

# Exploring Ragtime Revival: An Analysis of William Bolcom’s ‘The Garden of Eden’

## Introduction

Ragtime is a distinctly American musical genre that emerged in the 1890s, rooted in African American communities and known for its syncopated melodies and steady bass lines. It significantly influenced jazz and blues. After fading in popularity, ragtime experienced a revival in the 1970s, led by figures like William Bolcom. Bolcom uniquely blended popular idioms with classical forms, integrating jazz, folk, rock, and more. This study analyzes Bolcom’s *The Garden of Eden*, a suite of four piano rags, examining how his work reflects traditional ragtime while showcasing a modern, genre-blending approach.

## Background

**William Elden Bolcom** (b. 1938) is an American composer and pianist, known for blending classical music with popular styles like ragtime. He taught composition at the University of Michigan (1973–2008) and was a key figure in the ragtime revival. Bolcom discovered Joplin’s scores, including *Treemonisha*, in 1966, inspiring him to compose rags. His well-known *Graceful Ghost Rag* (1971) was written in memory of his father. He also collaborated with William Albright and drew inspiration from Eubie Blake’s stride piano style. His works include *The Garden of Eden Suite*, *Nine Bagatelles*, and operas like *A View from the Bridge*. Bolcom’s music spans cabaret, études, and musical theater, showing his passion for merging diverse styles.

