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Ghost Rags by William Bolcom: A Descriptive Analysis and Performance Guide

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GHOST RAGS BY WILLIAM BOLCOM:
A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS AND PERFORMANCE GUIDE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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in

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by

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B.M., Alcorn State University, 2012
M.M., Louisiana State University, 2014
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ABSTRACT

This document is intended to contribute to the ongoing study of William Bolcom’s work by focusing on the *Three Ghost Rags*. The main purposes of this study and the accompanying public lecture-recital are threefold: 1) to provide a background on William Bolcom’s compositional style and his role in the revival of interest in ragtime, 2) to provide a specific descriptive analysis of the *Three Ghost Rags* and 3) to provide a detailed discussion of the pianistic challenges and requirements found in the *Three Ghost Rags*. These are offered as a practical guide for the performer who wishes to attain an extensive understanding of this work.
CHAPTER ONE: WILLIAM BOLCOM – MUSICAL BACKGROUND AND THE INFLUENCE OF RAGTIME

“...I was trained as a classical musician all my life, but I was always interested in popular music. According to my teachers it wasn’t as good, but I loved it anyway.”

William Bolcom describes his compositional approach as influenced by diverse musical traditions, which contribute to an original, distinctive individual style. His work in a multitude of genres has made him one of the most important American composers of our time. For pianists, such solo works as his *Nine Bagatelles* (commissioned for the 10th Van Cliburn Competition) and his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Twelve Piano Etudes* are noteworthy. But it is perhaps the well-known piano rags that occupy a more special place in the repertoire. In these works, William Bolcom masterfully blended classic rag and stride piano techniques, the pianistic textures and compositional techniques of such 19th century composers as Chopin and Schumann, and more contemporary features.

A master of musical fusion whose music uses elements of classical traditions, ragtime, jazz, country, Broadway music and other styles, Bolcom was strongly influenced by two of his teachers, Darius Milhaud and Olivier Messiaen, both considered among the most important composers of the 20th century. Darius Milhaud particularly explored influences of jazz and Brazilian rhythms in his compositions. Bolcom very much admired Milhaud’s experimental approach to musical composition. Therefore, in his own music Bolcom also explores the intersections of a wide variety of musical genres.

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1 Yeng Yu, *A Style Analysis of William Bolcom’s Complete Rags for Piano*, University of Cincinnati, 2007, p.32.
3 Yeng Yu, pp. 1 – 2.
4 Yeng Yu, p.32.
5 Y. Yu, p.32.
Bolcom was born in Seattle on May 26, 1938 into a family with a long tradition of interest in music. His grandfather William Marshall Bolcom was a wealthy lumber mill magnate who placed great value on music, and even remodeled a wing of his home in Seattle as a performance venue for touring musicians. For instance, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, a world famous Polish pianist and composer, performed in William Marshall Bolcom’s home; as a child, William Bolcom’s father sat on Paderewski’s knee.6

By the time Bolcom was born, his family had lost much of their wealth. To support the family, his father resorted to making a living as a lumber salesman. Still, Bolcom’s musical education continued to be encouraged by both his parents. His mother was probably the strongest influence, having come from a German family in South Dakota with strong musical interests. Bolcom began his music lessons in early childhood.7 When William reached age eleven, he began commuting 30 miles by bus from his home in Everett to Seattle for lessons with John Verrall at the University of Washington, who studied with important early twentieth century European composers Zoltan Kodaly and Vincent d’Indy.8 Verrall significantly influenced Bolcom’s compositional style by inspiring William to explore various musical genres.9 In addition, he took piano lessons with Madame Berthy Poncy Jacobson, a Swiss-born pianist, who was also a pupil of Vincent d’Indy.10 An important influential thread, which came from Madame Jacobson, was an awareness of folk songs being a prime source of all music.11

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid, p. 25.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
Beyond his classical training, William Bolcom was always interested in popular music, jazz and rock and roll, country music, and enjoyed listening to and playing Broadway music as well.\textsuperscript{12}

