

PARALLELS AND DIVERGENCES: THREE CASE STUDIES IN THE MUSIC OF MICHAEL HERSCH

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Abstract: This article focuses on three recent works by the American composer Michael Hersch: *the script of storms* (2018), for soprano and orchestra, the chamber opera *Poppaea* (2019) and the 11-hour trilogy of works that have the overall title *sew me into a shroud of leaves* (2001–16). A discussion of aspects of these three scores will consider Hersch's deployment of a stylistically consistent musical language, his involvement with the work of the writers Fawsi Karim and Christopher Middleton and his articulation of often substantial spans of time.

Imagine opening a door. It looks like all the other doors, so it is reasonable to expect that it will open into a space of similar dimensions, revealing a more or less familiar range of things, arranged in a more or less familiar way. Getting to know the work of a musician is often like this: a particular piece provides the portal and from there one moves around, listening to first this, then that, making comparisons, getting to know what to expect. Now imagine instead that the door opens into a space whose dimensions seem, at least at first, to defy comprehension. Again there are familiar things, but some of them are of a size that seems to transcend the available space. For me, over the last three years, this has been the experience of trying to get to know the work of the American composer Michael Hersch.

The elegant website¹ devoted to Hersch's music lists over 60 works, divided into the usual classical categories of chamber music, opera and so on, but with an extra category, *sew me into a shroud of leaves*, of which more later; the earliest of the works listed was written in 1993 and the majority date from the present century. At first sight this may seem like a normal rate of production, but closer examination quickly reveals that the scale of most of these works is unusual: few last less than 20 minutes, many run for over half an hour and a handful take up an hour or more. Sometimes the longer durations are unsurprising, given the genre – one might well expect that operas (*On the Threshold of Night* (2012) and *Poppaea* (2019)) would fill most of an evening, or that a Piano Concerto (2002) or Violin Concerto (2015) would play for around 35 minutes – but other works occupy much more

¹ <https://michaelhersch.com> (accessed 22 November 2022).

time than is usual: the violin and piano duo *Zwischen Leben und Tod* (2013) is 100 minutes long; the string quartet *Images from a closed ward* 65 minutes.

Long works for the concert hall are, of course, not a new phenomenon: in the 1960s and 70s composers as various as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Éliane Radigue and Philip Glass all found different ways to organise music over extended periods of time; in the 1980s Morton Feldman's late works inspired a cult of duration that continues to have many loyal followers. What is unusual about Michael Hersch's long works, however, is that their mode of discourse is much more active than that in *Stimmung*, *Psi 847* or *Piano and String Quartet*. Hersch's music divides its long durations into short units, each rarely more than ten minutes long, and it is music full of dramatic contrast. This in turn changes the way in which Hersch's long works are experienced, something I will consider more carefully in the latter stages of this article.

Michael Hersch was born in Washington DC in 1971 and chose in his late teens to follow the example of his younger brother, the horn-player Jamie Hersch, and devote himself to music. He studied at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, where his principal teacher was Morris Cotel; other composers who also influenced his early development include a number of the most distinguished figures in American contemporary classical music: John Corigliano, George Rochberg and Christopher Rouse. He quickly established a reputation as, in the words of Rochberg, 'a rare and unique talent',² and his *Elegy* won the 1997 American Composers Prize, the first in an impressive series of awards that includes a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Rome Prize and the Goddard Lieberson Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Subsequently his work has attracted considerable attention on both sides of the Atlantic, with commissions and premieres by major American orchestras, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Aldeburgh Festival and Wien Modern. He is now a senior member of the composition department at the Peabody.

In this article I have chosen, for reasons that I will explain more fully later, not to follow the linear chronology of Hersch's output but instead to begin with a discussion of a relatively recent work, *the script of storms* (2018). On its title page the composer categorises the work as 'songs for soprano and orchestra after poems by Fawzi Karim', and the work was initially commissioned by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, although its first performance was eventually given on 14 February 2020 by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Tito Muñoz, with Ah Young Hong (a regular Hersch collaborator) as the soprano soloist, in a concert in the BBC's Maida Vale Studios. There are nine movements and in the recording of the London premiere, now available as part of a digital album from New Focus Recordings,³ the work lasts a little over 26 minutes.

