

AND WE, EACH

an opera in two acts

by Michael Hersch

after poetry of Shane McCrae

Sunday, October 13, 2024

4:30 PM

**Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg Center
555 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, D.C.**



JOHNS HOPKINS

PEABODY INSTITUTE

MIND ON FIRE AND PEABODY CONSERVATORY

present

AND WE, EACH

an opera in two acts

by Michael Hersch

after poetry of Shane McCrae

Michael Hersch, music

Shane McCrae, poetry

James Matthew Daniel, director

Tito Muñoz, conductor

Ah Young Hong, soprano

Jesse Blumberg, baritone

Emi Ferguson, flute

Andy Hudson, bass clarinet

Adda Kridler, violin

Leah Asher, viola

Coleman Itzkoff, cello

Kevin Tuttle, set design

John McAfee, lighting design

David Adam Moore, projection design

Jason Charney, tech director

Video

Tyler Davis, director of photography

Seth Herzog, assistant director of photography

Christopher Libbey, grip

Act I Dancers

The Ensemble Dance:

LaTeisha Melvin, choreographer

Addison Harvey, Asia Mitchell, Dakota Kaplan,
Rain Craven, and Shaun Brady

Act II Dancers

Orlando M. Johnson, Stephanie Alexandra Wallace,
Talbolt Johnson, Mopéomo Adesola, and
Ariel Cavalcante Foster

ACT I

Overture

I – XVII

— INTERMISSION —

ACT II

XVIII – XXX

TO GAZE, UNFLINCHING: THE MORTAL IMPERATIVES OF MICHAEL HERSCH'S AND WE, EACH

"Hersch ... is the explorer of an unconditional, radical expressivity that reveals the human abyss without any palliation. In music. In a new, crystal-clear beauty."

— composer Georg Friedrich Haas

I grew up in Texas and, in the summers, would sometimes visit the Guadalupe river in the state's central Hill Country. The stretch of river we would visit flattened out to a wide expanse, resulting in the water's depth being reduced to only a few inches. It was clear, and warmed quickly in the Texas sun. Not far downstream, the river narrowed and dipped into an uneven, rocky area. With its gradual but unrelenting force, the Guadalupe had carved into its rock bed a collection of miniature pools and natural slides. These pools which pock-marked the river each had their own individual but interrelated ecosystems, minnows and algae occupying their own physical and ecological niches. One could move laterally from pool to pool, exploring the similarities and differences in each. When one was ready (or lost balance moving between pools), the eroded slips of rock that formed the natural slides would send one jetting through the rapids, sometimes bumpily and bruised, and out into a narrower, deeper stretch of river, which seemed all the more cool for the warmth one had previously experienced. I never explored much further upstream or downstream than that, but the river implacably stretched in either direction nonetheless.

The sensations I still recall are the varying ways in which I was immersed in the water. The warm trickle over my feet while balancing in the shallows. Ducking, fully-submerged, into the spa-like pools to follow with my fingers the myriad crevices, populated by small colonies of green growth. Inevitably, swimmers would congregate near the narrowest part of the river to form a dam with their bodies: pressed close together, the water rose behind them, until it would break through, carrying us downstream in a miniaturized deluge. Sometimes children would attempt to reverse the process, climbing up the inclined stone, but rarely succeeding, instead swept back to the deeper parts of the river.

These memories of the Guadalupe resemble the frame of mind I enter when interacting with the music of Michael Hersch. Expansive and unstoppable, Hersch's work moves (sometimes with astonishing swiftness) between stillness and violence, navigating a spectrum of colors from dense, glistening clusters to resonant and open intervals, flowing implacably onwards. Listening actively, we prepare ourselves to enter these unwavering currents.

Vividly, I recall my first immersion in Michael Hersch's music in 2007. Sitting as a graduate student in a weekly composer's seminar, the sixth movement of *The Vanishing Pavilions* — Hersch's piano cycle from 2005 — washed me away. I relished exploring the interwoven environments created by the complex of movements,

the dramatic variance of texture and tempo like the heat and cold of the Guadalupe. Listening to movements of the Octet and Symphony No. 2 (both from 2001), the dam of artifice which I had felt trapped by in my own compositional process crumbled. To hear a composer speak plainly about trusting the inner well of one's emotions and musical instinct — that these were not only valid but a vital part of one's craft and which could yield scores brimming with precision and intentionality — was mind-altering for a young composer taking the first steps toward finding their musical voice.

In writing previously about Hersch's first opera, *On the Threshold of Winter*, I noted the power created by the clarity of these ideas, which seemed:

organic, yet crystallized, growing things whose bounds have seemingly been foretold. It is as if the music exists in a landscape, the details of which I am blind to; but the progression of movements, of motives, guides me through, introducing me to paths and objects that are beyond what I could alone imagine, and can, perhaps only touch — aurally — and not fully comprehend.... Yet, each movement, each passing idea, cyclical though driving forward, peels back one layer, and another, revealing unsought interiors — unsought, perhaps, because they mirror ourselves too closely.

This clarity and drive to uncompromisingly observe the human experience is on full display in *and we, each*, Hersch's fourth opera. The approach to narrative structure differs from his previous operatic works (*On the Threshold of Winter*, *Medea*, and *Poppaea*), whose arcs more traditionally define a dramatic outline. However, in *and we, each*, as in the previous three operas, the through-line of Hersch's purposefulness (and intensity) burns keenly for us to follow. He notes that:

... The work that I am attracted to, does not shy away from, nor attempt to escape this world, as difficult and as ferocious as it can be. There seems little interest in constructing opacity.

The words of *and we, each*, are by the American poet Shane McCrae. McCrae contributed new words for *and we, each*, specifically the more intimate passages. The remainder of the libretto was curated by Hersch from various works in McCrae's oeuvre (with the poet's blessing), specifically his books *Cain Named the Animal*, *The Many Hundreds of the Scent*, and *The Gilded Auction Block*. Passages of words are carefully transplanted to abut against others, emphasizing shared color, resonance, and meaning, an emergent narrative drawing us inexorably onwards.

