

# Music as Refuge: Stillness in Brian Cherney's Mature Piano Works

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Résumé de l'article

« Tandis que je m'attardais dans la campagne automnale, toute la magie des forêts anciennes me revenait invinciblement. Une voix douce, persuasive berçant vers l'oubli complet [...] et les tonalités creuses de l'angélus, qui appellent les champs au sommeil. » Pour Cherney, cette citation de Debussy est une des descriptions les plus évocatrices de la tranquillité, étroitement liée à ses propres souvenirs d'enfance — une fusion parfaite d'état d'âme, de paysage et de silence presque complet. Ayant grandi en apprenant le piano, Cherney utilise l'instrument comme exutoire personnel, outil de composition et moyen d'audition des sons de son imagination. Par son étude de la musique révolutionnaire de Debussy, Cherney est parvenu à son style mûr vers la fin des années 1970. Basé sur *Dans le crépuscule du souvenir...*, *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn* et *Tombeau* comme études de cas, cet article utilise des optiques biographique, analytique et esthétique pour examiner les deux manières dont Cherney voit la tranquillité, soit un espace d'inspiration et un lieu de retraite.

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## MUSIC AS REFUGE: STILLNESS IN BRIAN CHERNEY'S MATURE PIANO WORKS

*Zosha Di Castri*

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### INTRODUCTION

Brian Cherney begins a brief and incomplete autobiographical memoir with an analysis of an image (figure 1)—a screenshot captured from a semi-deteriorated home movie—of his parents dancing at a New Year's Eve party in 1941.<sup>1</sup> Cherney discovered the image some sixty-five years later and became engrossed by this split-second glimpse into a happy, even rapturous moment in their life together (an anomaly in an otherwise difficult and emotionally hostile marriage). Though the dancing pair appears for only three or four seconds, he freezes the frame where they emerge from the blurry blackness, to study it outside of time (Ravel's *La Valse* springs to mind). By quieting and suspending the scene, he carves out, within the swirling motion of the dance, a sense of calm and refuge. He reveals a beautiful tenderness between his parents, which he rarely experienced during his childhood.

Not immediately evident from this grainy image is Cherney's own quiet presence. Working backwards, he has calculated that his mother would have been one month pregnant with him at the time this movie was taken. The still presence of his unborn self is of metaphoric significance here: the quality of being present, receptive, but near silent seems to have carried forward well into his adult life and may unconsciously have seeped into his musical aesthetic. In his memoir, Cherney speaks about keeping "a low profile" (Cherney 2016, 21) and being as inconspicuous as possible to survive school and avoid the upheaval of his parents' fights (figure 2). Perhaps his desire for stillness, both musically and in life more generally, stems from this early need for refuge, from the stress, discomfort, and noise of daily life. In this light, stillness served as a shield, a strategic place of retreat from drama.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The memoir is an unofficial work-in-progress, written primarily for his children and grandchildren during his "off-time," which Cherney generously shared with the author (Cherney 2016, 1–2).

<sup>2</sup> This survivalist attitude is evident in his autobiography, where he speaks of the trauma experienced in his family home, his struggle with bullies as one of the few Jewish boys in his school, and perhaps also relates more broadly to a post-Holocaust sense of guilt, responsibility, and apprehension



Figure 1. Sylvia and Harry Cherney dancing, 31 December 1941, Peterborough, Ontario



Figure 2. Sylvia and Harry, seemingly happy, months before they were married, 1939

To understand Cherney's relationship to the piano fully, it is important to know more about his mother, née Sylvia Green. Intelligent and highly educated, Sylvia received a BA in English from the University of Toronto at the age of nineteen and was also an accomplished pianist (figure 3). Unfortunately, she was a rather unhappy person, whom Cherney describes as being "subject to a kind of inner war all of her adult life" (Cherney 2016, 7). She lived out her fantasy of a musical path through her children, putting great pressure on them to practise and excel at piano exams. In his words, "It was not really an option

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for having been born safely in Ontario, Canada, in the early 1940s while the atrocities of World War II raged in Europe.



Figure 3. Cherney's mother at the family upright piano, ca. late 1940s



Figure 4. Brian as a teen practising in his O'Carroll Avenue home, ca. late 1950s

to not pursue" music (Cherney email communication, 29 August 2017), and "progress on the piano became the measurement of our worth, our value as children" (Cherney 2016, 23).

He thus began to study piano at the age of five, first with Sister Agnes Teresa at the Catholic Convent in Peterborough, and later with a number of other teachers until the late 1950s, when he began studying with Margaret Miller Brown at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto (figure 4). The imposed solitude of practising can be felt in some of his mature piano works, where melancholic, dark atmospheres evoke the challenging side of solitude: that of isolation and withdrawal. Two pedagogues who marked his early development were the



gentle and precise Peterborough pianist and teacher Agnes Logan Green (who interestingly also taught his mother), and later Margaret Miller Brown at the Conservatory in Toronto. After the first-year Artist Diploma exam at the Conservatory in the spring of 1962, Cherney decided that he was not cut out to be a concert pianist and turned his attention towards composing and scholarly work, much to his mother's disappointment (Cherney email communication, 29 August 2017).

Not all his boyhood recollections are negative, however. His happier memories stem from moments of quiet escape: he describes the peaceful feeling of sitting by his bedroom window listening to the sound of birds and rustling leaves (Cherney 2016, 17); climbing neighbourhood trees, sitting up in their branches; and gazing through the octagonal window on O'Carroll Ave, day-dreaming in the stillness (Cherney email communication, 8 October 2017). Cherney also remembers falling asleep to his mother practising Bach, Schumann, Grieg, Debussy, Scarlatti, Brahms, and Schubert (Cherney email communication, 29 August 2017). This music continues to resurface both directly and obliquely in his mature work. Stillness can thus also be understood in a positive light as the productive space for fantasy, peace, and creativity, intermingled with memory. We could even consider solitude as a means for reaching toward higher spiritual ground.<sup>3</sup>

It is this particular mixture of stillness as melancholic withdrawal, and stillness as peaceful escape, that imbues Cherney's piano music with such mystery, power, and intrigue. His own personal ties to the instrument lend this repertoire a special place in his output. Listening to three of his mature piano works, (1) *Dans le crépuscule du souvenir ...*, (2) *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn*, and (3) *Tombeau*, we hear both a place of refuge suspended in time, and an alternative universe built as a site of freedom and a path toward transcendence.

### **DANS LE CRÉPUSCULE DU SOUVENIR ... (1977–1980)**

During his early years as a composer, Cherney wrote many collections of short pedagogical piano pieces that were intended for young musicians. Some of these miniatures seem to have resonated with curious young ears, as is evidenced by fan letters such as the one in figure 5;<sup>4</sup> however, these works are not typical of Cherney's mature compositional style. A rather radical shift in his piano writing took place in the late 1970s–80s, marking a transformation in his approach toward the instrument. This may be attributed mainly to his detailed study of Debussy's music, as well as to his analysis of twentieth-century repertoire

<sup>3</sup> David Metzger writes, "Silence, of course, has been a long-standing site of artistic, philosophical, and spiritual rumination, but it was not until the twentieth century that it assumed such an extensive presence in artistic creation." He also argues that a return to directly expressive idioms and the notion of interiority are notable features of much post-1980s modernist music (2009, 64).

