

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Robin Elliott, Guest Editor

In 1987 Brian Cherney completed a composition for small string orchestra titled *Illuminations*. Thirty years later, that title was borrowed for a symposium at the Schulich School of Music at McGill University—“Illuminations: Brian Cherney at Seventy-Five,” on 27 and 28 October 2017. It was a celebration of the life and career of Cherney, who turned seventy-five on 4 September 2017. The idea originated with three composers who had studied with Cherney at McGill and then relocated to New York: Taylor Brook, Zosha Di Castri, and Matthew Ricketts. They organized the symposium together with Aiyun Huang, a percussionist and Cherney’s colleague at McGill from 2006 until her appointment to the University of Toronto in 2017. A forty-four-page booklet provides detailed information about the symposium events, the presenters, and the performers.¹ In addition, a forty-four-page book of photographs of the symposium, taken by Robert Del Tredici, is available from Blur.²

The symposium featured four lecture sessions, three concerts, and a curated display of Cherney’s scores in the Marvin Duchow Music Library titled “The Score’s the Thing: Humour and the Absurd in the Music of Brian Cherney.” The display included a highly entertaining autobiographical sketch, in addition to excerpts from four works by Cherney—*Tangents I* for solo cello (1975), *Group Portrait with Piano* for woodwind quintet (1978), *Trois pièces desséchées en forme de sandwich* for viola and piano (1979), and *Playing for Time* for oboe, percussion, and piano (1981)—as well as the complete score of *Brahms and the German Spirit* for clarinet and cello, with optional piano (2009), along with a video recording of a performance of that work (*sans piano*). Cynthia Leive opened the display with the following remarks:

Celebrating Cherney’s recent seventy-fifth birthday, the exhibit focuses on five theatrical pieces he composed over a thirty-year span. Three of the first four works (*Tangents I*, *Group Portrait with Piano*, and *Playing for Time*) were written between 1975 and 1981 and explore and expand upon several integrated and overlapping themes. Cherney examines, in various humorous and improbable ways, the influence of nineteenth-century Romantic music on late twentieth-century performers and composers who share a love for its beauty but also must bear the weight of its unshakable

¹ <https://www.mcgill.ca/cherney75/>

² <https://www.blur.ca/b/8309363-illuminations-brian-cherney>

influence. He also critiques classical music performance traditions and pokes fun at the absurd relationships between live performers and seemingly inanimate musical instruments. The “irrational” and “ghostly” appearances of nineteenth-century musical excerpts and the theatrical conjuring of the composers themselves reinforce expressions of anxiety and ambivalence. The fourth theatre piece from this period is born out of Cherney’s frustration with the lack of live and recorded performances of Canadian music. In *Trois pièces desséchées en forme de sandwich*, the second movement joins together snippets of traditional music notation with a collage of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century lithographic images thereby creating a score, according to Cherney, “so visually interesting that it doesn’t need to be played.” [Ed: A page from this movement appears on p. 24 of this issue.] Decades later, Cherney combines the fruits of these early theatrical and absurdist experiments in the 2009 piece entitled *Brahms and the German Spirit*. In this extended and complex work, he expands his examination of nineteenth-century German high-art music and culture and contrasts it with Jewish musical traditions and history, culminating in the powerful imagery of the Holocaust. [Ed: Two pages from this work appear on pp. 26 and 48 of this issue.]

The eleven compositions heard in the three concerts for the symposium range over Cherney’s entire career, with representative works drawn from each decade from the 1970s to the present. About three-quarters of Cherney’s catalogue of approximately 100 works are scored for instrumental solo or chamber configurations; the other quarter is split between orchestral and vocal/choral repertoire. All but one of the works heard in the symposium performances were purely instrumental, ranging from solo viola to a chamber orchestra of twenty-two musicians.

After the symposium, the eleven people who presented papers were invited to contribute to this issue of *Intersections*, and all agreed to do so. The symposium papers are grouped into three sections. In the first section, “Personal Views,” Cherney reflects on his own life and career, first in an autobiographical essay on his musical education and early development as a composer, and then in the transcription of an interview with Chris Harman that took place during the symposium. Also in this section, John Beckwith writes about his own long association with Cherney, whom he has known for almost sixty years, first as a student at the University of Toronto, and later as a friend and collaborator. The second section, “Overviews,” presents three summary accounts of different aspects of Cherney’s career: Elliott writes on his work as a music scholar, Di Castri on his mature piano works, and Brook on his chamber music. The third section, “Insights into Particular Works,” begins with two essays on the String Trio of 1976, which Cherney has identified as a particularly important milestone in his development as a composer. Jaeger writes about the commissioning of the trio, and Schultz analyzes the work and reflects on his (Schultz’s) composition studies with Cherney. In his study of Cherney’s String Quartet No. 4 (1994), Neidhöfer examines how the composer structures time in this piece, and how the listener experiences it. Next Adamcyk analyzes the work that provided the title for the symposium, *Illuminations* for fourteen-piece string

orchestra, interpreting it as the dramatization in music of a transformative spiritual experience. Vishio offers the only article here about a texted work by Cherney: he employs both literary and music theory to examine how the composer sets the Holocaust survivor Paul Celan's despairing poem "Tenebrae" in a choral work of the same title. In the last essay in this section, Ricketts examines the orchestral work *Transfiguration* (1990) to shed light on its numerous allusions to death and the Holocaust. The final section, "Performing Cherney," was specially created for this issue; in it, three of the performers who were heard in symposium recitals—the violist Marina Thibeault, the pianist Julia Den Boer, and the percussionist Paul Vaillancourt—reflect on their own experience of performing Cherney's music, in conversation with Aiyun Huang.

