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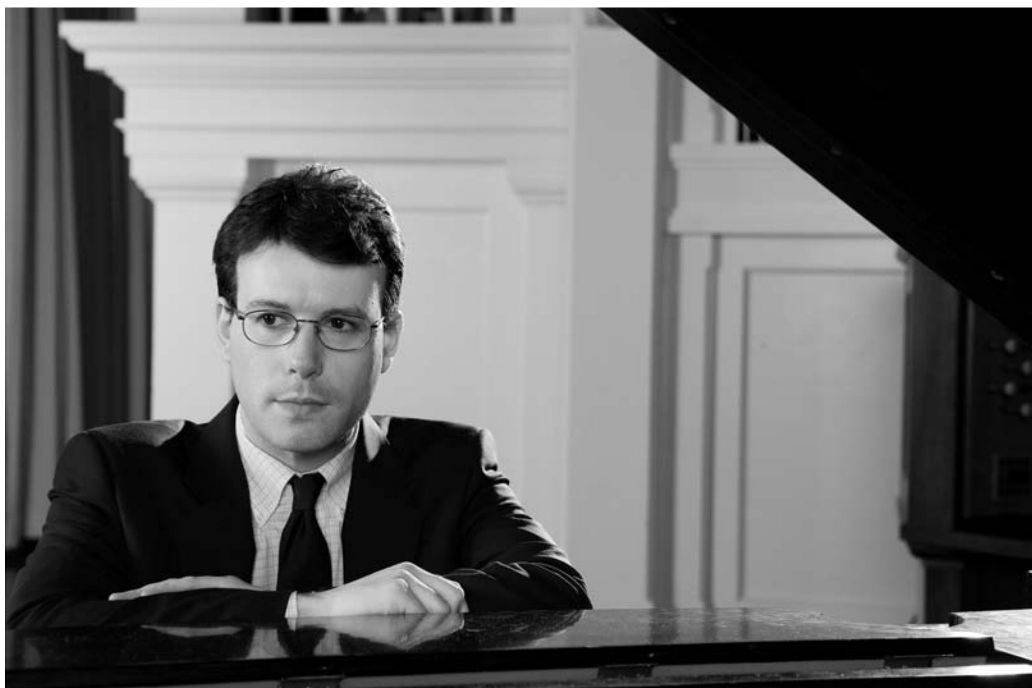

The Composer Michael Hersch in 2007

Susan Forscher Weiss

ON THE LIFE OF A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY COMPOSER: MICHAEL HERSCH

Three years after his solo-piano work *The Vanishing Pavilions* appeared, Michael Hersch unveiled *Last Autumn*, Part II of his massive trilogy, in October 2009 at St. Mark's Church in Philadelphia. The unusual instrumentation, for French horn and cello, was written for cellist Daniel Gaisford and the composer's hornist brother, Jamie (co-principal of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra). The music critic of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, David Patrick Stearns, a long-time follower of Hersch's music, in an article published before the premier, prepared his readers for hearing a work lacking "typical points of reference" that leave "listeners further unmoored from what they know." He added, "Music with such ambiguous destinations can be frightening."

The piece premiered on a rainy autumn evening in a church filled with musicians and music lovers eager for this major new work by a composer many of them knew personally. In the program notes, Aaron Grad provided some background to the composition, remarking that Hersch entrusted the score to two of the very few musicians in the world who could rise to its ferocious challenges. The forty-one movements, more than half in Book I and the remainder in Book II, were performed with a single intermission between the two. Unlike books of preludes written by Chopin or Debussy, where there may be little or no perceived connection between pieces (enabling performances of single preludes), the movements of Hersch's composition seem to connect in ways that require a hearing of the whole. Several movements from Book I recur almost verbatim in Book II (such as Lullabys

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I and II, and Scherzo [B]). At least one other movement from Book I—March, number IX—returns, slightly altered as XXV in Book II.

