

## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

By Aaron Grad

### MICHAEL HERSCH

Born 1971 in Washington, D.C.

Currently resides in Philadelphia, PA

Michael Hersch is one of the world's most fascinating young composers. Born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Virginia, he decided, at age 18, to devote his life to creating music after watching a video of Sir George Solti conduct Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Soon thereafter, he enrolled at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. By age 25 he attracted national attention by winning the American Composers Award, leading to a premiere in Alice Tully Hall conducted by Marin Alsop. Other conductors, composers and musicians took note of Hersch's prodigious gifts, and his orchestral music in particular gained an international reputation. Before his 30th birthday he had completed two symphonies and many other large ensemble works, along the way winning the coveted Rome and Berlin prizes and becoming one of the youngest composers ever to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship. In recent years he has increasingly turned his attention toward a different canvas; trading ensemble heft for freedom of duration, he has issued an incomparable series of broadly structured solos and duos.

Underlying much of Hersch's instrumental music is his long and unique relationship with poetry. Rather than set a text directly to music, as in a song, or follow a traditional narrative, he often extracts evocative poetic fragments and pairs them with abstract music. The text and music remain independent, yet they co-exist and reinforce similar psychological and emotional spaces. This structural process reached a pinnacle in the evening-length works *The Vanishing Pavilions* for solo piano and *Last Autumn* for saxophone and cello. While an uninterrupted hearing of these full compositions is ideal, the modular nature of Hersch's works allows them to speak equally well in excerpted performances, such as on this program.

*Two Pieces for Piano* originated as the first two movements of a piano concerto, completed in 2002 for Garrick Ohlsson and the orchestras of St. Louis, Oregon and Pittsburgh. Hersch is a striking pianist himself; that talent, combined with an instant recall of seemingly every note he has ever composed, allows him to sit at a piano and dash off spontaneous transcriptions of large ensemble works. Perhaps such an undertaking led to the genesis of *Two Pieces* as an independent composition, which he recorded on a 2003 disc of chamber music. This work introduces features that recur throughout Hersch's music: tightly voiced clusters (he has explained that he hears and constructs such "clusters" as very compact chords, with each tone having a significance and resolution), violent flurries, low rumbles, hymn-like progressions, often interconnected through a lush and sustained haze of sound. Certain sonorities recur as fixed points. They are eerily familiar, yet they are changed by the surrounding context, allowing a harmonic logic and recognition to emerge. The second movement stretches the formal container with even more extreme figurations, dynamics and articulations. Still, the sparse ending gives an unmistakably settled feeling around a tonic pitch.

*The Vanishing Pavilions* might be the 21st century's most ambitious musical project thus far. Hersch began the work in 2001, when, as a fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, he met

the British poet Christopher Middleton and felt an immediate artistic kinship. With no commission or even a guaranteed performance, Hersch began harvesting excerpts of poems and planning a massive cycle for piano. He spent most of the next four years composing the work, and even the process of copying out the final score took many months (in a move fitting the obsessive nature of the work as a whole, he wrote out the hundreds of pages of score by hand). Hersch performed the 2 hours and 20 minutes of music from memory at the premiere performance in Philadelphia in 2006, and later recorded the work for commercial release.

The piece consists of 49 movements divided into two books, alternating between sections based on text fragments and intermezzo movements with no specific connection to text. The musical forms range in duration from less than one minute to more than ten, and several recur at various points. The suite Hersch devised for this program jumps back and forth between books to create an abbreviated taste of the work's thrust. One of the most dramatic short movements reacts to the vivid text, "So the flashing knife will split / Memory down the middle ..." In a devilish play of word painting, Hersch slashes down the piano with aggressive eruptions, interspersed with strangely bright triads. The movement repeats, and then returns at two other points in the suite as a brittle, terrifying touchstone. Another movement appearing multiple times follows a text that begins, "Here the huge root spread: / A willow hit by lightning, long / Before we came." Single notes emerge from thick clusters, dense chords travel from outer ranges to meet in the middle, and repeated chords and dyads hover insistently. One of the longest movements in the piece builds from the only complete poem included in the texts, which starts, "Spectres, vast, remote / Uneasily wagging their heads / In shrouds of crushed amethyst ..." Slow, haunting chords form a broad respiration; they quicken, contract, and move forward with a deliberate intensification that results in music of unexpected contrapuntal density. A single chord becomes a constant point of return, and a final series of ascending explosions provides the closing gesture. Each movement proves to be a similarly rich miniature world, a testament to the astounding focus and breadth of *The Vanishing Pavilions*.

