



# **a drawing-down of blinds**

for solo piano

by

James Whittle

2014

## a drawing-down of blinds (2014)

Commissioned by Alex Wilson for The Banks of Green Willow tour.

Dedicated to the memory of the fallen and missing of the Great War 1914-18.

**Premiere** Alex Wilson, St Stephen's Church Bristol, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2014.

**Duration** c. 14 minutes

**Lighting** (optional) Begin with a large spot on the piano. Fade out in very slow stages continuously from bar 160, reaching a blackout by the end.

### Performance Notes

The opening *senza misura* passages are proportional:

- black/filled-in noteheads are short in length (but not *staccato* unless marked)
- white/open noteheads are held for as long as possible (i.e. until it is necessary for the finger/hand to move)
- dashed barlines indicate phrasing

Tempo may be very flexible here. Avoid any sense of melody. Lines may develop gradually into the metered passages.

Lunges are unpredictable movements that hold for a long, equally unpredictable duration. Each lunge is to a pose that looks as if the pianist is taking shelter/cover at the piano, e.g. head turned, one ear against the keys, one arm beneath the keyboard and another on the keys. Find what works comfortably for you. By striking the side arms/keyboard, lunges will excite resonance at a low dynamic: focus on the movement rather than on making sound. After a lunge return to a neutral sitting position.

Each comma is a pause, as if remembering, fearing, or retreating – a trailing off, or a stop. Keep your hands still, lingering, waiting. Then something new begins.

Box noteheads (e.g. bars 100, 106, etc.) indicate chromatic clusters of approximate pitches. bars 143-4, 149 and 151 give an approximate pitch contour.

Square pauses are longer than round pauses.

Perform with the grand piano lid open fully.

Ideally, the piece should be performed from memory to highlight the piano and pianist's visual relationship.

## Programme Note

Commissioned by Alex Wilson for “The Banks of Green Willow” tour in 2014.

*And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.*

(Wilfred Owen, ‘Dulce et decorum est’)

How do you begin to contemplate an experience as black, an event as monumentally catastrophic, as the Great War? How does one cope with such a memory? What of the experience one cannot fathom from the distance of time?

While reading again about the Great War, I became increasingly aware of the displacement between now and then: of a distance between those directly affected by the war and those who can see its significance today but only study it from afar.

A grand piano on stage always strikes me as being alone, black, motionless, silent. I decided to explore the weight of the past through the pianist’s relationship to the piano. Through how the pianist and piano interact, remembrance — the act of remembering — becomes the focus of the piece. I am indebted to Geoff Dyer for many insightful reflections on these themes in his book *The Missing of the Somme*.

This piece is a continuous sequence of four sections: recognition, concealment, confrontation, and reconciliation. Four quotations mark these sections in the score. A fifth appears after the final bar.

*‘an incomprehensible look ... more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, without expression’*

(Wilfred Owen, letter dated 31<sup>st</sup> December 1917, *Collected Letters*)

*‘Even when the blinds are raised, the sudden rush of light reveals how much is – and will remain – concealed, missing.’*

(Geoff Dyer, *The Missing of the Somme*)

*‘One does not fight with men against matériel, it is with matériel served by men that one makes war.’*

(Henri Philippe Pétain, French commander-in-chief)

*‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’*

(William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*)

*‘When we have been there long enough, we get up and leave, turn the page and move on.’*

(Dyer)

# a drawing-down of blinds

## I. recognition

*'an incomprehensible look ... more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, without expression'*

Enter stage left walking purposefully. The sight of the piano makes you halt abruptly. (Ignore any applause. The halt may be timed to occur just after applause starts.)

Stay looking at the piano for a long while (well after any applause has died). It is a silent monument.

Walk very slowly around the back of the piano, keeping your gaze on it. Listen to your footsteps.

Pause still again, once you have curved round to face the piano, clearly stood on stage right.

At last walk slowly forward to stand before the keyboard, then sit down.

fall forward,  
strike side arms, hold

return slowly  
to neutral

to neutral

Ped. \_\_\_\_\_

return hand to lap after each of these 4 dyads

fall forward,  
strike keybed, hold

3

5

8<sup>vb</sup>.....|

7

*8<sup>va</sup>* **ff**

*pp* *mf* *pp* **sf**

*mp* *8<sup>vb</sup>* **f** (keep held)

10

*8<sup>va</sup>* *rapid* freeze

**f** *pp* sub. *pp* *mf* (loco) **p** *pp* **ffp** *pp*

(♩ = 96+)

## II. concealment

'Even when the blinds are raised, the sudden rush of light reveals how much is – and will remain – concealed, missing.'

11

**f** **fff** *pp* *mp* *pp*

(keep slurred long notes held)

12

*8<sup>va</sup>* **f** *mf* *8<sup>va</sup>* *mf*

*mp* *f* *pp* *p* *pp* **f** *pp* **ff** *mp* *8<sup>vb</sup>*

1/2 pedal: catch resonance

♩ = 192

Musical score for measures 12-13. The piece is in 4/8 time. Measure 12 features a piano (*p*) melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. Measure 13 features a forte (*f*) melody in the right hand and a piano (*p*) bass line. A dynamic hairpin shows a crescendo from *p* to *f* in the right hand. An 8va (octave) line is indicated above the right hand staff.

