

The background of the entire image is a dense grid of small squares. Each square contains a different abstract, painterly texture in various colors including shades of blue, purple, orange, yellow, and grey. The overall effect is a complex, multi-colored mosaic.

shift

Nicholas Phillips, piano

shift [verb]: change in emphasis, direction, or focus

The title of this album draws inspiration from the exciting—and long overdue—shift in recent years with regard to more diverse and inclusive concert programming. It celebrates the increasing collective awareness, in general, of all the wonderful music that exists by women composers. This album is my small personal contribution to what I hope is a continued shift towards embracing and celebrating diversity and equity in the study, performance, and promotion of art music. I present here premiere recordings of eight works by composers whose music I have come to know and love.

||| ABOUT THE ARTIST

Described by the *New York Times* as a “talented and entrepreneurial pianist” and an “able and persuasive advocate” of new music, Nicholas Phillips’ playing has been praised for its “bejeweled accuracy” (*Fanfare*) and as “razor-sharp yet wonderfully spirited” (*American Records Guide*). He maintains an active schedule as a soloist and collaborative artist having performed all across the United States. He has also given solo recitals and performances in Europe, South America, Asia, and Africa.

In 2011 he released two CDs on Albany Records; *Portals and Passages*, which features the piano music of American composer Ethan Wickman (b.1973), and *Boris Papandopulo: Piano Music. American Vernacular: New Music for Solo Piano* (New Focus Recordings, 2014), features commissioned works written for him on that theme by 10 American composers. His most recent album is *Impressions* (Blue Griffin, 2016), a collection of 21st century American piano music.

Phillips is a Yamaha Artist, and is currently an Associate Professor of Piano at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. For more information, please visit www.nicholasphillips.net



||| ABOUT THE MUSIC *(program notes by each composer)*

I have a quasi-religious relationship to Chopin's Ballades. If I stumble on one of them unexpectedly—on the radio, in a hotel lobby, or walking past a pianist's practice room—I have to stop and sit down. Years ago, I communed with the Ballades to such a degree that now I almost fear them. Of all the Ballades, I was most affected by the Fourth. I'd read that Chopin wanted this piece to have a "sickly, creepy" feeling, which reminded me of an interview I'd read with Thom Yorke in which he'd said the goal of Radiohead's "OK Computer" was to make the listener feel "emotionally nauseated." In both cases these characterizations struck me as poignantly apt; there is a point at which introspection can feel vertiginous. I'm not sure I shared this artistic objective for this piece, but I kept thinking about it as I was writing it. Because of this, and in homage to the many technical and structural features of Chopin's Ballades that inspired the writing of this piece, I decided to call it *Ballade*.

There is a long tradition of composers writing pieces for specific occasions and in remembrance of great artists. Undoubtedly, there will be many compositions written and dedicated to the memory of Van Cliburn and I am honored to be able to contribute *In the Midst*. When I first thought about what kind of piece this would be, a mental image appeared that stayed with me throughout my writing process. I imagined myself in the concert hall following Van Cliburn's legendary performance of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow in 1958 – the resonance of the concerto lingering, the chords ringing in the air, the emotional energy expanded by Van Cliburn still palpable and the legacy of the performance imprinted onto the hall, the audience and history. As I was creating my own soundworld, I found myself in the midst of this energetic reverberance, filtering musical fragments of the concerto through

my own compositional voice and reimagining the music as a tribute to all the great performances that leave behind an emotional imprint on the listener. *In the Midst* is a remembrance, a celebration and an appreciation of an extraordinary musical life forever in our midst. *In the Midst* was written for Van Cliburn gold medalist, Stanislav Ioudenitch in memory of Van Cliburn and premiered by Ioudenitch on April 4, 2014 at the Van Cliburn Tribute Concert.

Built on a fleeting 32nd note turning motive, B-C-D-C-B, *White Piece 1* is my musical response to the last line of T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, (1925) "This is the way the world ends, ... Not with a bang but a whimper." I highlighted the motive with silence, space, rising lyric gestures, white-key geysers and expressive markings to create an idea of a piano work that may have existed but now remains only in fragments of itself suspended in crevices in the air and the broken narrative of memory.

