A Study of William Bolcom’s Compositional Style
Serious and Popular Elements as Exhibited by

12 Etudes, 12 New Etudes,

and

The Garden of Eden

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To answer your question “What does one mean by the serious music scene,” this is, I assure you, not my own original term; in fact I hate it, as it implies that everyone not in it is not serious—popism, I suppose. Your other question: “Shouldn’t ‘classical, serious’ composers learn from the ‘opposition’?” is one my whole life has addressed. – William Bolcom

Abstract
This paper will examine William Bolcom’s compositional style and expressive language as exhibited in three piano works: 12 Etudes, 12 New Etudes, and The Garden of Eden. An in-depth discussion will reveal how the composer assimilates certain 20th-century music stylistic trends, particularly turn-of-the-century ragtime and the mid-century avant-garde. For the purpose of this study, specific characteristics of Bolcom’s style will be described as either ‘serious’ or ‘popular’. Accordingly, 12 Etudes will denote Bolcom’s ‘serious’ style, while 12 New Etudes and The Garden of Eden will serve as illustrations of the composer’s blending of ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ idioms. Additionally, Bolcom’s rag suite, The Garden of Eden, will be discussed at length, with the intention of arriving at a specific ‘reading’ of the work through the interpretation of various expressive elements and symbolism found therein.

Terminology
As stated above, the terms ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ will be applied to a number of musical characteristics discussed throughout the study. ‘Serious’ will be used to describe features that are associated with the decidedly esoteric aesthetic of 20th-century art music, such as serialism, total chromaticism, and various avant-garde techniques, such as free dissonance, indeterminacy, and tone clusters. Conversely, ‘popular’ will delineate more colloquial 20th-century idioms, such as blues, jazz, and ragtime. This decision is made solely in the interest of establishing a clear nomenclature, and is not intended to imply that the terms are mutually exclusive.

Introduction
For many music scholars, 1938 is considered a vintage year in American music history. With the births of John Corigliano, Frederic Rzewski, and William Bolcom, the art music of the United States would be given a new voice, one distinctly American, in the tradition of Charles Ives, yet still grounded in the cutting-edge musical trends of the European avant-garde. Of the three aforementioned composers, William Bolcom seems to have taken the most ‘populist’ approach to American art music. Additionally, Bolcom œuvre may be seen as the most impervious to any particular hierarchical classification of musical style. His works, in particular the rags and cabaret songs, represent a legitimate treatment of American popular music. These works represent a sincere gesture toward musical styles that have at one time or another ‘moved’ the composer. The result is a body of composition that is, “in the full meaning of the word – ‘American’”2.

Bolcom and the ‘Academic’ Aesthetic: The Etude Sets
Beginnings
Growing up as a musically precocious youth in Tacoma, Washington, Bolcom took a weekly bus trip to the University of Washington to study piano and composition with Berthe Poncy Jacobson and John Verall, respectively.3 Bolcom’s studies with these two teachers foreshadow the composer’s open-minded approach to music aesthetics. Bolcom describes Jacobson’s teaching style as being strictly “old school–never praise your student to his face.”4 Conversely, Verall took a more laid-back approach, as he “didn’t like to criticize an unfinished composer because

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3 Ibid., 2
4 Ibid., 2
[he] might be keeping [the young artist] from a breakthrough.”⁵ This diverse educational experience seems to have given Bolcom an appreciation for both discipline and imagination, a combination that would heavily influence the composer’s later music studies.

Upon receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in composition from the University of Washington, Bolcom turned down the opportunity to study on full scholarship with Paul Hindemith at Yale University. Instead, he chose to study at Mills College with Darius Milhaud, whom Bolcom had met at the Aspen Music Festival.⁶ Bolcom’s work with Milhaud would provide the composer with an opportunity to study at the Paris Conservatory with Olivier Messiaën.⁷ This joint tutelage under Milhaud’s traditional, populist approach, and Messiaën’s progressive, academic style, reflects a further step in Bolcom’s progression towards his own unique ‘crossover art’. Surprisingly, the educational duality that would so profoundly influence Bolcom was a source of great intellectual discomfort for the composer. During this period he was introduced to the contention that profundity and accessibility are mutually exclusive, or as Bolcom puts it: “the either/or categorically…where one talked of ‘great music’ and ‘pretty music’ and ‘popular music’ with no possible fusion of the three.”⁸ Milton Babbitt famously supports this viewpoint in his oft-referenced screed “The Composer as Specialist”⁹:

_The preliminary differentiation of musical categories by means of this reasonable and usable criterion of “degree of determinacy” offends those who take it to be a definition of qualitative categories, which—of course—it need not always be. Curiously, their demurrers usually take the familiar form of some such “democratic” counter definition as: “There is no such thing as ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ music.” There is only ‘good’ and ‘bad’ music.”¹⁰_

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⁵ Ibid., 3  
⁶ Ibid., 4  
⁷ Ibid., 4  
⁸ Ibid., 4  
⁹ This article is (in) famously known as “Who Cares if You Listen?” However, the article was re-titled without Babbitt’s knowledge or consent, and the “offensively vulgar title” has become the conventional title.  
It suffices to say that the compositional environment supported by mid-20th-century academia in America was aesthetically hermetic. Much of the musical thought of the time was dominated by Boulez, Stockhausen, among others – a generation of composers that, while having a marked resonance in the music community, had little consideration for public appeal. This sentiment is clearly articulated in Babbit’s aforementioned article:

*It often has been remarked that only in politics and the "arts" does the layman regard himself as an expert, with the right to have his opinion heard. In the realm of politics he knows that this right, in the form of a vote, is guaranteed by fiat. Comparably, in the realm of public music, the concertgoer is secure in the knowledge that the amenities of concert going protect his firmly stated "I didn't like it" from further scrutiny ...Music they do not like is "not music," composers whose music they do not like are "not composers."*

This apparent contempt toward the average concertgoer created an artistic atmosphere in which, according to Bolcom, “one was suspect if they weren’t part of the ‘look-over-your-shoulder-lest-you-put-in-a-triad school of modernism’.”

This scrutinizing environment led Bolcom to “compose as if someone was looking over [his] shoulder.” 12 Etudes is a manifestation of Bolcom’s acquiescence to the 20th-century avant-garde movement.