Hersch and McCrae have known each other for over a decade. Their friendship began when McCrae wrote to Hersch, unbidden, regarding the poet's deep connection with the composer's music.

I've been thinking for a few days now about what I might say in a letter to you, but so far everything that has occurred to me has been ... probably useless. Still, I feel I must write, and as best as I can try to tell you how much I love your music.

Over the following years, Hersch read increasing amounts of McCrae's poetry, and, in 2022, wrote to McCrae:

I find myself unexpectedly embarking on a project with no clear external life, but one that I have become singularly and inexorably excited about. The project has had an increasing presence in my mind's ear and, little by little, an increasing existence on paper.... The framing of the work is unlike anything I have set about writing before in the sense that I am rethinking my approaches to "theater" work in the context of the other stage works I have written, and as I have understood the premise. In this case music that, simply put, has an essential visual component in performance ... I'm currently interested in finding a way to craft a work which calls for a deep and particular intensity both sonically and, especially, physically between the singers on stage, where the narrative aspects become much broader and (potentially) far more elusive, in this case an exploration of love through the often crystalline and deeply troubled imagery that threads through so much of your work. I am compelled to again quote my friend the sculptor Christopher Cairns... [who] attempts to convey 'love ... the love of humankind, even in its catastrophic relationship to where it is going.'

Having embarked on this project together, the artists' mutual respect and admiration for each other is clear. Of Hersch's music, McCrae writes:

I realized I had discovered something special. There was both tumultuous darkness and great intelligence in the music, and these appealed tremendously to my sensibilities... This completion of Hersch's project would be the fulfillment of one of the few long-held hopes I've had for my work ... I can't think of another composer so suited to expressing with music what I've tried to say with words.

Hersch was especially drawn to McCrae's ability to speak "at once so unsparingly and accurately about our public and private spaces." Hersch notes that a "particular power of McCrae's imagery is the depth and uncanniness of its broad and individual applications," that, like much of the most effective poetry, it generously "provides provocative and often explosive meaning to a given reader, and not what these words might otherwise represent."

To directly engage with such images— ranging from intimate touch, to metaphysical struggle, to the implied defilement of Aeneas' corpse — rather than to reach for metaphor may at first seem a difficult notion to reconcile. The challenge of such direct engagement is core to the opera's experience, however: "There is often a structural sense of confrontation in McCrae's writing," says Hersch, "a sensation of pressure upon the chest from the very first." We are being asked (or challenged, or encouraged) to go, according to Hersch, "headlong into the world as it is," into an opera that he describes as "an exploration of the treacherous territories of relationships — between individuals, within societies and, ultimately, the collapse of both."

This immediate pressure is reflected in the music: the first sounds we hear move between bitter and bare string harmonies, chord progressions which will recur throughout the opera. These press upon our consciousness, as do the lengthened notes in the winds (marked "beam-like" in the score), often a quarter-tone off from the surrounding ensemble. One feels the music strain against itself, eventually detonating with lines tearing through the musical texture. Pressure, force, explosion, release, all cycling, until — Persons 1 and 2 emerge.

There is...a recurring engagement with varying forms of violence in my work, violences at the core, or at least at the origin points of the musical exploration.

(M.H.)

Person 1 and Person 2 are primary entry points through which we may experience the opera. Their titles — despite emphasizing their personhood — depersonalize the characters such that we may map ourselves on to them. Throughout, I feel as though I am looking over their shoulders, hearing of their inner lives (which echo into my inner life as well) as they navigate their irreconcilable relationships with each other, with the violence and beauty of the world, and the temporality of it. This may be approached as a love story, but one that forces us to look unflinchingly at the trajectory of love within the frame of mortality.

It is important to note that — similar to *On the Threshold of Winter* being composed in the shadow of Hersch's cancer diagnosis and treatment — and we, each was composed in the wake of a cardiac arrest suffered by the composer, an experience which Hersch recently explored in an article, *The Harrowing and the Beautiful*, written for *Nautilus* magazine. Through Persons 1 and 2 — and via the stark musical environment through which they come to life — we can perceive facets of ourselves, our lives, and our relationships, and the impact which entropic and often violent forces have upon such cherished objects.

For the majority of the opera, when the two characters sing in the same scene, they sing different (and often interrelated) text. Rarely do Persons 1 and 2 sing the exact same words at the same time. In most scenes, words jostle as their meanings intersect and collide to inform and deform each other. In this I am reminded of the practice of early motet composers, who would layer several texts so that each acted independently while also informing the others, creating a new meaning when considered together.

In constructing the libretto, Hersch utilizes a variety of rhetorical approaches. Consider scene XXI, in which the baritone first intones a crucial line, “Where I meet you, we are here;” the text eventually migrates to the soprano at the end of the scene. Though this gives a sense that the two are unified, the distance in utterance emphasizes the characters’ irreconcilability. Or, we might hear the text of the two voices resonating with each other, as in scene IV: “A mouth gaping forever and a sacrificial altar” paired with “but who does not praise the mouth to whom the body comes.” Or, antithesis, as in Scene I, wherein Person 1 describes turning their head as far as possible to make contact, while Person 2 keeps their head still.

... the idea of simplicity has nothing to do with an absence of complexity; it is about fidelity to one’s ideas, specifically what the artwork at hand requires, unto itself. This ultimately becomes something which relies on an instinct: an intuitive signal that the “reality” of the piece has been identified and engaged with.

(M.H.)

One key element which helps me approach Hersch’s music is noting that, towards the end of a work, there is often a structural moment I describe as a musical nadir that seems to cast shadows within its own darkness, revealing in such strange relief the trajectory we have travelled, and the remaining distance yet to come. In *The Vanishing Pavilions*, this is movement XLVII, “The note pad and over it the candle glass;” in *On the Threshold of Winter*, it is scene XXVIII, “The light in the eyes has dimmed.” In these moments, it is as if I have swum out beyond the familiar waters and can no longer see the seabed beneath my feet. The earth has dropped out beneath the waves, leaving only implied depths that redefine my relationship with the shore, the ground, the vastness below me.