While attending the summer music festival in Aspen, Colorado in 1957, Bolcom met his future teacher Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), one of the most influential musical figures of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{13} In 1958, Bolcom turned down a full scholarship at Yale to study with Paul Hindemith, choosing instead to become a student of Milhaud’s at Mills College in Oakland, California, where he received the Master of Arts degree (1958-1959).\textsuperscript{14} The composer later received his Doctor of Musical Arts Degree from Stanford University in 1964.\textsuperscript{15} Bolcom continued his studies with Milhaud at the Paris Conservatoire in 1959-1961 and 1964-1965.\textsuperscript{16} While in France, Bolcom met Luciano Berio and Karlheinz Stockhausen at a conference in Darmstadt; he also was influenced by the latest compositions of Messiaen and Boulez. Bolcom experimented with pop and rock and roll influences in his compositional process. This caused some controversy among the faculty of the Paris Conservatoire. In 1965 Bolcom was awarded “2e Prix de Composition” for his String Quartet No. 8. According to David Ewen in \textit{American Composers: A Biographical Dictionary}, the composer did not receive first prize because he used the style of “rock ‘n’ roll” in the last movement of the piece.\textsuperscript{17} Upon winning the award and returning to the United States, Bolcom stopped writing concert music completely. He says that he considered being a pop musician at that time.\textsuperscript{18} This decision was partially caused by an unsuccessful premiere of his opera \textit{Dynamite Tonite}, which received only one performance by

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Y. Yu, p. 25.
\item[13] Ibid.
\item[14] Emily Hanna Crane, \textit{A Performer’s Approach To William Bolcom’s Concerto In D For Violin And Orchestra}, Florida State University, 2007, p.7.
\item[16] Ibid.
\item[17] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
the Actor’s Studio Theater in New York on December 23rd, 1963, and closed abruptly immediately after. This early work was Bolcom’s first collaboration with noted librettist Albert Weinstein (with whom he later collaborated on two successful operas, McTeague in 1992 and A View From a Bridge from 1998-99) and was his first major work to combine several musical styles “from the Viennese operetta to lounge act bop.”\(^{19}\) Dynamite Tonite is an early example of Bolcom’s signature style, which ultimately bloomed to bring him acknowledgement and fame all around the world. In his New York Times article from December 23rd, 1987, Michael Kimmelman spoke of this opera as a piece by a “talented beginner,” whose emerging style embraces diverse musical traditions and is “eclectic.”\(^{20}\)

During the same period, Bolcom was also teaching at Washington University (1965-1966). He was not, however, happy with this arrangement.\(^ {21}\) As for Bolcom’s personal life at the time, the composer experienced two failed marriages within just a few years; for one of them he later wrote Lost Lady Rag as a lament.\(^ {22}\)

In 1966 Bolcom came across the scores that changed his life – the piano score for Scott Joplin’s opera Treemonisha as well as several copies of rags from the influential ragtime scholar Rudi Blesh’s collections. Bolcom says he was immediately attracted to and astonished by these pieces: “When I discovered ragtime, I discovered music, which I could relate to in every way. I got knocked out by Scott Joplin. I think he’s one of the greatest guys of all time. He interested me because he was the first American who was able to take all of these various music sources and synthesize them…”\(^ {23}\) At this time, ragtime was not viewed as suitable for the concert hall.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, p. 26.
\(^{21}\) Yeng Yu, p. 27.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{23}\) Y. Yu, p. 27.
Many considered Native American (Indian) music to be more appropriate for concert settings. However, Bolcom says, “…American music simply is not American without black influence.”

The composer became highly fascinated with the idea of bringing ragtime to the concert hall; not only did he perform traditional rags in concert settings, in 1967 he also began composing his own ragtime pieces, at first modeled after Joplin’s.