Fawzi Karim (1945–2019) was an Iraqi poet who wrote in Arabic; in *the script of storms* Hersch sets his poems in English versions by Anthony Howell, based on translations by Abbas Kadhim. The poems chosen by Hersch confront the horrors of the coup d'état in Iraq on 14 July 1958 in which the British-backed regime was

² Quoted in Tim Page, 'The Natural', *Washington Post*, 4 July 1999, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1999/07/04/the-natural/3d46d089-21b5-407e-8b74-b2d1a95037f4/ (accessed 11 November 2022).

³ Michael Hersch, *the script of storms*. 2022, New Focus Recordings, fcr344, <https://newfocusrecordings.bandcamp.com/album/the-script-of-storms>.

overthrown and the Hashemite monarchy replaced by a republic. As a teenager in Baghdad Karim lived through the coup and witnessed the charred, dismembered remains of the former prime minister Nuri El-Said hanging from a bridge in the city. Images from that trauma run through the texts that Hersch sets in *the script of storms*: ‘now I smell the roasting of a thigh’ (in the first poem); ‘on the river’s bank there’s a death squad ten strong’ (in the fifth poem); ‘Be frightened, brother. I am’ (in the eighth poem). Even those passages that are less brutally direct are haunted by metaphors of death, absence, loss: in the third song the narrator peers ‘down on the city / Its roofs are stacked with the nests of storks. . . now it’s clear that the city looks more like a corpse’; in the final song he concludes that ‘You can’t get away from the sight of those mouths where the breath is stilled.’

It is possible to imagine a response to these poems in which the grim scenes that they depict could have become the subject of the music, but Hersch’s interest is in how Karim distils trauma into poetic expression, and it could be argued that in *the script of storms* it is Karim’s poetic sensibility that becomes the music’s main subject. In the first song, for example, the complete text reads thus:

The eye turns black. . .
 I was born in a mellower year,
 A year when people still paused at the smell of corpses.
 Now I smell the roasting of a thigh. . .
 He pours on more kerosene
 And the fire glows and the smell of flesh gets stronger.
 . . . my father said, ‘Whoever goes sniffing out corpses would want to be
 rid of their stench.’
 But it was a mellower year;
 A year when people still paused.
 A year that saw the barrier go down between me and that smell.

The central image of the smell of burning corpses is framed by the reflection that this was ‘a mellower year’, when ‘people still paused at the smell’, and Hersch’s setting similarly deploys framing devices. The most striking of these is a series of strident flourishes in the woodwind and trumpets, first heard in bar 20 (see [Example 1](#)), and immediately followed by the soprano intoning on a low E, ‘Now I smell the roasting of corpses’. The flourishes appear again in bar 36, this time following the words ‘and the smell of flesh gets stronger’. These juxtapositions reveal Hersch’s gift for dramatic contrast but they also demonstrate that he is too sophisticated a composer to match music to text exactly: the first appearance of the ‘mellow year’ phrase is sung to a turning figure at the top of the staff (see [Example 2](#)) but when it recurs it is spoken.

Karim’s representation of the awful events of 1958 consistently switch back and forth between the events themselves and their witnesses, primarily the teenage poet himself but also a more remote ‘you’, who is perhaps the reader, perhaps the contemporary world beyond Iraq. As he observes in the words of the fourth song:

Although you see in our cities ruins and skeletons,
 We are not victims of some past epidemic.
 Nor were we ever fodder for lost wars.
 No, we are your mirror.