Two significant moments in *and we, each* stand out to me as having these qualities. In scene XXIV, we hear the overture’s opening harmonic texture, but upon this is built a soprano aria, one which seems the most outwardly lyrical material in the work. Harmonies plainly outline a minor key. The music builds to triadic statements emphasizing “At last / Death was the god at the end of the world.” The movement ends with a chord built on an open perfect fifth, a shimmering, biting minor second seeping out from resonance. Though Hersch’s music has often been noted for its use of clusters, I have always found this particular type of chord to be an integral harmonic element in his compositions: Behind the veil of density, Hersch frequently reveals clean, cool fifths, tonal progressions that accrue semitones as metals accrue oxidation, new colors clinging to underlying forms.

Such a framework is most clearly revealed in scene XXVIII. Primarily instrumental, active lines eventually give way to harmonic focal points mid-way through the scene. Tones peel away until a clear, tonal progression is exposed. Finally, at this moment, the voices of Person 1 and Person 2 utter, in rare unison: “I heard the world ... of screams / and still I dreamed.”

As mentioned, the two characters do not always share such synchronicity of thought or rhythm. Though Person 2 does have their share of intimate language, it is primarily Person 1 who broaches connection. These attempts seem cursed to failure; consider again Scene I and the two Persons seemingly looking different ways (though the two characters do share a closing desire: “I want it fast and endless and to end”).

The characters’ linguistic focus — especially in their solo scenes — is notably differentiated. Person 1’s solos tend to be more ruminative, including responses to death, loss, and memory, but particularly focused on the nature of the relationship between the two characters. In Scene X, Person 1 describes “The tower we have often built together, You from imagination, I from memory.” Their shared reality (to whatever extent it is, indeed, shared) is built fundamentally from different aspects, Person 1’s internalized focus and Person 2’s externalized obsessions abutting each other while resisting a true sense of lasting connection. Particularly due to the mention of Aeneas in Scene XV (here, a corpse, and not an apotheosized progenitor of empire), my mind lights upon the underworld’s Gates of Horn and Ivory described in the Aeneid: through one passes illusory dreams, while through the other passes true prophecy. Which is backward-looking memory and which is forward-seeking imagination?

Person 2's soliloquies, meanwhile, focus on the violences themselves. Consider the gruesome battle sequence of XX, or the simple, sickening "popping" of buildings in Scene XII. In Scene VII, Person 2 relates the sound created by a train running over a body, and, in response, choosing to turn towards the screaming that followed: anguished sounds that naturally would draw one's attention. But it is an act that belies a compassionate sense as well: to turn away from the tragedy of what has happened means turning towards those that are suffering, to choose to enter into their world. Throughout *and we, each*, Hersch and McCrae beckon to us, urging an active contention with human tragedy, not out of grisly fascination (though we may indeed find ourselves responding this way), but out of love, Cairns' "love of humankind, even in its catastrophic relationship to where it is going."

The sound of death which McCrae describes in VII is "Like a piece of piece of paper tearing." My imagination is drawn to the fragile lives invoked in the opera and their relationship to paper as object and image. I focus on Person 1 and 2's opening line (another rare moment sung

in unison): "I write to you to make a wound write back." I imagine parchment, ink, and blood; and I track this image to its eventual disintegration by scene XXX, the end of the work: "Like paper burned loose from the kindling and flying from the fire." The intertwined lives and relationships we have witnessed succumb to finality, "world in world... chaos flung on bone."

I think now about the stretch of the Guadalupe that I did not explore, beyond the churn of rapids, the pools of minnows, the sun-warmed shallows. I remember my stomach clenching that I could not see my feet in the deeper water, did not know what was underneath me. Here, my mind's eye straining to follow the river's bend around the Texas hills, I am alone. The dam-makers and rock-climbers are now behind me and out of sight. Their revelry fades. The cold pricks my skin. The water moves on.

— *Douglas Buchanan*

Douglas Buchanan is a composer, conductor, performer, and educator based in Baltimore, Maryland, serving as musicology faculty at the Peabody Conservatory and Director of Music at St. David's, Baltimore.

AND WE, EACH

Text by Shane McCrae
Libretto by Michael Hersch

ACT I

OVERTURE

(PERSON 1, PERSON 2)

... I write you to make a wound write back

I.

(PERSON 1)

... you sitting to my right
To the left of me oblivion forever
I think it is oblivion forever
That you conduct oblivion from where
You sit unmoving ...
I turn my head as far to the right as I can
... keeping you - your body there in the corner of my eye
my body too far to see if you are watching me.
but I feel you watching me.

(PERSON 2)

I don't turn my head ...
Hand between us almost cramping -
But I can't pull it to my lap remove it from its nearness to your thigh;
My palm flat ... I close my hand and when
My hand becomes a fist and tallest there ...

II.

(PERSON 2)

...Because no excavator has yet been designed
to fear the thing it rips from the dirt
No excavator would be gentle enough
not to break the simulacrum
from its bone original and frame

(PERSON 1)

Or would the crumbling shape become a *him*
The excavator tears an arm
Off
and it dangles from the shovel as
Clumps of dirt fall through the shovel's teeth meat
Cooked
From the bone ...
Clumps of ...

III.

(PERSON 1)

My hand brushes you, your thigh ...
... My hand ... you ... your thigh ...
where it curves to disappear beneath you ...

(Person 2)

... my knuckles high now farthest from ...
... my knuckle brushes ...
... now farthest from ...
... my knuckle brushes ...

IV.

(PERSON 1)

... the shovel raised to the sky
a mouth
Gaping forever
and a sacrificial altar ...
one's it the other ...

(PERSON 2)

... The skull at her feet
but who does not praise
The mouth to whom the body comes.

V.

