



Counting Steps – Karaoke Version

In this resource you are invited to play along, **karaoke** style(!), with BCMG trumpet player **Richard Blake** in a new piece called *Counting Steps* by **New Zealand/US composer** Celeste Oram (pictured below).



Celeste composed *Counting Steps* as part of BCMG's *Soliloquies & Dialogues* project and it was premiered online in July 2020 BCMG trumpet player Richard Blake and a young trumpet player from Birmingham, Amelie. The *Soliloquies & Dialogues* series was conceived during **lockdown** and invites composers from around the world to reflect upon their situation in lockdown through music.

You can **listen** to and **watch** Richard and Amelie playing the piece here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2gZoacG2U>

As you can see from the video, Richard plays most of the parts and Amelie one part. We have created a version in which you can play Amelie's part along with Richard - like **Karaoke**! You don't need to be a trumpet player to take part but just play a C or Bb melody instrument as listed on the scores.

Find out more about Celeste and her music in this **interview** with BCMG Learning Coordinator Jenny Muirhead:

<https://youtu.be/niQiyNI8pI8>

Programme Note

The piece is partly inspired by an old **book** about how to compose called *Gradus ad Parnassum* (The Steps to Parnassus). This book was a method for composing **counterpoint** (the relationship between 2 or more musical lines) in the style of **Palestrina** (another composer), written by **Johann Joseph Fux** in **1725**.

In one sense, it is a very dry book: a scourge (pain) of music students who—over centuries and around the world—have been told to study and learn its arcane (obscure) contents.

In another sense, it is (like other musical method books) an interesting piece of **philosophical writing**, where ideas about the meaning of **music** are entangled with ideas about how we should live our lives and how **society** should be organised.

- Can you think of examples where how music is played seems also to describe ideas about how society should be organised? Do you agree with these ideas?
- In what ways do you think we build our musical cultures to reflect our societies?

The entire book is written as a Socratic dialogue (a **conversation** in the form of **questions** and **answers**) between the master Aloysius and the student Josephus. Their conversations are not limited to the rules of counterpoint but also stray into philosophy. These lines caught my attention as I began this piece:

'We do not live for ourselves alone; our lives belong also to our parents, our country, and our friends' and '...drops wear down the stone not by strength, but by constant falling.'

I wrote this piece in the early months of the **Covid-19 pandemic**: a situation which makes plain the ways our lives are woven together. It has become clear that **our lives** are inextricably tied to **economics** and **power** - where decisions about whether to ease the lockdown and require people to go back to work or school are weighed against the risk of more people becoming ill and losing their lives.

At the same time, when the economic necessity to work is removed, we can find space to **grow** and **give** to others, and **take care** of them, in a way that that costs us nothing. Recently, in the midst of the Covid pandemic, a nurse from Naples, Italy is quoted as saying:

'I thought I was a weak person. Now I am discovering that I have power and courage above all my expectations.'

During the pandemic we have all found our worlds shrinking. Who or what else is your life connected to? And what changes have you noticed in yourself as a result of the lockdown?

Your Turn!

Counting Steps is essentially a '**looper**' piece: a **repeating** section of music is recorded and immediately played back so a second voice can be added and recorded, then a third, and so on. In this 'virtual' digital version of the piece, BCMG trumpeter Richard Blake has recorded most of these parts to make a **virtual trumpet choir**.

One part remains unrecorded - that's for **you** to play!

We have created audio and video of the piece without the final part. You can decide whether you want play along with the audio or with the video.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_zF3IGkvak

In the piece there is a recurring **C Section** which features a **graphic score** that lasts about 10 seconds. This is an opportunity for you to **improvise** and **explore** sounds with your instrument. The graphic image represents the phrase:

'drops wear down the stone not by strength, but by constant falling'

Richard's playing emulates the **drops**; your playing emulates the **stone**. Think about how you can represent musically, with your instrument, the idea of a stone being eroded by raindrops...:

- Does the note **sputter out**?
- Does one note **break up** into many notes?
- Does the **pitch change** as it 'wears down'?
- Does the accumulating surge of raindrops **sweep** the stone **away**?

You might get creative and try out different **mutes** or playing **techniques**, if you have them, or even **find objects** around the house for your sonic explorations and improvisations! A pie pan, for example, or a sheet of tin foil, makes a wonderfully buzzy trumpet mute. NB check with your teacher to make sure these kinds of objects won't damage your instrument.

There are no dynamic markings on the score; instead there are descriptive words like 'thoughtful' or 'proudly'. It's up to you how you turn these descriptions into dynamic variations. You might also want to **add** in your own **ornaments**, like trills or glissandi.

Listen to Richard and Celeste talking about the piece:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQi6A585OtM>