



## The Composer Essay Project

### On SOLO FOR DUET

By Eve Egoyan

I am an artist whose medium is the piano. The piano is at the centre of my creative universe. I am inspired by it and continually re-invent my relationship with the piano through the exploration of new works.

Trained as a classical pianist, over the years I have followed my curiosity and sense of adventure into the world of contemporary music. I am always seeking ways to push the piano's limits and to find new ways to share the instrument I love with audiences who might not traditionally attend a piano concert. Most recently my explorations have led me to incorporate my love of visual arts into my practice through an exploration of the relationships between image and sound.

In SOLO FOR DUET I wanted to challenge myself further as an interpreter, improviser, composer and performer. I wanted to push myself past old limits, into frontiers that I have been testing the boundaries of over the years. SOLO FOR DUET's deeply integrated worlds of sound, image, and unspoken narrative challenge traditional conceptions of piano and myself as pianist unlike anything else I have previously performed.

Although I am a soloist on stage, I am always in a collaboration or in a duet with my piano, my composers, and my audience with whom I share the experience of listening. In SOLO FOR DUET I am also inside and responsive to a theatrical environment created by a team of designers which is intuitively bound together by Joanna McIntyre, my dramaturge/director. This physical and emotional environment holds the show together, creating an elegant hybrid of theatrical, musical and visual elements.

This larger theatrical presentation is the frame for six musical compositions. The composers are mature Canadian artists who are each highly respected within the international artistic community. Many of these artists have made a career working across disciplinary boundaries, something that Canadian artists excel at. Each of these compositions has its own internal duets.

These layers are all part of SOLO FOR DUET.

Linda Catlin Smith     *Thought and Desire*

Linda Catlin Smith writes:

*Thought and Desire* is a work I created as a wedding anniversary gift for Austin and Beverly Clarkson. The work is based on Shakespeare's Sonnet 45. I used an elaborate process for this work, assigning vowels to pitches, and aspects like fermatas to punctuation. The piece is played first with piano alone, and the second time through, the pianist sings, very quietly, the top note of each chord. The goal was to create a sense of intimacy between piano and pianist, so that the pianist joins with the sound through his or her voice. A marriage of player and instrument, intellect and emotion, thought and desire...

The gentle rhythmic flow of the music is rooted within the pulse of the spoken text. As I play, I hover between earthy harmonies in the mid-range of the piano and bell-like responses, high and low. When I sing into the upper line of the chords, I bind text and pianistic touch, voice and piano resonance. Boundaries blur as the piano extends my voice creating long shadows of sound.

I regularly record myself as part of my practice. When I first recorded Linda's piece, I noticed that I let the sound of my voice fade after singing each note. I sang like a piano, mimicking its natural decay, forgetting that the voice can extend a note in the way a piano cannot. At the piano, you cannot change anything once a note is played. I found it very strange that I had internalized being a pianist so deeply.

John Oswald     *Homonymy*

The following is based on a phone conversation with John Oswald on September 25, 2018, about his composition *Homonymy*.

The Société de musique contemporaine du Québec commissioned anglophone Ontarian John Oswald to write *Homonymy* for chamber ensemble (no piano) and cinema in 1998.

The music [...] is accompanied by a projected video of animated text (written and designed by Oswald) in playfully mixed French and English. In the original chamber version, each of the notes played is synchronized with the appearance of each syllable on screen.

In this version, arranged with Eve, Oswald has added a completely new role for pianist and piano. Unlike a traditional piano piece where the pianist plays the keyboard, here the disklavier plays most of the actual notes in *Homonymy*, integrated with a recording of portions of existing chamber score.

The pianist is tasked with a variety of unusual activities at, inside, and around the piano. These may be perceived as comic or dramatic; or as specifically functional to the timbral transformation of the instrument.

For the performer there is no leeway for expression in time. It is more important WHEN the sounds happen rather than WHAT the sounds are. Actively preparing the piano during the performance is more prevalent than the pianist performing at the keyboard. The pianistic sections are largely improvised, allowing the performer to enjoy these moments within such a tightly synchronized context. There is a certain wildness to these preparations.