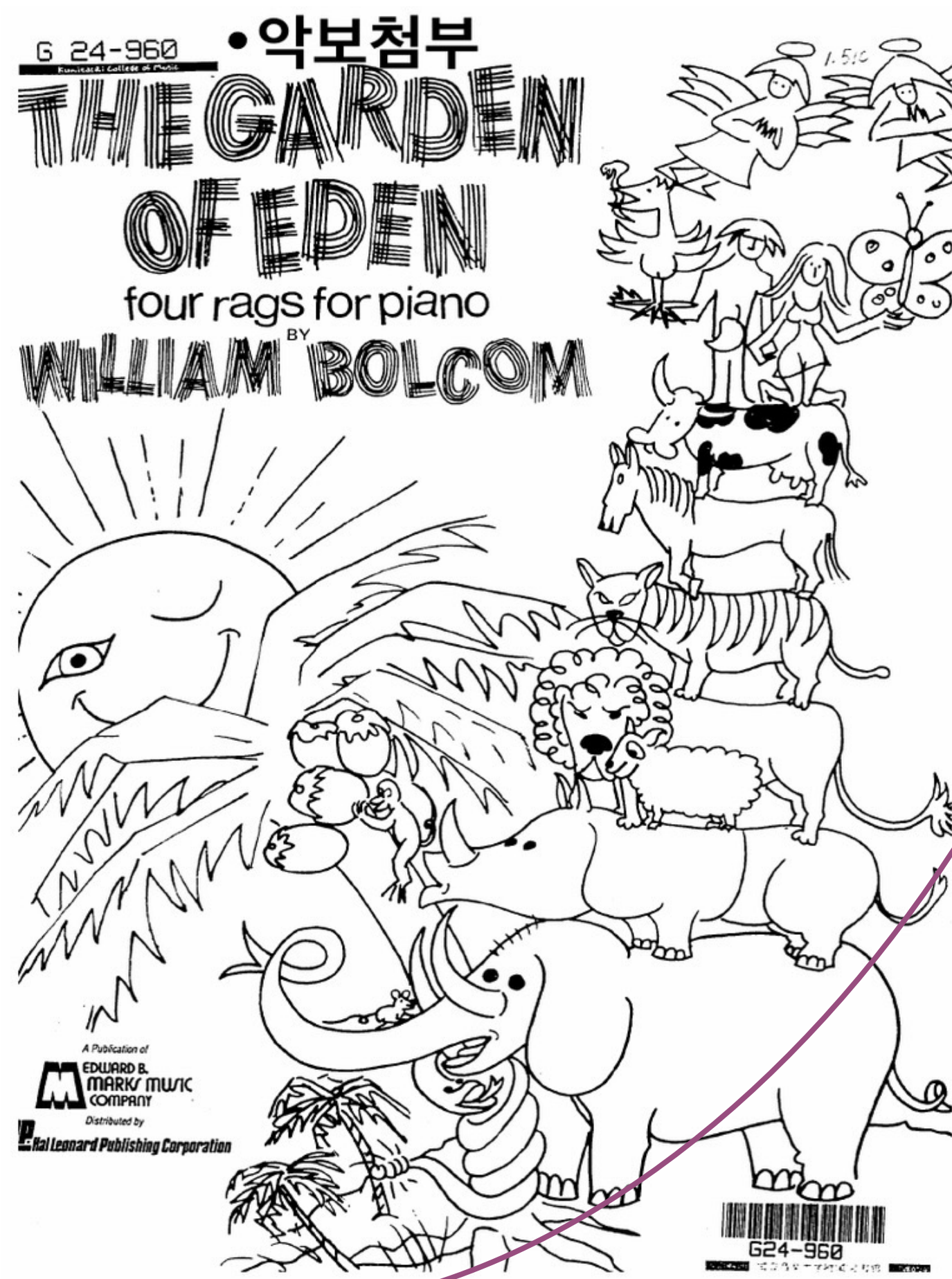
## The Garden of Eden

Completed in 1969, *The Garden of Eden* is a set of four piano rags that showcase a variety of musical styles. Bolcom weaves these pieces together into a “rag fantasy,” drawing inspiration from the biblical story of Genesis. Each section of the work reflects a different element of the story’s setting, bringing the tale to life through music.



## Conclusion

William Bolcom’s *The Garden of Eden* is a brilliant blend of traditional ragtime and modern musical ideas. While he incorporates familiar ragtime elements like syncopation, stride accompaniment, and classic song forms, Bolcom also brings in his own unique harmonic style and performance techniques. Each movement portrays different aspects of the biblical story, from the lively and rhythmic *Old Adam* to the slow and bluesy *The External Feminine*, the mysterious and dramatic *Serpent’s Kiss*, and finally, the calm departure of Adam and Eve in *Through Eden’s Gates*. Bolcom’s skilful blending of traditional ragtime with classical form makes his work not only unique while following ragtime’s traditions and taking it in new directions.

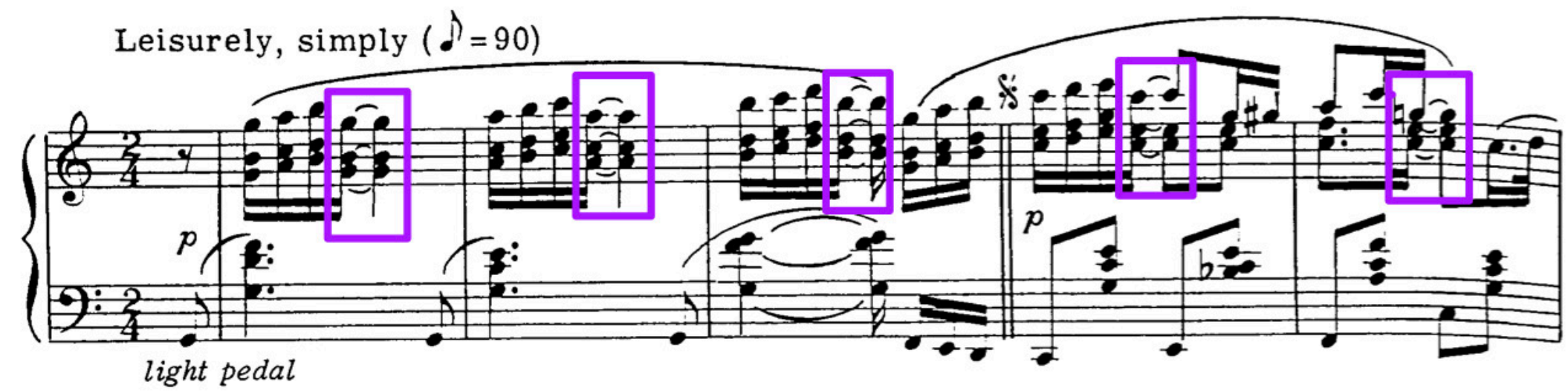


**Old Adam** – traditional ragtime feel  
**The Eternal Feminine** – lyrical and romantic  
**The Serpent’s Kiss** – theatrical and syncopated (audience favorite!)  
**Through Eden’s Gates** – calm and reflective

## Through Eden’s Gates

The final movement, *Through Eden’s Gates*, stands in clear contrast to *The Serpent’s Kiss* by omitting dramatic effects and complex forms. Bolcom describes this piece as capturing the moment when Adam and Eve peacefully cakewalk out of Eden. It embraces the hallmarks of classic ragtime, including a traditional ragtime structure, a moderate tempo, straightforward diatonic harmonies, and syncopations characteristic of the cakewalk style.

