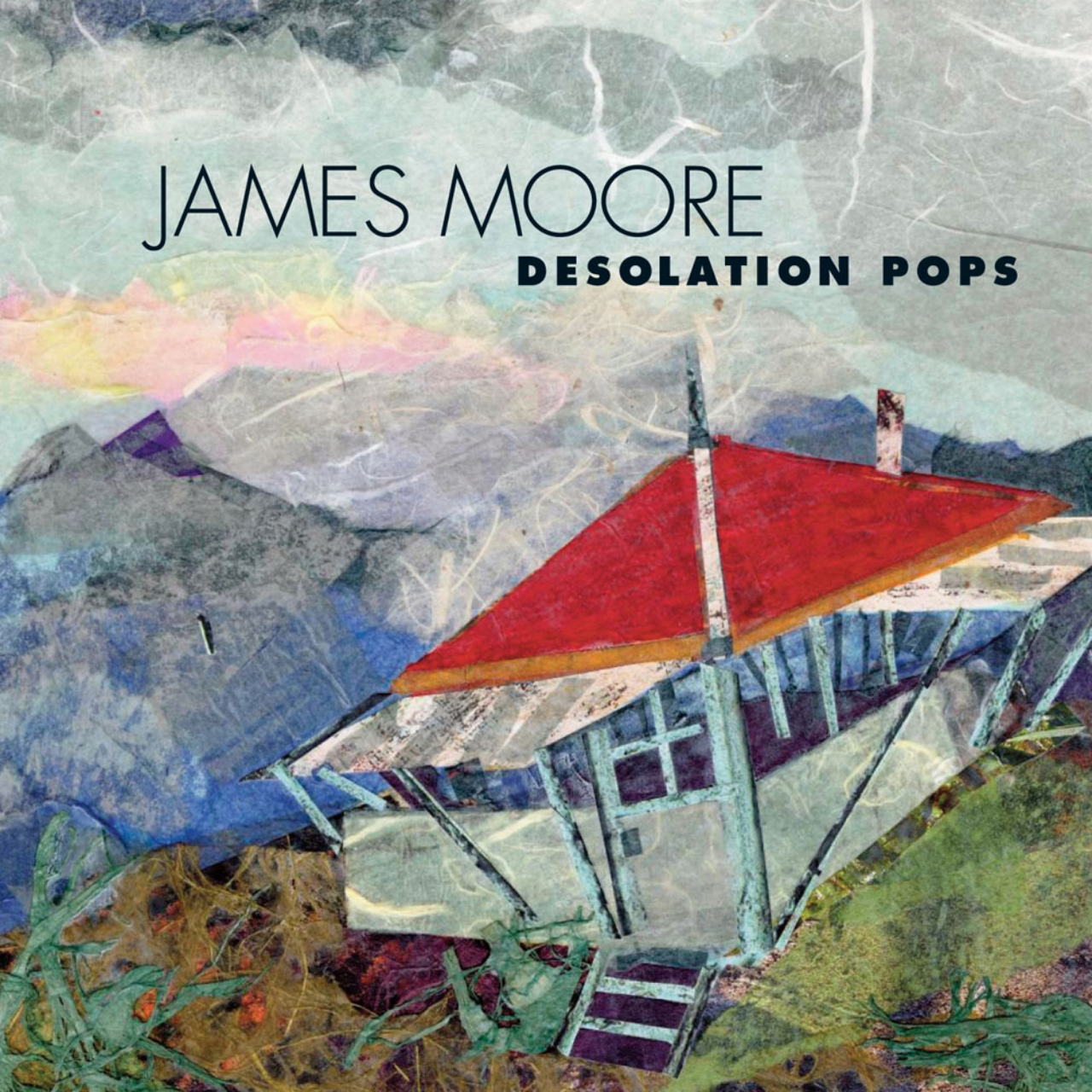


JAMES MOORE

**DESOLATION POPS**



**JAMES MOORE**

is a delightful weirdo.