White Piece 2, a quiet rapture, is my response to H.D. (Hilda Doolittle)'s poem *The Whole White World*, (1921). The poem palpitates with excitement and anticipation which I animate musically by creating a breathless, oscillating sextuplet (ii6/4 – i5/7) in the left hand. A melodic line soars over it, through it, under it and over it again, suggesting a fundamental key but never resolving to it, perpetually aloft. The B-C-D-C-B turning motive is embedded in the fabric of the music and is heard throughout.

White Piece 3 is a flat-out, white-key boogie with the energy of the Big Bop per (J.P. Richardson)'s 1959 rockabilly song *White Lightning*. The piano is a cultural vehicle. Beyond its identity as an instrument the piano can, and does, convey all kinds of cultural messages, brought to us through the elegant hands of pianists from all walks of life. Boogie is one of these walks. An American verb/noun/adjective, the word represents a state of being to an American way of life. From time to time the B-C-D-C-B motive makes appearances, developed and disguised.


I used Locrian mode (B-B white -key octave on a piano keyboard) to compose **White Piece 4**. Using the B-B scale, I composed a melody and, for the first half of the piece, placed it in the right hand over a one-measure B-B ostinato in the left hand. For the second half of the piece the roles are reversed, placing the ostinato in the right hand and the melody in the left. The B-C-D-C-B turning motive is embedded in the fabric of the music and is heard throughout.

In **White Piece 5**, I imagined the keyboard as an anemometer (a wind meter). Using the pitch D (a step above middle C) as its axis, diatonic white-keys spin around it with the energy and drive of a prevailing steady wind. As the piece progresses, the set of pitches expand outward from the D axis. The right hand gradually adds white-key pitches above it while the lower voice of the left hand shifts its pedal tone downward, moving from G to A, then to E followed by D. Finally, as the lower left hand moves downward to a C pedal, we feel tonic resolution of the previously unresolved B-C-D-C-D turning motive.

La Intervención is a piece about the moment when you gather your strength and decide to talk to a special person to tell them something needs to change in their lives. Something intense happens in someone else's life and this is the moment that follows what happens after that. It's a piece about the strategies that you use in talking to that person who's in a very different state of mind. The considerations of tone, subtlety, directness and compassion that one has to contemplate in this situation. There's profound despair and sorrow but also a sense of relief and inexplicable calmness.

Rang De Basant - One of the most fascinating raags I have yet encountered in my study of Hindustani music is *Raag Basant*. *Basant* means 'spring' in Hindi, but it couldn't be further from the Western conception of the season. Against a canvas of chirping birds and pastel colors, *Basant* feels dark and exotic, rendered in bold colors, and winding through passages of sinewy chromaticism.

The piece starts with large dense chords that change one note at a time, until they find their way slowly into *Basant*. This is followed by an excerpt



from a short Hindustani composition (called a *bandish*) in *Basant*, stylized and notated to accommodate the sonic possibilities of the piano. This *bandish* builds and eventually which vanishes back into the dense chords, only to have a little bit of *Basant* bleed through at the end. The title of the piece comes from an iconic Hindi film, “Rang De Basanti” (which literally translates to “Give it the color of Saffron”). Instead of giving this piece the color of saffron, I wanted to “color” it with the aesthetic of *Raag Basant*.

Reunion Ibis is from the *Extinction Series* – a collection of small one to six-minute miniatures written for both vocal and instrumental soloists. Each movement is a musical obituary to an extinct animal on the ever-growing extinction list. The concept for this compositional constraint was developed in 2014, and is an indeterminate and likely never-ending work, as the list of extinct animals is already daunting, and it continues to add members yearly. The sheer volume of the series is a commentary on mankind’s carelessly destructive tendencies and manifest destiny attitude towards other living creatures on this planet. With this thought in mind, the composer has chosen to embark on a piece that can never be completed without the necessary reversal of our outlook on the environment and our impact on it.

Based on the poem “Carpet Weaver” by Brenda Najimian Magarity, *Aghavni* (“Doves”) follows the lives of a group of women before and during the Armenian genocide, closing with a retrospective look at those women and what they lost from a “present day” perspective.

Karnavalito No. 1 is inspired by the distinctly Andean concept of *mestizaje*, as championed by Peruvian folklorist José Maria Arguedas (1911-1969), whereby cultures can co-exist without one subjugating another. Allusions to the rhythms and harmonies of the mountain music of my mother’s homeland of Perú abound in this boisterous work, albeit freely transformed in the blender of my personal imaginations. *Karnavalito No. 1* is dense in its virtuosity, with stylistic nods to the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, a music hero of mine.

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