**Assimilation as Instruction: 12 Etudes and 12 New Etudes**

12 Etudes and 12 New Etudes are, essentially, a means of assimilating the extended techniques that are required in the increasingly challenging and experimental music of the 20th century. Up to the time Bolcom published the 12 Etudes, the various techniques often encountered in avant-garde music (for example, playing with one’s fist and elbows, or randomly choosing passages to perform) were not represented in most technical regimens. In addition to illustrating various extended techniques, the etudes also provide numerous explorations of touch, texture, and rhythm. In an effort to exposes the pianist to a more modern aesthetic, Bolcom alludes to the

11 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 40
styles of a range of 20th-century composers, among them: Scriabin, Webern, Cowell, Messiaën, Boulez, and Stockhausen. This emphasis upon style is clarified in the prefaces of each etude set:

12 Etudes, while dealing with almost all aspects of technique, concentrates on control of textures, dynamics, pedals, and the use of the strings of the piano.\textsuperscript{14}
The technical and pedagogical purposes of these New Etudes is similar to that of the first set (12 Etudes for Piano, 1959-1966); as with the earlier volume of Etudes, the particular problem being addressed is noted at the beginning of each Etude. As in the first set, however, the major goal is the creation and execution of pieces of music, which happen to be exercises of style.\textsuperscript{15}

12 Etudes is a clear indication of Bolcom’s aesthetic sentiment during his first compositional period. The work, composed in the years spanning from 1959-1965, was premiered in Paris in 1965 by the composer.\textsuperscript{16} The influence of Boulez, Messiaën, and Stockhausen is palpable in the dense textures and chromatic musical language, while the instruction of Bolcom’s piano teacher, Berthe Poncy Jacobson, is reflected in the work’s technical difficulty and pedagogical objective. From a didactic standpoint, this composition is admirable in its transparent delineation of modern pianistic techniques, which range from complex rhythmical structures and unconventional notation, to extended techniques, such as string plucking and arm glissandos (Example 1).

Example 1. 12 Etudes - 6. Scherzino - Variations

![String Plucking and Forearm Glissando]

Similarly to the etudes of Chopin, Liszt, Scriabin, Ligeti, and numerous others, Bolcom’s two etude sets reveal a precise pedagogical and aesthetic purpose – namely, the composer’s attempt to better acquaint students with the technical and stylistic challenges found within a particular body of works. In this case, the extended techniques of 20th-century piano music are explored at

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 3
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p.3
length, though some more traditional piano techniques are tackled as well, for example *tremolo*, finger independence, and ornamentation. The mental demands of Bolcom’s etudes represent the new challenges facing the 20th-century pianist. It is evident that the composer’s intention is to introduce traditionally-trained pianists to new concepts of sonority and rhythm, not merely extended modern techniques.

Within each etude, Bolcom provides a well-constructed system of methodical explanations and meticulous performance instructions. Such careful descriptions are provided to guide the pianist, just in case they are not familiar with the particular style of each piece. Contrary to many composers of etude sets, Bolcom clearly articulates the technical motives behind each work. Each etude contains a brief prologue in which the technical challenges of the work are identified, thus giving the pianist a clear idea of the composer's didactic intention.

Stylistically, Bolcom’s etudes may be seen as a commentary on the eclecticism of the 20th-century, as each work provides the pianist with an ‘impression’ of the style of a diverse group of composers, such as Scriabin, Webern, Cowell, Messiaen, Boulez, and Stockhausen. These ‘impressions’ of the sounds and techniques of various 20th-century works make both of Bolcom’s sets worthwhile additions to the modern pianist’s technical and stylistic syllabus of study.

**Impressions of Messiaën**

Several features of the first etude from *12 Etudes* may be interpreted as allusions to the style of Olivier Messiaën. The use of overlapping hand positions, dissonant harmonies, shifting dynamic ranges, and slow tempo is found in numerous examples throughout Messiaën’s oeuvre. The most striking feature of the etude is the extremity of dynamic changes – reminiscent of Messiaën's
second etude from *Quatre Etudes de Rythmé*, – “Mode de valeurs et d’intensités”. (Example 2 & Example 3)

Example 2. Bolcom: *12 Etudes* – 1. Slowly, mysteriously, mm. 1 – 3.3

Contrasts of touch and dynamics, over and under hand technique in a small area.

Example 3. Messiaën: *Quatre Etudes de Rythmé* – 2. « Mode de valeurs et d'intensités »

Furthermore, the intertwining, treble-based hand positions of Bolcom’s first etude may reference the overlapping chords found in the fifth movement of Messiaën’s epic piano cycle *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*. Also notable are the complex rhythms, and frequently tied chords. (Example 4)
In addition to dynamic and textural allusions, Bolcom also seems to make references to the exceptionally slow tempi found in many of Messiaen’s works. Both “Etude No. 1” and « Regard du Fils sur le Fils », contain tempo markings which are assigned to subdivisions of the beat, despite time signatures that allocate the beat to the quarter note. This implies that a conventional metronome, which has a range of 40-208 beats per minute, is unable to measure the quarter note. “Etude No. 1” and « Regard du Fils sur le Fils » receive respectively 33 – 36 and 19 quarter notes per minute. Therefore, a tempo indication for the subdivisions must be given. Furthermore, this slow tempo, combined with the expressive instruction “Slowly, mysteriously,” enables Bolcom to subtly recall the ambient reverence found in Messiaen’s style (notice the doux et mystérieux\(^\text{17}\) in Example 4).

Bolcom creates further allusions to Messiaen’s style in the 12 New Etudes as well. The seventh etude, “Premonitions”, begins with a proportional acceleration of rhythm, a compositional technique that is common in the works of Messiaen. This progressively accelerating rhythm (valeurs progressivement accélérées) can be found in the 18\(^\text{th}\) movement of Messiaen’s Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus. (Example 5 & Example 6)

\(^{17}\) Translation: “soft and mysterious”
In addition, Bolcom gives the work a religious connotation by inserting a phrase from the text of the *Dies Irae* (*tuba mirum spargens sonum*) at the conclusion of the etude (Example 7). Not only does this allude to the sacred themes found in Messiaen’s works, but the syntax in which it is given – in parentheses and preceded by ellipses – may indicate a discreet nod to Debussy as well. (Example 8)

18 Translation: “how beautifully the trumpet sounds”
Impressions of Webern: “Mirrors” and Piano Variations, Op. 27

The ‘impression’ of certain compositional features may also be found in the third piece of 12 New Etudes, entitled “Mirrors.” Here Bolcom’s configurations strongly reflect the symmetrical constructions of Anton Webern, particularly those found in Webern’s Piano Variations, Op. 27. It is a well-known fact that Webern’s Variations represent a culmination of the composer’s obsession with symmetry, in particular, palindromes. In the brief excerpt from Webern’s Piano Variations given below (Example 9), one can observe that mm. 3-5 display an axis of horizontal symmetry. In “Mirrors”, Bolcom not only imitates this concept of ‘mirroring’, but he also recreates Webern’s jagged configurations. (Example 10) It is interesting to note that in both examples, the hands never play together. Additionally, the incessant cross-measure beaming found in “Mirrors” may be interpreted as yet another subtle reference to Webern’s Piano Variations.