Words like ferocity, intensity, urgency, and uncertainty come to mind when listening to *Last Autumn*. Both instrumentalists showed meticulous technical command: The cellist executed triple and quadruple stops, extraordinary leaps and wide ranges with little or no time for preparation, sustained bowings, and rapid passagework. The composer's brother on French horn dazzled the audience with his mastery of this most unforgiving instrument. This was not virtuosity for its own sake, but a new kind of playing that combined the meeting of technical challenges with an overarching expressivity that, for the listeners, almost made the complexities fade away.

Complex chordal structures and clusters (pitch simultaneities in close proximity, although not necessarily purely chromatic ones) permeate Hersch's massive solo-piano cycle, *The Vanishing Pavilions.* The composer premiered the piece from memory in the autumn of 2006 at Saint Mark's Church in Philadelphia. The composition of this two-and-one-half-hour work—a score of some 350 pages—had occupied most of Hersch's time between 2001 and 2005. Writing about the premiere, David Patrick Stearns noted:

> The evening felt downright historic. [Hersch] conjured volcanic gestures from the piano with astonishing virtuosity. Everything unfolds in open-ended, haiku-like eruptions, though built on ideas that recur throughout the 50 movements, from a lamenting, chant-like melody to passages of such speed and density you'd think the complete works of Franz Liszt were played simultaneously within three minutes. Overtly or covertly, *The Vanishing Pavilions* is about the destruction of shelter (both in fact and in concept) and life amid the absence of any certainty. And though the music is as deeply troubled as can be, its restless directness also commands listeners not to be paralyzed by existential futility.

The Vanishing Pavilions was released as a double-CD set on the Vanguard Classics label in 2007.

Christopher Theofanidis, a composer colleague and friend of Hersch's, describes the experience of listening to *The Vanishing Pavilions*: "I usually listen in single sittings, but sometimes in bits and pieces. I am always cognizant of Hersch's formal rigor, not in the usual way, i.e., developmental, but more modernistic in terms of relationship of materials. There is a juxtaposition of something violently virtuosic and something Spartan. If you are not following the line you could be shocked. There is a volatility from movement to movement. It is very personal. . . ."

The Vanishing Pavilions is also divided into two books. The first has twenty-seven movements framed by a Prelude and closing *Intermezzo* J and interspersed with nine additional *Intermezzi* (A–I). Book II has twenty-three movements separated by nine *Intermezzi* (K–S) followed by a repetition of *Intermezzo* Q. While the *Intermezzi* have no known relationship to any text, they provide an opportunity to come up for air. Hersch composed most of the other movements as companion pieces to poems by Christopher Middleton, a former professor of modern languages at the University of Texas at Austin. The inspiration for this collaboration came in 2001 when Hersch and Middleton were fellows at the American Academy in Berlin.

The following poem comes near the end of movement number twenty eight, the first movement of Book II:

Spectres, vast, remote
Uneasily wagging their head
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 the 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.

[*The Vanishing Pavilions*, No. 28 (Musical example 1 and Figure 1). To hear the musical examples in this essay, go to the magazine's website on Project Muse at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_hopkins_review. Or go to <thehopkinsreview.com>]

The score itself is a kind of *augenmusik*, depicting the contrary motion of clusters beginning far apart, hardly audible to each other, but growing more intense as they come closer together. Hersch calls for "ever-increasing intensity" as chord clusters grind one after another, eventually bursting into shooting scales before resolving into silence. The imagery of Middleton's poetry is clear. Hersch's chords, spaced as they are in time, evoke vast, remote spectres. Changing meters and the appearance of notes heavily weighted down by accidentals pair with the irregularity of Middleton's words. Hersch conveys musically the absence of certainty in a most precise and economic way. The textures are predominantly chordal, punctuated by the occasional single note, and *glissandi* that are actually dazzling scalar passages requiring complex fingering rather than a one-finger slide across the keys. The movement, less than eighty measures long, takes a little over eight minutes to perform. It is hard to think of more than a handful of artists, aside from the composer, who would be able to carry it off successfully.