Hersch’s music similarly switches between different modes of articulation. As I suggested earlier, these can be heard as conventional dramatic contrasts – loud music follows soft, sparse textures follow dense, high registers follow low – but they can also be heard as a transcription of Karim’s poetic method into sound. Nor is this confined to

Example 1: Musical score for woodwinds and brass, bar 20. The score includes parts for Piccolo (Pic.), Flute 1 & 2 (Fl. 1.2), Oboe 1 & 2 (Ob. 1.2), Clarinet 1 & 2 (Cl. 1.2), Bassoon 1 & 2 (B. Cl. 1.2), Contrabassoon (Cbss.), Horns 1.3 and 2.4 (Hn. 1.3, Hn. 2.4), Trumpets 1.2 and 2.1 (Tpt. 1.2, Tpt. 2.1), and Trombones 1.2 and 3 (Trbn. 1.2, Trbn. 3). The woodwinds and brass parts are highly active, featuring complex rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings such as *ff* and *mp*.

Example 1:
Michael Hersch, *the script of storms*,
bar 20 (woodwinds and brass only).

Example 2: Musical score for soprano, bars 9–13. The score is in 4/4 time and features a melodic line with dynamic markings *mp* and *f*. The lyrics are: "I was born in _____ a mel-low - er year".

Example 2:
Michael Hersch, *the script of storms*,
bars 9–13 (soprano only).

the internal organisation of individual movements: across the cycle as a whole Hersch creates a number of different sorts of musical continuity. After the vivid oppositions of the opening movement, the third movement, with its extraordinary bird's-eye view of the roofs of Baghdad, is more evenly paced, the soprano floating through an orchestral skyscape that is full of space.

Time also plays a significant role in the cycle. Three short songs (II, IV and VII), each only a little more than a minute long, intersperse five songs (I, II, V, VIII and IX) that last between 3'30" and 5'02"; the third song lasts 2'13".⁴ As an exercise in temporal architecture it is beautifully satisfactory, with longer spans framing shorter ones, but Hersch's music deliberately sets out to disturb our sense of the passage of time. Song IV, for example, seems to contain much more than its immediate predecessor, because its orchestral imagery is more violent and the soprano's delivery of the text more rapid. In the same way the final song, already the longest in the whole cycle, feels longer still because in setting a poem that includes the words 'The silence is sour, and remote as some fountain of wool', Hersch temporarily abandons music, leaving the soprano to intone

⁴ These timings are taken from the BBC Symphony Orchestra premiere recording on the New Focus label.

the text unaccompanied. It is as if, without the music's narrative momentum, time has been suspended.

the script of storms is a considerable achievement and a fitting response to Fawzi Karim's poetry. What is perhaps especially striking is the directness with which Hersch's music speaks to us, in an era when many composers of contemporary classical music see the very notion of music 'speaking' as at least conditional and, more probably, entirely problematic. I was present at the Maida Vale premiere of the work and its impact on me triggered this article. I wanted to discover why the music had made such a powerful impression and to what extent this went beyond Hersch's spectacular command of orchestral colour and Ah Young Hong's compelling account of the solo soprano part.

More time with score and recording has convinced me that *the script of storms* is a work in which musical vocabulary and subject matter are perfectly matched. Fawzi Karim wrote about conflict in Iraq but his writing was mediated through a poetic sensibility that was contingent on twentieth-century European modernism, appropriately so since the political turmoil about which he was writing was fuelled by the geo-political interests of western European nations and the US. In turn Hersch's musical vocabulary is unapologetically modernist in its abrasive dissonance and its violent timbral contrasts, even if that modernist sensibility is sometimes leavened with conjunct figurations and recurring pitch centres. In going on to discuss the opera *Poppaea*, the work that Hersch wrote immediately after *the script of storms*, I want to consider how this vocabulary translates from the drama implicit in an orchestral song cycle whose subject is a mid-twentieth-century coup d'état to the explicit drama of a stage-work that explores passion, intrigue and betrayal among the ruling elite of the Roman Empire, 2,000 years earlier.