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Impressions of Stockhausen: “Gestures” and Klavierstück XI

Quite possibly the most compelling example of Bolcom’s compositional tribute to a 20th-century colleague occurs in the tenth etude from *12 Etudes*, entitled “Gestures.” This etude may be viewed as an homage to Karlheinz Stockhausen’s polyvalent experiment, *Klavierstück XI*. Bolcom introduces the etude with the following preface:

*Leaps, use of sostenuto pedal. Speeds of phrases or “gestures” and spacing between them are left at the discretion of the performer. He may eliminate certain “gestures” according to his taste. He may not, however, change the order of the “gestures.” This etude is controlled by predetermination, not chance; the pianist should select is “gestures” in advance and work out a scale of proportionally pleasing speeds and spacings, much as an actor will take a speech and find lines to emphasize, others to suppress, some to declaim slowly, others to be rushed for effect, etc. The performer will find some “gestures” as complete thoughts, others as dependent material. If this etude is to be played separately, it should naturally have a different shape than if it is to be played as part of the series.*


Example 12. Stockhausen: Klavierstück XI
A striking similarity to Stockhausen’s famous piece is exhibited in the fragmented layout that Bolcom employs in “Gestures,” as well as in the flexible nature of the performance execution (choice on the part of the pianist with regard to the kinds of gestures used).

Nonetheless, it is important to note that there are also differences in the realization of these two works. In *Klavierstück XI*, Stockhausen prescribes a random execution of numerous fragments, and declares the work complete after the third iteration of any given fragment. In “Gestures,” however, Bolcom specifically states that there is an inherent structure that must be followed. As a result, the composer removes this ‘purely’ aleatoric element from the etude. Bolcom’s effort to emphasize the fact that the work is controlled by predetermination is significant.

*Klavierstück XI* had been heavily criticized by several members of the music community, including Boulez, Stravinsky, and Cage. This reception came about, in part, because the piece did not fit convincingly within any particular genre of the time. Stockhausen’s critics perceived *Klavierstück XI* as being ideologically flawed, because it was neither aleatoric or determined. As a result, Bolcom was probably making an attempt to retain the flavor of indeterminacy without sacrificing the ideological integrity of his music.

**Synthesis of Serious and Popular Veins: The Infernal Rag**

Bolcom’s intention of introducing the Classically trained pianist to new genres and techniques, is not confined solely to ‘serious’ 20th-century music. In fact, of the *12 New Etudes*, the most demanding work is the ‘crossover’ etude, “Rag Infernal” (*Syncopes Apocalyptiques*). With this etude, the composer makes manifest his assertion that “if you mix classical and popular forms,

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you bring life to both genres.” The “Rag Infernal” represents a masterful synthesis of 20th-century serious music, and American popular music. Even the subtitle, *Syncopes apocalyptiques*, can be interpreted as a reference to Joplin’s popular rag, *Elite Syncopations*.

Oddly enough, the composer concludes the preceding etude (“Premonitions”) with the words “*tuba mirum spargens sonorum*” from the *Dies Irae*. How cunning is Bolcom’s reference to the Requiem Mass before the pianist plunges into to the *Rag Infernal*, i.e. ‘hell’? The designation ‘*infernal*’ is not unbefitting – this etude is truly iniquitous. It is wickedly difficult, mischievously funny, and it embodies an ‘unholy’ alliance between ‘serious’ music and ‘popular’ music.

Bolcom’s use of intense rag configurations (Example 13) within the context of an etude, again, is not entirely new. Similarly vicious skips may also be found in Earl Wild’s *Gershwin Etudes*, in particular, Etude No. 7 – *Fascinating Rhythm* (Example 14), and perhaps to a lesser degree, in Chopin’s *Etude in A Minor*, Op. 25/4 and Rachmaninoff’s *Etude-tableau in A Minor*, Op. 39/6. (Example 15, Example 16)


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23 Translation: “Apocalyptic syncopations”


The rhythmic configurations of “Rag Infernal” are ostensibly American in flavor. Bolcom employs the traditional emphasis on the last 16th note of each beat (in Example 17, the 4th eighth note, because of the 2/2 time signature), that is the most prominent characteristic of American Ragtime music.

Another notable feature of the above passage is the frequent use of ‘jazz’ dominant 7th and 9th chords in the right hand. Moreover, the bass movement is based heavily on the interval of a fifth – a defining feature of 20th century jazz (see Example 13). Of course, the composer frequently chooses the diminished fifth (tritone), perhaps as a tongue-in-cheek conjuring up of the ‘diabolus in musica.’ Such configurations, in conjunction with their syncopated treatment, give the etude a cool, ‘jazz’ flavor, despite its almost sporadic harmonic structure.

In addition to a dissonant, unpredictable harmonic language, the etude also contains extended techniques from the 20th-century avant-garde, most notably tone clusters and arm glissandos. (Example 18)


“Rag Infernal” may be viewed as one of the best illustrations of Bolcom’s mastery of ‘crossover art.’ The composer’s use of a traditional genre (the etude), ‘serious’ 20th-century devices (clusters, atonality), and ‘popular’ idioms (rag, jazz) leads to the creation of an unique synthesis of compositional styles, which, in turn, ensures that the music attains both academic and popular appeal.

Crossover Art – Part 1: Classical Europe and Folk Song
Like the works of the late Classical masters, many of Bolcom’s works represent a genre, in which “the utmost sophistication of musical technique [exists] alongside – or better, fuses with – the virtue of street song.”\(^{25}\) In order to achieve this fusion, Bolcom carves out an innovative musical language, in which ‘difficulty’ is not sacrificed for the sake of ‘appeal’. Consequently, Bolcom’s keyboard works evoke what Charles Rosen refers to as a “mass appeal of high art [that] has never been recaptured.”\(^{26}\) Within this particular style, ‘mass appeal’ and ‘high art’ can never be divided equally. At times, ‘mass appeal’ can overtake the balance of ‘high art’. This is surely the case with The Garden of Eden. As the earlier discussion revealed, Bolcom’s 12 New Etudes provides an example of this synthesis, which is more firmly grounded in ‘high art’. This inconsistency of aesthetic emphasis does not weaken the composer’s synthesis of two opposing idioms, nor does it taint its originality. In fact, the same parallels could easily be drawn within the folksy écossaises and dance-like sonata movements of Beethoven.