Hersch began work on *Last Autumn* in 2005, and composed the music for much of the next three years. Like *The Vanishing Pavilions*, *Last Autumn* forms a dialogue with fragments of poetry, this time from W. G. Sebald, a German novelist and poet who died in 2001. As in his other compositions based on text, Hersch seems drawn to excerpts of particularly stark imagery. For this work, he expanded the intermezzo concept to include movements labeled *scherzo*, *lullaby*, *march* and *psalm*, interspersed among movements directly relating to the text. A key proving ground for this composition must have been his two earlier sonatas for unaccompanied cello, lasting 35 and 40 minutes respectively. Hersch calls for ample double-stops, broken chords, and other technical feats from the cello to expand the textural and harmonic possibilities in this spare ensemble. The full composition lasts nearly two hours, pushing the performers into unprecedented territories of endurance for chamber music (perhaps Morton Feldman was the only other composer whose epic works demanded such sustained concentration, yet he rarely required the same virtuosic execution as Hersch).

Book I, heard in its entirety on this program, consists of 22 movements. As in *The Vanishing Pavilions*, certain sections and concepts recur. One such passage, heard as the 10th and 21st movements, launches from the obscure but suggestive phrase, "... A dress entangled in thistles..." The saxophone is to play "harshly; biting," while the cello performs "with

tremendous force throughout; explosive.” The saxophone repeats a single pitch, and the cello cycles through a series of violent, halting gestures. The parts are independent until they merge for a frantic swoop and two final, abortive simultaneities. This musical mood represents a further distillation of those brutal shards issued from the piano in earlier works, here without even the diffusing effect of a sustain pedal (although a reverberant acoustic does seem essential as a unifying force, making a resonant church an ideal venue). In contrast, the 4th and 14th movements feature quite tender music. The first occurrence is for cello alone, accompanied by the text that begins, “A crow on the wing lost a white feather.” The cello’s instruction this time is to play “mournfully; haunting,” and the performer bows a plaintive melody in the reedy baritone range of the instrument. Concurrently, the left hand plucks an oscillating accompaniment on the open strings. When this music returns in the 14th movement alongside a new text (“... shade / in the heat of noon, / light in darkness, / shelter from frost and rain ...”), the saxophone adds a countermelody of increasing pungency. By the end, the once docile fragment builds to fortissimo intensity.

A fascinating aspect of this musical shift is how it corresponds to the text. The fragment ends, “... under Thy guidance / safely we may attain that place / to which we are drawn; / ... so that the stars propitiously / conjoin above us”—yet the music seems a rejection of such safety and conjoining. The discord between text and music reveals the dialectical nature of this compositional process: a particular sonority may trigger a recollection of a line of text Hersch read years ago; another related line may open a new sound horizon; and at any point the streams of verbal and musical content may cross or diverge. It seems that the underpinning of these monumental creations is Hersch’s memory itself, swirling with discoveries and associations. The deeply personal music that emerges from such an organic process of self-exploration cannot help but convey an inviting air of honesty and inevitability, no matter how unfamiliar the surface may be.

from *The Vanishing Pavilions*

Texts by Christopher Middleton (b.1926)

1.     So the flashing knife will split  
       Memory down the middle.
  
2.     Here the huge root spread:  
       A willow hit by lightning, long  
       Before we came.  
       Trees all around,  
       Their graves in the rock, under a green hood  
       They heard willow speak to water,  
       And housed the spring, so it could dwell  
       In itself, as such a place might wish to do.
  