Bolcom began contacting other musicians who played ragtime, meeting with them so that they could play for each other. One of the earliest collaborations was with William Albright (1944-1998), Bolcom’s colleague from the University of Michigan, where the composer began teaching in 1973. The musicians composed ragtimes together and shared newly written rags with each other. Ragtime also connected William Bolcom to Herbert Blake (1883-1983), better known as Eubie Blake, a famous master of stride piano and ragtime. During a period of revived interest in ragtime in the 1970’-s, Blake’s music became more influential. From him the composer learned stride piano style, which is present in Bolcom’s rags. Stride style is an outgrowth of ragtime, which developed in the East Coast in 1910’-s. It wasn’t called “stride” originally, instead, musicians from the East Coast called it “ragtime” or “shout.”

This style absorbed many characteristics of classic ragtime, including the striding motion of the left hand, which alternates lower bass notes with chords in the middle register of the piano. However, some differences between classic ragtime and stride style should be noted. For example, stride style features faster tempos and more virtuosic piano technique. In addition, unlike ragtime, stride style highlights improvisations over strictly following the written music. Also, in stride style, syncopations often alternate between the right and the left hand, creating counter-melodies.

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24 Ibid, p. 28.
26 Y. Yu, p. 18.
27 Y. Yu, p. 18.
most well known masters of stride style were James P Johnson, Luckey Robert and Eubie Blake. Blake became a major influence in Bolcom’s personal and professional life. At age 92, he even performed Mendelssohn’s *Wedding March* in ragtime style at the composer’s wedding to Joan Morris.  

The genre of ragtime inspired Bolcom – he often appeared in concert halls, performing both his original and existing rags. By 1975, Bolcom made an important recording of the *Heliotrope Bouquet Piano Rag* and finished twenty original piano ragtimes. Numerous performances and recordings of ragtime placed Bolcom in the forefront of the ragtime revival of the 1970’s. In addition, he began teaching at the University of Michigan in 1973 (keeping this appointment until the early 2000’s), and began composing concert music again. Both his professional and personal lives were flourishing during this period. This was the time when the *Three Ghost Rags* were written. All three pieces were composed in 1970 and 1971. The following chapter will discuss the *Three Ghost Rags* from an analytical and performer’s prospective: their stylistic and pianistic features, as well as the specific challenges faced by the pianist when preparing this set of compositions for performance.

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CHAPTER TWO: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS AND A DISCUSSION OF THE PIANISTIC CHALLENGES OF THE THREE GHOST RAGS

“Graceful Ghost Rag”

The opening piece of the Three Ghost Rags is the “Graceful Ghost Rag.” It is acknowledged as the best known of all three pieces in this set, and is one of the most popular of all Bolcom’s ragtimes. The piece is comprised of five strains as outlined in Table 1 below. The “Graceful Ghost Rag” contains three distinct themes, as illustrated in Examples 1, 2 and 3 below.

Table 1: Formal Outline of the “Graceful Ghost Rag.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure No.</th>
<th>1-17</th>
<th>18-35</th>
<th>36-51</th>
<th>52-68</th>
<th>69-88</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strain</td>
<td>Theme A</td>
<td>Theme B</td>
<td>Theme C</td>
<td>Theme C’ and transition</td>
<td>Theme A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonality</td>
<td>B-flat minor</td>
<td>B-flat minor</td>
<td>G-flat major</td>
<td>G-flat major</td>
<td>B-flat minor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As observed in Table 1, most strains contain sixteen measures. However, in his dissertation A Style Analysis of William Bolcom’s Complete Rags for Piano, Yeng Yu points out that the second C strain contains an “extra” measure (m. 68), which serves as a transition from G-flat major back to B-flat minor and the return of the material from the A strain.

Written in 1970 in memory of Bolcom’s father, the piece combines the traditional rag style and pianistic features of the romantic musical era. As shown in the examples 1-3 below, all

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31 Ibid.
themes in the “Graceful Ghost Rag” feature smooth, lyrical melodic lines. This recalls the pianistic style of such 19th century composers as Frederic Chopin and Robert Schumann.