Figure 1. Écossaise in G major, WoO 23, mm. 1-4

![Figure 1](image1.png)

Figure 2. Sonata in G major, Op. 31/3 - 3. Allegretto, mm. 1-4

![Figure 2](image2.png)


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 333
Bolcom’s ability to forge an impenitent collaboration between the European avant-garde and American popular music results in the composer creating a plethora of musical gestures. As a result, his works exhibit a broad and decidedly diverse expressive language. In an interview with Columns Magazine, the composer astutely reveals his aesthetic goals:

"By making them [classical and popular idioms] touch, something fresh, new and organic grows. I like the traditional and the newest culture coexisting in the same piece. The classical masters had that possibility—Haydn is full of pop tunes—and I want it, too."\(^{27}\)

As Bolcom points out, his interest in ‘pop tunes’ is not entirely new. In fact, many works of the Classical Era were written with the expressed intent of melding the sophistication of high art with the appeal of common street songs. According to Charles Rosen, ‘Haydn had, by 1790, created and mastered a deliberately popular style.’\(^{28}\) This is not to say that popular elements had been absent from the works of Haydn and other composers. References to colloquial genres, such as ländler, hunting songs, and yodels have always been present to some extent in high art.\(^{29}\) The allusion to popular elements can be seen in innumerable works of composers spanning from ‘Mauchaut to Schönberg’\(^{30}\). Rosen goes on to point out that ‘assimilation is the crux of the matter’\(^{31}\). In short, this means that Classical masters such as Haydn and Mozart made an effort not to eradicate the folksiness of these popular influences, but rather to appropriate such elements into their compositional style.

Conversely, composers such as J. S. Bach, who, on rare a occasion would incorporate a folksy turn\(^{32}\), would insert popular tunes as if “quoting [them] from a foreign language.”\(^{33}\) To be

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28 Rosen, p. 329
29 Ibid., 329
30 Ibid., 329
31 Ibid., 330
32 For example, the Quodlibet of the Goldberg Variations, or the Peasant Cantata
33 Rosen, 330
fair to Bach, the ostensibly simple nature of folk music seems to have had no place within the ornate melodic *frisés* and refined counterpoint of high Baroque art. Consequently, all traces of perceived commonness were removed from the borrowed material, and the melodies were placed within a more refined rhythmical or textural setting. Rosen provides a compelling example of this ‘flattening’ with the chorale *Ein feste Burg*.

**Example 19. Martin Luther: Chorale - *Ein feste Burg***

Here, as Rosen points out that, while the melodic contour of the chorale tune remains intact, folksy attributes such as the syncopated dance rhythm, are not retained, thus subduing the popular character of the tune.³⁴

Popular influences have also been used, most famously in the case of Bartók, as a means of forging a particular nationalistic voice; this point will be discussed more at length later. It is important to re-emphasis the fact that the successful “crossover art” ³⁵ of the Classical “triumvirate”, ³⁶ which saw not only immense critical acclaim, but also enthusiastic public

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³⁴ Rosen, 330  
³⁵ Schwartz/Childs, 481  
³⁶ Rosen, 330
adoration, marked a special time in music history when social awareness successfully coexisted with individual genius.37

**Beethoven Op. 110: The Sublime and the Ridiculous**

A famous illustration of this “crossover art” may be found in Beethoven’s *Piano Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major, Op. 110*. Here, the composer incorporates two German folk songs into the humorous scherzo movement: *Unsa Kätz häd katzln ghabt* (“Our cat has had kittens”) and *Ich bin lüderlich, du bist lüderlich* (“I’m a slob, you’re a slob”).38

![Example 21. German Folk Song - Ich bin lüderlich, du bist lüderlich](image)

This allusion to such crudely colloquial themes gives rise to several possible readings. The word *lüderlich* implies “a bedraggled or slovenly individual not fit for polite society.”39 According to William Kinderman, *Ich Bin Lüderlich* not only conveys a general sense of repugnance, but may also contain specific autobiographical undertones. Kinderman cites an incident in which Beethoven, in wretched attire and having lost his way in Weiner Neustadt, was arrested for peering into windows. Upon being apprehended, the composer’s protests were met with the response: “Well, why not? You’re a bum. Beethoven doesn’t look like that!”40 This anecdote seems to support a correlation between Beethoven’s personal experiences and *Ich bin lüderlich*,

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37 Rosen, 330
39 Ibid. 246
40 Original German: 'Warum nit gar? A Lump sind Sie; so sieht der Beethoven nit aus'
du bist lüderlich. Moreover, Kinderman asserts that Beethoven’s use of the popular tune serves a higher aesthetic purpose – to contrast the grotesque and mundane with the sublime and transcendentental.

However, many writers, some notably Martin Cooper, have remained suspicious of Beethoven’s intentions in referencing the coarse humor of Ich bin lüderlich, stating: “this Dutch vein of humor reminds us that Beethoven’s forbearers may well have been among the peasants whose gross amusements we know from the pictures of the Brueghels.”41 Even in the midst of such caustic observations, Kinderman maintains that the infusion of the ridiculous within the framework of an otherwise high-minded work is the composer’s primary goal, thus making the “transcendental and almost religious” characteristics of the third movement all the more significant. A similar intermingling of crassness and magnificence may be considered the foundation of William Bolcom’s compositional style, as evidenced by the composer’s assertion that:

“I hope to embrace an enormous emotional range in music: from the sublime to the ridiculous, often both at once, and everywhere in between”.42

With inspiration from Charles Ives, Bolcom would put this philosophy into practice, and use the international appeal of ragtime to once again validate sophisticated art music among the general public.

Crossover Art – Part 2: 20th–Century America and Ragtime

Charles Ives: Innovation within Emulation

As mentioned above, the practice of borrowing elements from popular idioms may be seen as a means of establishing a nationally-distinctive voice, or what David Burge refers to as one’s

41 Ibid., p. 247
42 Susan Feder. Liner notes to William Bolcom: Symphony No. 4; Session I. St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, New World Records long-playing digital recording NW 356, 1988
‘identification with place.’ 43 Rosen points out that Bartók’s treatment of distinctive cultural music material from countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Croatia, is surprisingly homogenous. This leads him to postulate that the composer’s intentions were grounded more in the appropriation of Eastern European ‘non-diatonic models’ than the establishment of a purely nationalistic demarcation.

On the other hand, composers, such as Dvořák and, to some extent, Charles Ives, seem to incorporate generic folk elements for more ‘patriotic’ reasons, therefore the choice of which specific folk tune is used seems to be a moot point. Rosen’s assessment may be unfair, however, as Bartok’s reworking of folk material has not only initiated ethnomusicological interest in the Eastern European region, but has also given international recognition to this particular regional aesthetic. In addition, it would seem irresponsible to cite the selection of particular folk tunes simply as novel ‘cameos’ within the framework of an otherwise high-minded art piece.

The works of Charles Ives would provide America with the first true example of this ‘identification with place’. Eric Salzman refers to Ives’ as “the first important Western composer to stand essentially outside the European mainstream.” 44 Some scholars, however, find this viewpoint to be rather misleading. J. Peter Burkholder points out that, despite Ives’ seeming rejection of the European compositional process, he produced traditional genres, such as “symphonies, sonatas, and art songs.” 45 Ives’ utilization of these genres, combined with the fact that the composer sought to be a ‘sort of continuing spirit’ of Beethoven, leads Burkholder to describe Ives’ music as “no more and no less American than Berg’s is Austrian or Bartok’s

Hungarian.” This is not to say that Ives’ music is not distinctly American, but rather, that many composers strive to provide the international stage with “a local color that will do all the world good.” Ives’ works would, however, intrigue future generations of American composers, most notably Henry Cowell and William Bolcom, with the latter citing Ives’ style as ‘the earliest and strongest influence in his [Bolcom’s] music.’