3.     Spectres, vast, remote  
       Uneasily wagging their heads  
       In shrouds of crushed amethyst:  
  
       Tomorrow I will confirm  
       That they are hill crests,  
       And slopes parade the green oak, olive,  
  
       Serried cherry.  
       On sunken pots of Rome  
       An iridescence, thick  
       Or light, signifies the human:  
  
       Should the moment return  
       At sundown's onset  
       I will ask what is this colour,  
  
       Again a few score of breaths,  
       And scaling the underside  
       Of pine branches  
  
       An aqueous rose, diffused.  
       Neither quality, nor adjunct.  
       How long so old."
  
4.     Intermezzo (K)
  
5.     ... pushing through slow centuries:  
       The space is branching out, blown back.

6. So the flashing knife will split  
Memory down the middle.
7. Intermezzo (A)
8. ... and over that plateau, in a vast and glowing atmosphere,  
Thousands of heaped stones absorbed the twilight.
9. Intermezzo (B)
10. The note pad and over it the candle glass  
Spills a shadow. Redder now the candle  
Housed in its glass. No red suffusing shadow  
  
Though alone he might die, discovered  
Hosting many maggots, hardest work undone.
11. Here the huge root spread:  
A willow hit by lightning, long  
Before we came.  
Trees all around,  
Their graves in the rock, under a green hood  
They heard willow speak to water,  
And housed the spring, so it could dwell  
In itself, as such a place might wish to do.
12. So the flashing knife will split  
Memory down the middle.
13. Intermezzo (D)

from *Last Autumn*

Texts by W. G. Sebald (1944-2001)

1. The air stirs the light ...
2. Spreading out above them  
is the branch work  
of a fig tree with fruit, one of which  
is entirely hollowed out by insects.
3. ... in a different consistency  
of the air, whose deoxygenated void  
in the gasping breath of the figures ...
4. A crow on the wing lost a white feather.  
The vicar, a limping messenger in a black coat,  
appeared on New Year's morning  
alone on the wide snow-covered field.
5. Scherzo (A)
6. Intermezzo (A)
7. Lullaby I
8. Scherzo (B)
9. March
10. ... a dress entangled in thistles ...
11. Lullaby II
12. Psalm (A)
13. ... with tiny lanterns  
they haunted the rubbish dumps ...
14. ... shade  
in the heat of noon,  
light in darkness,  
shelter from frost and rain,  
conveyance at the hour of weariness,  
help in extremity, so that  
under Thy guidance  
safely we may attain that place

to which we are drawn;  
... so that the stars propitiously conjoin above us

15. In the end, awaiting recovery  
she is placed in a hospital where ...

Still she lives on, infirm  
in body and mind.

16. Intermezzo (B)

17. ... the breaking  
of time from day to day  
and from hour to hour,  
it is rust and fire  
and the salt of the planets  
darkness even at noon and  
luminaries absent from heaven.

18. Intermezzo (C)

19. Lullaby III

20. Psalm (B)

21. ... a dress entangled in thistles ...

22. ... while behind us already the green trees are leaving their leaves ...

The black bird that in its beak  
carries a break-time meal  
to St. Anthony on his site  
in the desert may be the one with  
the heart of glass, the bird  
flying ever closer to us ...

... the water boils itself out,  
... the earth trembles and the great city  
with the iron tower stands in flames,

and darkness comes and with it a yellow dust  
that covers the land.