Poppaea was premiered on 10 September 2021 in Don Bosco, Basel as part of the Zeit Räume Biennale, and after a second performance in Basel the production then ran from 5–7 November in the 2021 Wien Modern festival. The work is cast in a single act, lasting about 110 minutes, and centres on Poppaea (a soprano – played by Ah Young Hong in this production), Nero (a tenor or baritone) and his first wife, Octavia (mezzo-soprano), with a supporting cast of three handmaidens (two sopranos and a mezzo-soprano) and an all-female chorus (again sopranos and mezzo-sopranos). A chamber orchestra (18 players, the unusual elements being bass clarinet, contrabassoon and two alto saxophones) accompanies the action.

When familiar opera subjects are repurposed it is useful to consider why they have been chosen for a new telling. Each of the many versions of the Orpheus legend reinvented music's foundation myth for the sensibilities of their own time; Nicolai, Verdi and Vaughan Williams cast Falstaffian masculinity as variously foolish, wily or avuncular; Wolfgang Rihm's *Oedipus* stripped away the epic framing of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* to offer instead a post-Freudian analysis of the characters of the drama; and in *Poppaea* Hersch and his librettist, Stephanie Fleischmann, offer brutal new perspectives on the events first seen in operatic form in Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*.

Monteverdi's opera sets a libretto by Francesco Busenello that is, as many commentators have observed, strikingly amoral in its depiction of desire, adultery and betrayal. Nero is married to Ottavia, but loves Poppea, who is married to Ottone; yet by the end of the opera, Ottone and Ottavia have been exiled and Nero and Poppea are bound together in mutual delight. The amorality of *L'incoronazione*

di Poppea is justified by a prologue in which Virtue, Fortune and Love debate which of them holds sway over humanity; in the three acts that follow, Nero and Poppea can do no more than play out Love's story. Four centuries later Fleischmann and Hersch chose instead to imagine Poppaea and Nero as active agents in their own lives and to confront the resultant emotional trauma. The result is a work in which horrible violence is predominant, the courtly machinations of Monteverdi's Poppea story replaced by a narrative in which the dreadful consequences of Nero and Poppaea's relationship are enacted.

Fleischmann and Hersch's *Poppaea* is told in flashback. The opera opens with a Prologue in which we see 'a man beating a pregnant woman, ferociously'; we don't yet know who they are but by the end of the opera we will have discovered that this is Nero beating Poppaea to death. The Prologue is followed by an instrumental Overture that extends and develops its savage musical imagery, establishing a vocabulary in which arabesques and fanfaring figures are constantly being set on edge by dissonance. The opening of Scene 2 demonstrates how this vocabulary is deployed (see [Example 3](#)). The opening flourish in the woodwind lands on a chromatic cluster that is matched by cluster chords in the piano and strings; the chorus respond with fanfare-like rhythms, singing harmonies full of semitonal clashes.

Not all the opera is like this and there are striking dramatic contrasts between the 12 scenes in which the drama unfolds. In Scene 6 Poppaea watches as Octavia is put to death and the music achieves a grotesque intimacy that we have not encountered before in the opera (see [Example 4](#)). Only Poppaea sings, reflecting on what she is watching, and for the first time the instrumentation is reduced to just a single violin and the piano, with momentary interventions from the oboe and percussion. 'Tell me, is death tender?' she sings, 'Is it reprieve?' In the midst of an opera whose music abounds in dramatic, colourful invention this brief restriction of means is chillingly effective, the stillness of the music in stark opposition to the horror of the stage action.

In the scenes that follow, Poppaea's fate is sealed. Her infant child is born, then dies, Rome burns, Nero abandons his duties as husband and emperor, then returns to the city to murder Poppaea, now pregnant again, in a scene that echoes the Prologue. The opera closes with the chorus of women's voices, who describe Nero's behaviour after Poppaea's death. At first they sing – 'There will be no funeral pyre for Nero's alabaster bride' – but as the story becomes more and more bizarre they lapse into whispers – 'He finds himself a look-alike, the boy Sporus. . . and they are wed.' It's a dramatic device that, rather surprisingly, echoes another 'Roman' opera, Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia*, but whereas that work offers a final, spurious Christian redemption, *Poppaea* ends with an epilogue in which music, but not words, have at last failed.