Ives’ unique style, exhibited by the incorporation of harsh dissonances, complicated rhythmic configurations, and broad musical textures, is the result of a uniquely eclectic musical experience, within which the composer’s father, George Ives, serves as the focal point. The elder Ives, along with being the town’s band-master, was a man of keen musical intellect and curiosity. As a result, Charles was on many occasions a participant in one of his father’s musical ‘speculations’. These ‘speculations’ were often didactic in nature, for example, one famous account has Charles singing Suwannee River in E-flat while his father accompanied him in the key of C major. Many of these experiments, such as the construction of a microtonal instrument to recreate the sound of the local church bell, were nothing more than “matters of sonic curiosity.” These explorations of sound, along with a 20-year long assimilation of church hymns, band music, and popular ballads would remain the driving force behind Ives’ music.

These early musical experiences were balanced by Ives’ studies at Yale, where his work under Horatio Parker not only strengthened his technical skill, but also taught him to view music

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46 Ibid., p.13  
47 Ives Essays before a Sonata. p. 81  
48 Kimball, Carol. Song. p. 284  
49 Burge, 33  
50 Ibid., 34  
51 Ibid., 33-34
as “not just functional or entertaining…but as a statement embodying the composer’s personality.”

The Garden of Eden

**Introduction**

“Most university composers are boring…my solution was to diversify, in order to get in contact with the world around me.”

As discussed above, the mature works of Bolcom are exceptional not only for exhibiting a combination of two contrasting styles, but also for the apparent ease with which the composer reconciles these conflicting aesthetics. Furthermore, Bolcom’s ability to utilize this amalgamation for the sake of symbolic, expressive, and even pedagogical purposes is equally admirable. The end result of this synthesis is a body of work that is distinctly American in style and is at once colloquial and urbane - with the ability to gratify and challenge audiences, without the risk of being labeled hermetic or rudimentary. This feature of Bolcom’s style is most clearly manifested in *The Garden of Eden*, a suite of four piano rags. Each rag in the suite, which was completed in 1969, portrays characters and events found in the Judeo-Christian account of the Creation story. The composer provides a succinct description of each piece in the preface of the work:

*The four rags that make up the suite The Garden of Eden tell the story of the Fall in ragtime. “Old Adam”, a “chicken scratch” recalling the animal dances of the 1900’s, contains a reminiscence of Chris Smith’s teens hit “Ballin’ the Jack.” “The Eternal Feminine” has a harmonically devious third strain that calls up the Mystery of Woman. Eubie Blake particularly liked the ‘rag fantasia’ “The Serpent’s Kiss”; the final rag in the set, “Through Eden’s Gates”, conjures the image of Adam and Eve calmly cakewalking their way out of Paradise.*

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52 Ibid., 34
53 Featherston, 8
The Garden of Eden, while exhibiting a diverse range of influences from popular genres, is inconspicuously, yet undeniably modern in its harmonic and expressive language. Much like Prokofiev’s ‘Classical’ Symphony, The Garden of Eden is ostensibly traditional in sound. However, upon closer examination, the apparent idiomatic writing of each movement gives way to markedly contemporary musical gestures. Throughout the work, one finds sophisticated symbols of wit and irony, which range from quotations of Broadway songs to avant-garde techniques, such as tone clusters and harsh dissonances.

A Semiotic Narrative

Within The Garden of Eden, Bolcom utilizes a number of compositional processes in order to effectively develop the creation narrative. Each rag contains unique, recognizable symbolic devices, which create each movement’s distinctive ‘personality’. By skillfully incorporating harmonic and motivic symbolism, Bolcom constructs a complicated musical model that establishes relationships between major players and events of the Eden story. This model connects not only Adam to Eve, but also Eve to the Serpent, and Adam, Eve, and the Serpent to the Fall. This is accomplished through an ingeniously veiled semiotic narrative in which tonality, rhythm, melody, and overall structure carry specific meaning throughout the entire work.

Humanity and the Fall: “Old Adam”, “The Eternal Feminine”, and “Through Eden’s Gates”

Hidden within the charmingly colloquial style of The Garden of Eden is a rich network of harmonic and melodic irony. This feature serves to establish an overall narrative, to identify characters, and to create distinct relationships between these characters. One such symbol lies in the composer’s choice of key for each rag within the suite. This tonal scheme allows Bolcom to
convincingly create specific links between the characters of the Eden story on a number of levels.

Table 1. Tonal Model for The Garden of Eden by Movement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Tonal Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Adam</td>
<td>D\textsubscript{b}/G\textsubscript{b} Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Eternal Feminine</td>
<td>A\textsubscript{b}/D\textsubscript{b} Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Serpent’s Kiss</td>
<td>D Minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through Eden’s Gates</td>
<td>C Major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most striking feature of the aforementioned tonal scheme is the portrayal of Adam and Eve as both a collective unit and as unique individuals. (see below) This, in turn, embodies an important dynamic within the world’s first relationship – namely ‘diversity within unity’.

Adam’s Rib and ‘One Flesh’

*And the man said “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman,’ for she was taken out of man.” That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. – Genesis 2:23-24*

As mentioned in Table 1 above, “Old Adam” begins in the key D\textsubscript{b} major, which consists of five flats.

As is common within the anatomy of the ‘classic rag’ form (see Structure as Means of Delineation and Unity, pg.34), “Old Adam” modulates to the key of the subdominant (G\textsuperscript{b}) during the ‘Trio’ (C section), and remains in this key until the conclusion of the piece.


\[\text{Musical notation image}\]

Subsequently, “The Eternal Feminine” begins in the key of A\textsuperscript{b} major, which has four flats, one flat fewer than “Old Adam’s” initial key of D\textsuperscript{b} major. This tonal gesture, in which the composer removes a flat from one rag to compose the next rag, brings to mind the story of ‘the Creator’ removing one of Adam’s ribs in order to create Eve.


\[\text{Musical notation image}\]

Like “Old Adam”, “The Eternal Feminine” modulates to the key of the subdominant (D\textsuperscript{b}) during the ‘Trio’ (C section), and remains in this tonality until the conclusion of the piece.
This results in “Old Adam” and “The Eternal Feminine” combining to create a circular tonal structure that begins and ends in the same tonality of D♭:

Figure 3. Tonal Unity within the first three rags of The Garden of Eden

This arrangement is noteworthy in that it allows Adam and Eve to ‘share’ the key of D♭. This mutual association with D♭ major effectively unifies the two characters, thus allowing the composer to portray them as diverse, yet unified beings – or, as ‘Mankind’, not just ‘Adam and Eve’.

