

Brian Cherney in Conversation with Chris Paul Harman Schulich School of Music, McGill University, 28 October 2017

Chris Paul Harman

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Article abstract

In conversation with his McGill composition colleague Chris Paul Harman,
Brian Cherney discusses his university education and his career as a composer,
from his earliest works in the 1960s up to 2017.

BRIAN CHERNEY IN CONVERSATION WITH CHRIS PAUL HARMAN

SCHULICH SCHOOL OF MUSIC, MCGILL UNIVERSITY, 28 OCTOBER 2017

CHRIS PAUL HARMAN. Good afternoon Brian.

BRIAN CHERNEY. Good afternoon. I'm wondering whether this is such a good idea ...

HARMAN. Simply surrender yourself to the experience and it will be a lot less painful that way. Brian, it is a pleasure to speak with you today in the context of the "Illuminations" symposium. In the last several weeks, I have been studying your list of works and would like to use this list to suggest specific topics as well as a general framework for our discussion today. Does that sound like a good idea?

CHERNEY. If you say so.

HARMAN. For the benefit of our audience, I will offer a brief overview of this list's contents. In a period spanning fifty-six years, from 1961 to 2017, you composed approximately one hundred works, including sixteen orchestral works, forty-five chamber works, eighteen solo works, nine vocal/choral works, six solo piano works, and one work each for organ and harpsichord. At first glance, this appears to be an extensive list. But I wonder if there may be other works not accounted for here, perhaps from your earliest years, or works from other periods that may have been withdrawn along the way?

CHERNEY. No, the list isn't complete. In fact when I went to the National Archives in Ottawa in May with Zosha [Di Castri] and Matthew [Ricketts] and Taylor [Brook], I was amazed to discover how many pieces I had written between 1961 and 1963 that I had completely forgotten about—songs, a concerto for violin and string orchestra which I did remember but had absolutely no recollection of what it was like, a piano piece—a really terrible piece called *Fantasia for Piano*, a piece for percussion ensemble that I had no recollection of at all, a piece I wrote, as I said in my talk the other day, for John Beckwith's fugue class—a fugue in some sort of twentieth-century idiom—a set of six pieces for viola and piano, another set of six pieces for piano ... there are more pieces, but I can assure you, there are good reasons why they are not in my list of works.

HARMAN. So ostensibly, this current list of works represents those works that you would wish to be heard today in performance.

CHERNEY. Most of them.

HARMAN. Your output has been remarkably consistent, with the completion of two works (often larger-scale works) per year. And it should be noted that throughout this entire period, in addition to your activity as a composer, you have been engaged in either full-time study or teaching. Am I correct in my understanding that you were still a high school student when the Violin Concerto was completed in 1961?

CHERNEY. No, the Violin Concerto was completed in 1963. It was done in between my second and third year of the BMus program. I was twenty.¹

HARMAN. OK, I should revise my list of works then. In 1964 you completed a BMus, followed by an MMus in 1967 and a PhD in 1974, all at the University of Toronto. For your doctoral degree, you were a student in musicology, not composition. If I may ask now, in hindsight: why musicology?

CHERNEY. Well, I got the BMus in a specialty called History and Literature, which was their terminology for musicology in those years, and I liked academic work. There was also a practical reason for it; I thought that the requirements were more rigorous, and I thought that a PhD in musicology might be more useful eventually for getting a teaching position. In those days—well, nothing has changed—no matter how idealistic you were, you did have one eye on practical matters, and I thought that perhaps it would be a good idea to get an academic degree. I think that in those days there were no course requirements for the DMus at the University of Toronto, you simply registered and then submitted a thesis—a composition—so it wasn't by any means rigorous.

HARMAN. Do you feel that your work in musicology has had an impact on your work as a composer?

CHERNEY. I would say basically none whatsoever, so my apologies to any musicologists here.

HARMAN. I suspect that this may not be entirely true, and I will return to this point a little later.

