

The piano music of Elliott Gyger

Inferno

A dramatic volcanic eruption at night. A bright lightning bolt strikes the ground, illuminating the scene. The sky is dark, and the ground is covered in glowing red lava and falling sparks. The word "Inferno" is written in large white letters across the center of the image.

Michael Kieran Harvey plays piano music by Elliott Gyger

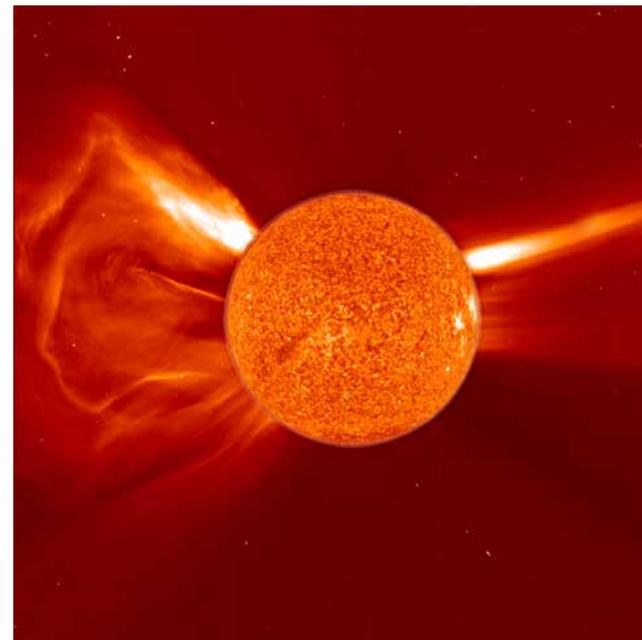
Inferno

- 1** Prelude: The Gates of Hell 3'18"
- 2** Interlude I: Acheron (the river of water) 0'58"
- 3** Etude I: The First Circle (Limbo – the unbaptised) 4'34"
- 4** Etude II: The Second Circle (the lustful) 4'05"
- 5** Etude III: The Third Circle (the gluttonous) 1'20"
- 6** Etude IV: The Fourth Circle (the miserly and the prodigal) 3'59"
- 7** Interlude II: Styx (the river of mud) 0'51"
- 8** Etude V: The Fifth Circle (the wrathful and the slothful) 5'46"
- 9** Etude VI: The Sixth Circle (the heretics) 2'26"
- 10** Interlude III: Phlegethon (the river of boiling blood) 0'47"
- 11** Etude VII: The Seventh Circle (the three rings of violence) 4'14"
- 12** Etude VIII: The Eighth Circle (the ten trenches of fraud) 11'09"
- 13** Etude IX: The Ninth Circle (the traitors) 6'36"
- 14** Interlude IV: Cocytus (the river of ice) 0'54"
- 15** Postlude: the stars 3'37"

Compass Variations

- 16** (Variations I to XI) 24'43"

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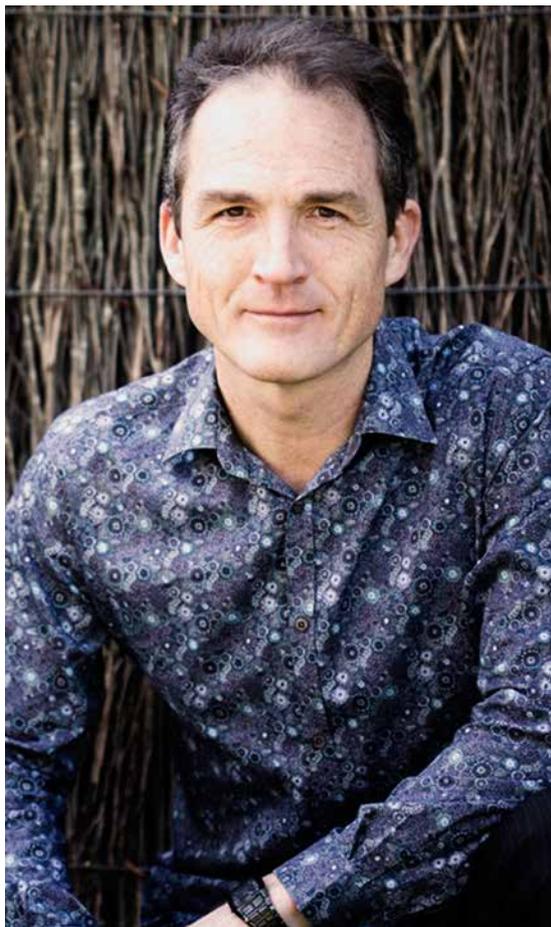
Inferno was recorded at Move Records studio between 26 October 2013 and 31 March 2014 by Vaughan McAlley and Blake Stickland. Editing by Blake Stickland.

Compass Variations was recorded live at Melba Hall on 13 June 2009 (as part of the Landmarks series) by Martin Wright.