Every opera challenges its creators to explain why they have chosen this subject and this mode of representation at this moment in history. In an essay, 'Poppaea: On Empathy and Imagination', published on Michael Hersch's website, Stephanie Fleischmann considers these questions and, in particular, 'Whose story is this, really? Do I/we have the right to tell it? Will the culture in which it is presented be receptive to *our* telling? Will that culture *allow* this story to be told?' Her answer is that

In the case of *Poppaea*, we are attempting to witness, to investigate, this violence through the lens of ancient Rome, translocated to a kind of all-time. For the

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Scene 2: The Wedding

12 days later. The streets of Rome. Nero and Poppaea's wedding.
♩ = ca. 80

*All crescendos that occur over the course of a quarter note or less without a destination dynamic which rise from a dynamic of *mf* or greater, should be executed with a rise of approximately one dynamic level. If the following pitch does not have a dynamic indicated, then return to the previously indicated dynamic. If there is a crescendo without a destination dynamic which occurs over the course of a quarter note or less which rises from a dynamic of less than *mf*, then this should be executed as an unmeasured increase in volume. As before, if the following pitch does not have a dynamic indicated, then return to the previously indicated dynamic.*

Example 3:

Michael Hersch, *Poppaea*, Scene 2,
bars 1–10 (pp. 68–69).

desecration with *Poppaea* extends to the here and now, whether in the ravaging of our earth or the sexual transgressions that have been and are still being inflicted and uncovered within the context of ‘Me Too’ or in the psychic and physical abuse embedded in cultures and traditions everywhere.

She goes on to compare Nero to Donald Trump, who ‘threw childlike tantrums and “performed” his presidency in the manner of a reality TV show, mirroring Nero’s obsession with spectacle’.⁵ It’s a plausible argument for the appropriateness of a new version of the *Poppaea* story, although it leaves open the larger question that Catherine

⁵ <https://michaelhersch.com/works/program/poppaea-essay-Fleischmann.html> (accessed 22 November 2022).

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Fl. $\frac{2}{4}$ $\frac{3}{4}$ $\frac{4}{4}$ *ff* *ff* *ff*

Ob. *ff* *ff* *ff*

Cl. *ff* *ff* *ff*

B. Cl. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Alto Sax. I *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Alto Sax. II *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Bsn. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Chas. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Hrn. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Tpt. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Tbn. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Perc. *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff*

Pno. *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff*

Chorus I *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff*

Chorus II *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff*

Chorus III *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff* *ff*

Vln. I *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Vln. II *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Vla. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Vc. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Db. *p* *ff* *p* *ff* *p* *ff*

Swal-lows flood the sky. Fi-re and wa-ter have met. Ne-ro and his veiled bride wind their way.

Swal-lows flood the sky. Fi-re and wa-ter have met. Ne-ro and his veiled bride wind their way.

Swal-lows flood the sky. Fi-re and wa-ter have met. Ne-ro and his veiled bride wind their way.

Example 3:
Continued

Clément first posed in 1979: must opera always be about ‘the undoing of women’?⁶

In her essay Fleischmann also explains that she prepared herself for writing the libretto of *Poppaea* by steeping herself in Michael Hersch’s music, and, as part of this process, she attended the first complete performance of his 11-hour-long triptych, *sew me into a shroud of leaves*. It is, thus, perhaps appropriate to move on from *Poppaea* and to a

⁶ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, tr. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

80

whistle

pp

Oc - ta - vi - a

con sord., non sul pont.

pp

p

81

Meno mosso

$\text{♩} = 36$

pp

Do - you - see - me? What do

f

f

ff

rake quickly, violently, with hard object

24

$\frac{3}{4}$ bass dr. (concert)

$\frac{4}{4}$ Più mosso

$\text{♩} = 48$

mf

ff

pp

you see? Oc -

stop pitches resulting in a sound approximately 50% white noise, 50% indicated pitches

nat.

ff

nat.

p

nat.