<sup>4</sup> *Elegy for a Misty Afternoon* (Cherney 1973), the short piece referred to in the letter reproduced as figure 5, (Cherney 1973) was commissioned by the Austrian-born composer and musicologist Gerhard Wuensch, who taught at the University of Toronto. Wuensch included it in a volume for young pianists for the Western Board of Music entitled *Horizons*, which he was co-editing. A recording is available on the album *Small Is Beautiful*, performed by Yoko Hirota (Cherney email correspondence, 22 May 2017; Brandhagen and Orford 2006).

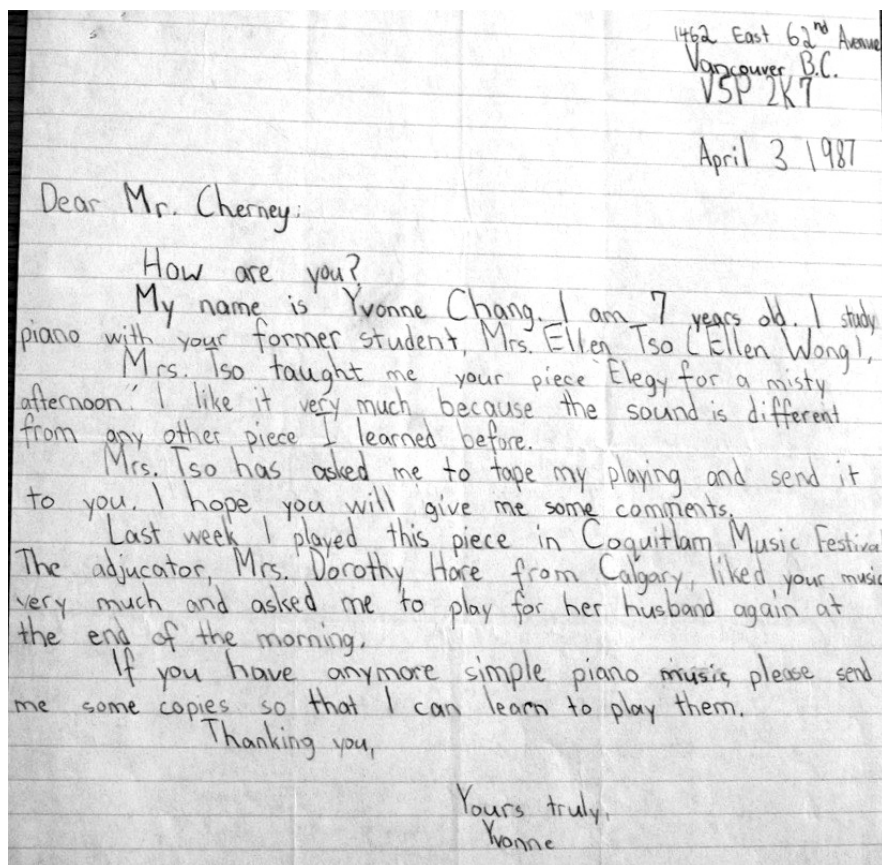


Figure 5. Letter from a young piano student about *Elegy for a Misty Afternoon*

more broadly for his teaching duties at McGill University. This mature style is characterized by: (1) a stronger control over form; (2) a careful working out of a coherent harmonic language; and (3) an attempt to build into his compositions a rich network of relationships to other music and/or extra-musical elements (Levitz 1999, 24). The move to Montreal might also explain his predilection for French culture and language (evidenced by the titles of many of his works), including his fascination with French poetry, such as the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, whom he quotes at the beginning of each of the five pieces that make up *Dans le crépuscule du souvenir* ....<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The title translates roughly as "In the twilight of memory ... (five pieces for piano)." Cherney became interested in Mallarmé after studying Boulez's *Pli selon pli* (1962), subtitled "Portrait de Mallarmé." Interestingly Boulez's piece also takes a line of Mallarmé's poetry as its starting point and constructs five movements around his texts. Cherney's title *Dans le crépuscule du souvenir* ... comes from "L'Orgue de barbarie" (The barrel organ) in Mallarmé's *Pages Oubliées. Poèmes en prose*: "L'instrument des tristes, par excellence! Le piano scintille, le violon ouvre à l'âme déchirée la lumière des alleluia, mais l'orgue de Barbarie, dans le crépuscule du souvenir, me fait désespérément rêver" (Mallarmé 1867–68, 81).

*Dans le crépuscule* is the first piano piece by Cherney that he considers to be truly successful. Written when he was thirty-five and revised considerably thereafter, this twenty-five-minute work was premiered by Tom Plaunt at Wigmore Hall in 1979.<sup>6</sup> The work comprises five pieces, but for the purpose of this article, the focus will be on the third and fourth. As the title suggests, this work is an introspective journey through the ambiguities of memory. It is as much about what we do remember, as it is about what slips through the cracks and escapes us as listeners. In the same way that photographs can come to replace memories themselves, musical fragments blur the line between music past (through the use of actual quotation) and music re-imagined (through the use of impersonation or faux-quotation). We are left uncertain as to whether we are hearing fragments of Schumann and Schubert, or whether the music merely sounds Schumann-like or Schubert-esque (note the connection again to the repertoire his mother played).

The third piece provides a visually novel example of Cherney's collage between fragments of original material, quoted found objects, and fictional replicas. It is unique in its circular graphical structure (figure 6), and pocket of fragments, which the performer must arrange in a path of his or her choosing following some basic guidelines (figure 7). Cherney specifies the piece must begin and end on the same bracketed block, but the performer may choose which of the four to begin with (labelled 1–4). The player then moves clockwise or counter-clockwise, perhaps symbolic of a kind of “time travel” implied by the watch-like face of the circular score and the references to music past. The jagged “ripped” areas must be filled with fragments marked I–V (from the pocket), and depending on whether material A or B is chosen at the top of the circle, certain fragments become restricted. A multiplicity of readings is thus encouraged, demanding that the performer becomes involved in the compositional act.<sup>7</sup> Not only does the performer need to decide *how* to piece together the puzzle, weighing the different possible connections, he or she must also decide *what* material will be left out. Here Cherney illustrates memory as not only an act of retaining, but also of productive forgetting to make way for the new and the abstract.<sup>8</sup>

Having performed this piece, I see its intermingling of past and present as a grappling with history. The modern fragments (1–4 on the circular score) are generally more abstract, making use of the low register and exploring inside the

<sup>6</sup> In a program note for a piano recital at Carleton University featuring this piece, along with works by Schubert and Ives, Plaunt wrote, “This is a program about memory. Music heard in one’s past, and colored by the passage of time” (Plaunt 1982).

