Early sonatas.

Notes

[1] For details see the end of this article.

[2] This and all succeeding quotations not separately acknowledged were either written or spoken by John White during a long conversation with the author in April 1979.

[3] From the programme notes for the concert entitled 'Four English Composers', Purcell Room, London, January 5, 1974. (The other composers were Christopher Hobbs, Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton.)

[4] One exception to this, however, is the Eighth (and final) Sonatina (1961). Encouraged, no doubt, by Brian's Gothic Symphony and Sorabji's *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, it lasts about one and a half hours and consists of the following movements: Concert Allegro; two Andantes and an Adagio; two Barcarolles and a Barcarolle Recitative; Scherzo (c. 20'); Symphony in five movements (c. 30'); and Finale.

[5] Brian Dennis, 'The Music of John White', *The Musical Times* Vol. 112, No. 1539 (May 1971), p. 435.

[6] One of White's least 'comfortable' works is the *37 Orchestral Snapshots* (1973). His only orchestral commission (from the Richmond Festival), it consists of brief extracts from the piano sonatas of 1972 and early 1973 separated by five to ten seconds of silence. For instance, the first four 'snapshots' are taken from the 53rd Sonata: no. 1 presents the opening three bars (on brass); no. 2 consists of bars 5–8; no. 3 of bars 16–17; and no. 4 of bar 37 to the end (woodwind and pizzicato low strings). Many of the extracts sound complete in themselves, even if unnaturally brief; the silences are formally logical but have quite a disturbing effect in performance. The strength of the contradictions (and the discomfort) is only possible within an idiom as accessible as White's.

[7] Told by Keith Rowe and related by Christopher Hobbs in the programme notes for John Tilbury's 'Volo Solo' concert series of October 1970.