This recalls Theofanidis's contention that while "in *The Vanishing Pavilions*, there is a sense of the space it occupies; it is also clear that it represents a single person in dialogue with himself. The listener

must begin with a premise that involves a different way of thinking about materials. As a listener we need to observe a struggle between the artist and environment. I think he has always been writing for himself. . . . I just read Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Rand explores the basic integrity of an artist who struggles with questions and answers only to himself. Most composers' compositions are modulated by influences from the outside world. Michael begins with his own internal struggle."

Hersch achieves this organically within a classical framework, with every part related to the whole. A number of the pieces are unified by repetitive structures, and some movements contain hints of the overall formal design through complete or partial recapitulations, as, for example, in movement number thirty, that follows *Intermezzo* J and is paired with Middleton's poem:

> I see two doves, first one
> And then the other fell
>
> And as the story ended—
> "Nightmares hounding him. . . ."
>
> Hardly having touched the ground
> Back up again they flew.

The music surges upward by leaps and then descends, depicting the dove in flight (*The Vanishing Pavilions*, no. 30 [Musical example 2 and Figure 2]).

* * *

Born in Washington, D.C. in 1971, Michael Hersch, one of three sons, was raised in Virginia by his mother, a writer, and his father, a businessman. Growing up, there was not much music in the household: "When Michael and I were very young," his brother Jamie recalls, "during our long, weekly car trips home from our farm, my mother, father, Michael and I would listen to Casey Kasem's *America's*

Top 40. I remember very clearly that Michael would be singing along with . . . every song that came up. I could not understand how he seemed to always know them by heart. . . . Without multiple exposures, it is hard enough for most people to remember a refrain, much less the entire song. And it was not just one song, it was every song. He would be the only one singing in the car most of the time because we were unable to keep up with Michael. It became obvious to me that he could memorize a song upon first hearing."

After years of spurning Jamie's efforts to get him to listen to classical music, Michael finally relented: "Shortly after Michael graduated high school," Jamie recalls, "I gave him a tape of the Beethoven Fifth Symphony with George Solti conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra which I had recorded off of public TV. Michael did not know the classical canon. He was enthralled." Around this time the Hersch household bought its first piano: "Michael immediately began teaching himself to play, every day, sometimes all day long. It soon became apparent he had perfect pitch . . . he could casually name anything and everything I would push down. It got to the point where I would just fool around and smash the piano with my forearms, and Michael's voice would call out from some distant part of the house, announcing to anyone who was listening, every note I had struck, in perfect sequence. . . . I soon saw that Michael was becoming overwhelmed by compositions he was forming in his own mind" and that he had to "learn the written language of music as soon as possible simply . . . to release the explosion of creativity building inside his head."

Hersch began his formal studies at the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore. Despite starting his musical training late by conventional standards, his talent was immediately recognized. Dr. Vern Falby recalls, "I began to hear rumors of Michael's abilities from colleagues well before he appeared in my Music Theory III class in the Fall of 1994." Hersch's mentor, the composer George Rochberg (1918–2005), writing in 1996 of the then twenty-four-year-old com-

poser, called him "a rare and unique talent . . . His music sounds the dark places of the human heart and soul. The inherent drama of his work is remarkable for being completely unselfconscious, unstudied and powerful in its projection, convinced and convincing. His 'voice,' his 'signature' is already unmistakably there."

Hersch supplemented his years at Peabody with studies at the Moscow Conservatory in Russia and as a fellow at the Tanglewood Institute. He first came to wider attention in 1997, when at twenty-five he became one of the youngest composers ever awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. That same year, Marin Alsop, now conductor of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, was a member of the jury that selected Hersch for a first prize in the American Composers Awards. The honor resulted in a performance of his early symphonic work, *Elegy,* conducted by Alsop at Alice Tully Hall. Hersch's one-movement *Symphony No. 1* (Musical example 3), written in 1998, and premiered by the Dallas Symphony in the following year, evokes comparison with his Viennese precursors. Other works written when the composer was still in his twenties show his grounding in classical styles and forms, as well as his homage to twentieth-century masters, such as Mahler and Alban Berg. Still, even Hersch's earliest works give evidence of an original voice.