<sup>7</sup> Cherney’s study of Boulez’s music, such as pieces like Piano Sonata No. 3 (1955–57), may have had an influence on this type of mobile form and performer indeterminacy. Cherney may have also been influenced by Stockhausen’s approach, with pieces like *Klavierstück XI* (1956).

<sup>8</sup> In contrast, Jorge Luis Borges’s character Ireneo Funes comes to mind, who remembers absolutely everything after a head injury from a horse accident (in the original Spanish, “Funes el memorioso,” from the collection *Ficciones*). Funes’s condition is both miraculous and unbearable in his lack of ability for abstract reasoning. Borges writes, “Funes not only remembered every leaf on every tree of every wood, but even every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it . . . I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but the details” (Borges 1962, 115).

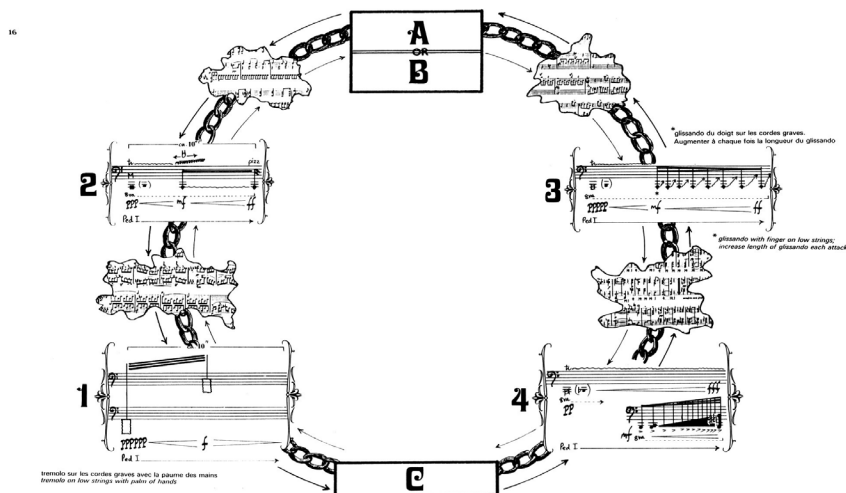


Figure 6. Circular score for the third piece of *Dans le crépuscule du souvenir* ...

Sortir de la pochette et placer à côté de la page 16 dans l'ordre voulu  
Remove from pocket and place opposite page 16 in order desired

**DIRECTIVES D'EXÉCUTION POUR LA PIÈCE N° 3:**

- faire une fois le tour du cercle, dans un sens ou dans l'autre.
- jouer d'abord un des fragments entre accolades (1, 2, 3 ou 4).
- aux miniatures dentelées, jouer un des fragments marqués I, II, III, IV ou V. Quand on choisit A en haut du cercle, ne pas jouer III. Avec B, ne pas jouer V.
- terminer en rejoignant le fragment du départ.
- d'un fragment à l'autre, le laps de temps ainsi que le jeu de pédale sont laissés à la discrétion de l'interprète.

**Performance Directions for Piece nr 3:**

- move either clockwise or counter-clockwise around the circle.
- start with one of the fragments in square brackets (1, 2, 3 or 4).
- in jagged areas, play one of the fragments marked I, II, III, IV or V. If A at the top of the circle is chosen, do not play III as well. If B is chosen, do not play V.
- end with the same square bracket fragment with which you began.
- time lapse and pedalling from one fragment to another are at the discretion of the performer.

Figure 7. Pocket containing fragments of material for piece 3 of *Dans le crépuscule*

piano by strumming, drumming, scraping, plucking, and muting the strings. The more historically referential passages, such as the “pocket” Fragments B and III, take place on the keys and tend toward a warped, semi-quotational diatonicism. In this piece there are references to Schubert’s *Impromptu* No. 1 in C minor, op. 90 in Fragment B (figure 8a), and Schumann’s “In der Nacht” from *Fantasiestücke*, op. 12 in Fragment III (figure 8b), among others. Fragment B begins with a held *pianissimo* chord, over a G in the bass. This references the ambiguous opening gesture of Schubert’s *Impromptu*, yet morphs it by changing the dynamics and fleshing out the harmony, thereby bridging the two worlds.





A triplet ostinato over a repeated G in the left hand is then introduced, and at the end of the third bar Cherney brings in the recognizable march-like theme. Rather than presenting the melody unaccompanied, as in the opening of the Schubert, Cherney harmonizes the melody immediately, similar to the style Schubert employs later in the piece. In the original, Schubert introduces the repeated Gs only midway through the impromptu, in bar 87, and later again in bar 160. The Cherney fragment can thus be seen as a dramatic distillation of Schubert's *Impromptu*, condensing the idea of the first theme, the chordal harmonization, and the repeated Gs in one short statement. He leaves the last bar of the fragment open and asks the performer to "repeat the final measure several times, ending *pppppp*," rather than closing off the harmony in a more cadential manner. The effect on the listener is one of recognition, yet also of blurry confusion, since the fragment is at once familiar yet distorted at the same time.

Fragment III plays with our memory of Schumann's "In der Nacht" in a similarly morphed way. The first four bars of the fragment follow the basic melody and bass line from the lyrical middle part of "In der Nacht," which Schumann labels *Etwas langsamer*. Cherney, however, transposes the melody up an octave, and rather than using ascending, arpeggiated accompaniment patterns, opts for a more fluttering, broken chord figure. As the metre changes in the fifth bar, the fragment gradually diverges, and we become less and less confident of whether this is in fact a Schumann quotation or freely composed material in a late Romantic style. As the fragment repeats and diminuendos to *niente*, the memory ephemerally crumbles into silence. Musical memory serves a double function here: it connects across time to composers from previous eras, serving as a point of communion; but it also carries with it a great weight. Cherney's music raises several questions: How do we give voice to something new? How can we reinvent an instrument with as much history as the piano?

The Mallarmé quotation associated with the third piece of the set is interestingly from a poem titled "Renewal." It recalls the "lukewarm twilights, that cut into the skull like a band of iron around an old tomb."<sup>9</sup> If we interpret the "lukewarm twilights" as references to music of the past, the chained graphical score ties in nicely to this poetic idea. The quotation ends: "And, sadly, after a vague and beautiful dream, I wander." In this piece, more than later ones by Cherney, there is a drifting quality at play in the form, rather than a clear directional drive or organic unfolding. The challenge for the performer is to find the stillness *between* the fragments—not to rush forward, but to enjoy the blurry process of searching and transitioning.

Like Cherney, Mallarmé longed to turn his back on harsh modern reality and seek refuge in an ideal, poetic world. He believed that this utopic alternative lay concealed in the apparent emptiness of space and that from it, infinity could be conjured (Anonymous 2018). The effect of the fourth piece in *Dans le crépuscule* is even more deconstructed and spacious, reflecting this mentality.