(PERSON 1)

... whatever carried me
Through time to him
could keep us there forever -
I could stand listening forever, between Him and the ocean.
I could stand forever.

VI.

(PERSON 1)

... Was it
merely that you wanted
To see the snow?
You saw the distant light
Of the fire burning ...
beyond the barn, and
You realized you might not ever have ...

(Person 2)

... To huddle closer to the burning center ...
... Take the path.
Before you.

VII.

(PERSON 2)

... I heard a woman go under the train
and the sound must have been the train crushing her body
but the sound sounded
Like a piece of paper tearing
that was what it sounded like -
then screaming
and the screaming was the sound I turned to.

VIII.

(INSTRUMENTAL)

... I have turned the brambles back.

IX.

(PERSON 2)

... we
Have watched the beams that hold the house
together flee the wall
Like ashes flying
Upward, burning

(PERSON 1)

Didn't you once confide in me?
You stumbled chasing ashes with your eyes as
The ashes fled a fire you couldn't yet see ...

X.**(PERSON 1)**

... But who was watching me
 This morning as I walked the clotted
 Path, breaking sorrows from the path
 Follow the path.
 I've yet to sweep the wreckage
 Of the brambles from its edges.
 You will find
 The tower we have often built together,
 You from imagination, I from memory ...

XI.**(BOTH)**

... in the high windows
 At which the sunlight stopped through
 which it could not pass
 Sadnesses crowded so against the glass I tripped and
 Fell and was pinned by the howls
 flat on my back
 on the glassy stones beside the rug.

XII.**(PERSON 2)**

... the buildings popped
 and left red flashes of what looked like blood hanging in the air.

XIII.**(Person 1)**

My lover spoke first loud to the skittish day
 Still blushing after his departed guest
 And startled airless blood across his chest
 The mockingbirds spoke back from the blued sky

(Person 2)

I thought my lover said a foolish thing
 That we would not be parted when we part
 And strangers' songs the mockingbirds still sing
 But each night in my dream she eats my heart

(Person 1)

As though the bird had heard me in the kitchen
 Half-singing as I scrubbed clumped grains from a bowl
 The mockingbird sings Who that hears the owl
 And like no man will use his voice to listen.

(Person 2)

And then my lover spoke to the unmown grass
 Near wild in the yard its white hair fled as smoke
 Nor would her image stay in the sun-flushed glass
 The voice of the mockingbird on the sill broke.
 ... nor would her image stay ...

XIV.**(PERSON 1)**

What if I started here
 if this were the beginning
 what except the differences were small and kept myself -
 no not the differences so long as long it might have been ...

(PERSON 2)

... Of now will disappear
 ...sinking the future now ...
 how fast sinking how ...
 ... if not abandoning ...
 life to have again
 From which no sorrow can subtract ...

XV.**(INSTRUMENTAL)**

... She saw Aeneas bloodied, with an arrow
 Through his neck, his arms spread wide
 Floating, for a moment, facedown
 In the sea, before his
 Heavy armor buried him.
 She clapped her hands together
 And the dog sat suddenly
 Upright, trained to expect meat
 At the sound, but she had none
 He barked, and she clapped again.

XVI.**(PERSON 1)**

Part of the world facing a row
 Of mumbling, kneeling corpses their
 Eyes open ...
 ... From one oblivion to another
 From noise to all I saw ...
 ... stumbled and
 Fell into him and the man fell
 First to his knees then forward onto
 His face without raising his arms to stop himself among the dead
 I mistook the dead for the living and
 Afraid he might be hurt I crouched
 And rolled him over and spoke ...

I didn't call your name

I just

Said it out loud

I just

it had

Become my name the moment you

Knelt

I just wanted to hear it

I wasn't asking you to follow

Me.

... when my name was taken

I couldn't rise to follow ...

How did you rise to follow me?

XVII.**(PERSON 1)**

... I reach to you everyday
 Impossible familiar you I reach
 To you I welcome you myself awake
 As I had reached to you the night before
 [Asleep, unmoving, lost]
 To find in you sunbright
 ... you the night ...
 and sleep.

(Person 2)

I feel your arms in the night as they enfold me -
 Awake they pull the darkness from the dark
 Through which before you come to bed I wander
 Asleep, unmoving, lost, and even after you let me go
 I know now where I sleep.

ACT II

"Who eats the world and burns in the hollow center"

XVIII.

(BOTH)

... here, you

XIX.

(PERSON 1)

Returning it your hand paused ...
Your lap but paused to not was it I said
Oblivion, but paused in the small air ...
Your hand ... your pinky over mine
Oblivion like silence after lightning

(PERSON 2)

You turn your head you pull your hand away
But pulling it away you turn your head
And see I think you see my hand is where
Your hand was when it brushed my thigh you must see it -
You pause I watch you seeing it
My hand you pause your hand in the air ...
...between your lap as if ...

XX.

(PERSON 2)

Rammed ... with her heavy shield ...
Breaking her shield arm, though she
Didn't feel it breaking ...
(She) only slid backward in the
Sand a few inches, and raised
Her spear to stop the hacking ...
... [His] spear, [now] weakened in the fight ...
[And she] kicked [his] legs from
Beneath him, and flung away ...
... She jumped on him then
Pinning his arms with her knees
And smashed the edge of her shield
Down on his face, just above
His nose, and smashed the edge of
Her shield down on his throat, and
Smashed the edge of her shield down
On his forehead, and as she
Raised her shield to smash it down
Again, she saw blood dripping
From the edge, and shards of bone
As dark as blood falling from
The iron edge of her shield
And she turned and smashed the edge
Of her shield down ...
And she stood, and threw her shield
At the backs of [them] ...

XXI.

(PERSON 1)

Where has it been my voice that now I hear it
Best now my lips are silent with yours
[Not disappearing but collapsing into fullness]
[And anonymity no room being room]
... where I meet you we are here

(PERSON 2)

... where I meet you we are here
My lips against your lips the room around us
Not disappearing but collapsing into fullness
And anonymity no room being room
As much as we are bodies now ...