Example 1: Bolcom, “Graceful Ghost Rag,” the beginning of Theme A, mm. 1-3.

Example 2: Bolcom, “Graceful Ghost Rag,” the beginning of Theme B, mm. 18-22.

In his dissertation, Yu compares Theme C of the “Graceful Ghost Rag” to the main theme from the second movement of the Schumann’s *Kreisleriana* (see Examples 3 and 4 below).  

32 Y. Yu, p. 119-120.
As he points out, both melodies feature lyrical, flowing qualities and polyphonic textures. As observed in Examples 2 and 3, the piece often features chromatic, dense textures. This requires that the performer pay close attention to proper arm and finger weight transfer to ensure effective voicing of melodic lines. The nostalgic mood of this piece is enhanced by the B-flat minor tonality of Themes A and B. The C theme, however, is in the key of G-flat major, as was mentioned in the earlier passages. This section, like the others, is also a gentle dance tune; it is lyrical and graceful. Bolcom instructs the performer to play “smoothly” and not to drag the
tempo, as even though this is a lyrical rag, it still has to be “danceable.” The composer also mentions in his interview with Mark Clague that his father was a wonderful dancer and a “gentle spirit,” characteristics that inspired both the title and the overall mood of the piece. The chromatic, dense textures, as well as the sophisticated syncopated rhythms of this piece could possibly cause the performer to “drag” the tempo. Therefore, tempo stability is an important concern and requires the pianist’s specific attention when preparing the piece for performance.

A specific challenge presented by this piece is the negotiation of the numerous widely spaced intervals and chords in the left hand, as shown in Example 5 below.

Example 5: Bolcom, “Graceful Ghost Rag,” the widely spaced intervals in the left hand, mm. 60-64.

![Example 5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNZBWKezp5M)

In measures 60-64 from the above example, note the broken ninth (m. 63) and tenths (m. 61). The pianist must stretch his or her hand while breaking the intervals rapidly yet smoothly. Some passages feature parallel tenths (as in m. 61), increasing the challenge for the player who must

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33 William Bolcom, interview on “Graceful Ghost Rag” with Mark Clague. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNZBWKezp5M.
34 Ibid.
negotiate several widely spaced intervals in succession while maintaining a steady tempo. In addition, Bolcom occasionally places a third note in between a wide interval, as in m. 63. For pianists who have difficulty reaching such wide intervals, this element of Bolcom’s ragtime style can pose a significant challenge. In addition, Bolcom instructs the performer to play some of these wide intervals without breaking them. For example, in m. 64 the second beat begins with an unbroken interval of a tenth in the left hand. If the pianist is unable to play this interval without breaking it, it is helpful to place more weight on the top note and stretch the hand as much as possible, while breaking the interval rapidly yet smoothly.

Another challenge the pianist faces in the “Graceful Ghost Rag” is created by the “oom-pah” patterns in the left hand. These patterns often employ wide leaps, which require rapid hand shifts from a bass note played on the first half of the beat to a chord in the middle register played on the second half of the beat. This particular feature is a significant characteristic of both the ragtime and the stride piano styles. This element is present throughout the whole composition and is especially prominent in strains A and B (see Examples 1 and 2).

The articulations also require the performer’s careful attention when preparing the piece for performance. Occasionally the melody is highlighted by *portato, non- legato, or staccato* marks. To negotiate the articulations effectively, it is advisable for the pianist to plan fingerings carefully. Example 6 below offers my fingering suggestion for a passage containing *portato* articulations.

In certain cases, the damper pedal can be used to help negotiate the articulations. For example, in the case of *portato* chords in measure 33 (see Example 7 below), I engage the damper pedal, using a short stroke for each individual harmony, lifting the foot at the moment when the hands shift from one chord to the next. This approach helps the pianist to observe the articulations while maintaining the smoothness of the melodic line.