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9 From the original French: "Des crépuscules blancs tiédissent sous mon crane / Qu'un cercle de fer serre ainsi qu'un vieux tombeau / Et triste j'erre après un rêve vague et beau" (Mallarmé 1914, 30–1).

Here Cherney atomizes his reference system to the smallest unit of the chord. He establishes a beautifully contemplative atmosphere by placing discrete Feldmanesque chords every four or five seconds. These chords are arranged in three phrases of seven, for a total of twenty-one harmonies—a nod to Arnold Schoenberg's twenty-one pieces in *Pierrot Lunaire* (Cherney email correspondence, 8 October 2017).<sup>10</sup> In a smaller staff below the main staff, Cherney inserts a highly fragmented *pppp* version of the first five bars of Robert Schumann's "Der Dichter spricht" (The poet speaks) from the end of *Kinderszenen*, which is parsimoniously presented one chord at a time (with long pauses between), interpolated by the odd melodic echo (figures 9a and 9b). In this slow, extended fashion, Cherney makes his way through the first two and a half bars of the original source. In the last three bars he elaborates on the embellished figure from the third to fifth bar of the Schumann, which he raises up an octave and leaves hanging inconclusively. The placement and stretched nature of this last reference, in relation to the rest of the material, carries a recitative quality similar to the middle of "Der Dichter spricht." Though it is hard to know exactly what meaning this reference carries for Cherney, one might extrapolate that this quotation is a way of referring to his own personal past (the music of his youth), as well as to draw upon a tradition of composers using music to portray their innermost thoughts. Just as Schumann incorporated his own perception of himself as an independent artist into "Der Dichter spricht," so too does Cherney write himself into his work through a web of references.<sup>11</sup> While the temporal proportions in the movement create a suspended, timeless effect, their harmonic references transcend linear time through careful voice leading across composers and centuries. One may wonder, At what point do we lose the identity of an idea when removed from its original context? Can our minds connect the dots across time? And can we subconsciously acknowledge their connotations without necessarily needing to know their exact provenance from Schumann to Mahler?

The fourth piece in *Dans le crépuscule* is typical of Cherney's early conception of stillness as the space between the notes (Levitz 1999, 25). It remains between *pppp* and *p*, with the *una corda* pedal depressed throughout. Performing it demands that the pianist move *through* the stillness, listening carefully to each decay. The resulting sound world seems frozen and lonely, as if coming from another universe. Cherney makes his own compositional voice spare (keeping a "low profile," as he might say), and so we experience the melancholy of this stillness as retreat. In Mallarmé's poem "Au seul souci de voyager," he addresses "life's sole goal of sailing onwards" (Mallarmé 1914, 144–5). Like the poet, Cherney in his own artistic evolution pushes out into the musical unknown,

<sup>10</sup> There are also many other references, including nods to the high trumpet A at the end of the first movement of Mahler's Tenth Symphony, and *Feuilles Mortes* by Debussy, just to name two.

<sup>11</sup> For a more complete discussion of the significance of Schumann's "Der Dichter spricht," see Taylor 1990.



## Der Dichter spricht.

N° 13.

M.M.  $\text{♩} = 112$ .

Figure 9a. Excerpt from Schumann's "Der Dichter spricht," *Kinderszenen*, op. 15, no. 3

Mon âme vers ton front où d'her, ô calice suave,  
Et vers le ciel avant de ton œil angélique  
Monte, couvre dans un jardin enfleuré,  
Fidèle, en blanc, j'ai d'un sanglier vers l'Azur?  
Maffrelet, "Bouquet."

4

19

20

21

Directives d'exécution pour la pièce n° 4:

- $\square$  = 4" - 5". Elle devrait revenir assez régulièrement.
- dynamique: entre *ppp* et *p* (sauf indication contraire).
- les fragments écrits en petit devraient être considérés comme des insertions entre les  $\square$ .

Performance Directions for Piece n° 4:

- each  $\square$  is 4" - 5" in duration. These should occur fairly regularly.
- dynamic level: between *ppp* and *p* (unless otherwise indicated).
- fragments on smaller staves: to be treated as interpolations between  $\square$ .

\* relâcher lentement la pédale  
release pedal slowly

$\text{♩} = 54-56$

$\text{♩} = 48-50$

$\text{♩} = 60$

$\text{♩} = 60$

Figure 9b. Overview of the fourth piece in Cherney's *Dans le crépuscule*, with reference chords to the Schumann boxed

continuing to develop his dramatically new piano style, where the goal is the voyage itself rather than the arrival.<sup>12</sup>

### **IN THE STILLNESS OF THE SEVENTH AUTUMN (1983)**

*In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn* was written in the fall of 1983 for the 1984 Eckhardt-Gramatté National Competition for the Performance of Canadian Music. This piece carries forward certain ideas introduced in *Dans le crépuscule*. Here, though, Cherney deepens his conception of stillness.<sup>13</sup> Moving into the 1980s, stillness began to take on a far more profound significance for him. *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn* (the second piece in a series of seven, which began with his 1982 work *In the Stillness Between*) was inspired in part by a passage written by Debussy, which appeared in *La revue blanche* (15 November 1901): “Lingering in the autumnal countryside, all that magic of the ancient forests invincibly came back to me. A gentle, persuasive voice that lulled one into perfect oblivion rose from the falling of the golden leaves—seeming to celebrate the glorious death throes of the trees—and the hollow tones of the angelus, which tolled the fields to sleep. The sun set quite alone, for there was no peasant in the foreground to strike a lithographic pose. Man and beast went to and fro together in peace; the day’s tasks were ended” (Debussy 1977, 51).

Here stillness suggests not only a silence or space between notes (Levitz 1999, 25), but also a place of retreat from the turmoil of contemporary life. In Cherney’s own words, this piece is “an imaginary world of hushed, still landscapes, suffused with gentle, quiet sounds—winds, birds, distant bells” (Cherney 1984). This atmospheric, even mystical world became of great importance to his compositional output, from this piece forward. There are also obvious similarities between Debussy’s quotation and Cherney’s recounting of his own pastoral childhood memories. In his autobiographical sketch he writes, “My bedroom window looked out on a backyard with trees and neighboring gardens. On spring evenings, once I was put to bed, when it was still light out, I loved to sit by the open window and listen to the sound of the birds and look at the abundant leaves on the trees along the fence. Often you could hear the sound of hand-pushed lawn mowers—there were, as I recall, no gas-powered ones yet. There was such a feeling of peace in all this that I could sit there for ages, until I finally got sleepy and crept into bed” (Cherney 2016, 17).

Finally, the title itself is evocatively mysterious and open-ended, suggesting perhaps that *something* happened in the stillness of the seventh autumn (though what, we never really find out). When asked about the dedication to Vicky Frimer, Cherney explained that she was a dear friend living in Vancouver at the time, who happened to have a serious cardiac incident while he was

<sup>12</sup> Mallarmé wrote this poem to celebrate the 400th anniversary of da Gama’s voyage to India, but he also saw in the explorer’s persistence in sailing into the unknown “an image of his own unwavering pursuit of the ideal world, despite disappointments and setbacks” (Anonymous 2018).