Musical score for measures 14-15. Measure 14 features a piano (*p*) melody in the right hand and a piano (*pp*) bass line. Measure 15 features a piano (*pp*) melody in the right hand and a mezzo-forte (*mf*) bass line. A dynamic hairpin shows a crescendo from *p* to *ppp* in the right hand. A 7:6 ratio is indicated below the right hand staff. A *rapid* marking is present above the right hand staff. An 8va (octave) line is indicated above the right hand staff.

Musical score for measures 16-17. Measure 16 features a piano (*ppp*) melody in the right hand and a piano (*pp*) bass line. Measure 17 features a piano (*pp*) melody in the right hand and a piano (*pp*) bass line. A dynamic hairpin shows a crescendo from *ppp* to *pp* in the right hand. A 3:2 ratio is indicated above the right hand staff. An 8va (octave) line is indicated above the right hand staff.

c. ♩ = 160

Musical score for measures 18-21. The piece is in 4/8 time. Measure 18 features a mezzo-forte (*mf*) melody in the right hand and a forte (*ff*) bass line. Measure 19 features a fortissimo (*sff*) melody in the right hand and a mezzo-forte (*più f*) bass line. Measure 20 features a piano (*pp*) melody in the right hand and a piano (*p*) bass line. Measure 21 features a piano (*p*) melody in the right hand and a piano (*p*) bass line. Dynamic hairpins show a crescendo from *mf* to *sff* in the right hand and a crescendo from *ff* to *pp* in the left hand. An 8va (octave) line is indicated above the right hand staff, and a 15ma (fifteenth) line is indicated above the left hand staff.

21

pp p più p pp

25

8va-1 f p p sub. p mf

(gradual accel. to ♩ = 192)

31

mf

33

♩ = 192 8va-1 fp mf p

♩ = 72

♩ = 192

♩ = 76

37 *8va*

*p* *pp* *f* *ff*

43 *8va*

*mf* *p* *più p* *f*

accel. . . . . ♩ = 192

49 *8va*

*pp* *p* *f* *ff*

(♩ = 96)

53 *8va*

*rf* *pp* *f*



### III. confrontation

'One does not fight with men against matériel, it is with matériel served by men that one makes war.'

The musical score is written for piano and consists of five systems of music, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/D minor) and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (8va, fff, f, mf, ff, più f), articulation (accents, slurs), and fingering (5). The piece begins at measure 57 with a fortissimo (fff) dynamic and an 8va marking. It features complex rhythmic patterns and melodic lines, with dynamics ranging from fortissimo to mezzo-forte. The score concludes at measure 70 with an 8va marking.

73 *8va*

76 *8va* *fff* *fff* *8va*

79

81 *ff* *mp subito* *fff*

84  $\text{♩} = 90$

*f* *rf* *rf* *ff* *p*

87

*ff* *p*

90  $(\text{♩} = \text{♪} = 180)$

*f* *pp* *8<sup>vb</sup> fp*

95

Slam fist into keys.

*p* *sff* *8*

101

*p* *sff* *8*

107

*sf* *sff* *mf* *sf*

(8)-----

112

*p* *sf* *f*

118

whole palm sideways whole palm

*sf* *mp* *sf* *p* *f* *sf*

124

*ff* *rf*

affretando

with fists... gradually lowering body... to use entire forearms

130

freeze

collapse onto keyboard, fist to elbow clusters

133

*ff* *fff*

7/16 7/16

keep body and forearms bent over the keyboard,  
play with clenched fists ("thumbs up")

137

*p* *f* *p* *f* *p* *ff*

7/16 6/16 7/16

play with fists turned sideways  
(thumbs sideways/palms down)

140

*mf* *f*

*fff*

RH: white notes  
LH: black notes

143

forearms    fists (palms down)

Keeping forearms across the keyboard, use any part of the forearms to play (this should keep the body closer/more 'into' the piano).

145

148

151

154

freeze, hands held down

to neutral

#### IV. reconciliation

*'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'*

160

Lunge to a prone position at the keyboard. Pause, remain still.

to neutral: still

lunge right

to neutral

lunge left

to neutral

*ff*

161

fall forward

to neutral

*più f*

*poco f*

*poco f*

Remain still throughout these final falls, as if resting, head bowed, remembering.

166  $\text{♩} = 80$   
with a gentle touch, unobtrusive throughout

*p* *ppp* *p* *ppp* *ppp*

$\text{♩} = 72$

*p* *ppp < p* *ppp* *ppp* *ppp*

171  $\text{♩} = 66$

*ppp* *pp* *pp* *ppp* *ppp*

176

*ppp* *pp* *ppp* *pp* *ppp*



181  $\text{♩} = 56$

*ppp* *più p*

*ppp* *più p*

186

*pp > ppp* *pp* *ppp*

*pp =*

191

*pp* *ppp* *pp* *ppp*

*ppp* *pp* *ppp*

195

*ppp* *loco* *pppp*

*fff* 8<sup>va</sup>

200

'When we have been there long enough, we get up and leave, turn the page and move on.'