XXII.

(PERSON 1)

... The knot, a moaning and a rasping scream
Both sounds approaching me together,
And I looked into the knot and saw what looked like eyes ...
... approaching me together ...

The tower we have ... built together

... burning.

(PERSON 2)

... eyes fury great as yours once was ...
Hunger more hollow than you could sustain now
They rose fixed on me ...
... great as yours once was ...

The tower we have ... built together

... They rose fixed on me ...

Upward, burning.

XXIII.

(BOTH)

... and I saw night beneath me
And for a moment I was
anyone watching from above me
would have seen a bright spot in a big darkness -
I must have been
I must have looked
exactly like ...
The [one] I always thought I was -
floating above Hell
and then I fell ...

XXIV.

(PERSON 1)

You loved the world and wanted that love
to end your obligations to the world -
Why make the world a garden
if you would punish its keeper for loving it...
Darkness spread across the ceiling ...
For you
To you
At last ...
Death was the god at the end of the world...

XXV.

(Person 1)

Across your hand my body in my stomach -
And feel your hunger in my body
my hunger that is my body slowly rushing
my insides to the edges of my skin
to catch up my lips catching yours -
Our hunger;
Hunger of thunder swallowing the sky.

(Person 2)

As if your hand were mine - as if I needn't
Have been afraid to lift it.
Your hand was there the moment mine was gone ...
From outside lock the door your hand my home -
Thunder in me my body in my stomach -
I slide my hand one finger then the next ...

XXVI.

(PERSON 2)

... What were you eating you can't tell
... a red flake of pepper or blood on your fork
Even though you see your face
You're not sure now
whether you were afraid ...

XXVII.

(PERSON 1)

... in and out
I saw more clearly as I rested -
Everything moving
Back and forth
Until the sun itself
As slowly as it moved
Seemed to be a part
Of the motion
... I saw more clearly ...
... everything moving ...
I saw more clearly as I rested -
Everything moving
Back and ... in and out ... in and out ...
... a part of the motion.

(PERSON 2)

... in and out
And back and forth
So that I saw it even
In the night
Moving on the other side
Of the world so that I saw the darkness
Deepening as the sun drew closer
... of the world so that I saw the darkness ...
...in and out ... in an out and back and forth ...
... as the sun drew closer
To the spot on the other side
Of the world ...

XXVIII.

(INSTRUMENTAL)

... *Shaking it tried to fly -*
It leapt
Flapping its wings - they sounded like
Chains rattling the bird fell face down
In the dirt - hot light burst from its back that
Light not the melting bird's screams
Woke me -
That sounded like a world of screams.

(Person 1)

I heard the world
... a world of screams -
I heard the world
and still I dreamed.

(PERSON 2)

I heard the world
And still I dreamed.

XXIX.

(BOTH)

Sometimes it's fast
I do not want it fast
Except in the midst -
then I want nothing more;
I want it fast and endless and to end -
don't let it end ...
... fast and endless ...
My hands are slow in air without your body
Come to me / make me fast don't let it end ...
Come to me I am empty ...
... to me your body ...
... I am empty
I am ...

XXX.

(PERSON 2)

... The couple stretched and broke
and one half followed them

(PERSON 1)

A dog eats its master's corpse
In the last days
days that had been before

(PERSON 2)

The woman pounded on the man's back and
He coughed the seeds on the porous ... and ...
hungry earth

(PERSON 1)

in the last days
That had before time been a single day ...

(PERSON 2)

... but the darkness they
Saw in themselves was darker than shadows
And had no boundaries
And after the man and woman were expelled
the people saw the darkness everywhere
They saw it on the now black walls
Now risen through the clouds trapping them all

(PERSON 1)

In the garden and on the skins of the rotten fruit
Fallen from the dead plants they saw it in the first night
And in the hole that opened ...

(PERSON 2)

In the trunk of the tree from which the man had eaten
The hole in the tree grew wider every day
Even as the people grew thinner ...

(PERSON 1)

... And as they starved some thought the hole was feeding them
In the end the man who had grown thin
And small as a boy
climbed in ...

(BOTH)

As I had reached to you the night before
I feel your arms ... enfold me
[Want it fast and endless]
enfold me

(PERSON 2)

Like paper burned loose from the kindling and flying from the fire.

(Person 1)

...world in world ... chaos flung on bones.
... where I meet you, we are here.

(BOTH)

... where I meet you, we are here.

BIOGRAPHIES

Ah Young Hong, soprano

A “transfixing” (*New Yorker*) soprano of “fearlessness and consummate artistry” (*Opera News*), Ah Young Hong has interpreted a vast array of repertoire, ranging from the music of Monteverdi, Bach, Mozart, and Poulenc, to works of Shostakovich, Babbitt, Kurtág, and Haas. *The New York Times* has praised Hong as “the opera’s blazing, lone star,” *The Chicago Tribune* called her “absolutely riveting,” and the *Kronen Zeitung* wrote “her stage presence, her soprano voice ... Breathtaking.” In high demand as a concert and chamber soloist, Hong has performed with violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Ensemble Phoenix Basel, BBC Symphony Orchestra, Camerata Bern, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, FLUX Quartet, the Netherlands-based contemporary music group Ensemble Klang, Konzerthaus Berlin’s ensemble-in-residence, Ensemble unitedberlin, Ensemble Dal Niente, The Daedalus Quartet, Wiener KammerOrchester, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Charleston Symphony Orchestra, Phoenix Symphony Orchestra, Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia, and Tempesta di Mare, amongst others. She has also appeared as soloist at the Aldeburgh Music Festival, CalPerformances series, Seattle Symphony recital series, and the Ojai Festival.

