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Etymalong for piano (Ross Edwards)

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Ross Edwards
Etymalong (1984)

Etymalong for piano is part of the series of slow and static works which Ross Edwards refers to as his sacred music.¹⁰ Although there is an unmistakable sonic connection among these works, the series, as it leads up to *Etymalong*, displays an increasing compositional austerity. Edwards has written of the meaning and significance of the title:

Etymalong is an Aboriginal word meaning watering place and is at the same time the name given to the mountain overlooking the village of Pearl Beach, NSW, on the edge of Brisbane Water National Park.

In this once sacred place I lived with my family from 1977 to 1984 and composed, amongst other music, a series of static, evanescent works much influenced by the sounds of the natural environment.

Etymalong could be termed minimalist in that it uses a quite limited number of short gestural motives which are subjected to repetitive processes and varied only by the holding of their last attacks for different durations. The most prominent motivic gesture of the work, the one which dominates the opening section, is also the one where the duration of the last attack is most varied (see Figure 15).

Figure 15



This motive is in two parts, X and Y_n where X is never varied but Y_n changes in duration. In this analysis n refers to the number of semiquaver units in the duration of Y. X appears sixteen times without Y_n (for example, bars 5, 13, 17, 20 etc.), but when this happens, X is usually either preceded or followed (or both) by a version of $X + Y_n$. X is also used by itself in conjunction with the related motive E_n and with motive C_n^1 (both quoted later). The duration of Y_n varies greatly but the most prominent value of n is 2 (a quaver). This occurs thirteen times. The following diagram lists all the values of n employed, with the corresponding number of occurrences in the work:

Number of semiquaver units (n=)	Number of occurrences
2	13
5	3
6	2
10	1
12	3
14	1
16	1
18	1
20	3
24	2
28	1

There is no apparent pattern in this table, as there is indeed no apparent rhythmic pattern in the unfolding of the various sections involving motive $X + Y_n$. For example, bars 2-11 may be stated as:

X	Y_{12}	X	Y_2	X	Y_{14}	X	X	Y_5
X	Y_{18}	X	Y_2	X	Y_6	X	X	Y_{24}

The composer claims to be attempting to achieve an intuitive durational logic, something akin to the sonic rhythms in the natural environment.

The motives themselves are inspired by the sounds of the bush, principally those of birds and insects. The melodic outline and certainly the rhythm of motive $X + Y_n$ is bird-like in character, but this motive, as well as the others in the piece, is essentially a chordal sonority. Motive $X + Y_n$ is a sonority composed mostly of superimposed dissonant intervals such as seconds, sevenths and ninths. The other motives have similar constructions¹¹ (see Figure 16).

Apart from a certain uniformity of intervallic construction, there are some obvious connections among the motives. The tones of A^1 and A^2 are found inverted in

10. Other works in this series are *Shadow D-Zone* for ensemble (1977), *The Tower of Remoteness* for clarinet and piano (1978), *Kumari* for solo piano (1980) and *Reflections* for piano and percussion (1985).

11. In this labelling the superscript number refers to a variation. For example C^2 is varied from C^1 since the F sharp in the left hand is replaced by an E. The subscript number refers to the duration of the last attack in the motive as explained in the above discussion of motive $X + Y_n$.

Figure 16

Figure 16 displays six musical motives, each presented in two staves (treble and bass clef) with dynamic markings and articulation marks. The motives are labeled as follows:

- Motive C_n¹**: Treble staff starts with a dotted quarter note, followed by an eighth note, and a quarter note. Bass staff has a quarter note and a half note. Dynamics: (p), mp, pp, p.
- Motive C_n²**: Treble staff starts with a dotted quarter note, followed by an eighth note, and a quarter note. Bass staff has a quarter note and a half note. Dynamics: p, mp, pp, p.
- Motive E_n**: Treble staff has a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. Bass staff has a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. Dynamics: mp, p, mp, p.
- Motive A_n² + B_n**: Treble staff has a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. Bass staff has a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. Dynamics: p, pp.
- Motive A_n¹**: Treble staff has a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. Bass staff has a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. Dynamics: (pp).
- Motive F_n**: Treble staff has a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. Bass staff has a quarter note, an eighth note, and a quarter note. Dynamics: p, pp, (p).

the right hand of E_n. The rhythmic gestures of X, B_n and E_n are related. As with motive X + Y_n, motives C_n¹, C_n², A² + B_n, E_n, F_n, and A_n¹ are subject to durational variation by the lengthening or shortening of their final attacks (again represented by n as a multiple of a semiquaver unit), but such changes are less frequent and less varied.

