

Piano Study #5 (for Just Fender Rhodes)

Piano Study #5 is one of my earliest pieces, written for Fender Rhodes in a non-octave repeating, 13-limit just intonation. It is an improvisation in which the “prime-tonality” of the harmonic fabric slowly evolves. The score comprises the tuning, and simple instructions for moving a folk tune through the harmonic possibilities of the tuning system from lower to higher primes and back again.

Piano Study #5 has a somewhat unusual history, nicely bookended by tonight’s performance. I wrote this piece in 1975 while an undergraduate at UC Santa Cruz. I borrowed a Fender Rhodes from fellow student Paul Sparrow, an oscilloscope from the electronic music studio, and purchased a monochord from Lou Harrison and Bill Colvig, my first meeting with those lifelong friends. I performed the piece on a concert of 20th Century American Music (1976) for piano, organized by fellow student Steve Key, and then again on my senior recital (1977) in the old Music Department concert hall (now in the Theater Department).

The difficulty of playing the piece (I’m a guitarist, not a pianist), tuning the piano, and the experience of carrying a Fender Rhodes up and down five flights of stairs to my NYC loft on Leonard Street and five or six blocks more to Roulette on Franklin St., discouraged me from continuing to perform the after that. I finally recorded it (with Tom Erbe, engineer) on my CD entitled *Change* (2002, Artifact CDs), and sold my Fender Rhodes. In the original performances, I had used the tune “Rally Round the Flag,” but on the Artifact recording I used “When de Whale Get Strike,” in memory of Bill Colvig. This song is a Bahaman lament for a fallen friend recorded by Alan Lomax (1935) and later transcribed by Ruth Crawford Seeger (1941).

It seemed to me possible, when writing the piece some 40 years ago, that anyone with a Fender Rhodes, a deep knowledge of tuning theory and the ability to improvise could perform *Piano Study #5*. However, to the best of my knowledge,

Andrew Smith is the first to do so. I am extremely fortunate that he has done so, even recording it for the Indexical label (with David Dunn, engineer).

Larry Polansky

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