



Batman's Supervillains: Piano Etudes for the Era of the DC Comic Universe

by Asher Armstrong

For some, the name Vincent Ho requires an introduction. This composer was born in Canada's capital, Ottawa, and is currently based in Calgary, where he serves as New Music Advisor to the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, Artistic Director of the Land's End Ensemble, and teaches at the University of Calgary. His identity as a composer shows a rich association with his own Asian-Canadian heritage and can be seen in such a work as his zhongruan concerto, *The Waterdragon*, as well as his work written for Chinese Orchestra, the *Journey of the Red Phoenix* (2017). Other large works have also received great acclaim outside of Canada (his *Arctic Symphony* recently elicited praise from John Corigliano, and Ho's works have been premiered to enthusiastic reception in venues such as Carnegie Hall).

The *Arctic Symphony* and zhongruan concerto are works of great scale and ambition, written for large forces and with big ideas at their centres. But Ho has also written a number of works for solo instruments, including several for his own instrument, the piano. Ho is himself a highly accomplished performer, and his piano works reveal a sensitive musician whose expressions are thought through in pianistic terms. Ho might be the first to tell you about his life-changing discovery of Nikolai Kapustin—a composer who is rightly becoming more well-known for his distinct, individual synthesis of Russian-style pianistic sensibility and genre with something “popular” and related to jazz styles: “What makes (his) pieces so great is that the tactile, gestural ideas are equally important to how the musical idea sounds... it's almost as if they have to go hand-in-hand. Whereas some composers think just about how it sounds and how it unfolds on an aural level, Kapustin also thinks about creating the right

gestures that fit with these musical ideas and figures out how to create these techniques that feel like the perfect match in expressing these motifs.”¹ Ho goes on: “Many of the greatest pianist-composers—what makes them so great is that their piano works aren't just great pieces to hear, but also when one plays (the music) ... when you play Beethoven it feels like Beethoven, when you play Ravel it feels like Ravel, same with Ligeti, Scarlatti ... and Chopin—once you start playing his pieces you feel the tactile *personality* in his music.”

One can perfectly see how passionately Ho considers this same approach when writing his own solo piano music—music which is not without its moments of great virtuosity, but is always written with the pianist in mind. Significant contributions to the recent repertoire include *Three Scenes of Childhood* (one of the official listings for ARCT repertoire in the Royal Conservatory Syllabus), and a magically effective and accessible canvas called *Reflections in the Water*, both of which deserve much wider appreciation and currency. But his latest entry in the world of solo piano music is a set of etudes of staggering virtuosity: the *Supervillain Etudes*. Each etude is based on the personality of a different villain from the Batman universe (those represented include the Riddler, Two-Face, Penguin, Poison Ivy, Catwoman, and the Joker). Ho cites his creative process as one which included research on imagined “psychological profiles” of each villain, as well as consideration of the “choreography” for each's gestural language; these are incredibly evocative when depicted in the music.

In the opening of the first etude, the *Riddler*, Ho concocts a distillation of 19th Century stock-and-trade virtuosity with schizoid cluster-like effects, black-key glissandi, and two-note “forks” which anyone on playing terms with Liszt's most pianistically intelligent canvases will find uncannily familiar. The topography of the keyboard and the pianist's athleticism are front-and-centre, and while the music looks frighteningly complex on the page, reading through, one will quickly realize this *feels* like the thinking of an exceptionally accomplished pianist. This phenomenon is similarly evident in the second etude, *Two-Face*, which also makes use of familiar textures and pianistic vocabulary, but includes, for the first time in the set, something new:

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*Optional: Flip a coin; be theatrical with it; in the spirit of the character.

Slightly faster

Example 1. Vincent Ho, *Supervillain Etudes, No. 2, "Two-Face,"* mm. 43-48.

This optional extended technique is just a hint of what is to come in the last etude, the *Joker*; for those worried about gimmickry, the subject matter seems to come with an enthusiastic invitation to make use of at least a few non-traditional devices. The small touch here seems to fit perfectly with the two—sided personality

of this Batman villain.

In terms of “tone-painting,” Ho’s third etude, the *Penguin*, is a similarly effective depiction, opening with figures that instantly belie the subject matter:

♩ = 200-208+
Like two flippers that are out of sync.