The performer's activities may be perceived as comic or dramatic, or as specifically functional to timbral transformation of the piano. The events may seem funny but it is really the precision of timing, something that comedians hone, which makes the events happen dramatically. It is this synchronicity, how things relate in time, which is most critical in a performance of *Homonymy*.

John created my part in his piece like a choreographer works with a dancer, workshopping it in rehearsal with me. My dramaturge, Joanna McIntyre, added theatrical elements to John's choreography. *Homonymy's* multi-layered landscape includes speaking, singing, and playing on the strings as well as performing duets with the disklavier as it plays itself. It is like a concerto for pianist, recorded sound, projected video, and live theatrical performance. There are two pianists (the disklavier playing itself and me)... two languages (French and English) on screen and spoken aloud.. two types of piano sound (prepared and not)... *Homonymy* is full of duets within itself.

**Michael Snow**      *EV3 (solo piano for Eve Egoyan)*

Michael Snow writes:

The title describes not only the pianist, but also the structure of the composition. Left hand activity meets right hand activity, crossing over in the middle. I composed the score by playing a Disklavier (a piano which can transcribe physical playing into digital information). Recording formalizes the effects of piano improvisations. On the one hand the piece was written for Eve Egoyan but on the other hand, it comes out of how I play.

Michael Snow's unusual compositional process results in a remarkable piano piece. The musical score is in free proportional notation written independently for each hand challenging hand independence. Snow composed the work by playing into my piano which has the capacity to transcribe. David Rokeby created software that translated this transcription into a notation that best conveyed Snow's performance. This score, then edited and internalized by me, formalized the effects of Snow's improvisations. The third movement was performed only in the extreme registers of the piano. To facilitate reading, I created a new notation for this movement that mirrors the physical feeling of playing wide registers at the piano.

When I play a score written by a composer who is also a pianist, I feel like I am ghosting their presence. I feel their particular hands and their particular body manifest in the notes on the page. Because the

notational process used in this piece is very direct and I was involved in its transcription, this composer-to-performer relationship is more hand to hand than usual.

In Snow's piece, hand independence and reading challenges are at odds with each other creating a difficult dialogue between brain and body. I look at the score with hooded eyes following the unique path of the written score while keeping the playing as untethered and improvisatory as possible.

### Nicole Lizée                      *David Lynch Etudes*

Nicole Lizée writes:

My piece *David Lynch Études* is an homage to the idiosyncratic vision, style, and imagination in Lynch's work and demonstrates the impact his films have had on me as an artist. It's also an interpretation and extension of elements in his films into musical material. A bit like composers in the past integrating poems and folk songs into their work. Mulholland Drive is my 'folk song'. It's not the musical soundtrack that's manipulated and developed, but the Foley sounds and elements of the dialogue. For example, there's an étude built around Diane's shivering breathing when she sees Camilla for the first time after "the switch". I transcribed it, created a rhythmic pattern with it and wrote a piano part overtop to colour it.

There's an obsessive quality to Lynch's aesthetic that I share. He sees the world differently than other film makers and is very connected to his subconscious and dreams. His films are in one way very grounded in reality (the characters and scenarios could very well exist) but they steadily become twisted and distorted until you're not sure what you're seeing or experiencing. This is something I find I naturally do as a composer and perhaps this is the reason for my affinity with his work.

In writing the *Études*, I wanted to capture and convey the wide spectrum of emotion that I experience when watching his films. The *Études* are my interpretation of both the moments within the films and the techniques of the director.

The *David Lynch Etudes* were commissioned and written for Eve with funding from the Canada Council for the Arts.