The aforementioned relationship effectively places “The Serpent’s Kiss”, for all intensive purposes, outside of the mainstream harmonic structure of the work, thus revealing its dubious, decidedly non-human nature. However, there is a subtle tonal relationship between “The Eternal Feminine” and “The Serpent’s Kiss” – after all, where would the serpent be without Eve?
Eve and The Serpent

“The Serpent’s Kiss” begins in D minor, a tritone below the opening of “The Eternal Feminine”. This tonal correlation may be viewed as an allusion to the archaic term for the interval of the tritone, *diabolus in musica* or ‘devil in music’.\(^{55}\) Perhaps most obvious to the listener is the fact that “The Serpent’s Kiss” is the only rag in the suite to be set within the minor mode. This, of course, is emblematic of the wily namesake of the piece, whose protagonist serves as a metaphor for evil, and in some religious circles, is depicted as the devil himself. In fact, Liszt’s “Après une lecture de Dante”, another famous portrayal of such ‘infernal subject matter’, is set within the key of D minor as well. To forge a parallel between these two works based solely on tonality would appear feeble at best; after all, the key of D minor has a dark history. Mozart’s *Requiem* and *Don Giovanni*, Schubert’s ‘Death and the Maiden’ quartet, and Liszt’s *Dante Symphony* are among a number of works that effectively and deliberately portray the *macabre* in D minor. In fact, the original Gregorian setting for the “Dies Irae” (Day of Wrath), which is so often quoted as a metaphor for death, could easily be analyzed as being in D minor.

Example 26. *Dies Irae* in neumatic notation

Example 27. *Dies Irae* in standard notation

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What prompts one to relate the “Après une lecture de Dante” and “The Serpent’s Kiss” is not a concern for the choice of key, but rather, the context in which the key is introduced. A thorough grasp of this relationship merits a brief discussion of tonal processes in Liszt’s Deuxième Année de Pèlerinage.

**Grace and Evil**

In her discussion of ‘expressive resonance’ within the piano cycles of Liszt, Dolores Pesce points out that the overall tonal plan of the Deuxième Année de Pèlerinage directly relates to the overall themes of the work, namely ‘love’ and ‘death’. The most striking relationship featured in her discussion is the tritone relationship between the final two pieces: “Sonette 123 del Petrarch” and “Après une lecture de Dante”. The first piece is based on Petrarch’s sonnet I ’vidi in terra, a love-stricken depiction of a “beauty of such ‘angelic grace’ that she could move even heaven”. This poignant work is based in the key of A-flat major (the same as “The Eternal Feminine”). The concluding melodic A-flat is in turn transformed into the leading tone of the dominant in D minor, the key of “Après une lecture de Dante.” This gesture effectively creates a tritone-based correlation between the two works, which may be yet another reference to the ‘diabolus in musica’.


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57 Ibid., 403
58 Ibid., 403

33 | P a g e
The tonal delineation between ‘grace’ and ‘evil’ found within Deuxième Année de Pèlerinage can be easily applied to “The Eternal Feminine” and “The Serpent’s Kiss.” Further evidence of the Eve-Serpent dynamic will be addressed below (see Motive as a Means of Delineation and Unity, pg. 41).

The Fall
“Through Eden’s Gates” concludes the work in the key of C major. This is striking because, as mentioned before, Bolcom utilizes the key of D♭ major to unite Adam and Eve as a collective unit and symbolize ‘mankind’ as a whole. Therefore, if The Garden of Eden begins in D♭ major, to end the suite in C major would illustrate a drop of a semitone, thus harmonically symbolizing the ‘Fall of Man’, or more aptly, the ‘Fall of Humanity’. Additionally, one may see the key of C major as representing a certain catharsis in the form of an expulsion key signature, perhaps representing a clean slate upon which humanity may commence at the end the story.

Structure as Means of Delineation and Unity
“Old Adam”, “The Eternal Feminine”, and “Through Eden’s Gates”, due to a number of structural features, can each be categorized as ‘classic rags’. The term ‘classic rag’ was originally coined by music publisher John Stark, who is credited with discovering and promoting the music of Scott Joplin. Stark’s fruitful relationship with Joplin began with the publication of Maple Leaf
Rag. The immensely popular rag was purchased in 1899 for fifty dollars plus royalties of one cent per copy. Following an initial printing of 5,000 copies, over a million were sold. Over the next two decades, Stark published and promoted the ‘classic’ style rag pioneered by Joplin. Consequently, *Maple Leaf Rag* is consistently considered to be the archetype for the ‘classic rag’ form, as subsequent rag composers wanted to emulate the success of the composition.

Table 2. The Ideal Classic Rag Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>C (Trio)</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key:</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example 30. Joplin: *Maple Leaf Rag* - A, B, C, and D Sections

*Tempo di marcia.*
Many authors emphasize that, while this structure defines the ‘classic rag’ style, few ‘classic rags’ actually follow the anatomical features verbatim. Frequently, rags by James Scott or Joseph Lamb will deviate from the aforementioned traits of ‘classic rag’ by incorporating some of the following variations:

- The introduction may be longer or shorter than four bars, or may be omitted altogether
- The C and D strains may continue in the original key rather than use the subdominant key
- The D strain may be omitted or replaced with a restatement of the A or B strain
- Some repetitions of strains may be omitted, usually one of the repeats of the A strain
- Brief transitional phrases may be inserted between strains

**Adam and Eve**

It has already been established above that Bolcom utilizes tonality to forge a relationship between the Old Adam and Eternal Feminine movements in *The Garden of Eden* suite. This connection between the two ‘characters’ is further accentuated by a homogeny of structure, namely, the aforementioned ‘classic rag’ form. Within this form, Bolcom employs slight differences in order to further illustrate the ‘diversity within unity’ concept.