<sup>13</sup> The word *stillness* was originally suggested to Cherney by several lines from the end of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*: “At the source of the longest river / The voice of the hidden waterfall / And the children in the apple-tree / Not known, because not looked-for / But heard, half-heard, in the stillness / Between two waves of the sea.”

writing the piece. The stroke left her severely damaged, with four young children in tow. Though the piece was already well underway when this occurred, one could possibly interpret the stillness of the title as referring to her silence, through her loss of speech.

Interestingly, the piece is framed by seven seconds of silence at the beginning and at the end. This imposed silence builds into the score a deliberate moment to prepare the performer and still the mind, much as one would in meditation. It also makes space for the first sound, a very quiet cluster in the extreme registers of the piano. Cherney then plays with silently depressing keys, so that their sympathetic resonances might be revealed in the after-halo following sharp, forte attacks, such as at bar 4 (figure 10). Like the invisible presence of the embryo in the portrait of his parents dancing, here a pregnant silence inconspicuously blooms into existence. The opening passage presents mysterious and melancholic fragments, planting motives, which are later re-taken and contextualized.

The structure of the piece is tightly controlled but gives the illusion of floating through time. It is constructed in seven sections proportioned by the Fibonacci series (figure 11). Each section becomes progressively longer, orbiting around a central, symmetrical eight-note harmony that first appears in bar 8 (figure 12a). The centre of the chord is composed of two diminished triads a minor third apart, each flanked by a perfect fourth in the outer voices. Cherney conceptualized this symmetrical chord as “resolving” only at the end of the piece in bar 131, by a transposition down a whole tone (figure 12b). This harmony can be traced back to a chord in Debussy’s piano prelude, *Feuilles mortes*<sup>14</sup> (figure 12c). There is a conscious imitation between the “final resolution” in Cherney’s piece (at bar 131), and the opening parallel descending gesture of *Feuilles mortes*.<sup>15</sup> It is as if Cherney takes this micro sigh-like moment and stretches it over the course of an entire form. Cherney’s sketches show how he builds his harmony from this basic Debussy chord, using it as an anchor throughout the piece (figure 12d).

Also embedded in this formal structure is a retrogradable registral wedge. Cherney uses a series of symmetrical chords that work their way from the outer extremes of the instrument towards a central axis on F $\sharp$  in the middle of the piece in bar 95, and then back out again. These chords chime out every minute or so, articulating the passage of time underneath the surface (figure 13).

Much of the nervous energy occurs earlier in the piece, with the fourth section containing the most prolonged and active climactic passage (bars 12–48, especially). By expending this outburst of violent energy and intense expression, the following stillness is thrown into relief and made all the more vivid.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Note that the indication “F.M. chord” in Cherney’s formal sketch (figure 11) refers to this referential harmony from *Feuilles mortes* (Debussy 1998, 58).

<sup>15</sup> Though we might not hear this as a very “final” sounding harmonic resolution, Cherney has spoken of it repeatedly in these terms.

<sup>16</sup> For a thought-provoking and detailed discussion on silence in post-1980s repertoire, such as the work of Nono and Sciarrino, rooted in the lineage of Webern, see chapter 2, “Modern Silence,” in Metzger (2009).



7

3

*mp*

*p*

*mf*

*p*

*pp*

*ppp*

3

8 - - - 1

*ppp*

7

*mp*

*m.3*

*m.3*

*m.3*

*m.3*

*p*

*mp*

*ppp* <

3

8 - - - 1

*ppp*

Figure 12a. Symmetrical eight-note harmony first appearing in bar 8 of the Cherney

131

*pp* *ppp* *ppp*

3 5 8

(32)

Figure 12b. “Resolution” by transposition of the symmetrical harmony in bar 131 and melodic fragment quotation from *Feuilles mortes*

-II.

Lent et mélancolique

*pp*

*douxement soutenu et très expressif*

*pp*

Figure 12c. The harmony Cherney references from the opening of Debussy's *Feuilles mortes* and the melodic fragment quoted



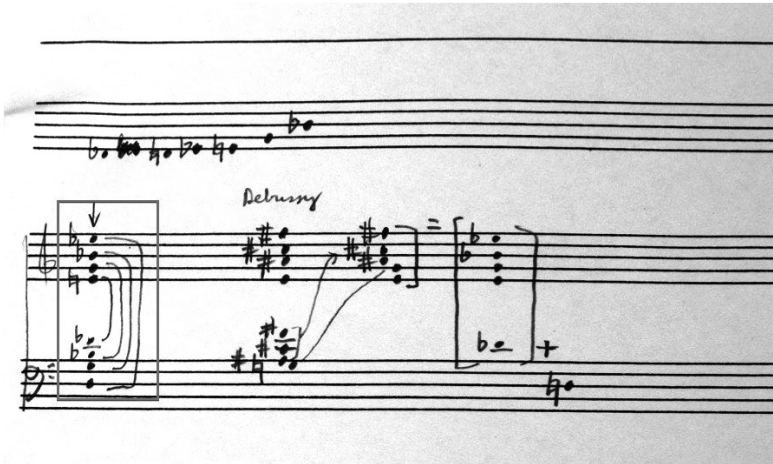


Figure 12d. Cherney's sketches showing how the Debussy reference is manipulated and reordered

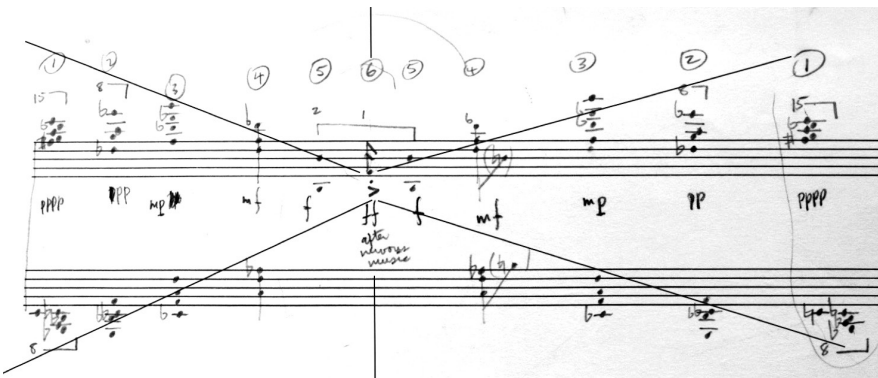


Figure 13. Sketch of retrogradable registral wedge converging to a central axis on F# before reversing course

We tune in attentively as Cherney opens the music upward and outward. The pacing slows and time is suspended. Over deep bass pedals, he unfolds harmonies that are more consonant and widely spaced, allowing them extra time to resonate and decay, starting at bar 62 (figure 14). This stretching of time transitions us towards an atmosphere of “stillness as escape”—moving towards a peaceful, contemplative state.