CHERNEY. Yes, I know Webern did a PhD in musicology and looked at the works of Isaac and probably was influenced by the canonic structures that he found there, but I can't really say there was a comparable influence on me of that discipline. But you're going to find one, aren't you?

HARMAN. I wonder if it may have more to do with methodology and practice, but again, we will come back to that a little later. In the early 1960s, the early period of your post-secondary studies, the University of Toronto's electronic music studio was the first and only studio of its kind in Canada until the opening of the electronic music studio here at McGill in 1964. Surprisingly, however, there is a conspicuous absence of electronic music in your catalogue. Was electronic music a part of your curriculum at the University of Toronto?

CHERNEY. Certainly not as an undergraduate, but as a graduate student I did take a year of electronic music with Gus Ciamaga, who was the main person who taught it in those years, and I did some work in the studio after I

¹ Harman was referring to a Concerto for Violin and Strings, which Cherney wrote at Interlochen in 1961, whereas Cherney is talking about a large-scale three-movement Violin Concerto written under the guidance of Sam Dolin in Toronto. Both works are mentioned in Cherney's article "How I Might Have Become a Composer" in this issue.

did the course. For instance, I actually did background music for a theatre production directed by one of my wife's friends in those years, a production of Brecht—*Edward II*. I did do pieces too—there are tape pieces around, one of which was done at the University of Toronto in a public concert around 1966, and it was well received. Eventually I didn't have that much interest in pursuing it, but I did do it, yes.

HARMAN. Are there ways in which electronic music may have left an imprint upon your instrumental music, either in its sound, or in its design?

CHERNEY. Probably very indirectly. When you spent a couple of hours in the studio working with sound materials that existed in those days, and then you came out into the world—in this case Queen's Park Crescent—everything you heard in the environment tended to sound like electronic music. The first time I heard a recording of a piece by Ligeti was I think in the spring of 1966. I don't know how he acquired it, but Gus Ciamaga had a recording of *Atmosphères*. We sat down in the studio and listened to that piece, and it was a staggering experience, it was just amazing. And of course the connections between that piece and electronic music are very strong. Then I went to Darmstadt in 1966 and discovered much more of Ligeti, who became an influence, as he did with many other people in those years. So there is an indirect relationship, but not a direct relationship.

HARMAN. Turning back to the realm of purely instrumental music, I suspect that many composers would be daunted by the prospect of writing for a solo instrument, that is, an unaccompanied orchestral instrument. I am therefore struck by the relatively large number of solo compositions in your list of works, eighteen in total for various instruments: five for cello; two each for violin, viola, flute, and oboe; and one each for English horn, trumpet, trombone, alto saxophone and bassoon. How did you come to write so many works in this medium?

CHERNEY. I suppose it was due to relationships with particular performers, and opportunities that arose. And of course there is a practical aspect, because if it's a single performer, you don't have to worry about getting an ensemble together. But this started very early; the earliest thing I think was a set of pieces for solo oboe, of all things, and then after that, well the piano pieces from the early 1960s. I did some solo viola pieces, which were commissioned by a group in Toronto called Contemporary Showcase, and then when I met Rivka Golani, I ended up writing the solo piece *Shekhninah* for her. The first cello solo piece was for Antonio Lysy, and then I wrote another piece for Matt Haimovitz; these were commissions. Actually, there were two pieces for Antonio; there was a big solo piece, which was commissioned by the CBC—it was done once and never again. Certain instruments I also love writing for—the cello certainly is one of my favourite instruments, so I would be glad to write for it again; it's just a wonderful instrument.

HARMAN. Given the importance of harmony in your music, did you face any special challenges when writing solo works for wind instruments?

CHERNEY. No, not really. Bob Aitken told me that he had been after Elliott Carter to write a solo flute piece for years. Carter had been writing these

multi-voiced compositions for years, some of which were very dense and many-layered. He just didn't feel comfortable writing for a solo instrument. But then finally, in 1991, he wrote a piece for Bob Aitken [*Scrivo in vento*], and then in his later years he wrote probably dozens of pieces for solo instrument. But writing for a solo instrument never fazed me; I managed to find ways of doing it that interested me. *Shekhnah*, for instance, has multiple layers in certain parts, in which you have sort of a dialogue between registers and with certain materials.