Example 7: Bolcom, “Graceful Ghost,” the *portato* figuration, m. 33.

To summarize, “Graceful Ghost Rag” features such pianistic challenges as the negotiation of dense chromatic textures, requiring careful attention to the effective voicing of melodic lines and to harmonic clarity; negotiation of widely spaced intervals and chords in the left hand; negotiation of the “oom-pah” patterns, featuring wide rapid leaps in the left hand; and the clear projection of articulations.
“The Poltergeist”

The second piece of the set, “The Poltergeist,” is subtitled “Rag Fantasy.” It was composed in 1971. A “poltergeist” is a spirit who plays jokes on people. Accordingly, the composition conveys a humorous, playful character and is performed at a rather brisk tempo. Yu points out that the dissonant harmonies are employed extensively in this piece to depict the character of a mischievous ghost. The formal structure of the piece is outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Formal Outline of “The Poltergeist.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure No.</th>
<th>1-18</th>
<th>19-41</th>
<th>42-67</th>
<th>68-70</th>
<th>71-86</th>
<th>87-103</th>
<th>104-123</th>
<th>124-139</th>
<th>140-159</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strain</td>
<td>Theme A</td>
<td>Theme B and variation of the first theme</td>
<td>Theme B’ and variation of the first theme</td>
<td>Trans.</td>
<td>Theme C</td>
<td>Theme C’</td>
<td>Theme B’</td>
<td>Theme C’</td>
<td>Theme C’’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonality</td>
<td>E-flat minor; G-flat major; E-flat minor</td>
<td>G-flat major; E-flat minor</td>
<td>A-flat minor</td>
<td>A-flat minor</td>
<td>A-flat minor</td>
<td>G-flat major</td>
<td>A-flat minor</td>
<td>A-flat minor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35 Y. Yu, p. 120.
36 Ibid, p. 126.
This rag contains three themes, as illustrated in Examples 8, 9 and 10 below, a transition and variations of all main themes.

Example 8: Bolcom, “The Poltergeist,” the beginning of Theme A, mm. 1-4.

Example 9: Bolcom, “The Poltergeist,” the beginning of Theme B, mm. 19-22.

As in the “Graceful Ghost Rag,” each of the strains A, B and C introduces one of the three themes. However, section B, the longest strain of the piece at twenty-three measures, contains two elements: the B theme in the key of G-flat major, and a variation of Theme A, returning to the key of E-flat minor. As illustrated in Example 11 below, the variation begins in
m. 34 and employs the harmonic progression of Theme A, embellished by a distinct figuration in the right hand.

Example 10: Bolcom, “The Poltergeist,” the transition and the beginning of Theme C, mm. 68-74.

Example 11: Bolcom, “The Poltergeist,” the beginning of the variation of Theme A, strain B, mm. 34-37.

As observed in Examples 8 and 11 above, both Theme A and its variation feature chromatic passagework in the right hand. As illustrated in Example 8, *staccato* and accented notes in the melody enhance the playful, humorous character of Theme A. In addition, both Theme A and its variation feature rapid wide leaps in the left hand, as observed in Examples 8
and 11. The majority of this passagework is marked *staccato*. It can be challenging to perform rapid hand shifts while playing *staccato* and maintaining a brisk tempo. Therefore, both sections require the pianist’s specific attention to this technical feature when preparing this rag for performance. As observed in Example 9, Theme B features a whole-tone scale in canonic imitation, introducing the scale in the right hand in mm. 19-20, and then imitating the passage with the left hand in mm. 21-22. As shown in Table 2 above, the C Theme is developed into several variations, C’, C’’ and C’’’. Strain C begins in m. 71 and features a syncopated melody in the right hand accompanied by the ragtime and stride style “oom-pah” patterns in the left hand, as observed in Example 10. Strain C’ begins in m. 87 and features the same melody. However, the harmonies in the left hand are different from the ones introduced in the previous section, as illustrated in Example 12 below.