pp

Set 1
strike all pitches inside piano
within this arco with palm of hand

28

mp

poco

mp

ta - vi - a. But - ter al - mond of a girl. Your -

arco sord. poco sul pont.

pp

mf

arco corda

82

mf

*sing Db in bars 29-30 then dropping down to the Cb in bars 31-33 on a short "u" sound (as in Octavio)

arco corda

** *note play 8th Ch bars 1-8 & of m. 29 through bar 1 of m. 33

Example 4:
Michael Hersch, *Poppaea*, Scene 6,
bars 20–32.

discussion of this epic work, even if the protocol of chronology suggests otherwise, especially as, it seems to me, *sew me into a shroud of leaves* is the work in which Hersch most completely reveals himself.

Indeed, how it could it be otherwise: it is at the extremes of human activity that we probably reveal ourselves most clearly, whether trying to encapsulate a wealth of experience in a single act – a poetic fragment, a penalty kick – or sustaining a mode of being far beyond what is considered normal – a marathon, an 11-hour concert work made up of 152 separate movements that took 15 years to complete. But how to write about something on this scale? The whole work is

available on Hersch's YouTube channel⁷ but here I can offer no more than a series of snapshots: an attempt to give some sense of the music that Hersch has created to fill this vast span of time and to consider what makes the project grand rather than merely grandiose.

sew me into a shroud of leaves is a trilogy: it begins with music for piano, *The Vanishing Pavilions*, continues with music for horn and cello, *Last Autumn*, and concludes with more music for piano, *one day may become menace*. Each part of the trilogy is itself a cycle of shorter pieces that are grouped into 'Books' – two in the first two parts (made up respectively of pieces 1–27 and 28–50 in *The Vanishing Pavilions*, pieces 51–72 and 73–91 in *Last Autumn*), three in the third (pieces 92–110, 111–130, 131–152) – and the composer suggests that there should be an intermission between each book. Each part is also related to the work of a different writer: Christopher Middleton (1926–2015) in *The Vanishing Pavilions*, W. G. Sebald (1944–2001) in *Last Autumn* and Marius Kociejowski (b. 1949) in *one day may become menace*. In the composer's programme notes each piece within the trilogy is associated with either a generic musical title (Intermezzo is used most frequently, but there are also Preludes, Lullabies, Marches, Psalms, Scherzos and Songs, a Chaconne, a Fragment, a Fugue and a Hymn) or a poetic text by the writer to whose work that part of the trilogy is related.

As I suggested earlier, extreme activity can be particularly revealing, and in composing *sew me into a shroud of leaves* Hersch seems to have chosen ways of working with which he was comfortable. Often these are quite straightforward: the division of time across *The Vanishing Pavilions* sets up a quite distinct structural rhythm in which movements that last around two minutes are followed by movements that last about one minute (movements 1–6). After that the sequence of durations becomes more varied but the one- or two-minute tactus remains the default. There are some exceptions – 16 of the movements are longer than three minutes, of which movements 26, 28 and 41 are the longest, with durations of 10'18", 8'38" and 8'49" respectively (all the timings given here are taken from Hersch's 2007 recording of the complete work) – but the overall sense of the passage of time through the cycle feels measured, reliable.

Less comfortable, measured and reliable are the expressive concerns of this music. When I asked Hersch about his work on *The Vanishing Pavilions* he pointed out that he had begun 'the first part of 'sew me into a shroud of leaves' in the days just after September 11, 2001', the day when the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York were destroyed in a terrorist attack, although he went on to say that 'what impact, if any, the events of that day had on the work I cannot say with confidence'.⁸ He also added that this initiated a period in his life during which 'issues relating to violence both externally and, later, internally (illness), would never be far from my work' and that musically this became characterised by a 'grappling with the varied violences' respective parallels and divergences'.

The opening of *The Vanishing Pavilions* is a compelling musical enactment of this 'grappling' with 'parallels and divergences'. The first movement, entitled 'Prelude', alternates just two blocks of

⁷ Michael Hersch, *sew me into a shroud of leaves*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxfPulU5BDE (accessed 11 November 2022).