In opera, Hong has premiered Michael Hersch’s *On the Threshold of Winter*, a one woman opera, and *Poppaea* in the title role. Other roles include the title role in Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea*, Morgana in Handel’s *Alcina*, Gilda in Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, Fortuna and Minerva in Monteverdi’s *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria*, and Asteria in Handel’s *Tamerlano*. She has also appeared with Opera Lafayette in *Rebel* and Francoeur’s *Zélinde, roi des Sylphes* at the Rose Theater in Lincoln Center and as La Musique in Charpentier’s *Les Arts Florissants* at the Kennedy Center.

A prolific recording artist, Hong recorded the American premiere of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Alles mit Gott und nichts ohn’ ihn*, BWV 1127, for National Public Radio’s *Performance Today*. Other recordings include the world premiere of *Rebel* and Francoeur’s *Zélinde, roi des Sylphes* (Naxos), Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* (Peter Lee Music), and *Sentirete una Canzonetta* with Harmonious Blacksmith. Hong is a featured soloist in Ensemble Klang’s recording of Michael Hersch’s *cortex and ankle*. Early 2018 saw the commercial release of her debut solo CD on Innova Recordings featuring Milton Babbitt’s *Philomel* and Michael Hersch’s *a breath upwards*. Hong was hailed as “an important new soprano undaunted by difficult contemporary challenges” (*The WholeNote*), who gives “landmark performances of two landmark works” (*Gapplegate Classical-Modern Music Review*).

Fall 2022 saw the release of Michael Hersch’s *the script of storms* with BBC Symphony Orchestra on the New Focus label. Recent performances include those with Ensemble Phoenix Basel in the world premiere of Michael Hersch’s *one step to the next, worlds ending* and with the Talea Ensemble in Georg Friedrich Haas’s ... *wie stille brannte das Licht*. Hong currently serves as associate professor in the Vocal Studies Department at the Peabody Conservatory of the Johns Hopkins University.

Jesse Blumberg, baritone

Baritone Jesse Blumberg enjoys a busy schedule of opera, concerts, and recitals, performing repertoire from the Renaissance and Baroque to the 20th and 21st centuries. He has performed featured roles at Minnesota Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, Atlanta Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, Boston Early Music Festival, Opera Atelier, and at Château de Versailles Spectacles and London’s Royal Festival Hall.

Blumberg has sung major concert works with Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, American Bach Soloists, Boston Baroque, Carmel Bach Festival, Apollo’s Fire, Oratorio Society of New York, The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and on Lincoln Center’s American Songbook series. He has been increasingly active on concert stages in Canada for the last several years, appearing with the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra, Symphony Nova Scotia, Early Music Vancouver, Arion Baroque, Grand Philharmonic Choir, and at the Montréal Baroque Festival.

Blumberg’s recital highlights include appearances with the New York Festival of Song, Marilyn Horne Foundation, and University Musical Society in Ann Arbor, in addition to teaching and performing residencies at song festivals across the United States. He has participated in many world premieres of recent American operas and song cycles, and works closely with renowned composers as a member of the Mirror Visions Ensemble.

He has been featured on nearly thirty commercial recordings, including the 2015 Grammy-winning and 2019 Grammy-nominated Charpentier Chamber Operas with Boston Early Music Festival. Blumberg’s other albums include Bach cantatas with Montréal Baroque, *Winterreise* with pianist Martin Katz, Rosenmüller cantatas with ACRONYM, *Green Sneakers* with the Miami String Quartet, and *St. John Passion* with Apollo’s Fire, as well as American Bach Soloists’ 2015 film release Handel’s *Messiah* in Grace Cathedral.

Blumberg received undergraduate degrees in History and Music from the University of Michigan and a Master of Music degree from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, before participating in young artist programs at Santa Fe Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, the Ravinia Festival, and Chicago Opera Theater. His early career was buoyed by recognition in several competitions in the U.S. and Europe. In 2007 he took First Prize at the International Hilde Zadek Singing Competition in Vienna, and in 2008 he was awarded Third Prize at the International Robert Schumann Competition in Zwickau, becoming its first American prizewinner in over thirty years.

A passionate advocate for chamber music in its myriad forms, in 2007 Blumberg co-founded Five Boroughs Music Festival in New York City and for twelve years served as its Artistic Director. In 2021 and 2022 he stepped into a Visiting Faculty position at The Cleveland Institute of Music, and continues to enjoy private teaching as well as the occasional masterclass and guest coaching engagement. Since fall 2023, Blumberg has been based in both Toronto and New York City, enthusiastically making musical connections across North America and beyond.

Tito Muñoz, conductor

American conductor Tito Muñoz recently completed an acclaimed ten-year tenure as music director of the Phoenix Symphony and has previously served as music director of the Opéra National de Lorraine in France. Other prior appointments include assistant conductor positions with the Cleveland Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Chamber Orchestra and the Aspen Music Festival. Muñoz has appeared with many of North America's most prominent orchestras, including Atlanta, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, New York and Utah. He maintains a strong international conducting presence, including engagements with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, SWR Symphonieorchester, Deutsche Radio Philharmonie Saarbrücken, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Lausanne Chamber Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony, Ulster Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic (London), Luxembourg Philharmonic, Lucerne Festival Contemporary Orchestra, Opéra Orchestre National Montpellier, Opéra de Rennes, Auckland Philharmonia, Sydney Symphony and Sao Paolo State Symphony. Born in Queens, New York, Muñoz trained as a violinist and conductor at Queens College and at the Aspen Music Festival. He made his professional conducting debut in 2006 with the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center and made his Cleveland Orchestra debut at the Blossom Music Festival that same year.

Emi Ferguson, flute

A 2023 recipient of the Avery Fisher Career Grant, Emi Ferguson can be heard live in concerts and festivals with groups including the Handel and Haydn Society, AMOC*, Ruckus, the New York New Music Ensemble, the Manhattan Chamber Players, and as the music director of Camerata Pacifica Baroque. Her recordings, *Amour Cruel* and *Fly the Coop: Bach Sonatas and Preludes*, celebrate her fascination with reinvigorating music and instruments of the past for the present and have been called “blindingly impressive ... a fizzing, daring display of personality and imagination” by *The New York Times*. Ferguson has spoken and performed at TEDx events and has been featured on the Discovery Channel, Amazon Prime, WQXR, and Vox talking about how music relates to our world today. As part of WQXR's Artist Propulsion Lab, she created the series “This Composer is SICK!” with Max Fine, exploring the impact of syphilis on composers Franz Schubert, Bedřich Smetana, and Scott Joplin, and she is a new host of WQXR's *Young Artists Showcase*. Her book, *Iconic Composers*, co-written with Nicholas Csicsko with artwork by David Lee Csicsko, was released in 2023. Born in Japan and raised in London and Boston, she now resides in New York.