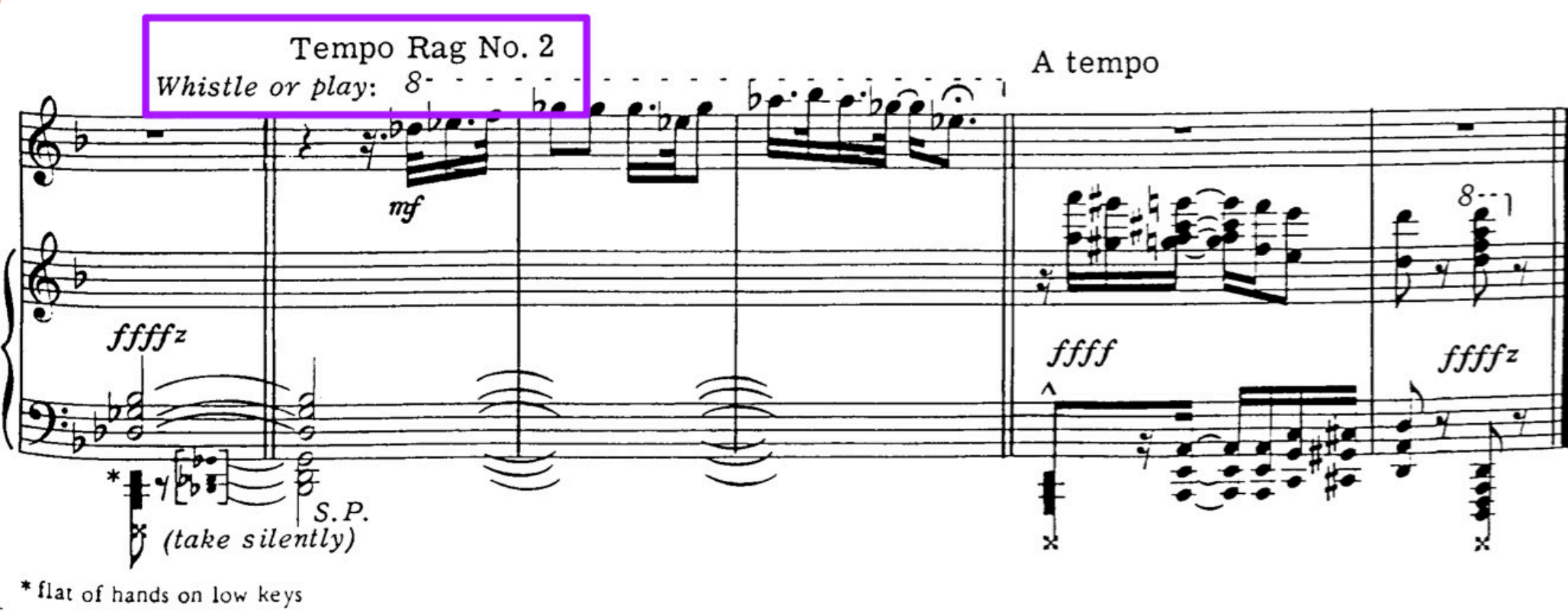
## IV. THROUGH EDEN’S GATES Cakewalk



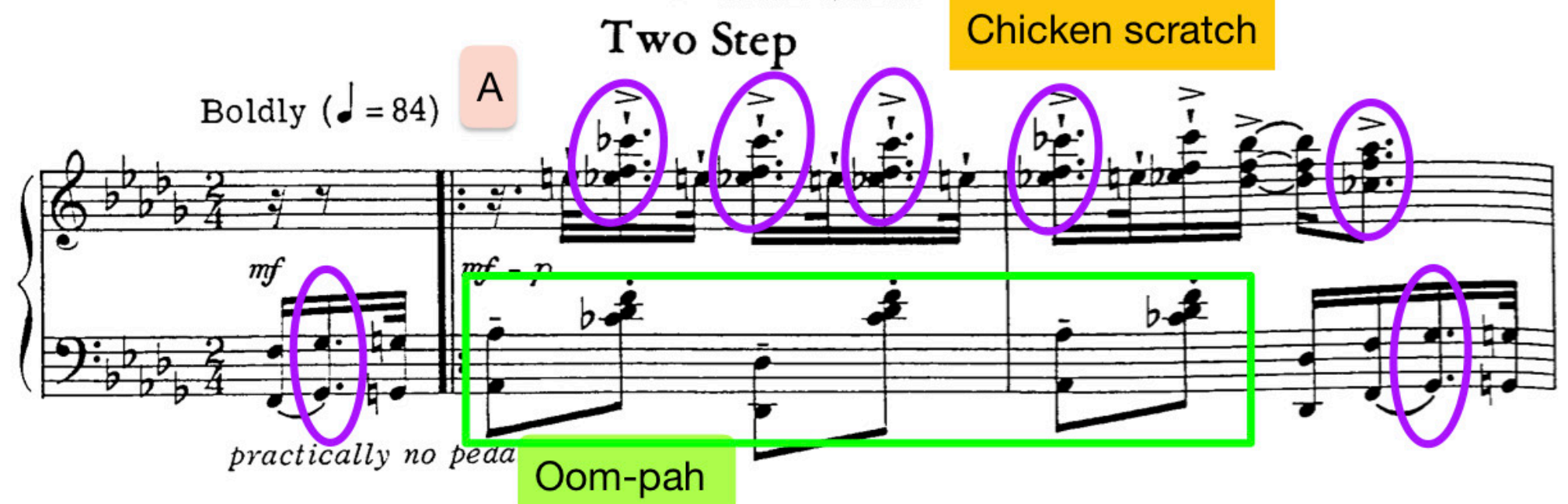
Section B is built around a stride-style call-and-response pattern. The right hand plays a short phrase in the lower register as the “call,” which is then echoed in a higher octave as the “response”. This call-and-response likely represents the conversation between Adam and Eve as they walk out of paradise, while also recalling a similar section in the opening piece of the suite, *Old Adam*.



This piece is not technically demanding. While it lacks dramatic effects, the straightforward, lyrical melody, along with the classic ragtime harmonies and syncopations, gives the piece a delightful charm.