⁸ Email correspondence with Michael Hersch, 24 April 2021.

Handwritten musical score for piano, Example 5, showing three systems of music. The first system is marked "Ped." and includes a tempo marking of 42-46. The second system is marked "Ped. cont." and includes a note "* - all pitches 0-8". The third system is also marked "Ped. cont.". The score features complex rhythmic patterns and clusters in both hands.

Example 5:
Michael Hersch, *The Vanishing Pavilions*, I.

piano sonority, one lower and more open, the other higher and clustered, that are articulated in a rhythmic pattern (counting in eighth-notes: 4-4-4-4-1-7-2-6) which is repeated three times (see [Example 5](#)).

The second movement is a response to lines by Christopher Middleton:

... the snows ignite:
A flag revolves, a bird has flown –
Our objects, humble, they aspire;
Learn we our ashes by their fire.

Hersch had got to know Middleton and his work in 2001 when they were both Fellows of the American Academy in Berlin, and it was this encounter that sparked Hersch's conception of the entire *sew me into a shroud of leaves* cycle. His response to Middleton's imagery is typically direct: 'ignite', 'flown' and 'fire' seem to have been the keywords, triggering rapid successions of clusters and scalic figures. As [Example 6](#) shows, all this material is based on a four-note grouping in which a central major second is flanked by minor seconds. It is both idiomatically pianistic, the two hands taking clusters an octave apart, then crossing over one another in the scalic passages, and also a kinetic development from the first movement: there the two hands played together, first low, then high; here they are separated.

Example 5:
Continued

As this may suggest, *The Vanishing Pavilions* is music in which the sound of the piano and the movement of the pianist's hand across the keyboard combine to create images that are immediately engaging. It is this immediacy and the fluency of Hersch's sonic imagination that carries the listener from movement to movement, and when the final movement of *The Vanishing Pavilions* eventually arrives it is, yet again, both a beautifully realised musical response to the text with which it is associated and also a very effective way of marking the end of the first cycle of *sew me into a shroud of leaves*. Christopher Middleton's poem is about disintegration, disappearance –

Will they still be there?
Will they shout? Not likely,
For twilight comes and far, far ahead
The air is spreading a terrible hush.
Time has not hesitated.
From the crossroads, now, and sees
That bend in the road goes on forever,
And trees, identifiable once, melt into nebulae
Disgorging dust, not stars.⁹

⁹ Christopher Middleton, *The Vanishing Pavilions*, first published in *PN Review* 156, 30, no.4, March–April 2004.

Example 6:
Michael Hersch, *The Vanishing Pavilions*, II, bars 1–4.

– and Hersch traces a very slow chordal ascent across the upper half of the keyboard, as ‘twilight comes’ and ‘trees, identifiable once, melt into nebulae’. *sew me into a shroud of leaves* never offers simplistic transcriptions from poetic image into sound but this music is nevertheless a fascinating study in the ways in which piano sonority can hover between aurally distinct collections of pitches – ‘trees’, perhaps – and more nebulous timbral events. As [Example 7](#) shows, there are 36 of these events, each lasting between four and five seconds. The interval of a perfect fourth is present in most of the pitch collections but any tonal implications are always contradicted by one or more semitonal oppositions. The right hand moves quickly to a series of octaves (bars 5–20) that initially seem to sketch in a melodic motif (B \flat –D \flat –C–E \flat –F; bars 5–9) but then settles on repeated notes – G \flat four times, then A \flat four times.

More or less at the midpoint of the movement (bar 18) comes the one moment of explicit drama, a left-hand appoggiatura that echoes the A \sharp –B dyad heard at the very beginning of the movement. As the music continues its upward progression the two hands replicate bars 5–17, but now an octave higher (the one exception is bar 23, where the left hand is varied). Finally, the music stops, as it must, because the right hand has run out of notes. As I have suggested throughout this article, Hersch’s musical language and the formal

The image displays a handwritten musical score for Example 7, consisting of two systems of piano and violin parts. The piano part is written in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature. The violin part is written in treble clef. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'p' and 'pp'. There are also some handwritten annotations and a note at the bottom right that says '# - hold ca. 60 seconds'.