Andy Hudson, bass clarinet

Praised for his “fearless” (*Cacophony*) performances with an “irrepressible musicality” (*The Clarinet*), clarinetist Andy Hudson has appeared widely across North America, Europe, and Africa in solo, chamber, and orchestral settings. He has recently performed with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the North Carolina Symphony, the Sarasota Orchestra, and the Charlotte Symphony, and was appointed Bass/3rd Clarinetist of the Cabrillo Festival Orchestra in 2020; other festival appearances include the Lucerne, Bang on a Can, Hot Air, and Great Lakes Chamber Music festivals. “Truly a performer for the moment” (CVNC), Hudson has premiered 100+ works to date and has performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on their MusicNOW series. He has recorded for Sony Masterworks, New Amsterdam, Naxos and Potenza record labels, and is currently artistic director with the international sextet Latitude 49 and clarinetist with Miami's Nu Deco Ensemble. Hudson has given master classes at many of the world's great conservatories and centers for musical study, and he is the co-author of two books with composer Roger Zare for Conway Publications: *Elements of Contemporary Clarinet Technique* (2021) and *Space Bass: Advanced Explorations for Bass Clarinet* (2022). Hudson is currently associate professor of Clarinet at the Lawrence University Conservatory of Music in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Adda Kridler, violin

Described as “lyrical and precise” by *The New York Times*, Adda Kridler has established herself as a musician with a unique and versatile voice, thriving in the rich diversity of the New York music scene. Highlights include performances with Talea Ensemble and the Argus Quartet, recording for Ryuichi Sakamoto and Succession, and opening for the Dillinger Escape Plan's 20th anniversary shows with hardcore string quartet SevenSuns. She plays in the pit for *The Great Gatsby* on Broadway, and is artistic director of the Rochester Chamber Music Society in Vermont.

Leah Asher, viola

Violinist/violist, composer, and visual artist Leah Asher is an avid performer of contemporary music and creator of new artistic works. Asher is the executive director and violinist of The Rhythm Method string quartet and co-creator of MEANINGLESS WORK with Nicolee Kuester. Asher regularly performs with New York-based ensembles such as International Contemporary Ensemble, Talea Ensemble, and S.E.M. Ensemble. She formerly served as solo violist of NOSO Sinfonietta and co-principal viola of the Arctic Philharmonic. As a composer, Asher has been commissioned by ensembles including andPlay, Chartreuse, Periapsis, NorthArc Percussion Group, The Great Learning Orchestra, Du.O, and solo artists such as Meaghan Burke, Tristan McKay, and Jennifer Torrence. Recent releases include Asher's solo album *Retreat into Afters* on SCRIPTS records and The Rhythm Method's album *Pastorale* on New Focus recordings. Leah joined the faculty of Manhattan School of Music as of 2022.

Coleman Itzkoff, cello

Cellist and performer Coleman Itzkoff stands at the intersection of baroque/classical/new music, contemporary dance, and experimental theater. Whether premiering works by living composers, performing baroque music on historical instruments, acting and dancing and playing in pieces of avant-garde dance theater, composing, arranging, and recording music for films, or simply playing solo Bach for hospital patients in the time of COVID, Itzkoff continues to push the boundaries of what it means to be a musician of the 21st century, bringing his diverse range of interests and shape-shifting presence to every room and stage he occupies. Hailed by Alex Ross in the *New Yorker* for his “flawless technique and keen musicality,” Itzkoff has performed in the great halls and festivals of America and abroad. He is a dedicated member of several ensembles, including the early music ensembles Ruckus and Twelfth Night, and is a founding member of the American Modern Opera Company. Itzkoff holds degrees from Rice University, USC, and The Juilliard School.

James Matthew Daniel, director

James Matthew Daniel is an interdisciplinary artist working at the intersection of stage and screen. Directing projects include: *AGATHA* with Camerata Bern, Michael Hersch’s *On the Threshold of Winter* at the Peabody Institute and the Blair School of Music, and *Romance of a Lifetime* as part of the Park Avenue Armory under-construction series. Cinematography projects include: *The Manchurian Candidate* at Minnesota Opera, Kevin Newbury’s *Epiphany V* and *STAG*, and recent videos for the Up Until Now Collective. Daniel was recently the video director for Global Citizen, and has worked on past productions for Opera Philadelphia, Santa Fe Opera, The Prototype Festival, and Florida Grand Opera. Daniel’s music videos include work for: Armor for Sleep, Sullivan, Lux Rd, Morgan James, Yanni Burton, Una Lux, and more. This is Daniel’s fourth collaboration with Michael Hersch. He’s honored to get to premiere a new work with the incredible group of creatives that have contributed to this piece. Many voices are singing in *and we, each*, listen for them all.