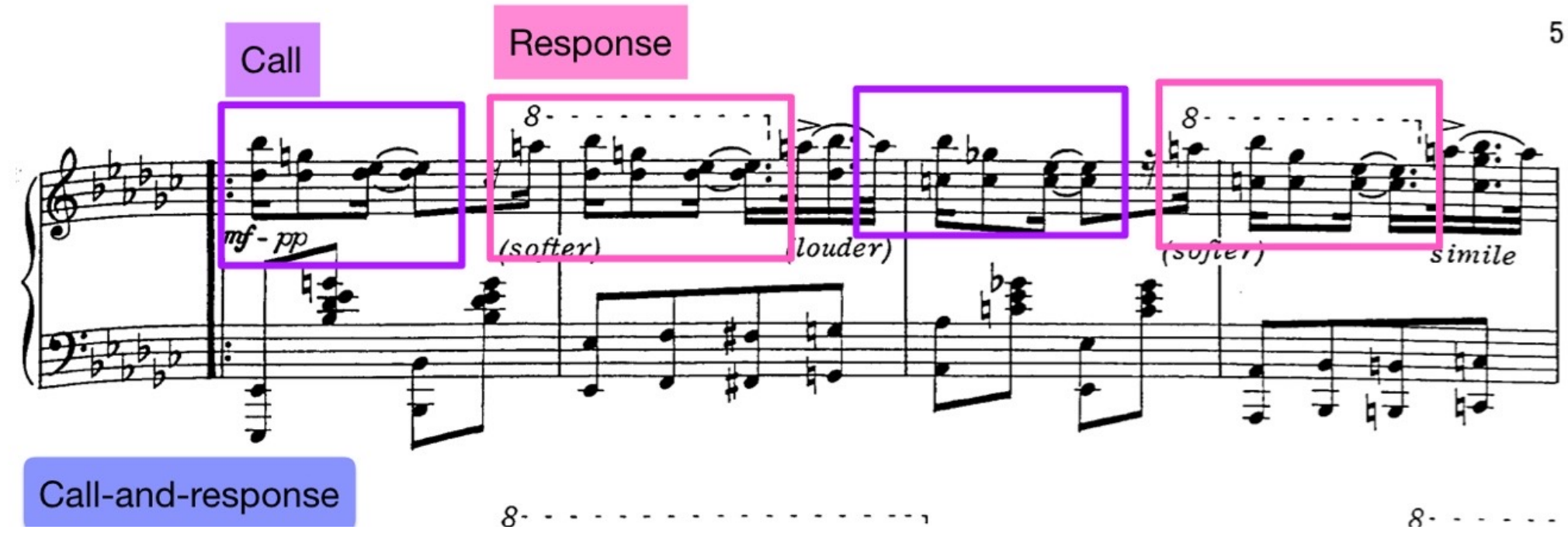
## I. OLD ADAM



## Old Adam

The first movement, *Old Adam*, is a lively two-step dance reminiscent of the “chicken scratch” style, characterized by its playful dotted rhythms. This piece brings to mind the animal dances popular in the 1900s. Bolcom incorporates stride piano in the accompaniment, with the left hand starting in the lower register before shifting to the middle register to create a cheerful “oom-pah” effect.

A “call-and-response” technique adds to the charm, where musical phrases are first played in the lower range and echoed in a higher range, mimicking a lively conversation. In the right hand, the initial phrase serves as the “call,” while the response comes as an octave higher repetition. The movement follows a classic ragtime form with sections organized as AA-B-A-B-C-C’-DD.



Fast-paced and straightforward, *Old Adam* blends elements of animal dance, stride, and traditional ragtime styles. The frequent use of keys with five or six flats reflects Bolcom’s distinctive compositional style, a hallmark found throughout his contemporary works.

## The External Feminine

The second movement, *The Eternal Feminine*, is a slow and lazy rag where it begins with a calming melody, portraying the character of Eve. Swinging melodies, syncopated rhythms, bluesy harmonies bring a lively yet relaxed energy to the piece. Bolcom uses unexpected harmonic progressions and tonal instability in the C section to evoke the “Mystery of Woman.” The right hand’s twisting, chromatic melody line moves unpredictably, often featuring half-step appoggiaturas that add to its intrigue. Classic ragtime elements are still present, including well-balanced two and four bar phrases, simple diatonic harmonies, and tied syncopated rhythms, particularly noticeable in the opening section.

## II. THE ETERNAL FEMINE Slow Drag



While *The Eternal Feminine* stays true to many traditional ragtime characteristics, the harmonic ambiguity of section C reveals Bolcom’s willingness to explore new ideas. This creative freedom becomes even more prominent in his later rags, showcasing his evolving approach to the genre.