“Old Adam” falls comfortably within the anatomical structure of the ‘classic rag’, though a number of exceptions are present. First, the customary 4-bar introduction is omitted, which is also the case in all but the last movement. Furthermore, the overall structure is slightly altered. Bolcom retains the appropriate number of repeats (one per strain), but instead of single repeats of each strain (AABBA), the composer inserts the customary reiteration of the A strain *in between* the repetition of the B strain (AABAB). The C section, labeled ‘Trio’, moves to the key of the
subdominant, and remains there until the end of the piece with the conclusion of the repeated D strain. (compare Table 2, p. 33 & Table 3, p. 35)

Table 3. Structure of “Old Adam”

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C (Trio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Example 32. *The Garden of Eden* - 1. “Old Adam” - Trio, mm. 9-12

Example 33. *The Garden of Eden* - 1. “Old Adam” - Trio, mm. 36-38
“The Eternal Feminine”, again a ‘classic rag’, is markedly different from “Old Adam” in structure. Here, the composer utilizes the traditional AABBA model for the A and B strains. The ‘Trio’ receives special emphasis with opening and closing 4-bar transitions. Perhaps the most striking deviation from the ‘classic rag’ model is the exclusion of the D strain in favor of a final reiteration of the B strain in the key of D-flat. (compare Table 2 & Table 4)

Table 4. Structure of "The Eternal Feminine"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>C (Trio)</th>
<th>Transition</th>
<th>B’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IV</td>
<td></td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Expulsion

“Through Eden’s Gates”, perhaps the most straightforward piece of the set, is an extended ‘classical rag’ model, with the A section recapitulated – as if the ‘cast’ is giving a final curtain call at the end of the work (see Motives as a Means of Delineation and Unity, pg. 41). Also noteworthy is the inclusion of the 4-bar introduction, making “Through Eden’s Gates” the only movement to incorporate this common ‘classic rag’ feature. (Table 2 & Table 5)

Table 5. Structure of "Through Eden's Gates"

Table 5. Structure of "Through Eden's Gates"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>C(Trio)</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Leisurely, simply (d=90)

tight pedal
Motives as a Means of Delineation and Unity
Aside from using tonality and structure as a means of identifying and joining certain characters of the creation narrative, Bolcom evokes an expressive narrative based on motivic devices, which can be traced through each movement of The Garden of Eden. These ‘motivic identifiers’ may be used to derive a more concrete reading of the work, therefore strengthening its inherent programmatic nature. Motivic resources originate both within the rags themselves and are also
extrapolated from outside sources (most notably *West Side Story*). Bolcom continues a rich tradition of inserting popular music quotations into classical works (see Beethoven’s use of popular themes in *The Sublime and the Ridiculous* above).

**Old Adam**

As indicated by the composer, “Old Adam” is reminiscent of Chris Smith’s teens hit, *Ballin’ the Jack*. Two features of Smith’s tune provide Adam’s motivic identifiers: dotted rhythms and call and response.

Example 43. Smith: *Ballin’ the Jack*


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The overall boisterousness that is created by these musical characteristics is unique to “Old Adam”, thus making this character unmistakable when heard in other movements (Example 46 & Example 47). One of Adam’s most notable appearances occurs at the climax of “The Serpent’s Kiss”. Disguised within Eve’s melody form the second rag are Adam’s characteristic dotted rhythms. (Example 46)

By combining Eve’s melodic theme with Adam’s dotted rhythms, Bolcom places both Adam and Eve at the ‘scene of the crime’ during the final bars of “The Serpent’s Kiss” (see “The Serpent’s Kiss” below). This hint of ‘gender equivalence’ is decidedly progressive, and markedly out of step with the Judeo-Christian its assertion that women are to blame for the Fall of Man, and are consequently to be viewed as the subordinate gender to their male counterparts.
Consequently, Bolcom establishes a certain sense of ‘equality’ between Adam and Eve at the conclusion of “The Serpent’s Kiss”.


In Example 47, one encounters Adam’s final appearance during the ‘curtain call’ of the suite. Here Bolcom provides a subtle allusion to Adam’s character, by inserting a brief section of ‘call and response’. With the exception of the D Strain of “Old Adam”, this is the only occurrence of ‘call and response’ within the entire *Garden of Eden* suite.

**The Eternal Feminine**

From a thematic standpoint, “The Eternal Feminine” provides the suite with two important motivic identifiers: Eve’s Theme and The Eternal Feminine Theme:

Example 48. Bolcom - "The Eternal Feminine" - Eve's Theme

Example 49. Bolcom - "The Eternal Feminine" – The Eternal Feminine Theme
While these two themes have little programmatic significance within the context of “The Eternal Feminine,” they are integral to the narrative structure of “The Serpent’s Kiss.” (Example 51 & Example 52)


The Serpent’s Kiss

“The Serpent’s Kiss”, perhaps the most complicated movement of the suite, contains a number of motivic identifiers, which represent both characters and ideas, (i.e., temptation.) The opening measures of “The Serpent’s Kiss”, with their driving rhythm and diabolical character, create an allusion to a beating snake’s tongue. Likewise, the second, more sinuous motive, reminds one both aurally and visually of a snake, crawling up and down a tree (in this case, as it outlines a diminished triad) (Example 53). This winding, chromatic theme will later be referenced in
“Through Eden’s Gates.” As the character of the snake participates in the final ‘curtain call’.

(Example 73, pg. 57)


\[ \text{Fast, diabolical (d = 96, or faster)} \]


Perhaps the most significant motivic identifier in “The Serpent’s Kiss” is the Temptation theme, seen below. Unlike previous motives, this theme seems to represent an idea rather than a character, as it is passed on to numerous characters later in the rag. (Example 54)
Interestingly, this theme may be seen as being derived from two sources, both pertinent to the overall narrative of “The Serpent’s Kiss”. First, in may be argued that the Temptation theme is derivative of the B Strain of “The Eternal Feminine.”

One can easily identify the similarities, both in melodic contour and intervallic progression, within the Temptation theme and the above excerpt from the B Strain of “The
Eternal Feminine”. This is further evidenced within “The Eternal Feminine” theme (Example 51, pg. 45), in which corresponding intervallic and directional features are present.


This interpretation is acceptable in that it ties Eve to the serpent at a musically organic level. By deriving the most integral theme of “The Serpent’s Kiss” from key material found in “The Eternal Feminine”, Bolcom makes the two inseparable, much like the Creation story; as Eve was formed from within Adam, so here is the serpent formed from within Eve. This relationship forges an organic link between the serpent and Eve’s experience of desire and temptation.

The second interpretation, though completely disavowed by the composer for legal reasons, still warrants discussion. As mentioned above, music has a rich tradition of quotation that may be traced back to the cantus firmus masses of the Renaissance, most notably the L’Homme Arme masses of Josquin de Prez, Giovanni Palestrina, and Guillaume Dufay. In the earlier discussion of Beethoven’s Op. 110 (see Beethoven Op. 110: The Sublime and the Ridiculous, pg. 23), one can see how the insertion of a popular song within the framework of a classical work can help provide an unmistakable aural reference for listeners. In “The Serpent’s

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Kiss”, one may hypothesize that the Temptation theme is not only an extension of Eve’s B Strain material, but also a quotation of “Gee, Officer Krupke” from West Side Story.

