“Noctuary” – 12 night-pieces for piano solo. 2010-2011 . Total duration: 40’

Notes for **NOCTUARY** by Raymond Deane

A “noctuary“ is a nocturnal diary. The 12 pieces constituting this cycle (2010-11) are “nocturnal” in various ways, but the title of No 1, *Minerva's owl*..., hints at an overall philosophical concept: Hegel wrote that “the owl of Minerva takes flight only as twilight falls.” He meant (partly) that history can only be understood once it has passed, and this understanding is itself a part of history. *Noctuary* thus becomes the latest of my works to explore the sense of lateness, of “coming after”, characteristic of our time. *Noctuary* was commissioned by Hugh Tinney with funds from The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, and is dedicated to Hugh – the ultimate philosophical pianist.

**BOOK ONE**

**I: *Minerva's owl...***

This piece is written on, not in, the key of C# minor, which plays an important symbolic role in the cycle: I have associated it with the night since my childhood obsession with Beethoven's “Moonlight” Sonata in that key. Here, it “collides” with brighter material focussed on the white notes.

**II: *Versipel.***

A “versipel” is any creature capable of changing its form (e.g., a werewolf). This piece, a kind of Scherzo, playfully adapts materials used more earnestly in my recent opera (2006-2010) on the painter Kokoschka.

**III: *Duskiss.***

The title, a Hiberno-English word meaning “twilight”, was lent me by Mary Costello, wife of my colleague Roger Doyle. This piece is a true nocturne, again evoking C# minor within an overall context of peacefully overlapping major and minor thirds.

**IV: *Nachtfalter.***

The title means “moth(s)”, but could be literally translated as “night folder(s)”. This is a fleeting piece in which wispy patterns are folded and unfolded between the hands and between the black and white keys.

**V: *Mezzotint.***

A mezzotint is a manner of engraving by scraping or burnishing a roughened surface to produce light and shade. *The Mezzotint* is also the title of a famous M. R. James story, in which a picture unfolds a ghostly tale of revenge before the eyes of its owner. My piece is based on a recurrent 9-note figure that undergoes drastic transformations.

**VI: *...hitherandthithering...***

The “hitherandthithering waters of. Night!” evoke that ultimate literary night-piece, James Joyce's Finnegans Wake. This piece is built on rapid scale and arpeggio patterns that fly over the entire keyboard, and brings the first half of Noctuary to an extrovert conclusion.

**BOOK TWO**

**VII: *Eine Trauerweide…***

Beethoven (again!) inscribed the *Adagio* of his first Rasumovsky Quartet with the words "Eine Trauerweide oder Akazienbaum aufs Grab meines Bruders" – “A weeping willow or acacia on my brother’s grave”. This piece is dedicated to the memory of my brother Declan, who died during its composition, and represents the cycles deepest descent into the ultimate night.

**VIII: *Terzengang*.**

The title means “a run (or progression) of thirds”. While superimposed major and minor thirds formed the basis of the gentle *Duskiss*, here a similar structure is put to much more strenuous use.

**IX: *Night Watches.***

The title is a mild pun – the piece evokes the idea (so dear to Ligeti) of clocks (or watches) going out of synch with one another.

**X: *Cereus.***

The Cereus is a cactus one short-lived genus of which (the Nightblooming Cereus) has given rise to the myth that it flowers on only one night of the year. This piece accepts the poetic truth of that myth.

**XI: *Lunar Boogie.***

A short, demented piece of great technical difficulty.

**XII: *Couchant*.**

In heraldry, a *lion couchant* is lying down with its head raised. In modern French, the word refers to the sunset. However, here it is perhaps the night that is lying down. *Noctuary* reaches a peaceful conclusion, evoking C major rather than the C# minor of the cycle’s opening.

**Raymond Deane** (©2011)