

Alex Nikiporenko

New music for adult amateurs

Composer and pianist Alex Nikiporenko speaks to Murray McLachlan about his life, career and most recent compositions, including his book *Ten Short Pieces for solo piano*.



interview

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How many pieces have you composed for adult amateurs so far?

I have now completed twelve pieces – ten of which feature in my book.

What was your motivation in writing?

I began teaching piano soon after I finished Chetham's, back in 2009. The majority of my students are children following the established curriculum and it is relatively clear what to teach them, given the abundance of the material in piano tutors, grade books, and quality educational repertoire from Schumann, Tchaikovsky, et al.

However, this curriculum doesn't work for everyone. There are many people who have taken up piano late, haven't been able to advance past the first few grades, or simply do not have time to practise, yet are looking for a musically rewarding experience. Easy works by common practice masters are often aimed explicitly at children, whilst easier "serious" works (eg. Chopin's and Bach's preludes) are actually not that simple. Personally, I am a big fan of early music – there are some excellent renaissance works that aren't difficult, but not everyone enjoys their aesthetic. Same goes for the works of the contemporary composers – Howard Skempton and Laurence Crane write fantastic music, but their works can be aesthetically challenging for an unprepared listener.

That's why I decided to take on this project. My goal was to write musically rewarding pieces in a contemporary, minimal style that would be relatively easy for an amateur. They are all quite short – the longest one is four pages, and there are three pieces that are only a page long. Length is important for someone who cannot sight-read – learning a couple of lines and realising that you have already learned a significant portion of the piece is very encouraging.

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Also, I feel that now is a particularly good time to write simple music. Minimal aesthetic is hugely influential across all art disciplines and it is definitely easier to write something simple with a focused, meditative soundworld than in a high romantic or modernist style.

What were the main challenges?

For me, the main challenge was to ensure that I did not compromise the musical quality, whilst maintaining the relative simplicity. And just the usual challenge of composing – it's not easy to write good music!

What are the differences in writing for adults as opposed to children?

The world of a child tends to be more innocent than that of an adult – we do not expect a child to have awareness of deep existential issues that plague adult experience. Hence, children's repertoire is not meant to have the same emotional depth as the "adult" music. Also, in order to make it more relatable, children's music often explores the themes of childhood – toys, fairytales etc.

Not being held by these constraints, my goal was to write emotionally mature music that I would personally enjoy listening to.

Would children enjoy playing the pieces too?!

Teenagers definitely would. Many teachers would empathise with how difficult it is to get a teenager interested in an arrangement of *Three Blind Mice*!

Tell us about your musical career post-Chetham's.

After Chetham's, I did a music undergrad at King's College London followed by a composition masters at the Royal College of Music. Since then, I've been living in London, composing and teaching piano. Most of the music I write today is experimental/minimal – influenced by people like Cage and Feldman. My biggest project to date was founding an experimental music concert series, 840 – named after Erik Satie's inscription in *Vexations*. Since its launch in 2015, the series has presented fifteen concerts, featuring music of 54 living composers, and it is still going strong – our latest concert was on 7 April in Norwich.

Self-publishing a book of piano pieces for older beginners is my latest project, and so I am very excited about seeing how far I can take it and where it can lead to.

Why did you decide to self-publish the book?

Years of making presentable scores of my experimental works have taught me how to make a good-looking, clear score. Also, one of my responsibilities in running the 840 concert series is to design posters and the online presence – website and social media. I felt confident that I could use these skills to design and promote my book. Printing it was easy too – there are numerous online printing companies that would print to a specified format – including a thicker cover!



Buy Alex's book and watch him play his pieces at alexnikiporenko.com/pianomusic



Born in Moscow in 1990, Alex Nikiporenko is a London-based composer. He received his formal education at Chetham's School of Music, King's College London and the Royal College of Music, and has studied privately with Laurence Crane. Named BBC/Guardian Young Composer of the Year in 2008, Alex was nominated for the 2016 BASCA British Composer Award and his music has been broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and Resonance FM. Alex co-curates 840, an experimental music concert series, and collaborates with Arbonauts, a multi-disciplinary performance group.

Aside from composing, Alex enjoys teaching and playing piano. Every year, he organises two concerts for his enthusiastic students, whose ages range from 5 to 50+. Occasionally, Alex gives public recitals himself, both as a soloist and in chamber groups.