## MICHAEL HERSCH

Widely considered among the most gifted composers of his generation, Michael Hersch first came to wider attention over ten years ago when at age twenty-five he was awarded First Prize in the American Composers Awards. Other honors and awards include a Guggenheim Fellowship in Composition, the Rome Prize, the Berlin Prize, and both the Charles Ives Scholarship and Goddard Lieberon Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts & Letters. His work has been conducted in the U.S. and abroad under conductors including Mariss Jansons, Robert Spano, Alan Gilbert, James DePriest, Carlos Kalmar, Marin Alsop, and Gerard Schwarz, by the orchestras of Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Dallas, Baltimore, Bournemouth, Seattle, Atlanta, Cincinnati, and Grant Park among others. He has written works for other ensembles including The String Soloists of the Berlin Philharmonic, and the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia; and soloists Garrick Ohlsson, Midori, Boris Pergamenschikow, Walter Boeykens, Daniel Gaisford, and Peter Sheppard-Skaerved. For the 2002-03 season Mr. Hersch was selected as the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's resident composer by conductor Mariss Jansons. Also regarded among today's most gifted pianists, Mr. Hersch has appeared throughout the U.S. and Europe including performances on the Van Cliburn Foundation's "Modern at the Modern" Series, the Romaeuropa Festival, St. Louis' Sheldon Concert Hall, and in New York City at Merkin Concert Hall, the 92nd St. Y, Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall and on WNYC among others. Mr. Hersch has been a fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center, Norfolk Festival for Contemporary Music and the Pacific Music Festival. He studied at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore under Moshe Cotel and at the Moscow Conservatory in Russia with Albert Leman. Mr. Hersch is currently on the composition faculty of the Peabody Conservatory.

## GARY LOUIE

Internationally recognized as one of the leading saxophone virtuosos of our time, Gary Louie has appeared as soloist with, among others, the National Symphony Orchestra and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra under conductors including Hugh Wolff, Daniel Hege, David Lockington, Juanjo Mena and Yan Pascal Tortelier, in performances of Milhaud's *La création du monde*, Debussy's Rhapsody for Saxophone and Orchestra and Glazunov's Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra. He has also appeared with the orchestras of Annapolis, Bozeman, Harrisburg, Richmond, and the Washington Chamber Symphony, among others. In recital he has been presented by prestigious institutions from coast to coast including Alice Tully Hall, the Frick Collection, La Jolla Chamber Music Society, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Cleveland Museum of Art, the Phillips Collection, and the Kennedy Center. International performances have been given in Paris, Rome, Hong Kong, Spain, Russia and Germany. Highlights of Gary Louie's current season include the release of his first solo concerto CD featuring the St. Petersburg Symphony conducted by Vladimir Lande. He also records Bernstein's Mass with Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. An avid supporter and interpreter of contemporary music, Gary Louie is deeply involved in the commissioning and performing of new works for the saxophone. He has premiered new works by the distinguished composers William Albright, John Harbison, Lori Laitman and John Anthony Lennon. Gary Louie began serious studies on the saxophone with George Etheridge in Washington, DC, and went on to

study at the University of Michigan with the legendary saxophonist/teacher, Donald Sinta. He currently serves as Professor of Saxophone at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University.

## EVELYN ELSING

Cellist Evelyn Elsing received degrees from the University of Michigan, where she was awarded the university's highest honor to a performer, the Stanley Medal. She later participated in the Professional Studies Program at The Juilliard School. Ms Elsing has been a member of the faculty at the University of Maryland since 1974 and is the first recipient of the Barbara K. Steppel Memorial Faculty Fellowship in Cello in the School of Music. Ms. Elsing has garnered recognitions as a prizewinner in the Munich Cello Competition, a finalist in the Tchaikovsky Competition, and a prizewinner in the International String Competition sponsored by the Friday Morning Music Club in Washington, DC. She is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Recital Soloist Grant and a Certificate of Merit from the American String Teachers Association. Ms. Elsing has collaborated with the Cleveland, Guarneri, and Muir Quartets. She is a founding member of the Ecco Trio, a piano trio with whom she has toured Japan and the United States. She has performed at such venues as Dvorak Hall in Prague, Salle Pleyel in Paris, the Festspielhaus in Vienna, Tchaikovsky Hall in Moscow, San Marco Cathedral in Venice, Alice Tully Hall, the Library of Congress, Phillips Collection, and the Kennedy Center among others. She has participated in the summer festivals throughout the U.S. and abroad. For fifteen years, Ms. Elsing was principal cellist of the Handel Festival Orchestra, and she was a regular performer with the historic Theater Chamber Players, birthplace of the Left Bank Quartet. She is a founding member and Co-Artistic Director, with David Salness, of the Left Bank Concert Society. She has recorded for the AmCam and Fontec labels, and her performances have been broadcast on National Public Radio.