Hersch is also considered among the world's most formidable pianists. His public debut took place in Carnegie Recital Hall in 1999. Hersch and fellow composer Jason Eckardt had both received commissions from Carnegie Hall. Eckardt recalls that

> as part of the commission we were asked to coach pieces that we had written in open rehearsals. As it happened, the pianist for Michael's *Piano Quartet* had dropped out, and Michael stepped in to play the part himself. When Michael played, it was clear that he was very technically accomplished, as the writing in his piece was quite virtuosic. But what really impressed me was his command of the music and the musical ideas of his work. I was startled when, without the music, Michael would rehearse and be able to recall from memory not just entire passages but also

> the specific music that occurred at a particular measure number that another performer would use as a point of reference during practice. For the performance, Michael played the complete piece—which was quite long—from memory and with bravura. It never occurred to me that Michael did any of these things to impress the audience or his colleagues but rather were just a natural extension of his musicality.

Several years after returning to Peabody to complete his studies, Hersch won the Rome Prize in 2000 and the following year, the coveted Berlin Prize. These prizes allowed him to spend the next few years in Europe. As a composer, by the late 'nineties he was gaining international recognition. As a performer, however, he had yet to make a public debut. Despite virtuosic facility, he did not consider himself a performer. Gaisford recalls that Hersch "didn't really even claim to be a pianist. I don't think he had even given a public performance when we first met."

In 2000 Hersch met his wife Karen, also a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. It was around this same time that he met Daniel Gaisford who had come across the *Sonata No. 1 for Unaccompanied Cello* (Musical example 4), a work Hersch completed in college. Gaisford devoted himself to learning the fearsomely difficult piece over the following year and soon became the foremost interpreter of Hersch's cello works. From 2001 to 2004, Hersch and Gaisford performed in Europe and the U.S. They would split programs, with Hersch performing various solo works and Gaisford performing Bach Suites paired with one of Hersch's two sonatas for unaccompanied cello. They would also perform some of Hersch's songs in arrangements for cello and piano. The *Sonata No. 2 for Unaccompanied Cello* (2000) was dedicated to Gaisford. The commitment that Gaisford has made to Hersch's work has not always been an easy one: "[His] music takes a long time to live with. It requires serious concentration and study to really digest what it's all about. And I don't think that even after several performances one really, truly, knows the music the way" a person will "if they spend years with it. I know from experience."

Hersch recognizes that his performances of his own works constitute their most authoritative accounts, but even so, he remains ambivalent about performing. Although he has appeared as a pianist at Carnegie Recital Hall, Merkin Concert Hall, New York's 92nd St. Y, the Van Cliburn Foundation, and the Romaeuropa Series, these appearances are infrequent. He reserves public performance mostly for premieres. These are usually given in small settings. And yet, in spite of this relatively low profile, he is considered one of our most gifted pianists, an artist at home in a repertoire stretching from Byrd to Boulez.

The premiere in August 2002 at the Schloss Neuhardenberg Festival in Brandenberg of his *Octet for Strings*, commissioned by Boris Pergamenschikow and the Kronberg Akademie, led to a performance at the Philharmonie in Berlin. In 2003 Hersch's first commercial recording, *Michael Hersch: Chamber Music,* was released on Vanguard Classics featuring the *Octet* performed by members of the Berlin Philharmonic. This disc also marked his recording debut as a pianist, performing his *Two Pieces for Piano* and *Recordatio* (in memory of Luciano Berio). The recording would be the first in a series for the label, a relationship that continues to this day. In the *Octet*, Hersch first explored an evolving harmonic language that was to be the cornerstone of his works over the last ten years. Hersch has called this work a "pivot point" leading to his mature style. The tone of the *Octet* and recent works departs from the more triadic sound of his earlier works. In place of conventional harmonic chords, this work explores an innovative technique that might best be described as complex clusters of vertical sonorities (Musical example 5).