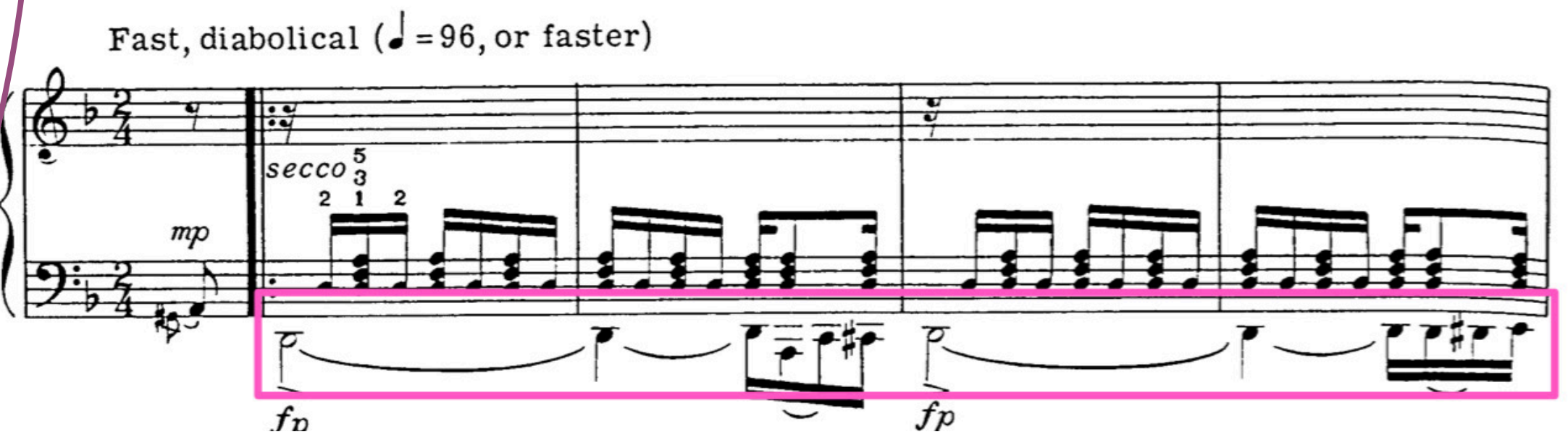
## Bibliography

“A Study of William Bolcom’s Compositional Style.” Scribd. <https://www.scribd.com/document/506805350/A-Study-of-William-Bolcom-s-Compositional-style>.  
Eliza. “William Bolcom and His Contribution to the Revival of Ragtime.” Interlude.hk, Interlude HK Limited, December 13, 2020. <https://interlude.hk/william-bolcom-and-his-contribution-to-the-revival-of-ragtime/>.  
Ginell, Richard S. “The Reverence and Irreverence of William Bolcom’s Rags.” San Francisco Classical Voice. <https://www.sfcv.org/articles/review/reverence-and-irreverence-william-bolcomsrags>.  