Mastering: Martin Wright

Cover photo of the Sakurajima Volcano
by Martin Rietze
Photo this page: NASA
Michael Kieran Harvey photo by Pia
Johnson

Ever since I heard the extraordinary performance by Simon Docking of Elliott Gyger's *Compass Variations* on CD back in 1994 I have been wanting to release an album of Gyger's unique piano music. It was only in 2009 that I finally had a chance to perform this particular amazing work, but recording technology has only recently become sufficiently advanced to remove the irritating helicopter noise from this live recording from the Landmarks series at Melba Hall, and so allow a CD release.



This makes a great compliment to the gift of his 2013 piano cycle *Inferno*, which I premiered at the Totally Huge New Music Festival in Perth in August of that year. These two works bookend Elliott's extraordinary musical universe – which, like Messiaen, appeared fully-formed at a precocious age, to extend in profundity and depth throughout an already long and stellar career.

Michael Kieran Harvey

Compass Variations (1993)

was written for Simon Docking. In navigational terminology, the “variation of the compass” is the difference between true North and magnetic North. As one travels large distances across the world, this discrepancy varies continuously, from zero to a maximum of 180° at certain places in the Arctic and Antarctic.

The idea of gradual change, of the successive divergence and convergence of the compass needle on true North, is mirrored in the large-scale shape of *Compass Variations* in a number of ways: the lengths of sections alternately contract and expand, and the density of texture fluctuates between simple and complex. The tempo structure – starting at a moderate tempo and moving outwards to the extremes, so that the last two sections are the slowest and fastest respectively – could also be likened to a wildly swinging compass needle.

However, the two words in the title also have more specifically musical connotations. There is a long and illustrious tradition of variation sets for keyboard, from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book onward. However, like other 20th-century examples of the form (notably the key masterpieces by Webern and Copland), this work comprises explorations of different ways of using the piano, rather than primarily variations on a theme.

Compass Variations focuses on two characteristics unique to the piano. Firstly, it exploits the whole of the instrument’s 88-note range (or “compass”), using the extreme high and low registers not merely for colour but as an integral part of the musical fabric. At some points, a single melodic line spans several octaves, and contains huge leaps from one note to the next – a melodic style of which no other instrument is capable. And secondly, each of the work’s eleven variations calls for a different style of “touch”, that elusive quality which is so central to the art of playing the piano. While the musical material is stylistically consistent, the manner of playing ranges widely, “encompassing” keyboard styles from Bach and Chopin, through Liszt and Scriabin, to Webern, Prokofiev, Takemitsu and Boulez.

Variation I – Grazioso

Variation II – Deliberato

Variation III – Inquieto

Variation IV – Meccanico

Variation V – Cantabile

Variation VI – Tranquillo

Variation VII – Appassionato

Variation VIII – Martellato

Variation IX – Misterioso

Variation X – Pesante

Variation XI – Leggiero

Inferno (2013)

is an hour-long cycle for solo piano written for Michael Kieran Harvey. Powerful images from Dante’s vision of Hell provide programmatic starting-points for a series of pieces whose internal logic is nonetheless purely musical. The vocabulary imprisons powerfully expressive gestures within tightly controlled structures, creating Lisztean tableaux of virtuosity and damnation influenced by Messiaen, Carter, Ligeti, Birtwistle and other giants of the post-war avant-garde.

The cycle consists of nine Etudes for the nine Circles of Hell, framed by four brief Interludes corresponding to the Rivers of Hell, together with a Prelude and Postlude. Each Etude explores a different subset of the piano’s range, moving gradually downward and alternately expanding and contracting across the cycle. All four Interludes, by contrast, traverse the same harmonic field spanning the entire range of the instrument, as well as the same metrical structure. Another recurring element is the transposition of Dante’s distinctive terza rima (three-line stanzas with interlocking end-rhymes: aba bcb cdc ...) onto musical parameters.

Prelude: The Gates of Hell

The nine lines of the Inscription above the Gate of Hell – finishing with Dante’s most famous words: *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi*

ch'entrate (abandon all hope, you who enter here) – are transcribed, syllable by syllable, into rough-hewn piano gestures.

Interlude I: Acheron (the river of water)

Overlapping cascades of notes moving at different speeds.

Etude I: The First Circle (Limbo – the unbaptised)

Limbo is the eternal domain of those who have not sinned, but died unbaptised. An etude in quiet, overlapping resonances, creating a vast, bleak, empty space.

Etude II: The Second Circle (the lustful)

Just as the lustful were overmastered by their passions, here their souls are driven on by a perpetual wind. A toccata etude in hand-to-hand legato, interrupted at the mid-point by a brief duet for the two hands representing the doomed lovers Francesca and Paolo.

Etude III: The Third Circle (the gluttonous)

The gluttonous are pelted with unending hail, rain and snow. Another toccata etude, in interlocking chord clusters.

Etude IV: The Fourth Circle (the miserly and the prodigal)

The complementary sins of avarice are reflected by the two groups of sinners rolling huge weights against one another. An etude in accelerating and decelerating rhythms.

Interlude II: Styx (the river of mud)
Viscid successions of chords, with the two hands converging in inexact contrary motion.