The motives quoted, together with their various extensions, account for all the musical material in the piece with the exception of the motive D in the first bar of the piece which is the only motive¹² not subject to repetition. Thus it is possible, using only the letters and numbers described above, to make a diagrammatic representation of the score (Figure 17).

An analysis of Figure 17 suggests that the broad structural design of the work is determined by different groupings of the basic motives within sections. Table 1 divides the work into seven sections, though other overlapping interpretations are possible.

Section 1 is dominated by X and Y but involves a nine bar segment where C is included. Section 3 is a similar section where E is worked in instead of C. The inclusion of E with X and Y is also a feature of section 6. Apart from this, section 2, employing A, B and C is balanced by section 5 which also uses A, B and C. A similar relationship exists between sections 4 and 7 which both employ E and F, although section 7 also includes A.

Although it is possible to formularise the structure of *Etymalong* in even greater detail than presented here,

12. This motive appears to be a variation of B_n but it also includes three of the tones of X (C, A and B flat).

Figure 17

Bar Nos	Motives
8	D X Y ₁₂ X Y ₂ X Y ₁₄ X X Y ₅ X Y ₁₈ X Y ₂ X Y ₆ X X Y ₂₄ X C ₂ ¹ X X C ₂ ¹
15	X Y ₂ X Y ₁₀ X X Y ₂₀ X C ₂ ¹ X X C ₂ ¹
22	X Y ₆ X Y ₂₀ X X Y ₂ X Y ₂₈ A ₁₆ ¹ A ₁₆ ²
29	B ₂₂ A ₂₂ ² B ₂ C ₂ ² A ₂ ² B ₂ A ₂ ² B ₂ C ₂₀ ² A ₂ ² B ₂ A ₂ ²
34	B ₂ C ₂ ² A ₂ ² B ₂ C ₂₄ ² X Y ₁₂ X X Y ₂ X Y ₅
40	X Y ₂₀ X Y ₂ X Y ₂₄ X Y ₂ X E ₄ X Y ₂
47	X E ₂ X E ₂₀ E ₂ X Y ₂ X E ₂ X E ₂₆
57	E ₂ F ₂ E ₂ E ₂ F ₁₄ E ₄ E ₂ F ₂ F ₈
68	E ₂ F ₂₂ A ₁₈ ¹ A ₁₈ ² B ₂ A ₂ ² B ₁₂ A ₂ ²
74	B ₂ C ₁₈ ² A ₂ ² B ₂ A ₂ ² B ₂ C ₂ ² A ₂ ² B ₂ C ₂₀ ² X Y ₁₂
79	X Y ₂ X Y ₁₆ X Y ₂ X E ₄ X Y ₂ X E ₂
87	X E ₁₆ E ₄ X Y ₂ X E ₂₂ A ₁₆ ¹ E ₄ A ₄ ¹
95	E ₂₀ E ₂ F ₂ E ₄ E ₂ F ₁₄ E ₄ E ₂ F ₂
105	E ₂ F ₂₂ A ₁₆ ¹ E ₄ A ₄ ¹ E ₁₆ A ₆ ¹ E ₄ E ₁₈
114	A ₅ ¹ E ₁₈

Table 1

Section number	No. of bars	Bar nos	Motives used
1	27	1 2-12 12-21 23-7	D X, Y X, Y, C X, Y
2	8	28-35	A, B, C
3	20	36-44 45-55	X, Y X, E, Y
4	14	56-70	E, F
5	6	71-7	A, B, C
6	14	78-92	X, Y, E
7	22	93-115	A, E, F

there are aspects of the work that defy analysis. There is a strong element of surprise both in the order of appearance of the motives and in their mysteriously varying durations. In talking about another of the sacred works Edwards has suggested that for the lis-

tener the overall structure is less important than a contemplative appreciation of the individual events:

...the ideal state of mind for the listener should be one of calm intensity, with attention focused on each detail as it occurs instead of projecting the mind back and forth in search of structural associations.¹³

It is perhaps ironic, however, that in striving to create a representation of the arbitrariness of the sequence and duration of events in nature, the composer has created a form which may be seen as an innovation within a particularly Western understanding of musical structure. Certainly it is difficult for the Western listener to adopt Edwards's suggested Eastern approach because attention is easily diverted to his mastery of the craft of planned randomness.

Erymalong, for solo piano, was composed in 1984 especially for the pianist Sally Mays and is dedicated to her in recognition of her longstanding championship of Australian and New Zealand composers.

Michael Hannan

13. Quoted by Jonathan Mills in his program note for *Shadow D-Zone*.