He's a composer with an eye toward the world of games and experimental theater. He's an electric guitarist who's willing and eager to treat his instrument as a playground, not a reverent, static tradition. He's a tinkerer, a charmer, and a fella who's always up for another round at the bar of wacky ideas and intellectual questioning. He's excited for new and unexpected opportunities for collaboration, but always maintains a voice that seems to stay recognizably his own throughout the myriad projects he takes on as his life's work. The beautiful pieces on this album reflect those playful and curious penchants of this music-maker extraordinaire. You'll hear comforting clarity, choreographed awkwardness, sudden synchronies, and inexplicable noises on this record. Put on your coziest vintage sweater, grab a classy cocktail in a quirky heirloom glass, and get ready to give your ears a treat as you tour the stringed and unstringed sounds of *Desolation Pops*.

"Ahh. . ."

"Uh. . ."

"wha. . ."

". . . ooooh . . ."

That's my typical trajectory through a James Moore piece. I'm first impressed by his seemingly full command of particular instrumental idiosyncrasies (my own composer-heart is often jealous at his seemingly endless flow of idiomatic writing for a huge diversity of instruments and ensembles). Next, at some point (usually quite soon in), I notice myself feeling a rupture in that flow—some event, some texture, some new harmony or detun-

ing that makes my pleasant head bob just a bit uncomfortable. If that discomfort persists, I go into "what is happening?!!!" territory—a delightful liminal space between aesthetic joy and intellectual curiosity. The weirds have come and I invite them in. I hear the detuning or unexpected technique or the slithery harmonies as inviting me further down a rabbit hole, but not for their own sake. I'm getting deeper into the world of the piece and I'm leaving preconceived notions or fixed expectations behind. Once I'm sitting comfortably in my new surroundings, I can have fun wondering at their own individual grace and quality. It's quite a ride.

I met James decades ago through a mutual friend—a cellist named Jody Redhage who had just played a piece of mine in a concert in the West Village of New York City. I was new to New York and I didn't know that many people, but after the concert, Jody invited me out for pizza with her and two friends of hers: composer and organist Wil Smith, and composer/guitarist James Moore. There, over cheese slices at Bleecker St. Pizza, James was so open and friendly and curious about me from the first moments we began talking, I felt at ease right away. Now, after a near-twenty-year friendship, I see him project that same earnest and kind curiosity in all the new people he meets. I think you can hear it in his music: He projects comfort with himself and easy kinship with others. His composeserly voice is clear, but his invitation to performers to inject their own respective characters into his pieces comes out in the details of his writing. He doesn't write for \*a\* pianist—he writes for \*that\* pianist.

*Lowlands* (2017) is very much written for Nathan Koci, not for anonymous solo accordion. Nathan Koci is an accordionist in The Hands Free, a band consisting of James, Nathan, Caroline Shaw on violin, and Eleonore Oppenheim on double bass. In the context of The Hands Free, James had written tunes that relied on Nathan's amazing accordion chops and his deep experience in theater and music direction—Nathan can get a group of people singing and smiling in no time. *Lowlands* is a rich and flowing journey for

accordion that came about from a conversation Nathan and James had in a car on their way back to New York City from a gig The Hands Free played in Boston back in 2016. Nathan had been excited to build up his accordion rep and James was excited to sink his teeth into the beefy challenge of writing for a Stradella bass system accordion, a task he'd only done previously within the context of his ensemble writing for The Hands Free. The Stradella bass system is the way in which some accordions organize the three-note chord-buttons that are played by the left hand of the performer, while the right hand is freed to play individual-note melodies on a more familiar keyboard layout. Stradella involves organizing nearby chords around a circle of fifths system (C chords of various types and flavors neighbor G chords of their assorted varieties, which neighbor D chords, and so on). Though Stradella makes lots of intuitive sense to theorists of European-centric music and the accordionists who were taught this layout as the default of musical translation, it's a bit of a brain-cracker to the composers who take on the gauntlet. To my memory and understanding, no other acoustic instrument makes use of this type of physical layout, and in order to create a piece that fits comfortably in the performer's hand and happily in the listener's ear, attention must seriously be paid. James paid that attention! Through numerous conversations with Nathan and drafts of rewrites, a lush and flowing piece was born.

