

# Still, for solo piano

James Romig, composer

Ashlee Mack, pianist and principal commissioner

## COMPOSER BIOGRAPHY

**James Romig** responds to an increasingly fragmented and accelerated world by creating highly isomorphic works that evolve slowly and reveal themselves gradually. Endeavoring to reflect the intricacies of the natural world, his compositional designs exert influence on both small-scale iteration and large-scale structure, obscuring boundaries between form and content. Critics have described his music as “rapturous, slow-moving beauty” (San Francisco Chronicle), “developing with the naturalness of breathing” (The New Yorker), and “profoundly meditative... haunting” (The Wire). His *Still*, for solo piano, was a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in Music. Romig's works have been performed — in 49 states and 34 countries — by such notables as the Quad City Symphony, Talujon, Duo Harpverk, Iktus, JACK, Khasma Duo, Ensemble Chronophonie, Altered Sound, Suono Mobile, Cadillac Moon, Due East, Collide-O-Scope, flutists John McMurtery and Harvey Sollberger, percussionists Tom Kolor and Doug Perkins, and pianists Louis Goldstein, Taka Kigawa, and Ashlee Mack. Recordings have been released by New World, Navona, Blue Griffin, and Perspectives of New Music. Guest-composer visits include Eastman, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Bowling Green, Illinois, Northwestern, and the American Academy in Rome. Artist residencies include Copland House, Centrum, and Everglades, Grand Canyon, and Petrified Forest National Parks. He holds degrees from the University of Iowa (BM, MM) and Rutgers University (PhD), where he studied with Charles Wuorinen. Milton Babbitt provided additional mentoring and served on his dissertation committee. Romig has been on faculty at Western Illinois University since 2002. His music is published exclusively by Parallax Music Press (ASCAP).

## PERFORMER BIOGRAPHY

Pianist **Ashlee Mack** has given recitals in Germany, Italy, and across the United States. Specializing in contemporary music, she has premiered works by many notable composers including Christian Carey, Matthew Heap, David Maki, Robert Morris, Lawrence Moss, Paul Paccione, Bruce Quaglia, James Romig, Edward Taylor, and David Vayo. In 2012, she and Katherine Palumbo founded the Khasma Piano Duo, an ensemble dedicated to performing music from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Their albums are available on CD Baby, Amazon, and iTunes. Other solo and chamber recordings by Mack can be heard on Innova, Navona Records, Parallax Music Press, Perspectives of New Music/Open Space, and New World Records, with an upcoming release on Parma. An avid hiker and nature enthusiast, she has been an artist-in-residence at Wupatki National Monument, Everglades National Park, Grand Canyon National Park, Petrified Forest National Park, and Centrum in Fort Worden State Park, WA. In 2017, she premiered James Romig's 55-minute piano solo, *Still*, which was recognized as a Finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in Music. She has since presented the work more than twenty times, including performances at the Clyfford Still Museum, the Milwaukee Art Museum, and Frank Lloyd Wright's historic Cedar Rock estate in Quasqueton, IA, and The Stone in NYC. Mack is Director

of Piano Studies at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. For more information, please visit [www.khasmapianoduo.com/ashlee-mack](http://www.khasmapianoduo.com/ashlee-mack).

#### **PROGRAM NOTE**

*Still*, for solo piano, was commissioned in 2016 by Ashlee Mack, Carl Patrick Bolleia, Louis Goldstein, Michiko Saiki, and Paola Savvidou, with additional support provided by the Clyfford Still Museum (Denver, Colorado). The work was a finalist for the 2019 Pulitzer Prize in Music, and a recording by Ashlee Mack is available on New World Records. *Still* has been performed in concert halls, art museums, historic homes, and in *plein air* performances at national parks.

As the work unfolds over the course of approximately 54 minutes, a strand of 24 pitches (a linear concatenation of eight unique trichords) is gradually revealed via a series of 43 iterations of equal duration performed without pause. Each iteration comprises three, four, five, or six pitch-classes, progressing successively in a repeating pattern of 3–4–5–6–5–4–3.... Because iterations containing a larger number of pitches also incorporate a higher degree of musical activity, seven large-scale arcs of rhythmic density are formed over the duration of the piece. On the musical surface, each of the 43 iterations contain a similar arc of intensity, resulting in a fluctuation of moment-to-moment activity that corresponds isomorphically to the work's large-scale structure.

The music is inspired by the paintings of American abstract expressionist Clyfford Still, who felt that his work was best appreciated when shown in a gallery containing *only* his work. He preferred not to sell his paintings, and on the rare occasions when he did he endeavored to keep the works together in groups. Collections that he parted with during his lifetime can be seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, the San Francisco Museum of Modern art, and the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo. Aside from these exceptions, and a smattering of single paintings and small collections held elsewhere, most (95%) of his work was held in storage during his lifetime. After his death in 1980, his estate searched for an American city willing to house the enormous collection, and In 2011 the Clyfford Still Museum opened in Denver, Colorado.

When visiting the Clyfford Still Museum, one wanders intuitively from work to work, making a variety of connections between different paintings. Each visitor has a unique experience, but because all the works come from a single creator a "big picture" eventually emerges. The goal of this piano piece is to create a similar environment, allowing a listener to develop a notion of the work's entirety by listening to multiple iterative variations of harmony and rhythm (color and form). The inner repetitions and associations within and between the sections of music are likely to provide each listener with a unique experience, determined by whichever musical features are noted, remembered, and compared. It is the hope of the composer that *Still* is in some ways a "museum of sound" that provides each listener with a variety of aesthetic pathways to wander and explore.