HARMAN. At different stages of your creative development, there appear clusters of works whose titles are linked by common descriptors or themes. The first such cluster of works, works variously titled or subtitled *Mobile*, dates from 1968 to 1972. I came to know about this cluster specifically through a 1974 interview that you granted to John Rea; a transcript of this interview was published in the 1974 newsletter of the Arraymusic Ensemble in Toronto ["Conversation between Brian Cherney and John Rea," *Array Newsletter* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1974): 9–19]. Since these works have not been the subject of any of this symposium's presentations, I wonder if you might comment briefly upon them now. What was their impetus? And what is their larger significance in your output?

CHERNEY. This was an early and not very fully realized attempt to write a series of interconnected pieces in which the idea of [Alexander] Calder—of the mobile—was in play. I was familiar with the mobile in art and I thought it was rather an interesting idea to apply it to music. Of course certain composers had done that—Earle Brown, for instance. The first piece I wrote, which became part of a series, was a piece for solo cello in 1968 called *Mobile II*. But this was not very successful. I don't think I really managed to find distinctive materials that would come back in other pieces. Also the important thing was that the materials were supposed to evolve and rotate in certain ways freely within a piece, as well as from one piece to another. I largely regard this whole thing as sort of a failure. But then in 1982 I wrote a piece called *In the Stillness Between* ... , and that started a series of pieces with the word *stillness* in the title. In these pieces, because I knew what I was doing a lot better by that time, I did find a way of coming up with what I call archetypes—certain kinds of music that recur from one piece to another—the ascending music, for instance. This was much more distinctive and interesting in terms of what I could do with it, because there are infinite ways of elaborating upon this basic archetype. And so that series—well, it's better music. But I should add that the piece being done tonight called *Seven Images* was in fact one of the mobile pieces, but I don't even remember which one it was. And I didn't write the mobile pieces in the order they are numbered. There is a piece written for the Stratford Festival for voice and chamber ensemble in 1969 called *Mobile IV*, but number three, which was supposed to be a big piece for oboe and chamber ensemble, I worked on for a long time and finally gave up on.

HARMAN. And *Mobile I* was, I believe, a placeholder for a potential orchestral piece.

CHERNEY. Yes, that's right.

HARMAN. Yesterday morning Zosha Di Castri explored the notion of “stillness” in your later solo piano works. However, the word *stillness* figures in the titles of no fewer than seven works for very different instrumentations composed within a ten-year period:

- *In the Stillness Between ...* (1982) for large wind ensemble and percussion
- *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn* (1983) for piano
- *Into the Distant Stillness ...* (1984) for orchestra
- *In Stillness Ascending* (1986) for viola and piano
- *In the Stillness of the Summer Wind* (1987) for oboe and string quartet
- *In the Stillness of Eden* (1992) for solo violin
- *In the Stillness of September 1942* (1992) for English horn and nine solo strings

Could you elaborate on your interpretation or understanding of the word *stillness*, and on the means by which you bring such an interpretation to bear upon these seven works? Is the notion of stillness equally applicable in a work for any instrument or combination of instruments?

CHERNEY. Well, first of all, I would say that Zosha did a much better job of explaining the meaning and significance of *stillness* than I could ever do. I don’t know what I could add to what she said yesterday. I guess it does respond to some kind of need on my part for peace and internal quiet. As she mentioned, I felt this need already as a child, for various reasons that I don’t need to go into again. Also certain pieces of music made a big impression on me from that point of view. One of the pieces I heard when I was in Europe in 1969–70 was an early piece by Helmut Lachenmann called *temA* [1968], which is an anagram of *Atem*, or “breath”; I was very impressed with it—and it’s a very quiet piece. So I developed a great affinity for quiet pieces. For example, in the outer sections of the third movement of Berg’s *Lyric Suite*, the writing is so elegant in terms of minute articulations—very, very quiet and very subtle. Also the second movement of the fourth quartet of Bartók—the same kind of quiet but busy music. In the first string quartet of Carter, the scherzo sections are made up of the same kind of music. So that also perhaps played some sort of role in the sense that I admired these pieces, but I wasn’t always trying to create the same kind of music.