Etude V: The Fifth Circle (the wrathful and the slothful)

An etude with three overlapping layers. A distorted barcarolle shows Dante and his guide, Virgil, making their way across the muddy river Styx in Charon's boat; the wrathful burst from the surface of the mud, tearing at one another in violent outbursts; and the slothful, unseen at the river's bottom, are depicted in a murky low chorale.

Etude VI: The Sixth Circle (the heretics)

Each heretical sect is confined to a different tomb within the infernal city of Dis. An etude in contrasting spaces, juxtaposing bitter chordal fanfares with tremolos and sinister lines, each within a different chordal frame.

Interlude III: Phlegethon (the river of boiling blood)

Turbulent arpeggio patterns, moving outwards from the mid-range to the extremes.

Etude VII: The Seventh Circle (the three rings of violence)

A toccata etude on a cantus firmus, which moves downwards through three contrasting sections: bubbling scales in contrary motion, representing the boiling

river in which tyrants and murderers are immersed; a stark sonic landscape for the forest of the suicides; rapid runs and repeated notes for the desert of burning sand, punishing violence against God.

Etude VIII: The Eighth Circle (the ten trenches of fraud)

The manifold varieties of fraud are punished in ten concentric trenches (*bolge* in Italian), each with its own variety of torment. The longest and most complex of the etudes, this movement develops elements from many of the previous sections in the form of a climactic set of variations.

Etude IX: The Ninth Circle (the traitors)

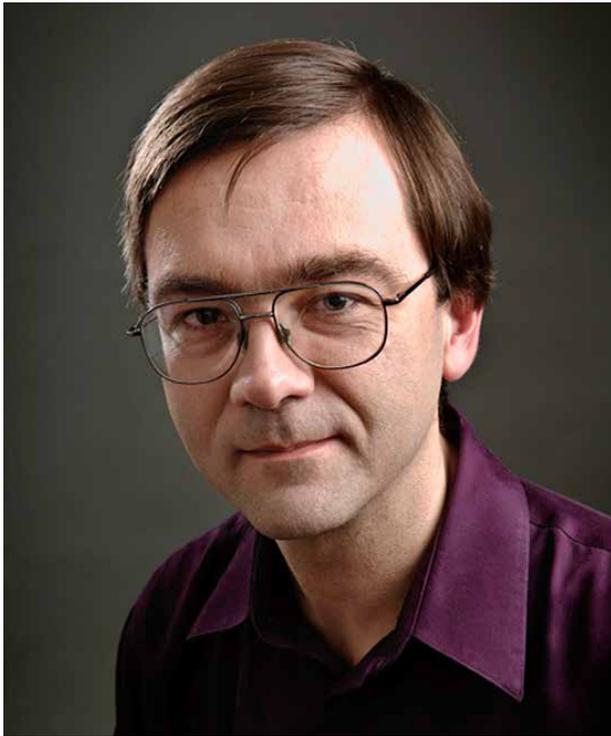
The traitors in the lowest level of Hell are frozen in everlasting ice. A nightmarishly slow etude, confined to the bottom two octaves of the keyboard.

Interlude IV: Cocytus (the river of ice)

The harmonic field of the rivers distilled into massive chords.

Postlude: the stars

After the brutal descent of the entire work, the final movement offers a brief glimpse of possible transcendence, as Dante and his guide emerge to see the night sky above them. Based on the transcription of Dante's final lines, as in the Prelude.



Elliott Gyger

was born in Sydney, and has been writing music since about the age of ten. He holds degrees in composition from the University of Sydney and Harvard University. His composition teachers have included Ross Edwards, Peter Sculthorpe, Bernard Rands and Mario Davidovsky. His compositional and research interests include the creation of a purely musical sense of drama and narrative, and the multilayered interplay of music and text. His music has been played by many of Australia's major performing groups, including the Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Tasmanian Symphony Orchestras, as well as North American ensembles such as the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, Columbia Sinfonietta, Collage, and the Emerson, Mendelssohn and Ying Quartets.

Among his major works are the "nocturnal concerto for orchestra" *Deep and dissolving verticals of light* (1994); *A wilderness of mirrors* (1996), for E flat clarinet and large ensemble; *si doux* (1997), commissioned by the Australia Ensemble; *Polishing Firewood* (2001), for the New York New Music Ensemble; and *From the hungry waiting country* (2006), for Halcyon. Recent premieres have included a celesta concerto entitled *Angels and Insects* (2010); *voice (and nothing more)* (2011), for San Francisco-based choir Volti; and *In Praise of Sandstone* (2012), to words by John Tranter, for solo voices, choir and percussion ensemble. His

"dialogue for orchestra" *on air* (2011) was awarded the Sydney Symphony 80th Anniversary Composition Prize, receiving its first performances with the SSO under Vladimir Ashkenazy in March 2012. *giving voice* (2012), for mezzo-soprano and five instruments, was awarded the 2013 Paul Lowin Song Cycle Award.

Elliott Gyger was Assistant Professor of Music at Harvard from 2002 to 2007, and has taught at the University of Melbourne since 2008, where he is currently Senior Lecturer in Composition.