Cherney goes on to introduce several of his signature musical *archetypes*<sup>17</sup> towards the end of the piece (in fact, this work helped define many of these seminal techniques that show up in subsequent works). The first is a striking

<sup>17</sup> A term Cherney uses to designate musical tropes that define his personal style and return in multiple works.

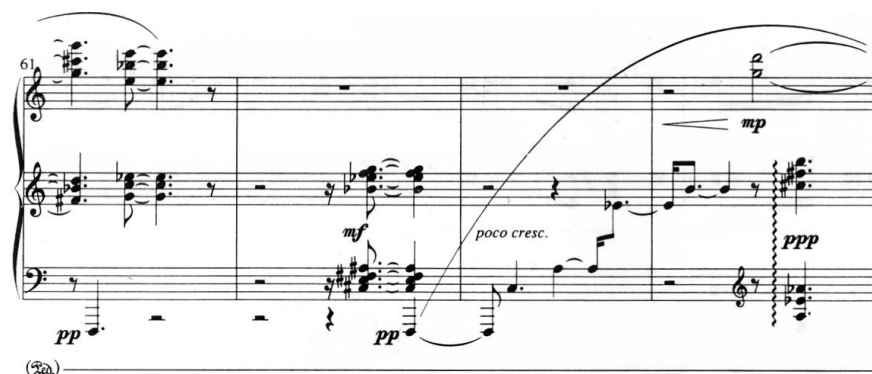


Figure 14. Unfolding upward gestures in the fifth section, bars 61–4

(1) **blurry texture** beginning at bar 96, where very soft, continuous, unmeasured arpeggios weave up and down the entire range of the keyboard, layered with floating chords, hovering above the surface (figure 15). Then, in perhaps the most haunting moment of the work, Cherney transports the listener to a near transcendent state with his (2) **ascending music**, a series of solid chords that spiral ever upward across the entire range of the piano in bars 101–8 (figure 16). Though barely audible, marked *misterioso* and “very evenly, no accentuation,” this is one of the most memorable and peaceful moments of the piece. Following the long ascent, he introduces (3) **birdcalls**, bringing us back down to earth through the imitation of natural sounds, such as in the right-hand figures beginning in bar 109 (figure 17). These have been hinted at earlier in the piece but are now presented more explicitly, strung together in longer phrases. Finally, Cherney ends with a (4) **tolling bells** texture. Juxtaposing three distinct registral and rhythmic layers that evolve and repeat at different rates, he recreates the spatial effect of distant bells. The decay of each sound is used to determine its approximate length—the lowest layer moving the slowest, the middle slightly faster, and the highest moving the quickest. The overall effect, however, is strangely one of stasis (perhaps due to the texture’s repetitive nature). Parallels can be seen again here with Debussy’s *Feuilles mortes*, where a similar three-part tolling bells texture is apparent (figures 18a and 18b).

Cherney’s *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn* carries much of the subtle elegance, restraint, and harmonic beauty of Debussy, whom he so admires. This piece exemplifies many of the characteristics of his unique pianistic style and presents both the melancholic and spiritually uplifting qualities in his use of stillness.



ca 4-5 ♩ = 100  
*molto legato*  
 96 *ppp*  
 8-----1  
*p p p*  
 8-----1  
 (U.C.)  
 U.C.

97 *ppp*  
 8-----1  
*p*  
 (U.C.)  
 (U.C.)

Figure 15. Excerpt of Cherney's *blurry texture*, bars 96–7

102 *mp mf f*  
 3"  
 ♩ = 60  
*très régulier, sans accentuation*  
*very evenly; no accentuation*  
*ppp misterioso*  
 8-----1  
 (U.C.)  
 (U.C.)

104  
 (U.C.)  
 (U.C.)

Figure 16. Excerpt of Cherney's *chordal ascending music*, bars 103–4

Figure 17. Excerpt of Cherney's birdcall material, bar 109, right hand

Figure 18a. Excerpt of Cherney's tolling bells texture, bars 116-18

Figure 18b. Similar tolling texture in Debussy's *Feuilles mortes*, bars 25-7

### **TOMBEAU (1996–1997)**

*Tombeau*,<sup>18</sup> a challenging and deeply personal seven-movement work from 1996, shows Cherney pushing the concept of stillness to its absolute and darkest end.<sup>19</sup> Here he confronts death as the final stillness. In death, we see a bridging of stillness as withdrawal from the world as we know it; and stillness as spiritual escape, the transcendence of the soul from the shell of the body. Connecting back to the seventeenth-century musical tradition of composing *tombeaux* to commemorate the death of notable individuals, Cherney pays tribute to his dear friend Dr. Martin Bass (1942–96). Cherney met Bass (one of the only other Jewish kids at his school) in Grade 7, and they instantly became lifelong friends. The two shared many activities, from Hebrew class to Key Club to Boy Scouts, and later in life, their families and children spent time together. Bass was an internationally recognized leader in family medicine research and was from all accounts a brilliant, warm, optimistic, and devoted man. We might imagine that Martin's premature death confronted Cherney with his own mortality, having been born the same year and having grown up in similar circles. He wrote that losing his friend was like losing a part of himself (Cherney 1997).

What first strikes the ear when listening to *Tombeau* is the explosive, forceful quality of the opening of movement I—"Prologue," as well as the two wildly virtuosic scherzo movements (movement II—"Scherzo I," and movement VI—"Scherzo II"), which are registral mirror-opposites of one another. The beginning gesture of the piece presents a tolling bell texture (figure 19), but rather than the distant, atmospheric bells of *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn*,



Figure 19. Clangorous, dense tolling bells texture in bar 1 of the "Prologue" of *Tombeau*

<sup>18</sup> Performed by Julia Den Boer as part of the "Illuminations: Brian Cherney at 75" Concert No. 3, on Saturday, 28 October 2017.

<sup>19</sup> The movements are: I. Prologue; II. Scherzo I; III. Interlude I; IV. Portrait; V. Interlude II; VI. Scherzo II; VII. Epilogue.

it is as if we are in the bell tower, deafened by the forceful clanging. Cherney voices the anguish of deep loss in this way, severed by startling moments of silence such as at the end of the first page, where the pianist silently depresses low C sharps in the bass, while hammering out a *fff* C# in the middle register. A bleak lyricism gradually emerges out of the stillness, with continuing echoes of the once overwhelming bell texture—still dissonant, yet less aggressive than in the opening strains. The scherzos present roiling, rumbling, *motto perpetuo* textures. Though the piece is not programmatic, these movements could be interpreted as a desperate desire for life, injecting as much density of motion as possible into the piano, as if to deny the finality of death's devastating stillness.

*Tombeau* stands as a remarkable testament to Cherney's ability to manage large-scale musical architecture, through careful proportioning, planning, and symmetrical relationships between movements. Early sketches in his notebooks illustrate the kinds of control he was exerting on formal proportions, register, and tension, though the timings of the movements did change over the course of the compositional and performance process (figures 20a and 20b). Throughout the piece, Cherney uses several methods to invoke the memory of his friend: from inscribing a music cryptogram into the texture by assigning the letters of Bass's name to pitches<sup>20</sup> (figures 21a and 21b), to persistently returning to the tonal centre of C# (a pitch he associates with pain, suffering, and grief). The dust eventually settles towards the centre of the work. The cornerstone that holds together the arc of the piece is the lyrical fourth movement, entitled "Portrait" (flanked symmetrically by "Interlude I" and "Interlude II").