HARMAN. I have been wondering, considering the topic of orchestration, how I would create a distinct impression of stillness in each of these works, with seven radically different instrumental ensembles. But it sounds like it is something that has been intrinsic to your way of making music, that you transcend the surface features to find a deeper level of stillness.

CHERNEY. I guess it’s part of my genetic makeup!

HARMAN. Interestingly, there appear two works in your catalogue, both composed within the space of a year, that borrow titles from compositions well known in the classical music canon: *Apparitions* (1991), for cello and fourteen musicians, shares its title with a 1958–59 orchestral work by Ligeti; and *Doppelgänger* (1991)—in two versions, one for solo flute, and one for two flutes—shares

its title with an 1828 Schubert lied from the song cycle *Schwanengesang*. Is this a coincidence?

CHERNEY. That's interesting. Well, as for *Apparitions*, the piece that I wrote for Lorraine [Vaillancourt, director of the Nouvel Ensemble Moderne], for cello and ensemble, the reason for the title was that there are certain musical elements that emerge during the piece almost as if they are apparitions—for instance there are some fragments of a Scarlatti sonata, among other things. And also the sound of the opening is phantom-like, with the solo cello and its colours, playing *sul ponticello* and so on. I didn't know the recording of the Ligeti piece, because it hadn't been released. I knew the score of that piece, because for some bizarre reason, before I ever came to McGill, the library had ordered eight or nine copies of the score—it's a small score—but there was no recording. But I knew about the piece.

HARMAN. I think the work was not recorded in fact until 2002 [by Jonathan Nott with the Berlin Philharmonic].

CHERNEY. Yes, that's right.

HARMAN. More obliquely perhaps, a conflated reference to two works by Satie may be found in the title of your 1979 viola and piano duo, which John Beckwith mentioned yesterday: *Trois petites pièces desséchées ... en forme de sandwich* ("three dried pieces ... in the shape of a sandwich"). What is your relation to the music of Satie, and what is your relation to the sandwich?

CHERNEY. I would say my relationship to the sandwich is a lot closer than my relationship to Satie! But of course, I know a lot of Satie's music, and my friend Alan Gillmor is a Satie specialist, so I'm certainly familiar with Alan's work. Satie is a figure I admire immensely because of his humour and the irreverence and so on. He was a bit of a rebel, so I guess I admired that. And of course I know some of the serious works—*Socrate* and others—which I admire. My "sandwich" pieces were written with a very cynical attitude. I had written a big piece called *Group Portrait—with Piano*, and the performers cancelled their first performance, so I could have had much more time to write the piece. It was eventually performed, twice. But after that, for some reason, I decided to write a piece that would have such an interesting-looking score that it would never have to be performed, and that's why I did it. I mean it was fun, too—I had a great time doing that piece—but it was a very cynical attitude behind it. And it was very successful too, because the piece has been played twice, but the score has been shown all over the place!

HARMAN. As part of the exhibition, "The Score's the Thing: Humour and the Absurd in the Music of Brian Cherney," recent visitors to the Marvin Duchow Music Library will have had the opportunity to see the pages of one of your recent scores, *Brahms and the German Spirit* [2009], enlarged and arranged like a series of tableaux along the east wall of the main floor. The score's preface, written in English, with French and Yiddish translations, describes "a 'theatre' piece for two musicians who not only play their instruments but also act out contrasting personalities, which evolve over the course of the work. This is intended to be humorous." In this note, the word *theatre* receives scare quotes,

whereas the word *humorous* does not. What does it mean to be unconditionally humorous in a work that conditionally predicates on the idea of theatre?