Michael Hersch, music

A composer of “uncompromising brilliance” (*The Washington Post*) whose work has been described by *The New York Times* as “viscerally gripping and emotionally transformative music ... claustrophobic and exhilarating at once, with moments of sublime beauty nestled inside thickets of dark virtuosity,” Michael Hersch is widely considered among the most gifted composers of his generation. Recent events and premieres include his Violin Concerto with Ensemble intercontemporain in Paris, the Lucerne Festival, and the Avanti Festival in Helsinki; new productions of his monodrama, *On the Threshold of Winter* in Chicago, Salt Lake City, and Washington, D.C., and his elegy *I hope we get a chance to visit soon* at the Ojai and Aldeburgh Festivals, where Hersch was a featured composer. Other recent premieres include his 10-hour chamber cycle, *sew me into a shroud of leaves*, a work which occupied the composer for fifteen years, at the 2019 Wien Modern Festival. In 2021, the composer’s opera, *Poppaea*, premiered in Vienna and Basel in a co-production with ZeitRäume Basel and Wien Modern. The opera was a nominee for the 2023 Austrian Music Theater Prize for Best Contemporary Music Theater. During the 2019/20 season, Hersch was the composer-in-residence with the Camerata Bern, and in early 2020, his new work *Agatha* had its premiere performances in both Bern and Geneva. In 2022/23, major projects included his *one step to the next, worlds ending* for Ensemble Phoenix Basel and his opera *MEDEA* for Sarah Maria Sun, Schola Heidelberg, and Ensemble Musikfabrik.

Over the past several years, Hersch has written works for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Ensemble Klang, the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Alban Berg Ensemble Wien, Decoda Ensemble, and the Library of Congress. Other notable recent events include European performances by the Kreutzer Quartet of *Images from a Closed Ward* in the U.K. and Sweden, a recording of the work by the acclaimed FLUX Quartet, and a work for unaccompanied violin commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, premiered at the orchestra’s Biennial.

Hersch has worked closely with Patricia Kopatchinskaja, the violinist commissioning several works, including his Violin Concerto, which premiered in 2015, his chamber work ... *das Rückgrat berstend*, which premiered at New York City’s Park Avenue Armory during the autumn of 2017, and the song cycle *sapped from me broken*. She recorded the concerto with the International Contemporary Ensemble (I.C.E.), and the duo with cellist Jay Campbell. Most recently, Kopatchinskaja performed one of the solo roles in the premiere presentations of *Agatha*.

Notable past performances include *Night Pieces*, commissioned and premiered by the Cleveland Orchestra, and a song cycle for baritone and piano, *Domicilium*, commissioned and premiered by Thomas Hampson and Wolfgang Rieger on San Francisco Performances. Hersch's second piano concerto, *along the ravines*, was given performances with the Deutsche Radio Philharmonie and the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, and as part of the George Enescu International Festival in Romania. Hersch's *end stages* was commissioned and premiered by the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, his *Zwischen Leben und Tod* recently received its European premiere, and *A Forest of Attics*, commissioned for the Network for New Music's 25th anniversary season, was selected as one of the year's most important classical music events by *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. The paper said of the work, "A Forest of Attics threw a Molotov cocktail into the concert: Everything before it paled in comparison ... Hersch has written some towering works in recent years; this is yet another."

Also a pianist, noted for his "astounding facility at the keyboard" (*International Piano*), Hersch has appeared around the world including appearances at the Ojai Festival, Aldeburgh Festival, the Festival Dag in de Branding in the Netherlands, the Warhol Museum, the Romaeuropa Festival, the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., Cleveland's Reinberger Chamber Hall, the Festival of Contemporary Music Nuova Consonanza, the Network for New Music Concert Series, the Left Bank Concert Society, Festa Europea della Musica, St. Louis' Sheldon Concert Hall, and in New York City at Merkin Concert Hall, the 92nd St. Y - Tisch Center for the Performing Arts, and Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall, among others.

Born in Washington, D.C., Michael Hersch came to international attention at age 25, when he was awarded first prize in the Concordia American Composers Awards. The award resulted in a performance of his *Elegy*, conducted by Marin Alsop in New York's Alice Tully Hall. Later that year he became one of the youngest recipients ever of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Composition. Hersch has also been the recipient of the Rome Prize, the Berlin Prize, the Goddard Lieberman Fellowship and Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts & Letters, and the Johns Hopkins University's President's Frontier Award, amongst many others. He currently is a professor of composition at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University.

Hersch's closest collaborator of the past decade has been soprano Ah Young Hong. He has written more than fifteen works for her, including the title role in his opera *Poppaea*, and solo roles in *the script of storms: songs for soprano and orchestra after Fawzi Karim*, *cortex and ankle*, *sapped from me broken*, *I hope we get a chance to visit soon*, *anonymous beneath the lemon trees*, *a breath upwards*, and many others.

Shane McCrae, poet

Poet Shane McCrae grew up in Texas and California. The first in his family to graduate from college, McCrae earned a BA at Linfield College, an MA at the University of Iowa, an MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and a JD at Harvard Law School. McCrae is the author of several poetry collections, including *Mule* (2011); *Blood* (2013); *The Animal Too Big to Kill* (2015); *In the Language of My Captor* (Wesleyan University Press, 2017), which was a finalist for the National Book Award; and *The Gilded Auction Block* (2019). His work has also been featured in *The Best American Poetry 2010*, edited by Amy Gerstler, and his honors include a Whiting Writers' Award and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

McCrae's attention to both meter and its breakage in his poems emphasizes the chafe of historical accounting against contemporary slippage, engaging this country's troubling history and continuation of oppression and violence. In a 2013 conversation with Danniell Schoonebeek for *PEN America*, McCrae stated, "For me, writing into history is a way to grapple with the terrifying certainty of the present. That is, the more one studies and writes with history, the more often one discovers that apparently large and important human developments—a lot of things most people would call 'progress'—are superficial." In a 2014 review, Michael Klein observed, "*Blood* is as radical in structure as it is in the unbridled wildness of its emotional center. Lines descend on the page in varying lengths usually culminating into a single stanza and often broken or interrupted by a caesura or sutured with a slash—a blade, appropriately—or, as I came to think of the slash: a mark in the account where the tape got spliced. It's a powerful visual effect—where the content is so married to its delivery—and approaches—strange and as hallucinatory as it can be—the dignity of oration. These are poems that are unrelenting and immediate—never delicate and never gentle." His most recent book, a memoir, *Pulling the Chariot of the Sun*, was released to acclaim in 2023.

McCrae lives in New York City and teaches at Columbia University.