Interlude I exists in a hushed dynamic range between *pppp* and *mp*, and at a slower tempo than the previous movements. A haunting melody emerges in bar 8 in the upper register, reminiscent of a crystalline lullaby, ringing out over a falling inner line of descending triads. In "Portrait," blooming from a florid C# trill, a more comforting lyricism and harmonic language give way, yet these remain veiled by indications like "*un peu dehors*" or "*quasi lontano*." The omnipresence of the C# grounds this movement, pointing to an undeniable inner angst, yet it also contributes to a sense of stasis verging on acquiescence. Starting in bar 18, Cherney weaves away from the C# via the chordal *descending music* motive (hinted at in "Interlude I"), which hauntingly returns at the very end of the piece in the "Epilogue" movement as well.<sup>21</sup> It winds its way ever downward, very evenly, getting softer and softer, recalling familiar descending death motives, such as Purcell's aria "Dido's Lament." The commotion that surrounds the "Prologue" and the two scherzos expertly prepares "Portrait" as the centrepiece, so that its progression toward stillness is even more powerful and devastating.

<sup>20</sup> Like Johann Sebastian Bach does with his well-known B-A-C-H motif (B<sup>b</sup>, A, C, B<sup>b</sup>). Here, Cherney uses the nickname "Mart" converting M to the pitch "E" (as in *Mi* in solfège), A = "A," R = "D" (as in *Ré*), T = "B" (as in *Ti*), and for the last name "Bass" he follows the traditional Germanic nomenclature of translating letters to note names (B = B<sup>b</sup>, A = A, and S = E<sup>b</sup>).

<sup>21</sup> This can be seen as a reversal of his *ascending music* archetype; however, the connotations of such a directional flip are obviously dramatically quite different.





## Dr. Martin Bass 1942–1996

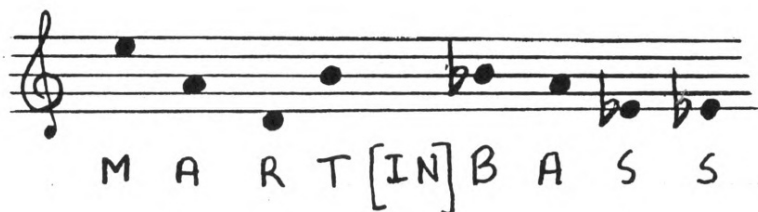


Figure 21a. Martin Bass theme

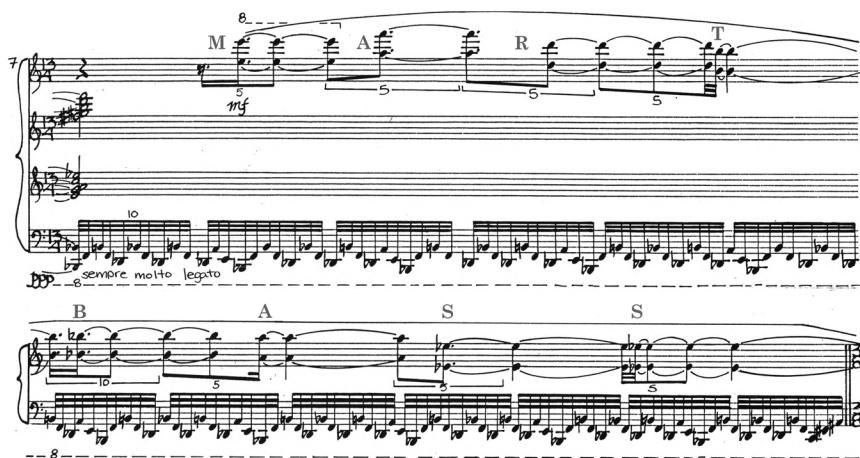


Figure 21b. Example where it appears in bar 7, mvt. II

The fifth movement, “Interlude II,” presents additional funereal motives, such as the repeated low chords at the beginning of the movement that stop and start with long rests, like a ritual death knell ringing out ominously (figure 22a). Fragments of previous movements appear and disappear in more abrupt juxtapositions. Furthermore, Cherney makes reference to an earlier work of his, *Three Songs to Texts by Paul Celan*, for soprano and piano (1996–2007). There is a secret note to the pianist in *Tombeau* in this interlude where words from Celan’s “Vom Blau, das noch” (Celan 1952) are written above a melody beginning in bar 6 (figures 22a and 22b). These are not meant to be sung or spoken, but rather channelled internally through the performance. Like the poetic fragments by Friedrich Hölderlin present in Luigi Nono’s string quartet *Fragmente-Stille, An Diotima* (1980), Celan’s text serves as a silent song, voiced

Interlude 2 V

Figure 22a shows the opening of the fifth movement, "Interlude 2," with death-knell chords and Celan textual quote. The score is in 4/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 54. It features a piano accompaniment with dense, rhythmic chords and a vocal line. The piano part includes markings for "Ped I" and "Ped II". The vocal line includes a German textual quote: "Aus deiner Fuß-spur trink ich und ich seh". The score is divided into measures 4 and 6.

Figure 22a. Opening of the fifth movement, "Interlude 2," with death-knell chords and Celan textual quote

Figure 22b shows an excerpt from the first of Cherney's *Three Songs to Texts by Paul Celan*, from which an adapted version of the melody is borrowed in *Tombeau*. The score is in 4/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with dense, rhythmic chords and a vocal line. The piano part includes markings for "Ped I". The vocal line includes German lyrics: "sucht trink ich als ers ter Aus dei-ner Fuß- spur trink ich und ich seh Du rollst mir durch die Fin-ger". The score is divided into measures 5 and 6.

Figure 22b. Excerpt from the first of Cherney's *Three Songs to Texts by Paul Celan*, from which an adapted version of the melody is borrowed in *Tombeau*



inwardly to inflect the music with deep meaning. The passage refers to the part of Celan's poem that reads:

I drink from your footprint and see:  
 You roll through my fingers, pearl, and you grow!  
 You grow, as do all the forgotten.  
 You roll: the black hailstone of sadness  
 is caught by a kerchief turned white with waving goodbye.<sup>22</sup>

Cherney's use of "mute" song offers refuge and represents an attempt to cross over the border to the other side of stillness.<sup>23</sup> The descending chordal motive returns, though haltingly, and the second interlude ends with the eerie yet familiar sound of a clock tolling, marking the passage of time (note the *non rit.* indication, which can be interpreted both musically and metaphorically).