Example 57. Bernstein/Sondheim: “Gee, Officer Krupke”

Upon close examination, one can see that, with the exception of an additional chromatic note in m. (1), the melodic contour, intervallic progression, harmonic thirds, and tonal progression of the temptation theme are identical to the chorus of “Gee, Officer Krupke”. Bolcom’s inclusion of this particular song is interesting in that “Gee, Officer Krupke” embodies the very nature of temptation – namely the justification of bad behavior through sound logical reasons. The crux of “Gee, Officer Krupke” is a humorous list of excuses for why some people (in this case, the Jets) are ill-disciplined.
Sondheim: “Gee, Officer Krupke” Chorus 1

Gee, Officer Krupke, we're very upset:
We never had the love that ev'ry child oughta get
We ain't no delinquents, we're misunderstood.
Deep down inside us there is good!

In this context, the Temptation theme assumes a more cunning, manipulative character that grows gradually more convincing as the rag progresses, with the Temptation theme appearing in numerous incarnations over the course of the rag.

The Temptation of Eve

In m. 41 one sees the serpent’s first attempt to cajole Eve into tasting the forbidden fruit; however, the foot stomps and loud chords indicate that the serpent is quickly denied.


In Example 58, one can see the serpent again trying to attain Eve’s good graces, this time by changing character, as is indicated by a shift from D minor to D major. The plan fails, as indicated by further stomps and dissonant chords; yet the serpent perseveres, and one sees the mischievous prognosticator begin to work its spell over the graceful protagonist.

Table 8. The Garden of Eden - 3. “The Serpent’s Kiss” – Chord Progression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D Major</th>
<th>B♭ Minor</th>
<th>C♯ Major</th>
<th>G♯ Major</th>
<th>D Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B7</td>
<td>Gm/E</td>
<td>B♭m/G</td>
<td>Bm/E</td>
<td>A7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At this point, the Temptation theme has been superimposed over the D major chord progression (see Table 8) found in Example 60. This potent combination of sweetness and deception allows the serpent to successfully convince Eve to do the unthinkable. (Example 61)

The serpent completes his swindle with a tap dance, reminiscent of a turn-of-the-century vaudeville show. This effect of tapping on the piano recalls Joplin’s Ragtime Dance, in which the pianist stomps during a similar ‘stoptime’. Bolcom completes this section with ‘kisses’
(tongue clicks) from the serpent that finally explode in a ‘bitingly’ dissonant cluster, itself representing Mankind’s fateful nibble. (Example 64)


Example 63. Joplin: Ragtime Dance

Example 64. The Garden of Eden - 3. “The Serpent’s Kiss” - "The Bite"

Following Eve’s famed transgression, the proud scoundrel celebrates with a slight alteration of the snake’s theme, this time including two major chords.
However, the serpent’s celebration is short-lived, and is abruptly interrupted by a grave, passacaglia-like section. In this section, the sinking bass line and ringing pedal tones foreshadow Adam and Eve’s grim fate.
The final iteration of the Temptation theme is seen as Adam and Eve make their way through Eden, as God’s thunderous footsteps (exemplified by more foot stomps) signify the couple’s impending damnation. Adam and Eve, with the help of the Temptation theme, try to justify their indiscretion, but are ultimately expelled from paradise. (Example 68 and Example 69)

An interesting motivic device is introduced in the final 6 measures of “The Serpent’s Kiss” – a G₇ major chord in first inversion. From a tonal standpoint, one could argue that G₇ could represent “Old Adam”, as the eponymous first rag ends in the key of G₇ major.
Though such an interpretation is certainly valid, one could argue that this particular chord represents a previously unseen, yet integral character in the Eden story – the Creator. In order to support this, one must turn to Olivier Messiaën’s greatest religiously influenced piano work. In the earlier discussion of Bolcom’s etudes, a parallel was drawn between the composer’s first etude of 12 Etudes and Messiaën’s Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus. The crux of Messiaën’s epic cycle regarding the Nativity is the Thème de Dieu, or Theme of God.

Notable here is that the thème de dieu begins and ends with and F-sharp chord in 1st inversion. If one considers the final G⁶/₃ (enharmonically respelled F♯⁶/₃) of “The Serpent’s Kiss” as a veiled reference to Messiaën’s thème de dieu, one may assume that in this context, it humorously depicts duo suddenly ‘running into’ God. After an awkward reiteration of Eve’s theme (slightly altered to include Adam’s dotted rhythm), the first couple are expelled from paradise with a thunderous cadence, complete with foot stomps and intense dynamic markings in the extreme registers of the instrument. (Example 69)
Through Eden’s Gates: A Curtain Call

The final rag of *The Garden of Eden* serves less as a continuation of the narrative found in “The Serpent’s Kiss,” than a light-hearted encore. The implication here is that the suite is, in a sense, more of a piece of musical theatre than a solo piano work. After all, this composition contains a compelling story, familiar characters, recognizable leitmotifs, and even special effects (i.e., stomping, knocking, tongue-clicking). So, how apt is it that Bolcom closes the work with a curtain call? In this context, it is easy to identify each main character of narrative by their unique motivic features. Each persona, as is customary in musical productions, is given “call music” in the form of the A strain, which is recapitulated a total of three times. As one could imagine, the serpent mischievously enters the stage without call music, thus abruptly interrupting Eve’s ‘curtain call’. (Example 72) For the final iteration of the A strain, Bolcom calls for a slight slowing of the tempo, which brings to mind a grand finale leading the entire production to a close.

Example 71. Call and Response in “Old Adam” and “Through Eden’s Gates”
Example 72. Cantabile melody and similar chord progression in "The Eternal Feminine" and "Through Eden's Gates"

Example 73. Sinuous melody and chromaticism in "The Serpent's Kiss" and "Through Eden's Gates"
Conclusion

Bernard Holland praises Bolcom’s compositional language for its masterful blend of ostensibly antithetical styles.

“He works hard to erase the lines between the elite and the vulgar, the intellectual and the visceral, the select and the popular. Music, he seems to be telling us, has pulled itself apart from both ends of the cultural spectrum: the classical extremity eager to isolate high-mindedness and rise above the everyday; the pop end cornered by a concern for the bottom line.”

William Bolcom’s musical language is undeniably sophisticated, and his mature works exemplify an impenitent collaboration between the esotericism of 20th-century European avant-garde music and the accessibility of 20th-century American popular music. What separates Bolcom’s ‘crossover art’ from that of other composers of the 20th-century is this composer’s sincere appreciation of ‘popism’. In contrast to the famous ‘rags’ of such 20th-century composers, such as Hindemith (1922) and Stravinsky (Piano Rag Music), Bolcom’s ‘crossover’ works aptly represent contemporary ‘high art’ in a balanced, almost symbiotic relationship with popular music.

"The more I look to the future, the more I keep coming back to the past. They come together. Maybe if we can find these axes between old and new, serious and popular, we can keep music afloat.” – William Bolcom

It is this synthesis of serious and popular elements that contributes to Bolcom’s appeal among both the erudite and non-connoisseur audiences.
Bibliography