Digging into his penchant for creating dialogues and ensemble-systems within the worlds of his pieces, James soon landed on the idea of adding an audience-choir to the plan for *Lowlands*. Nathan, with his storytelling nature and calm, glowing musicality, is given the role of leading his audience in the cyclic repetition of a long and graceful melody as a counterpart to the thick streams of accordion phrases and sections. The performance you'll hear on this album was recorded in my apartment: James and Nathan and a dozen or so wonderful friends came over one evening, and my husband, Jascha Narveson, set up some microphones and the cozy magic began. We sat on the couch and the floor in our tiny music room on busy Smith Street in Brooklyn, beverages in hand

with plants and string lights surrounding us, as Nathan smiled and the warm, slightly unsteady cloud of our voices melted together into something between a campfire singalong and a meditative practice. The kind of experience James fostered for his choir-audience in *Lowlands* enables a deep and active listening that's hard otherwise. The sung part is simple and supportive enough that I, as a singer (see if you can find my nasal alto in the mix!), felt myself able and invited to focus even more on Nathan and the full sound of the piece than I would have normally done in a concert environment. The piece became a more integrated and engaged community practice, rather than a more straightforward concert performance where performer and audience roles are clearly delineated.

Then, fittingly, we all adjourned to the kitchen for pasta.

*Clair-Obscur* (2018) was also a commission between friends. Claire Hap-pel is a dancer and a harpist who has been friends with James for years. They chatted in 2018 about the possibility of a piece that would capitalize on both of her practices, and James signed himself up for another composer-behemoth: writing for TRIPLE harp, an unusual model of harp that has three rows of strings, including a microtonally-tuned inner row. Harp, with its pedal workings and unintuitive choreographic requirements, is an instrument famously opaque to non-harpists even without the microtonal string row, but James the light-hearted musical adventurer decided to take on that brain-twisting challenge with aplomb. Through an intensive collaborative week of residency in New Hampshire at Avaloch Music Institute, James and Claire built a piece together that ultimately used a single low-placed light-source (sometimes just the flashlight on a cell phone) to cast a grand and graceful shadow of the performer on the wall behind her. Seeing a video of a recent performance of this piece (from the Princeton University "Sound Kitchen" concert series), I'm reminded of the intended allusions to dramatic renaissance portraits and the world of dance and movement art, but I'm also inspired, like a kid, to imagine the shadows of the harpist's hands as creatures, chatting and fighting and dancing with each other

as their playful interactions usher in compelling journeys through flowing arpeggios and peevish chromatic cyclones.

Though “clair-obscur” (French for the better-known Italian term “chiaroscuro”) is a title that serves to highlight the role shadows play in the piece, it is also an adorable tribute-pun for Claire Happel, the performer/commissioner. A highly cultured reference and a cheesy pun in one? Classic James Moore.

*Desolation Pops* (2016–18), the final piece on the album, came about in a more progressive and evolving way. For his residency at The Stone, John Zorn’s venue then located in the Alphabet City neighborhood of Lower Manhattan, James talked to his longtime performance buddy Kathy Supové about creating something entirely new for one of the concerts. Again, however, as an ensemble-minded, dialogue-inspired composer, James decided to create his new piece for Kathy as a piano solo with an open-scored, game-inspired accompaniment to match. That first performance involved Pauline and Conrad Harris (the violin duo String Noise), James Ilgenfritz on double bass, and James himself on guitar. Taking what he liked from that resulting performance, over the course of months and years James refined that idea to create a more fixed ensemble version for Kathy and The Rhythm Method.

When I hear this piece, I don’t think of the canon of piano quintet: I am only reminded of the community I live in—of music so lovingly and tailor-made for Kathy and The Rhythm Method (an adventure-seeking, deeply quirky string quartet made up of weirdo badasses). This piece holds a special place in my heart and memory: A performance was pre-taped and live-streamed as part of Tribeca New Music’s “Brave New World: Divergent Trajectories” concert series in January of 2021. I, along with so many of my friends and colleagues, were still struggling with how to maintain vital and loving music community around us while isolating in our homes and avoiding gatherings during a largely unvaccinated time during the COVID-19 pandemic. This livestream of *Des-*

*olation Pops* fed my soul. This sometimes joyful, sometimes dark work is always fresh sounding—to me it’s a conversation between traditional and whimsy. James was home with his family in California when he wrote this piece: He was there to be with his granny, a modernist composer and a hilarious wit, as she passed. I can only imagine what effect his granny’s sound world, past and concurrent, must have had on his mind and heart as he worked out these passages. I’m quite confident she’d have loved the result.

