



THOMAS OTTEN  
INTRODUCES  
LESLIE ADAMS' PIANO ETUDES,  
PART II

*Thomas Otten chairs the piano department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He recently released a premiere recording of composer Leslie Adams' Piano Etudes, Part II on Albany Records. Dr. Otten shares the experience of discovering this music of a contemporary American composer and the joy of performing it.*

Mary Hannon: I've never heard of Leslie Adams. Tell us about him.

Thomas Otten: Leslie Adams is an 83 year old African American composer from Cleveland, Ohio. He attended Oberlin Conservatory and is best known for the many art songs he has written. His foremost piano work is a set of 26 Etudes that he divided into Part I that includes 12 Etudes and Part II that includes 14 Etudes.

MH: How did you discover these etudes?

TO: Louise Toppin, chair of the music department at the University of North Carolina also heads Videmus, an organization that promotes the music of women, African American and underrepresented composers. In 2012 there was a festival celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the organization and I offered to play in the faculty recital. It was suggested that I play selections from Part II of Leslie Adams' Etudes so I learned and performed three of them. Having become acquainted with this music, I found the other Etudes in Part II to be very attractive and decided to learn them as well. The Etudes in Part I were performed and recorded by pianist Maria Corley in early 2000.

MH: What did you find attractive about these etudes?

TO: The music is highly melodic. Adams has worked with singers, having written many art songs, and has a strong melodic gift. The harmonies are fresh and interesting with the feel of jazz and pop. The thick, rich chordal textures bring to mind Russian classical music and they are combined with a very American approach to jazz harmony and rhythm. It's like Rachmaninoff meets Bert Bacharach. This style of writing really speaks to me.

MH: Did you have any contact with the composer when you were learning the Etudes?

TO: Yes, he and I were in touch by phone a lot. Reading the published score was difficult because it is written in his handwriting, not typeset, so I had many questions. After spending hours and hours with the music, I found some passages non-playable and discussed this with him. He was agreeable

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to my making some adjustments and also adding dynamics because there were very few in the score. I didn't discuss interpretation with him because I felt a strong emotional connection to the music. It's very open-hearted music that is emotionally conceived, not intellectually conceived, and I like that.

MH: Is the score available?

TO: Yes, it was published by the American Composers Alliance and is available through them.

MH: What happened after you learned all of the Etudes?

TO: In 2014 I organized an Etude Festival at the University of North Carolina that was a week-long event involving faculty and students. The final two concerts were the world premieres of the complete set of Adams' Etudes. We brought in Maria Corley who recorded Part I in 2000 and I played Part II. Adams came to the Festival and was thrilled to hear the Etudes in their entirety for the first time.

MH: Since then these Etudes have taken on a life of their own.

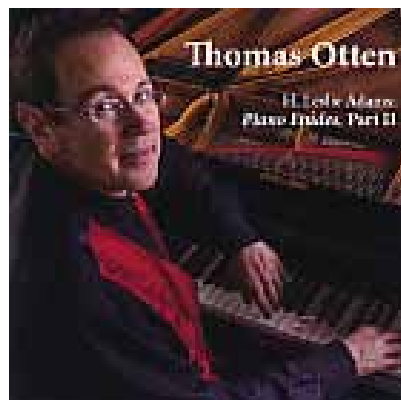
TO: Yes, I recorded them in late 2013 and early 2014 and they were released by Albany Records in September 2014 and are available on Amazon. I've been performing them ever since and that's nice because people don't know them and they should know them.

MH: Where have you been performing them?

TO: Last summer I performed them in Munich and Frankfurt, Germany and this summer I'll be performing them at a festival in Italy. I've gotten interest from the schools including Westminster Choir College at Princeton and I'll be performing them for David Dubal's class at Juilliard this spring. I believe it's a good service to introduce people to the music of a living composer with a different ethnic background.

MH: It seems the more you delved into this music, the more you've found that intrigues you.

TO: The primary thing is that I really like this music. I enjoyed learning the pieces and I've gotten to know them on a deeper, more meaningful level. It's nice to be as comfortable with them as I am, even though they're very tricky. It's good to have them integrated into the hands, the head and the heart. Now I just enjoy playing them and sharing them with audiences.



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