After a second whirling scherzo, played very softly and quickly, the end of the work is moving and dark. Martin Bass's birth and death dates are cleverly transcribed into the rhythmic durations of the first bar of the "Epilogue" (movement VII), like an engraving on a tombstone (figure 23). The upper two staves, which chime out in homorhythm, use thirty-second notes as the base value to express the dates "1942" in the first bar, and "1996" in the second bar.<sup>24</sup> The spacing of the musical gestures is more spread out, allowing the listener to focus on the piano's resonance. The persistent C# trill returns in bar 11, signaling the transition toward the coda. In an opposite gesture to that of the ethereal upward spiral of *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn*, the descent into the depths of the piano's register concludes the "Epilogue" with a chilling sense of finality. Cherney's sequence of chords wraps seamlessly back onto itself, over and over, creating an infinite climb down into the tomb (figure 24). The pianist Marc Couroux (who commissioned and premiered the work with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts) noted that the descending sequence totals fifty-four chords, Bass's exact age when he died. This was apparently a total coincidence but registered as a noteworthy and sombre accident. The piece ends with low, ominous, *ppp* chords, similar to the opening of "Interlude 2," but more sustained and extended, like the chiming of an old grandfather clock.

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<sup>22</sup> Translated from German by Michael Hamburger (Celan 1988, 64). The original German reads:

*Aus deiner Fußspur trink ich und ich seh:  
 du rollst mir durch die Finger, Perle, und du wächst!  
 Du wächst wie alle, die vergessen sind.  
 Du rollst: das schwarze Hagelkorn der Schwermut  
 fällt in ein Tuch, ganz weiß vom Abschiedwinken.*

<sup>23</sup> See Metzger (2009, 84–91) for a deeper investigation of this topic.

<sup>24</sup> (1 = one thirty-second note, 9 = a held duration of nine thirty-second notes; 4 = an eighth note, which equals a held duration of four thirty-second notes, etc.)

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Epilogue" (Movement VII). The tempo is marked as  $\text{♩} = 48$ . The score is written for piano (p) and includes a trumpet (trp) part. The music is divided into two systems, each with a left hand (LH) and right hand (RH) part. The first system is marked with a "Ped I" (Pedal I) instruction. The second system is marked with a "Ped I" instruction and a "L.H. trp" instruction. The music features a descending motive in the right hand, which is transcribed with numbers 1, 4, 9, 16, 25, and 36, representing the birth and death dates of Bass. The tempo is marked as "molto legato" and "dolce".

Figure 23. Rhythmic transcription of Bass's birth and death dates at the beginning of movement VII, "Epilogue" (calculated by number of thirty-second notes)

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled "Epilogue". The score is written for piano (p) and includes a trumpet (trp) part. The music is divided into four systems, each with a left hand (LH) and right hand (RH) part. The first system is marked with a "Ped I" (Pedal I) instruction. The second system is marked with a "Ped I" instruction. The third system is marked with a "Ped I" instruction. The fourth system is marked with a "Ped I" instruction. The music features a descending motive in the right hand, which is transcribed with numbers 1, 4, 9, 16, 25, and 36, representing the birth and death dates of Bass. The tempo is marked as "molto legato" and "dolce".

Figure 24. Descending motive from the last page of "Epilogue"

## CONCLUSION

In the Centredics documentary portrait of Brian Cherney, Joel Wapnick, a music professor at McGill University, remarked, “The idea of using stillness as a concept in music is really a fascinating one, since music is never still. And it’s really a way of looking at music which not too many composers have followed . . . . Stillness encompasses two concepts that are almost opposite, one being peace and the other being death” (Cornfield and Montagna 2005, Zibens transcription p. 5). I would argue that it is precisely this tension that animates *Tombeau* and other works by Brian Cherney. Cherney has managed to unite these two aspects, (1) stillness as escape, and (2) stillness as withdrawal, and it is through this marriage of considering peace and death that he nears a truly transcendent state.<sup>25</sup>

I would like to end by returning to the metaphor between music and photography. Roland Barthes writes, “If photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death . . . . It’s true that a photograph is a witness, but a witness of something that is no more . . . [a record] of *what has been*” (2010, xi, xvii). Cherney’s piano music constantly balances between recovering music from the past and renewing music through innovation. These three pieces stand not as still lifes, but as suspended glimpses into a moving and constantly transforming reality. Cherney challenges us to slow down and truly listen to the beauty and stillness that surrounds us, if only we choose to tune in and take refuge.

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<sup>25</sup> Metzger writes, “The state of silence, as Beckett has told us, appears to be always beyond reach, a mysterious realm. All we can ever experience are qualities of it. Yet aspects of expression . . . can bring us close to this mystery” (2009, 103).

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## ABSTRACT

*"Lingering in the autumnal countryside, all that magic of the ancient forests invincibly came back to me. A gentle, persuasive voice that lulled one into perfect oblivion ... and the hollow tones of the angelus, which tolled the fields to sleep."* For Cherney, this Debussy quotation is one of the most evocative descriptions of stillness and closely tied to his own childhood memories—a perfect fusion of mood, landscape, and near silence. Having grown up studying piano, Cherney uses the instrument as a personal outlet, a compositional tool, and a means for auditioning the sounds of his imagination. Through the study of Debussy's revolutionary music, Cherney came to his mature style in the late 1970s. Using *Dans le crépuscule du souvenir ...*, *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn*, and *Tombeau* as case studies, this article uses biographical, analytical, and aesthetic perspectives to examine Cherney's dual approach to stillness: as a space for inspiration and one for withdrawal.

## RÉSUMÉ

*«Tandis que je m'attardais dans la campagne automnale, toute la magie des forêts anciennes me revenait invinciblement. Une voix douce, persuasive berçant vers l'oubli complet [ ... ] et les tonalités creuses de l'angélus, qui appellent les champs au sommeil.»* Pour Cherney, cette citation de Debussy est une des descriptions les plus évocatrices de la tranquillité, étroitement liée à ses propres souvenirs d'enfance — une fusion parfaite d'état d'âme, de paysage et de silence presque complet. Ayant grandi en apprenant le piano, Cherney utilise l'instrument comme exutoire personnel, outil de composition et moyen d'audition des sons de son imagination. Par son étude de la musique révolutionnaire de Debussy, Cherney est parvenu à son style mûr vers la fin des années 1970. Basé sur *Dans le crépuscule du souvenir ...*, *In the Stillness of the Seventh Autumn* et *Tombeau* comme études de cas, cet article utilise des optiques biographique, analytique et esthétique pour examiner les deux manières dont Cherney voit la tranquillité, soit un espace d'inspiration et un lieu de retraite.

## BIOGRAPHY

Zosha Di Castri is a Canadian composer living in New York. Her work extends beyond purely concert music to include projects with electronics, sound arts, video, and dance. She has worked with ensembles such as the San Francisco Symphony, the National Arts Centre Orchestra, the L.A. Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, ICE, JACK Quartet, the NEM, and Talea Ensemble, among others. She is the Francis Goelet Assistant Professor of Music at Columbia University and a fellow at the Institute for Ideas and Imagination in Paris (2018–19).