I hope you enjoy every run and clash and sweet resolution on this album. I hope you get to meet Nathan, Claire, Kathy, and all four weirdo badasses of The Rhythm Method. I know you’ll be meeting James Moore as soon as you press play.

If you’d like a virtual tour before you embark, here’s are a few of the specs and stats that make this album run:

*Lowlands* toggles between chorus and episodes, though the section boundaries blur with organic development and natural internal places of closure. The first chorus is a melody taught to the audience, repeating as a hocketed, joyous vamp till the new choir of performer/listeners gains audible confidence, at which point the accompaniment fades away, leaving the a cappella audience to fade into the first episode. The accordion builds additively, increasing in density, until there is no choice but for it to break at the climax of a single cluster, crumbling into a cascade of abrupt toggles of the accordion’s various register switches. The episode ends with two notes at the very lowest range of the instrument, ushering a return of the chorus, inviting the audience to join as a choir, this time without the hesitation of an audible learning curve. The accordion again supports, then drifts away, but this time reaching harmonically higher and stranger tonalities, climaxing in a distant shimmer. The next episode departs from this shimmer, slowly building to a lilting 4/3 melody. At its resolution the chorus begins anew and the audience again joins. The accordion now pushes the audience’s stamina by adding more and more harmonic and rhythmic gestures. This chorus essentially becomes the third episode which

grows and churns and becomes more dissonant until the accordion becomes a raucous percussive machine. As it reaches its meltdown, the distant theme of the first episode lurks just beneath the surface as the music and the vocals fade together.

Each of the three pieces that make up *Clair-Obscur* are in fact based on a modal idea: “Cecilia” rooted around A; “Minerva,” F; and “Cleopatra” around G. “Cecilia” begins by highlighting the gorgeous pure thirds of the triple harp’s tuning (quarter-comma meantone temperament), then calling attention to the quirkiness of the inner row, which offers different flavors of perfect thirds for use in certain harmonies. James takes advantage of this 14-tone scale, bringing out the dissonance and beauty of the accidentals in this idiosyncratically modal context. “Minerva” is a rondo, written very freely, inspired by the harp music of microtonal mastermind, Lou Harrison. “Cleopatra” is in a more meditative state, built around a simple vamp, using a diatonic cluster constructed with the outer rows of the harp in the pursuit of a lazy waltz; the harpist bobs and weaves, improvising in a fragmentary language. “A broken music box” is the instruction and inspiration James offers in the score.

Over the course of the eight movements that make up *Desolation Pops*, the pianist travels between worlds of directional playing and ethereal soundscapes. The piano material is often overtly referential to the canonic classical pieces that James, who takes pride in being an unrefined pianist, would slowly hack through on his family’s baby grand. “The Smiling Fish” serves as prelude to the piece, with Kathy offering eerie long tones by pulling fishing wire slowly through the strings of the piano’s insides. The strings emerge from these tones with a distant chorale that continues to rise until they reach what seems like the highest harmonic space in the world. From there, “All the Insects Ceased” provides a more familiar texture, as Kathy enters with her first traditional keyboard-centered piano playing, a delicate line that descends from that highest range. While generally tonal, the effect is of melodic and harmonic melting, perhaps referential of Debussy or Ravel with a

touch of Schoenberg. The strings provide a distant reverberation for this opening passage, holding out delicate long notes in parallel with the piano. This line finally lands on a more formal melody, which feels like a nod to Romantic piano repertoire. While the music feels more familiar, the strings provide the fresh element of disintegration to dissipate any feeling of direct reference to an earlier style. Still serving as an extension to the piano, their sustained tones go in and out of worlds of wonky glissandi and ethereal harmonics, creating a pliant lens to bring the piano in and out of focus.

The rest of *Desolation Pops* largely proceeds in this fashion, going between worlds of the familiar and the abstract, playing with references and relationships between pianist/soloist and strings/accompaniment. “A Hoop for the Lowly” places a simple song-like melody, reminiscent of Stephen Foster, at the extreme low register of the piano as the strings support it with staggered swells (almost mimicking the sound of a backwards piano sample). These swells, while distant and intangible at first, ultimately morph into a fragile air, “Little Teeth,” the only movement written for the strings alone.