Example 2. Vincent Ho, *Supervillain Etudes, No. 3, "Penguin,"* mm. 1-6.

Ho’s indication “Like two flippers that are out of sync” almost goes without saying, given the predominate figuration that subverts that so “academic” procedure known as imitation, or “double counterpoint.” These flipper-like figures become gradually more threatening and obtrusive, leading to bigger clusters which bring to mind the “col pugno” fistfuls of notes found in Prokofiev—however keeping the gleeful comic-book context intact. What is most evident in this etude (and distinctly in some of the later ones as well) is Ho’s intent on *visually*

depicting the musical idea: “I want to retain the character of the idea as close as possible, where when one looks at the music it’s absolutely clear what that idea is supposed to represent musically. As a pianist that’s important to me. When I see a piece of music I should be able to stand 10 feet away and say ‘yeah, that music is so clear to me I can already feel it in my fingers.’” Here his success is impressively three-fold: the visual, tactile, and aural are in perfect harmony.



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The 4th etude is the most accessible of the set, but is not without its rigorous moments, especially when one considers it is for the left hand alone:

In and out of ♩ = 72

Piano

Seductive and mysterious

p

mp

pp

Ped.

Example 3. Vincent Ho, *Supervillain Etudes*, No. 4, "Catwoman," mm. 1-8.

Ho's decision to tie one hand behind the pianist's back in depiction of the Catwoman's nimble, fleet-footed agility is the perfect choice (the pianist may hope to escape without going through all nine lives). The music's vaguely augmented/diminished harmonic shadings lend to an atmosphere of elusive slipperiness, making room for stylish and flashy arabesques which Ho sometimes indicates as impossibly large "graced" note collections. The kinesthetic qualities of Ho's music seem nearly eclipsed by the power of his "10-feet-away" visual sensibility in the next (5th) etude, *Poison Ivy*. The optics of the music rival that

of the *Penguin*, and the opening indication by Ho again seems almost redundant: "like two fragrant floral vines becoming more and more empoisoned as they get more and more entangled." Initially, these vines unravel gently if ominously in friction-tinged thirds with rhythms that are often straight out of Chopin. Ho's eventual adoption of a "senza misura" intensification further amplifies the visual effect of the entwining vines (simultaneously his juxtaposition of tonal collections creates a fragrantly vibrant aural landscape):

fff

Example 4. Vincent Ho, *Supervillain Etudes*, No. 5, "Poison Ivy," mm. 37-38.

By far the most extensive of the set is the last piece, the *Joker*. Many enthusiasts of the DC comic-book world may eagerly turn to this etude in particular to see what Ho is up to—the most

synonymous villain of the Batman universe certainly requires a virtuosic and diabolic musical setting. Ho does not disappoint. The opening instantly showcases a special device:

Example 5. Vincent Ho, *Supervillain Etudes*, No. 6, “Joker,” mm. 1-4.

These graphic notations are crazily fun to play, and what could be more effective in translating the insanity of the joker into musical form? Ho notes of his use of graphic notation: “one of the things that I still believe in is composing at the piano, pencil-to-paper ... with pencil to paper, I can do whatever I want, I just

let my fingers go; I try to create the closest graphical notation of whatever it is I just did.” Here the impulse is brilliant, and Ho’s introduction of “Entrance of the Gladiators” a gleefully clever choice:

Example 6. Vincent Ho, *Supervillain Etudes*, No. 6, “Joker,” mm. 16-20.

This is one frightening clown you won’t soon forget. The theme is wildly manic, with dissonant and off-kilter harmonizations which are rudely, “comically” interrupted by rabid surges and clusters (Ho’s two-note forks, seen in the *Riddler*, also make an appearance). The diabolical energy which seems to underpin this etude in its flow is brilliantly unpredictable, eddying suddenly

into biting toccata-like figuration which brings to mind Lowell Liebermann’s smoldering *Gargoyles*. When Ho has exhausted the stinging effect of his frenetic graphics, clusters, and toccata-like figuration, he introduces a new element (seen prior, very briefly at the end of *Poison Ivy*):



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Example 7. Vincent Ho, *Supervillain Etudes*, No. 6, "Joker," mm. 113-116.