In addition to his solo and chamber music, Hersch's orchestral works have garnered international attention. In late 2002, his *Piano Concerto*, commissioned by Garrick Ohlsson and the orchestras of St. Louis, Oregon and Pittsburgh, was premiered in St. Louis. Over the past decade his music has been conducted by Mariss Jansons, Robert Spano, Alan Gilbert, Marin Alsop, James DePriest, Carlos Kalmar, and

Gerard Schwarz. Hersch developed a particularly close relationship with Mariss Jansons (now conductor of the Royal Concertgeboeuw Orchestra in Amsterdam) and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, which appointed Hersch its resident composer for the 2002–2003 season. By then he had completed three works for the orchestra including *Ashes of Memory* (2000), and his *Symphony No. 2* (2001).

Leading the Bournemouth Symphony, Marin Alsop recorded Hersch's first two symphonies, as well as two other orchestral works, *Fracta* (2002) and *Arraché* (2004). *Arraché* was commissioned by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for the opening of its new concert hall at Strathmore, and it was premiered by conductor Yuri Temirkanov in 2005. *Arraché*—"torn away"—was inspired by media reports of the "terrifying, wrenching events" of the hostage crisis in Iraq in the summer of 2004. The work contains hallmarks of Hersch's mature musical style, first explored in his *Octet for Strings*—a style deemed brooding, angular, compelling, and aggressive. His signature clustered harmonies move from their first presentation in muted strings (Musical example 6) to a woodwinds chorale that breaks off or is "torn" from the mood of reflection and prayer into fury and complex counterpoint—a frightening quadruple fugue (Musical example 7). The work concludes with a quotation from the beginning and a sense of qualified calm. The imagery and range of feeling are accomplished without the instrumental colors provided by percussion. That critics did not uniformly praise the initial performance of *Arraché* is not surprising. Hersch's works of the last decade require multiple hearings; a single hearing will not suffice.

In 2004 a work for violin and piano, *the wreckage of flowers: twenty-one pieces after poetry and prose of Czeslaw Milosz* (2003), commissioned by the violinist Midori, was performed in Lisbon, London, and New York. Hersch has called this work "a shattered song cycle without words." The work channels *The Vanishing Pavilions,* albeit on a smaller scale. In the fall of 2009, Vanguard Classics released a recording of Hersch's *Sonatas Nos. 1 & 2 for Unaccompanied Cello*, performed by

Daniel Gaisford. This year Vanguard releases the second in a series of recordings of Hersch's works for strings, a disc that includes *the wreckage of flowers* (Musical example 8).

In August 2010 *The Financial Times of London* reviewed Hersch's *Symphony No. 3*, performed at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music and conducted by its Music Director, Marin Alsop: "Hersch seems to have carved his *Symphony No. 3* with granitic force," wrote the reviewer. "He has cast it in two large movements, surrounding five brief interludes; the dense harmonies, forbidding instrumental detail and sensation of inexorability seem not to have fazed the 83-member festival orchestra. The strings brood, the brass rages and, once in a while, you encounter a consonance with the sweetness of honey. Hersch provides a few moments of relief. Before he plunges into the tumultuous finale, he offers a short episode of broken phrases, and the silences between them leave you breathless."

Some would argue that Hersch's music has moved from an expansive romantic style, to one that, while still teeming with passion, finds itself in a wholly new place. His earlier works met with widespread acclaim, but some critics have suggested that their large romantic sweep obscures detail. That lack of attention to detail, if accurate, is certainly no longer the case. Theofanidis believes that while "Hersch has always been writing for himself, . . . the language he was using didn't allow for the personal quality heard in a work like *The Vanishing Pavilions*. The juxtaposition of materials and the actual harmonic language may sound 'clustery' to the average listener, but these are not merely massed sounds. Hersch chooses his sonorities with great exquisite care. One word that describes the approach is hyperclarity."

Hersch now writes with a precision that situates meticulous details within a dramatic, turbulent soundscape. Intense chromatic sonorities, an avoidance of the predictable, and an economy of musical language are the marks of his mature style as he works with blocks of material that keep the form buoyant and interesting. Theofanidis observes that "the pieces are gigantic . . . works conceived on an astonishing scale.