The primary duet in this work is between the piano part and the sounds and images of corrupted scenes from Lynch's film and TV work. My piano performance infiltrates the music on screen. The score also includes a layer of extra-pianistic musical activities such as foot stomping, singing, and breathing which I must perform along with the piano part. For *SOLO FOR DUET*, dramaturge/director Joanna McIntyre edited and re-ordered the original *David Lynch Etudes* and added new layers of interaction with the actors on screen through physical mirroring and additional breath work. She also formed an emotional landscape for me to inhabit during the times I am not playing, inviting me to invest in these in-between times to draw the world of the films out onto the live concert stage.

## David Rokeby and Eve Egoyan      *Surface Tension*

*Surface Tension* is a bridge between two continents that have coexisted and regarded each other across the water for a long time, between my life partner, media artist David Rokeby, and me. It is an exploration of possibility, of seeking ways to integrate our two very different approaches to creation. We both also wanted to explore ways in which image could be married to sound in a way that neither dominates the other.

I named the piece *Surface Tension* referring to the membrane-like quality of touch through which I enter into the realm of sound. While not all touch expressivity can be captured digitally, a combination of disklavier (a real piano that digitally captures the performance on the keys) and spectral analysis (through which the computer analyses the timbre of the sound actually produced by the piano) provides a great deal of data about qualities of touch from which David works.

In *Surface Tension*, my performance is interpreted and transformed by custom computer software into live visual images projected onto a screen rising from the body of the piano. The visuals respond to a variety of performance parameters including dynamics, pitch, the harmonic relation between pitches, the use of the sustain pedal, and the duration of individual notes.

In my collaboration with David, my performance conjures visual worlds, extending the piano into a visual instrument. My intuitive understanding of the visuals and how they respond to musical gestures drives my playing.

Much of the visual material is based on simulations of natural processes such as the swarming behaviours of insects, the trajectories of planets, or the rippling of water when a pebble hits the surface. My performance triggers and modulates aspects of these simulations; the visual representations respond to me, but also have a sort of life of their own, becoming in a sense a partner in the performance.

The performance itself is a loosely structured audio-visual improvisation. The improvisation is shaped partly by my response to the system's visual response to my playing. All visual activity on the screen is directly responsive to me. The result is an integration of sound and image in which neither of these elements dominate the other.

David created five visual environments for me to partner with. Each asks for a different type of musical responsiveness some of which challenge my normal musical aesthetic. I feel like David has invited me to dance with him and each dance requires a different type of footwork on my part.

Even though I have performed this work many times, I still find it difficult to maintain a balance. Either my eyes become overly intrigued with the screen or my body and ears want to escape into the creative place I know best, sound. To be in the middle and to be the creator of each is always challenging. To keep this work buoyant I need to accept there is a sacrifice, neither sight or sound will or can ever be fully satisfying in themselves. However, the experience is extraordinarily expansive. The feeling is similar to snorkelling where you can be in more than one element simultaneously.

Eve Egoyan                      *Duet for Solo Piano*

I wanted to create a piece for myself that would delve into the space between “what a piano can do” and “what I wish a piano could do”. I wanted to be able to play the piano and reveal, at the same time, things that the piano is not be able to do such as holding a pitch forever, crescendoing on a note after the key has been struck, shifting and bending pitch, and reproducing sound experiences such as harmonic overtones. I wanted the piano that I love to be able to duet with a dream piano that I imagine.

I also wanted to destabilize the piano, an instrument that holds so much weight within the history of western music as the arbitrator of our tuning system.

I created a new instrument within the body of a regular piano. Engaging with real and virtual sound worlds at the same time takes the listening and decision-making aspects of my performance to a whole new level. When I draw the virtual piano sound out of the piano's natural acoustic sound, I bring the two pianos into dialogue and create duets between them.

Many of these explorations have been made possible through generous funding from New Chapters at the Canada Council for the Arts and grants from the Canada Council, Ontario and Toronto Arts Councils.

Eve Egoyan. October 2018. Toronto, Canada.

Eve Egoyan is an artist whose medium is the piano. Born in Victoria, she lives and works in Toronto. You can learn more about her work at [eveegoyan.com](http://eveegoyan.com)

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