From here, the suite pivots into a playful and maniacal world. “M’Ugly Spine” features piano preparations and extreme string gestures, featuring a relentless odd-meter ostinato that grows until it explodes into absurd territories. First it arrives at a playful cartoon-music inspired toccata, and after a brief return to the ostinato, a drunken bar-room parlor piano piece. “Far from Bhudda” keeps a lighter feel, beginning with a piano solo that brings the idea of a Bach prelude into a more minimalist texture. The strings again emerge from the piano material as in the earlier movements, but this time with even more agency. Their distant muted unison lines, at first seemingly coming from an old Victrola, depart and grow into a lush over-the-top Romantic chorale that engulfs the piano, which from here acts like an accompanist trying to hold her drunken choir together. For “Misurgirafical & Plomlied” the pianist returns to her initial posture inside the piano, this time pulsing on the lowest strings of the piano with a mallet to provide a

churning bed of noisy swells. This pulsing grows harmonically and timbrally, and its climax bursts into a maniacal gospel-tinged lament, with Kathy simultaneously playing inside the piano and on the keys of the keyboard. As the final chord of the movement fades, the strings once again emerge from their place of distant beauty as they segue into “Empty Space Blue,” vamping on a simple chord progression constructed of natural harmonics. The piano enters with a delicate melody (*una corda*—soft pedal of the piano depressed), now reminiscent of Satie. The strings drift toward an even more ethereal world as their line joins in that eerie pulse and eventually alights into the distance.

—Lainie Fefferman

*Lainie Fefferman makes music by putting dots on lines, drawing curves in software, writing code in boxes, and finding new ways to wiggle her vocal cords. Fefferman is a co-organizer of the New Music Gathering, a national new music annual event, and is an assistant professor in the Music & Technology program at Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey. For her latest projects and more fun info, visit: <http://lainiefefferman.com/>*

**James Moore** (b. 1979) is a composer, guitarist, and bandleader. He is a founding member of the raucous electric guitar quartet Dither, the whimsical acoustic group The Hands Free, and the sloppy-math/avant-grunge rock band Forever House. He performs internationally as a soloist, chamber and orchestral musician, and as a collaborator in theater, dance, and multimedia projects. James recently premiered his electric guitar concerto, *Sleep is Shattered*, at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s MusicNOW series. In this piece—originally written for the influential guitarist Marc Ribot—as in many of his projects, he enjoys assembling unique groups of artists and finding a collective language through collaboration and improvisation. Other compositions include *Send Back My Love* for the multi-faceted mezzo-soprano Alicia Hall Moran; *Ghost School* for haegeum virtuoso Soo Yeon Lyuh with So Percussion; *Ciest Na Tèangan*, for sean-nós singer Iarla Ó Lionáird in duet with Caro-

line Shaw; and *The Untroubled Mind*, for folk musician Anna Roberts-Gevalt, cellist Theresa Wong, and instrument builder Ellen Fullman. Originally from the San Francisco Bay Area, Moore studied guitar performance at UC Santa Cruz and The Yale School of Music. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Music Composition at Princeton University.

[www.jamesmooreguitar.com](http://www.jamesmooreguitar.com)

**Nathan Koci** is a musician, music director, conductor, and collaborative artist working across disciplines including musical theater, folk music, jazz, contemporary and experimental classical music, dance, and karaoke singing. His theater credits include *Hadestown*, Daniel Fish’s *Oklahoma!*, *Most Happy in Concert*, William Kentridge’s *The Head and the Load*, Ted Hearne’s *The Source*, and John Hegginbotham/Maira Kalman’s *The Principles of Uncertainty*. As a performer, he plays with Sam Sadigursky’s The Solomon Diaries, improvisatory folk chamber party The Hands Free, The Michael Leonhart Orchestra, Guy Klucsevsek’s Bellows Brigade, and SC-based trio The Opposite of a Train.

[www.nathankoci.com](http://www.nathankoci.com)

Harpist **Claire Happel Ashe** performs on the pedal harp, triple harp, and Paraguayan harp with groups including the Saint Louis Symphony Orchestra, Newberry Consort, and River Town Duo. She has commissioned and premiered works by Caroline Shaw, Hannah Lash, and Stephen Andrew Taylor, among others. Claire recently contributed articles on the Alexander Technique to the *American Harp Journal* and the upcoming book, *The Dance of Everyday Movement: A Framework for Integration*. She holds degrees in music and dance from Yale University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and studied on a Fulbright Scholarship in Prague.