CHERNEY. I don't know whether I can answer that question very intelligently at this point! Well, that piece originated simply as a piece for the cellist, who was giving a recital and she wanted a theatre piece. And so when I heard this, I thought, oh well here's another opportunity, as I had already done a number of these things, and so I wrote the piece. In the piece, the central idea is that they start off trying to play Brahms, except it's my version of Brahms, it's not a quotation. And then, inexplicably, the Brahms turns into klezmer music—you know, cello and clarinet—and they both end up doing various things. And again, it's about the nature of the performer personality. The clarinetist is a very showy extrovert, the cellist is more serious and just wants to play, and they end up changing roles in a way, so there's a lot of humour already in the piece, just as a theatre piece. But then—I don't know exactly why—I started adding things to the score, which was a very dangerous thing to do. The result is that there is a whole other really very grim underlay there.

HARMAN. Is it possible that *Brahms and the German Spirit* is not very funny at all? Given your background in musicology, one might surmise, as I have, that the score—apart from its role in performance—may function as something else altogether; something akin, perhaps, to a thought experiment in cultural anthropology, a kind of theatrical research-creation project that underlines incongruities between its dramatis personae and their contrasting degrees of social privilege and prestige, rendered in a format that John Beckwith has likened to a “graphic novel.”

CHERNEY. You are absolutely right. So obviously you have proved me wrong, because it seems that I am actually some kind of ...

HARMAN. Musicologist/ethnomusicologist/composer?

CHERNEY. No, I would deny being a musicologist. I mean, most people who are musically educated know a certain amount about Brahms. The other part of it, of course, is because I have read very extensively about the Holocaust, and I am acutely aware of the relationship between it and German high culture. I won't go into details, but there are plenty to make anybody think about this relationship. So I guess I did something that is pretty naughty in a way, I made a very strong connection between the two.

HARMAN. Very naughty indeed. The last entry in your catalogue is a composition for twelve brass instruments from 2017, *A Fanfare Fit for a King*. Which king might this have been?

CHERNEY. Well fanfares are traditionally associated, sometimes, with royalty. Henry VIII probably had lots of fanfares written for him in those times. So that was maybe the association. But in fact I fear that this piece may turn into another *Brahms and the German Spirit* type of piece.

HARMAN. Did you take an Oath of Allegiance before composing it?

CHERNEY. No, no. There are actually two kings involved here, but I will leave that in abeyance ...

HARMAN. Brian, in closing, I would like to say that it has been a pleasure to research and to reflect upon your work in the last several weeks, and a privilege

to be able to speak with you about it today. I congratulate you on the success of the “Illuminations” symposium and look forward to hearing your music in concert this afternoon and this evening. [*applause*]

ABSTRACT

In conversation with his McGill composition colleague Chris Paul Harman, Brian Cherney discusses his university education and his career as a composer, from his earliest works in the 1960s up to 2017.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours d’une conversation avec Chris Paul Harman, son collègue en composition de McGill, Brian Cherney discute de sa formation universitaire et de sa carrière de compositeur, depuis ses premières pièces dans les années 1960 jusqu’à 2017.

BIOGRAPHY

Brian Cherney, the dedicatee of this collection of articles, has been a professor at McGill University for over forty-five years. His colleagues recognized his dedicated work as a teacher of composition, analysis, and Canadian music with an Outstanding Teacher Award in 2005. Cherney’s catalogue of over 100 compositions for diverse media have been commissioned, performed, and broadcast across Canada and internationally. In addition, he has written a monograph on Harry Somers (1975) and with John Beckwith co-edited a collection of essays about John Weinzwieg (2011). He remains intensely active as a professor and a composer and is at work on another book on Somers.

Chris Paul Harman is a Canadian composer whose works have been performed and broadcast in Canada and abroad. He is twice a recipient of the Jules Léger Prize for New Chamber Music, and is currently Associate Professor of Composition and Music Research Department Chair at the Schulich School of Music of McGill University, where he has taught since 2005.