Example 12: Bolcom, “The Poltergeist,” the beginning of strain C’, mm. 87-89.

[Music notation image]

The next variation of the C Theme is introduced in m. 124, the beginning of the C’’ strain. This section features a counter-melody, played above the original melody in the right hand, suggesting “call and response,” as observed in Example 13 below.

Finally, at the beginning of the strain C’’’, m. 140, Bolcom instructs the performer to play in a swing style, as shown in Example 14 below. This is the beginning of the third and the final variation of Theme C, as well as the concluding section of the piece. The variation features tenths in the left hand, as illustrated in Example 15 below.

As in the “Graceful Ghost Rag,” these widely spaced intervals can pose a challenge for the pianist with smaller hands. In addition, strain C’’’ features parallel tenths, as in m. 152 and m. 153. In these cases, the performer must negotiate several widely spaced intervals in succession while maintaining a steady tempo.

Example 14: Bolcom, “The Poltergeist,” the beginning of the strain C’’’, mm. 140-142.

Strain B” is the most humorous section of the piece. As shown in Example 16 below, the composer employs such expressive and technical tools as abruptly changing contrasting dynamics, wide rapid leaps in both the right and the left hands, and the employment of clusters, marked sforzando.37


The contrasting dynamics requires the pianist to perform rapid shifts of weight distribution, while negotiating wide rapid leaps across the keyboard. Because of these challenges, I believe this section demands the performer’s particularly careful attention when preparing the piece for

37 Y. Yu, p. 126.
performance. As in Theme A and its variation, this section requires that the performer keep the hands close to the keys in order to advance the precision of this passage in performance.

A specific challenge presented by this piece is the negotiation of the passages that include rapid octave and chordal runs. This is featured in a variation of the B Theme, strain B’’, mm. 104-109, as illustrated in Example 17 below. In this section, the right hand contains rapid passages with alternating octaves and chords in octaves in mm. 104, 105, 108 and 109.


“The Poltergeist” is the fastest of the Three Ghost Rags. Maintaining a humorous, lively character can be challenging for the performer, as the difficult passagework must often be played lightly and playfully. To summarize, in this most virtuosic piece of the set, the performer faces such challenges as the negotiation of complex chromatic right hand passagework; rapid, wide leaps in both hands; difficult octave and chordal runs in the right hand; abruptly contrasting
dynamics that require rapid shifts of weight distribution; and the effective negotiation of widely spaced left hand intervals.

“Dream Shadows”

The concluding piece of the Three Ghost Rags is “Dream Shadows,” a hazy, phantomlike rag. “Dream Shadows” was composed in the same year as “The Poltergeist,” 1971. Yu mentions that Bolcom himself spoke of the “Dream Shadows” as a piece that “would not sound out of place in a Joan Crawford movie-drama.”

This rag employs the formal structure outlined below in Table 3.

Table 3: Formal Outline of the “Dream Shadows.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure No.</th>
<th>1-16</th>
<th>17-35</th>
<th>36-50</th>
<th>51-59</th>
<th>60-70</th>
<th>70 back to 18; 30 skip to 71-74</th>
<th>74-101</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strain</td>
<td>Theme A</td>
<td>Theme B</td>
<td>Theme C</td>
<td>Theme D with left hand counter-melody</td>
<td>Theme C’</td>
<td>Theme B and transition</td>
<td>Coda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonality</td>
<td>C major</td>
<td>C major</td>
<td>F major</td>
<td>A minor</td>
<td>F major</td>
<td>C major</td>
<td>C major</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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38 Y. Yu, p. 127.
As Yu points out, the “Dream Shadows” draws on several musical influences, including early twentieth-century cabaret songs, stride piano elements and classic ragtime.\(^{39}\)

As in the “Graceful Ghost Rag,” smooth, lyrical melodic lines are prominently featured in this piece, as shown in Examples 18, 19, 20, 21 and 22 below.