Key, Jordan Alexander. “Ragtime and Rhetoric: William Bolcom, ‘The Garden of Eden, III. The Serpent’s Kiss.’” Jordan-Alexander-Key (blog), August 7, 2018. <https://www.jordanalexanderkey.com/single-post/2018/07/23/william-bolcom-the-garden-of-eden-iii-the-serpents-kiss-e2-80-9d-ragtime-art-and-the-rhet>.  
The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. “Ragtime.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/art/trip-hop>.  
Yu, Yeung. “A Style Analysis of William Bolcom’s Complete Rags for Piano.” Doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2007. [http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc\\_num=ucin1177096593](http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ucin1177096593).

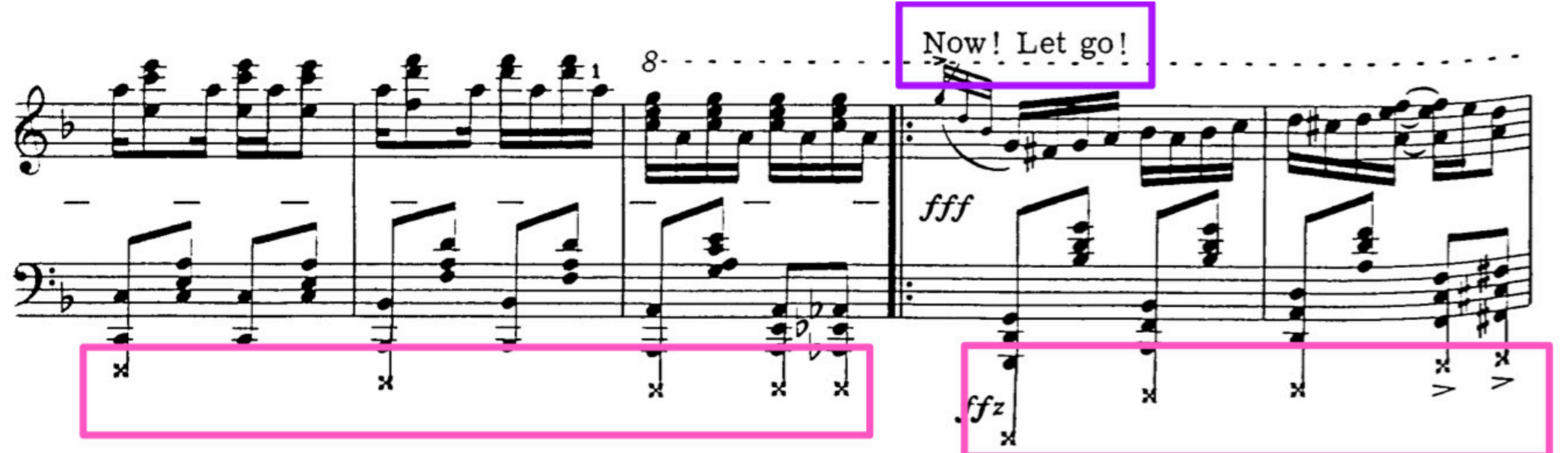
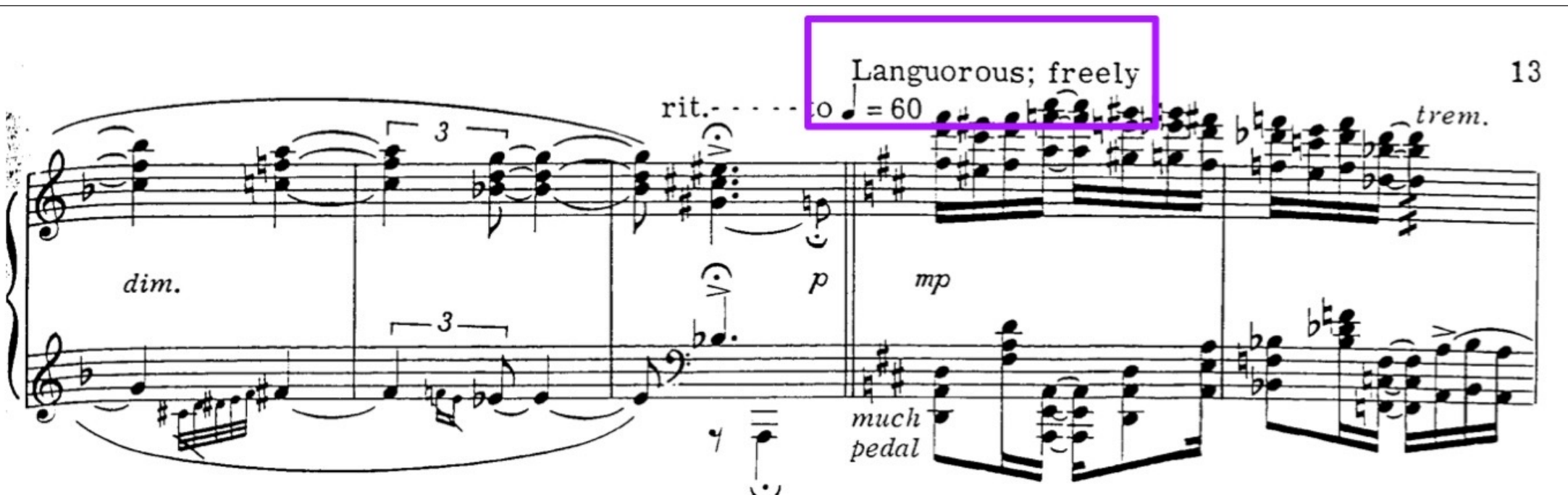
## The Serpent’s Kiss