Each of these essays can be read on its own; collectively, they touch upon many aspects of Cherney's life and music, ranging from broad considerations of topoi that recur often in his oeuvre (e.g., stillness, quotation and allusion, reflections on the Holocaust, spirituality, and "ascending music" [Cherney's phrase]), to detailed explorations of compositional techniques used in specific works (e.g., symmetrical pitch, harmonic, and structural devices; the Fibonacci series; modal, chromatic, and octatonic pitch collections). The papers as a whole provide many rich insights into Cherney's life and career.

For assistance in preparing this issue of *Intersections* for publication, my sincere thanks to the twenty-four peer reviewers who provided assessments of these articles. Karen Fournier, Ariane Couture, and the entire editorial and production team of *Intersections* have been unstinting with support, encouragement, and practical help. Finally, Brian Cherney has been unfailingly cooperative and accommodating in responding to a great many requests for information and assistance from the editor and many of the contributors. It is an honour and a pleasure to dedicate this collection of papers to this outstanding musician, educator, and scholar in celebration of his seventy-fifth birthday.

A NOTE ON RECORDINGS AND SCORES

The Canadian Music Centre's Centrestreams streaming audio service offers free access to about fifty of Cherney's works (approximately half of his total output), some of them in multiple performances. Information about how to access Centrestreams is provided on the Canadian Music Centre website.³ Many scores of works by Cherney are available for loan from the Canadian Music Centre, which has branches in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Montreal. Eighteen of Cherney's scores are available in beautifully engraved editions, either as PDF files for immediate download or as hard copies for shipping, from the publisher Doberman-Yppan.⁴

A list of CD recordings featuring music by Cherney is on the Canadian Music Centre website.⁵ The following recordings are particularly notable, as they feature multiple works by Cherney in excellent performances:

³ <https://www.musiccentre.ca/node/82125>

⁴ <https://productionsdoz.com/nos-artistes/cherney-brian>

⁵ <https://www.musiccentre.ca/node/37247/recordings?page=1>

Brian Cherney: String Quartets Nos. 3–5. 2008. McGill Records MR 2008-02-2, Lloyd Carr-Harris String Quartet

Canadian Composers Portraits: Brian Cherney. 2005. Centrediscs CMCCD 10405, 2 CDs

- Disc 1:
 - *Cherney Documentary*, produced by Hele Montagna and Eitan Cornfield
- Disc 2:
 - *Like Ghosts from an Enchanter Fleeing*—Antonio Lysy, cello; Rena Sharon, piano (rec. 1994)
 - *String Quartet No. 3*—Lloyd Carr-Harris String Quartet (rec. ca. 2004)
 - *In the Stillness of September 1942*—Cary Ebli, English horn; members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra; Jukka-Pekka Saraste, conductor (rec. 1996)
 - *La Princesse lointaine*—Judy Loman, harp; Cary Ebli, English horn; Toronto Symphony Orchestra; Christopher Seaman, conductor (rec. 2002)

In Stillness Ascending. 1991. McGill Records 750036–2

- *Dans le crépuscule du souvenir*—Louis-Philippe Pelletier, piano
- *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn*—Louis-Philippe Pelletier, piano
- *Shekhinah*—Rivka Golani, viola
- *In Stillness Ascending*—Rivka Golani, viola; Louis-Philippe Pelletier, piano

Ovation, Volume 4. 2011. CBC Records CD-CMCBX 00211, Disc 3 (of 4)

- *Illuminations*—I Musici de Montréal; Yuli Turovsky, conductor (rec. 1992; orig. rel. 1993)
- Woodwind Quintet—York Winds (rec. 1982; orig. rel. on LP 1982)
- String Trio—Otto Armin, violin; Rivka Golani, viola; Peter Schenkman, cello (rec. 1978; orig. rel. on LP 1983)
- *Quelquefois, à l'ombre de la nuit ... au lointain*—James Parker, piano (rec. 1998)
- *Into the Distant Stillness*—Esprit Orchestra; Alex Pauk, conductor (rec. 1990; orig. rel. 1991)

BIOGRAPHY

Robin Elliott was appointed to the Jean A. Chalmers Chair in Canadian Music in the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto in 2002. The main focus of his scholarly work is composed Canadian music; he has produced a dozen books and editions of music (as author or editor), and 100 articles of varying length. He was the English editor of *Intersections* from 2014 to 2016.