As in the other two rags, each strain introduces new thematic material. As shown in Examples 18 and 19, the melodies introduced in strains A and B are accompanied by rich, sophisticated harmonies. The intricate, colorful harmonic language is a significant feature of Bolcom’s style in his rags.

Example 18: Bolcom, “Dream Shadows,” the beginning of Theme A, mm. 1-5.

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\(^{39}\) Y. Yu, p. 127.


As in both the “Graceful Ghost Rag” and “The Poltergeist,” such widely spaced intervals as ninths and tenths are featured in “Dream Shadows.” For example, measures 2-5 feature these intervals in the left hand, as illustrated in Example 18 above.
Example 21: Bolcom, “Dream Shadows,” the beginning of Theme D, mm. 51-55.

Example 22: Bolcom, “Dream Shadows,” the beginning of the Coda, mm. 74-79.
Bolcom also places a third note in between the wide intervals as in mm. 60-64 of the “Graceful Ghost Rag,” discussed earlier in the chapter.

As shown in Example 20 above, Bolcom instructs the performer to play “simply” at the beginning of the strain C. Yu maintains that this strain is composed in a classic ragtime style, implying a simpler texture with less sophisticated harmonies than the textures found in the other sections of the piece. ⁴⁰ Theme C is a lyrical, syncopated melody in F major, a subdominant key of the piece. As in the second theme of the “Graceful Ghost Rag,” portato articulations are featured here (Example 20 above). This melody is accompanied by simple harmonies in the left hand. As shown in Example 21 above, strain D introduces a new theme in A minor, a relative key to the C major. This melody could be viewed as a continuation of Theme C. As shown in Table 3 above, the D strain is only eight measures long, and upon its conclusion, the C Theme returns, featuring some changes in the harmonic progression, as shown in Example 23 below.

Strain C’ leads into the transition back to strain B followed by the Coda, the most “ghostly” part of the composition. As illustrated in Example 22 above, the score is marked mysterioso and leggiero to enhance the dreamy and perhaps phantomlike atmosphere of this section. Yu compared the Coda of this piece to the main theme of George Gershwin’s Prelude II. ⁴¹ In this section, steady dotted rhythms in the right hand, marked legato, are accompanied by stride piano figures in the left hand that are occasionally interrupted by parallel tenths. The performer faces several challenges in this section. As shown in Example 22 above, the sophisticated, highly syncopated rhythmic figurations in the right hand require that the pianist be attentive to rhythmic precision and tempo stability. In addition, this section features a dense chordal texture in the right hand.

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⁴⁰ Y. Yu, p. 129.
⁴¹ Ibid, p. 131.
Bolcom instructs the performer to play the entire Coda softly. It begins *pp* with a slight *crescendo* to *p* in m. 81. Then *pochissimo crescendo* in m. 83 is followed by *pp* in m. 85. In mm. 90-91, *p* and a slight *crescendo* are followed by a *diminuendo* to *ppp* in mm. 92-93. Starting in m. 95, *diminuendo poco a poco* prepares the softest dynamic mark of the piece in m. 98, *pppp*. In the concluding measures of the piece, mm. 99-101, a slight *crescendo* and *ppp* are followed by the return of the *pppp* dynamic mark. Also, the score is marked “let vibrate” in the final measure. Therefore, the pianist must wait before lifting the foot from the right pedal to allow the concluding sonorities to ring and “evaporate.” In such a dense texture, it can be challenging to maintain a light, soft effect. The composer instructs the performer to engage the left pedal to help maintain the dreamlike atmosphere. In addition, it is helpful to focus on proper arm and finger weight transfer to ensure effective voicing of the melodic line. Finally, as illustrated in Example 24 below, left hand tenths are prominently featured in the Coda.
Example 24: Bolcom, “Dream Shadows,” the beginning of the Coda section, left hand tenths, mm. 75-77.