The third movement, *The Serpent’s Kiss*, is the most well-known piece in the set and is described as a “Rag Fantasy.” Bolcom credits the term to his colleague William Albright, who first used it in his own ragtime compositions. A rag fantasy extends the traditional rag form, allowing composers greater freedom and creativity in their musical expression. The piece begins with a mysterious and suspenseful atmosphere, perfectly capturing the serpent’s arrival. The melody in the left hand cleverly represents the serpent’s flickering tongue.

## III. THE SERPENT’S KISS Rag Fantasy



The piece showcases frequent shifts in musical expression and texture, with striking contrasts between sections. It features wide leaps in chords and octaves, rapid running passages and complex rhythms. The dynamics change abruptly, often without gradual crescendos or decrescendos. Additionally, the piece includes unexpected tempo changes throughout, which is uncommon from the conventions of traditional ragtime.



In the middle section of *The Serpent’s Kiss*, performers are instructed to incorporate rhythmic patterns by tapping the wooden part of the piano and clicking their tongue, marked with the tempo indication “Stoptime.” In tap dancing, jazz, and blues, stoptime refers to an accompaniment pattern featuring single accented beats separated by silences. These interruptions in the usual rhythmic flow alternate with solo passages, creating a dynamic effect. Stoptime is a tradition rooted in the classic ragtime era. Scott Joplin famously explored this concept in his *Stoptime Rag* (1910), providing explicit instructions on how to achieve it. He wrote that pianists should heavily stamp the heel of one foot on the floor whenever the word “stamp” appeared in the music, whether the hands were playing or resting. In Bolcom’s *The Serpent’s Kiss*, this concept is expanded and modernized. These unique performance techniques vividly bring the serpent’s dance to life, adding dramatic flair and building to an exhilarating climax.



The movement concludes with the soloist either whistling or playing the melody from *The Eternal Feminine*, a gesture that suggests the serpent mocking Eve for succumbing to his scheme. *The Serpent’s Kiss* remains one of Bolcom’s most significant and impactful rags.