Nobody I know has had that kind of ambition and can achieve this high level of artistry." But because of their length and difficulty these pieces are rarely programmed. It is not uncommon for audiences, and even other composers and musicians, to question why a composer would write music that has little chance of being heard. But according to Theofanidis, Hersch "doesn't follow trends. They don't constitute meaning to him. They remain subservient to the music itself." When asked if he could find a model for a work like *The Vanishing Pavilions,* Theofanidis suggests Liszt in his *Années de pèlerinage,* "if Liszt had written them linearly at one time and not, as he did, spread out over years." As Theofanidis has said, listening to Hersch involves "a different way of thinking about materials."

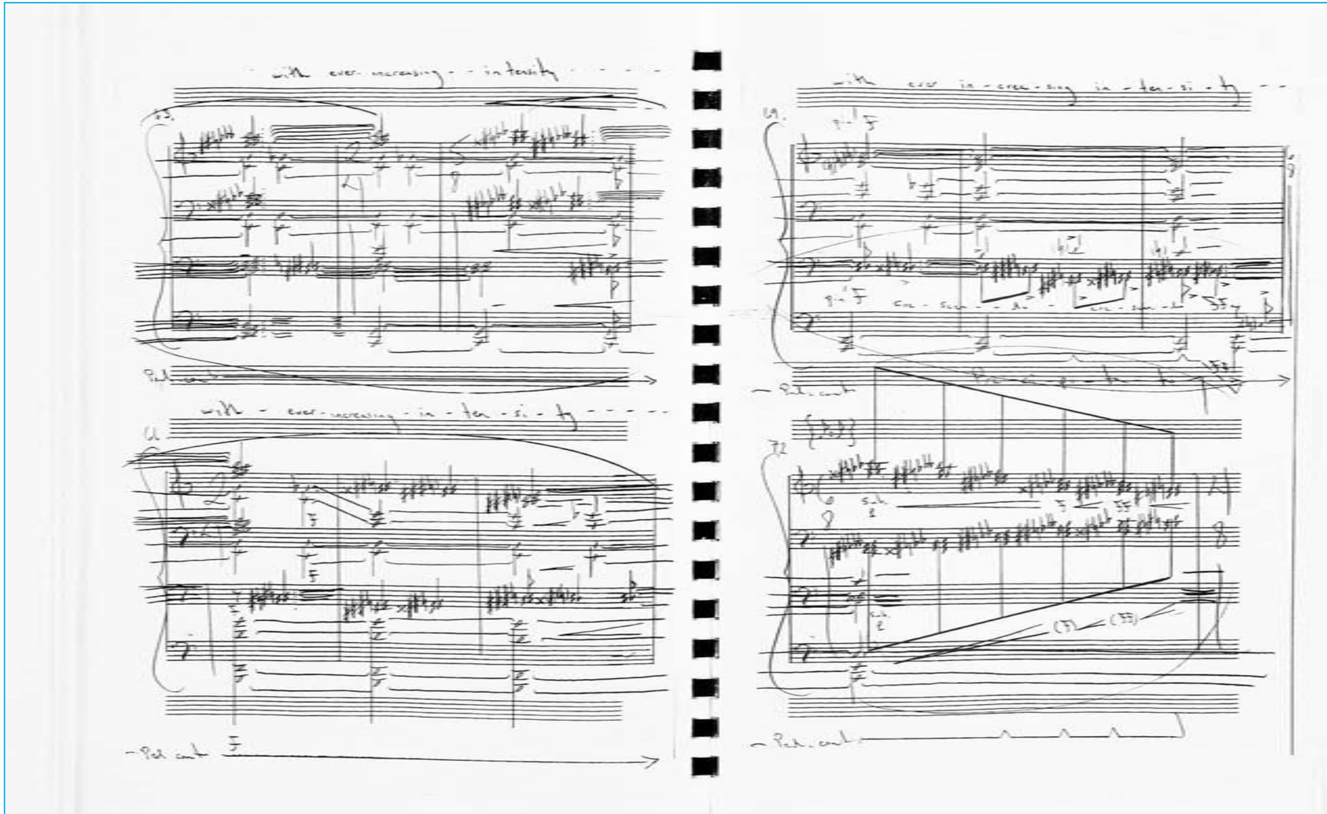

Figure 1.