This feature poses challenges for the performer with smaller hands, as noted in earlier discussions. The difficulty of negotiating the tenths is increased because the performer must also play softly.

To summarize, “Dream Shadows” features technical issues similar to those encountered in the other two pieces in the set. They include the negotiation of stride-style left hand parts that often require wide stretches; negotiation of dense chordal textures while maintaining smoothness and harmonic clarity; maintenance of tempo and precision of complicated, highly syncopated rhythms; clear projection of articulations; and the clear highlighting of melodic lines.
CHAPTER 3: CONCLUDING POINTS AND A LIST OF PIANISTIC REQUIREMENTS OF THE THREE GHOST RAGS

The Three Ghost Rags were composed at a time when Bolcom began to experience career success. These pieces have long been acknowledged as three of the most beloved solo piano compositions of the 20th century. It is safe to assume that, in the future, they will continue to be performed.

The previous chapter offered descriptive analysis while highlighting specific pianistic/technical requirements. In summary, a successful performance of Three Ghost Rags requires that the pianist possess the necessary technical skills to address the following features:

1) dense chordal textures, which require the pianist’s attention to smoothness and harmonic clarity (e.g. “Dream Shadows,” mm. 1-35, mm. 74-101; “The Poltergeist,” mm. 19-32, mm. 104-117; “Graceful Ghost Rag,” mm. 1-35, mm. 52-68)

2) sophisticated rhythmic figurations, highlighting syncopations (e.g. “Dream Shadows,” right hand part in the Coda section, mm. 74-98)

3) stride-style left hand parts that often require wide stretches (e.g. “Dream Shadows,” the Coda section, mm. 74-98; “The Poltergeist,” strain C’’, mm. 140-154; “Graceful Ghost Rag,” mm. 60-64)

4) rapidly rolled intervals and chords, which may exceed the reach of the hand and often appear in succession (e.g. “Graceful Ghost Rag,” mm. 61 and 63; “Dream Shadows,” mm. 8-10)

5) the ragtime and stride style “oom-pah” patterns in the left hand, featuring wide rapid leaps (e.g. “Graceful Ghost Rag,” mm. 1-35; “The Poltergeist,” mm. 125-130, mm. 140-154; “Dream Shadows,” mm. 1-31, mm. 74-98)
6) *staccato* figurations in the left hand, featuring wide rapid leaps (e.g. “The Poltergeist,” mm. 1-12, mm. 34-37)

7) chromatic passagework in the right hand (e.g. “The Poltergeist,” mm. 12-16, mm. 34-40)

The main purpose of this document and the accompanying public lecture-recital has been to share, with both pianists and non-pianists alike, my experiences in preparing this set for performance, all in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the stylistic and technical challenges of these important pieces, in the process contributing to a more successful live performance. It is hoped that this document will encourage more interest in this set of compositions, and will inspire more performers to program *Three Ghost Rags* in concert.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Upon her graduation from the Professional School of Music for gifted children in Voronezh, Russia, Vera Zholondz came to the United States in 2008 to attend Alcorn State University, Mississippi on a full scholarship. While in college, Vera performed as both pianist and violinist at the numerous venues all across the United States, including the Kennedy Center in Washington, District of Columbia. In addition, she taught a piano studio at the “Universal Language” School of Music in Port Gibson, Mississippi, and served as a pianist and an alto section leader at the First Presbyterian Church in Natchez. Vera Zholondz received her Bachelor of Music Degree with Highest Honors from Alcorn State University in May 2012, and her Master of Music Degree from Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge in 2014. Vera Zholondz is currently an instructor at the “SuperMusic” music studios, an organist and pianist at the First Christian Church of Baton Rouge, and a Doctoral student at the Louisiana State University in the studio of Dr. Willis Delony.