[www.clairehappelashe.com](http://www.clairehappelashe.com)

Pianist **Kathleen Supové** presents numerous solo concerts under the moniker of The Exploding Piano. Through it, she has performed and premiered works by a Who's Who of contemporary music. The Exploding Piano is a multimedia experience using electronics, theatrical elements, vocal rants, staging, and other disciplines. She has performed with Disklaviers, laptop orchestras, robots, XReality, and the Mugic® device. More information about her current projects is at [www.supove.com](http://www.supove.com), Facebook (supove, explodingpiano), Google, and Instagram (@supove). She is also a composer and a member of several ensembles, including A Musical Sacrifice, Killdeer, Dr. Nerve, Antidepressant, and Guy & Doll.

The four virtuosic and inventive composer-performers of **The Rhythm Method** strive to reimagine the string quartet in a contemporary, feminist context. Their continually expanding practice encompasses improvisation, vocalization, graphic notation, songwriting, and theater. The quarter has performed across the country and abroad, at venues including Roulette, the MIT Museum, Joe's Pub, The Stone, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Morris Museum, and the Noguchi Museum, and have been featured artists at the Lucerne Festival Forward, the String Orchestra of Brooklyn's String Theories Festival, MATA Festival, Music Mondays, TriBeCa New Music, and the Austrian Cultural Forum's Moving Sounds Festival. [www.therhythmmethod.nyc](http://www.therhythmmethod.nyc)

#### SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

##### **Dither**

*Dither*: Henceforth Records 108.

*Potential Differences*. New Focus Recordings FCR 235.

##### **Forever House**

*Eaves*. Infrequent Seams IS16.

##### **The Hands Free**

*The Hands Free*. New Amsterdam Records NWAM 100.

##### **James Moore & Andie Springer**

*Gertrudes: Music for Violin and Resonator Guitar*. New World Records 80771.

##### **James Moore & Elliot Simpson**

*guitars, streets, resonances*. Infrequent Seams IS25.

##### **John Zorn**

James Moore plays *The Book of Heads*. Tzadik TZ 8337.

Producer: James Moore

All tracks mixed by Andrew McKenna Lee at Still Sound Music, East Chatham, NY.

*Lowlands* was recorded on October 4, 2017 by Jascha Narveson in Brooklyn, NY.

*Clair-Obscur* was recorded on January 23–24, 2023 by James Land and Angel Perez at COFAC Recital Hall, Western Illinois University, Macomb, IL.

*Desolation Pops* was recorded on June 16, 2022 by Bernd Klug at Taplin Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

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# JAMES MOORE

(b. 1979)

## DESOLATION POPS

1. *Lowlands* (2017) 18:12  
 Nathan Koci, accordion  
 Voices: Joe Brent, Lainie Fefferman,  
 Betsy Moore, James Moore, Jascha Narveson,  
 Brett Parnell, Kenji Shinagawa, Kathleen Supové,  
 Andie Tanning, Randall Woolf

*Clair-Obscur* (2018) 10:27  
 2. I. Cecilia 3:51  
 3. II. Minerva 2:20  
 4. III. Cleopatra 4:17  
 Claire Happel Ashe, triple harp

*Desolation Pops* (2016–18) 32:54  
 5. I. The Smiling Fish 2:30  
 6. II. All the Insects Ceased 4:45  
 7. III. A Hoop for the Lowly 1:53  
 8. IV. Little Teeth 2:07  
 9. V. M' Ugly Spine 5:05  
 10. VI. Far from Bhudda 4:49  
 11. VII. Misurgicalical & Plomlied 5:46  
 12. VIII. Empty Space Blue 5:59  
 Kathleen Supové, piano; The Rhythm Method:  
 Leah Asher & Marina Kifferstein, violins;  
 Carrie Frey, viola; Meaghan Burke, cello

TT: 61:33

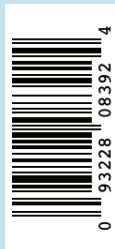


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