This goes beyond the gothic, Mephistophelian ostinato effects found in Liszt—the pianist who can step a bit out of their comfort zone will find this effect thrilling (and what Ho asks is really nothing near those challenges of "extended technique"

found in Cage or even Crumb). As the music nervously abandons the stopped tone effects it morphs unexpectedly into a sardonic iteration of "Chopsticks," again hilariously subversive as its contour is disfigured by dissonant tones and pulled into clusters:

Example 7. Vincent Ho, *Supervillain Etudes*, No. 6, "Joker," mm. 130-141.

This rapidly coalesces into virtuosic pianistic figuration: torrential swathes of jittery arpeggiations, maniacally oscillating double notes (again bringing to mind the machine-like "blind octaves" of Liszt and Rachmaninov), and triadic batteries across the keyboard, until finally, at m. 191 the music suddenly fixates on an

unnerving "mirror" idea. This grows in obsessive intensity (Ho's indication *poco a poco accel* is repeated above every system), with the psychological character of the Joker beginning to eclipse the actual pianistic athletics:

(♩ = 132)
(Poco a poco accel.)

...chuckling...

Pno. *ff*

(8^{va})

*Get faster and faster to the point where the notes become messier and messier, reaching full chaos (like going mad).

(Poco a poco accel.)

...laughing (sadistically)...

Pno.

(8^{va})

The image shows two staves of piano music. The top staff is marked 'Pno.' and 'ff'. It features a complex rhythmic pattern with many beamed notes. Above the staff, there are markings for '(♩ = 132)', '(Poco a poco accel.)', and '...chuckling...'. Below the staff, there is a marking '(8^{va})'. A note marked with an asterisk (*) is highlighted. Below the first staff, there is a footnote: '*Get faster and faster to the point where the notes become messier and messier, reaching full chaos (like going mad)'. The second staff is also marked 'Pno.' and features a similar complex rhythmic pattern. Above it are markings for '(Poco a poco accel.)' and '...laughing (sadistically)...'. Below it is another '(8^{va})' marking.

Example 8. Vincent Ho, *Supervillain Etudes, No. 6, "Joker,"* mm. 199-202.

At the same time, Ho asks that the pianist “start giggling,” which turns to “laughing (sadistically).” Again, Ho’s integration of this kind of 4th-wall breaking extended technique is entirely organic, and not without precedent (see, for instance, the music of inveterate traditionalist Jörg Widmann)—nothing he asks here is beyond the kind of extended techniques or musical thinking one finds in much of the last century’s music (and even beyond if you count Schoenberg!).

This is music which is risky, exciting, and shocking, and requires the best of the performer. Moreover, it richly and powerfully

inhabits its 21st century locus—there are so many qualities about it that are attractive and eminently accessible (its pianistic language, harmonic vocabulary, visual brilliance, and of course, how it sounds), and Vincent Ho is still careful not to push the pianist who may not be a new-music specialist too far outside of their comfort zone (for a much more adventurous work in terms of extended technique, see his early piano piece *The Swan*). One hopes that these brilliant and effective pieces will gain traction and currency in many pianists’ repertoires, and that Vincent Ho will continue writing music of this exciting caliber for piano. ✎

i Vincent Ho, interview with the author, 14 May 2020. Subsequent quoted material is taken from these unpublished notes unless otherwise cited.

ii This and all subsequent score excerpts used courtesy of Vincent Ho and his publisher, Promethean Editions Limited, Trading as 43 Books & Music (Publisher Member of APRA, Member of the Music Publishers' Association UK) © 2020.



A native of Knoxville, Tennessee, Asher Armstrong is an Assistant Professor of Piano at the University of Arkansas, and formerly served on the Piano Faculty of the University of Toronto as a lecturer of Piano and Piano Literature. Recent concert engagements include concerto soloist with the Mozart Players of Toronto, the Pax Christi Chorale, and numerous solo and chamber appearances in Canada and the US. Additionally, Asher has recorded a two-disc album with Blue Griffin, featuring the solo piano music of Brahms, including one world premiere recording (due out by December of 2021). A member of the Royal Conservatory’s College of Examiners, Asher adjudicates hundreds of pianists across North America every year. An enthusiastic music scholar, Asher has been published by Cambridge University Press’s *Tempo* as well as *Clavier*, *American Music Teacher*, *EPTA’s Piano Journal*, and others. He holds degrees from the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (MM) and the University of Toronto (DMA), where he worked with renowned pianist-teacher Marietta Orlov.