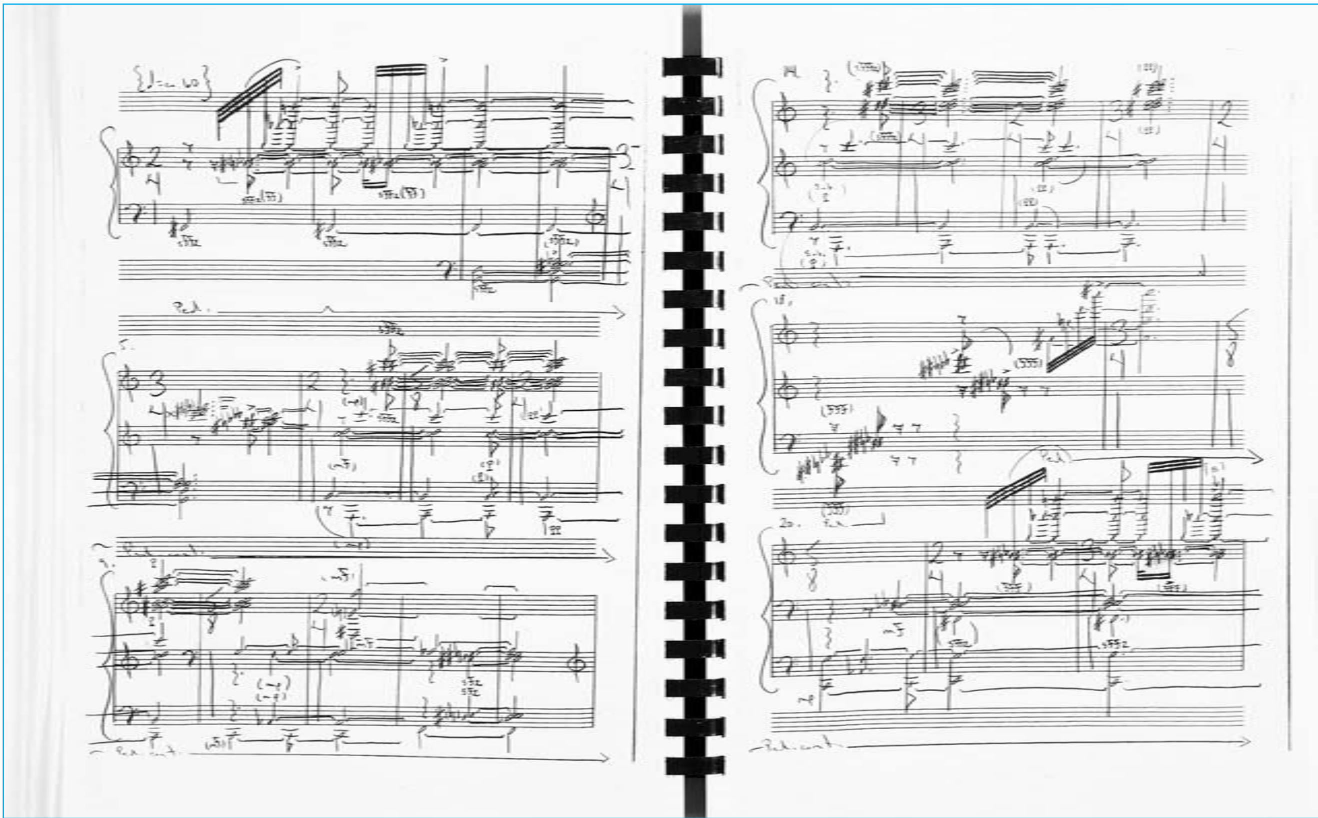

Figure 2.