Example 7:

Michael Hersch, *The Vanishing Pavilions*, movement 50.

devices he uses are often quite familiar. Yet the expressive impact of music almost always belies the means of its making. On paper this final movement of *The Vanishing Pavilions* quickly yields its secrets – recurrent intervallic formations, transposed repetition – but the acoustic characteristics of the upper registers of the piano shroud them in ambiguity.

To go from the final movement of *The Vanishing Pavilions* to the beginning of *Last Autumn*, the second part of the cycle, is exhilarating. After the ‘terrible hush’, with which the first piano cycle ends, comes a fanfare (see [Example 8](#)), opening out from a unison A with a series of flourishes in which fourths and fifths are juxtaposed with seconds. ‘The air stirs the light...’ are the words from W. G. Sebald that precede the music in the score, and these opening figures – the ‘air’, perhaps? – are followed by more sustained music that begins in bar 7; the movement maintains this binary opposition throughout.

Hersch’s predilection for dramatic contrast is evident in the second movement, which relates to these four lines:

Spreading out above them
is the branch work
of a fig tree with fruit, one of which
is entirely hollowed out by insects.

The image of ‘spreading out’ informs the development of the music. Whereas the first movement began with horn and cello in unison, the second movement opens with repeated notes in the horn (see [Example 9](#)). The cello responds with, first, two notes, one a minor second above, one a major second below the horn; we hear the same constellation of notes again and then – the ‘spreading out’ – the instruments move apart, adding four new pitches but in an intervallic relationship that (allowing for octave equivalence) adds only another minor second.

Horn in F

Violoncello

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 130$

with great ferocity throughout

ff

with great ferocity throughout

ff

6

Hn.

Vc.

sim.

mf

ff

ff

Example 8:
Michael Hersch, *Last Autumn* I, bars
1–14 (N.B. the horn part is in F).

Hn.

Vc.

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 50$

with a hollow, covered sound,
con sord.

n < p

ppp < p

*hollow, metallic;
sul pont.*

7

Hn.

Vc.

pp

pp < p

mf

with slightly more presence

poco sul pont. - to fully sul pont. - to overpress.

pp < p < mf < f

Example 9:
Michael Hersch, *Last Autumn* II, bars
1–13.

As in *The Vanishing Pavilions*, the overall ambition of *Last Autumn*, written between 2006 and 2008, is grand, but its musical means are not complex and throughout *sew me into a shroud of leaves* Hersch uses a repertoire of formal archetypes within which the juxtaposition of contrasting material is pre-eminent: quicksilver passagework follows monolithic blocks of sound, loud follows soft, dense textures follow more transparent sonorities. These recurrent structural devices are allied to a musical vocabulary that, as I have emphasised throughout this article, is remarkably consistent. This is even more remarkable when one remembers that the complete *sew me into a shroud of leaves* cycle was written over a period of 15 years, a time interrupted by bereavement and Hersch's own treatment for cancer.

To conclude this epic work Hersch returns to the piano for *one day may become menace*. It is the most extended part of the cycle – three books instead of two, 62 movements, and a total playing time that exceeds that of *The Vanishing Pavilions* and *Last Autumn* together – and individual movements within *one day may become menace* tend to be less straightforwardly unitary than those in the first two parts of the cycle. Yet the underlying principles by which the whole work is organised are maintained: the listener's attention is constantly being engaged and re-engaged by a succession of clearly delineated musical images that, as in *The Vanishing Pavilions*, confirm Hersch's extraordinary pianism and his vivid pianistic imagination.

Perhaps one more example will suffice. The eighth movement of *one day may become menace* is described by the composer as a 'March' and after a stumblingly slow beginning it begins to settle

Example 10:
Michael Hersch, *one day may become
menace*, VIII, bars 73–83.

into a more even progress, arriving at steady quarter-notes in bar 18. Gradually the tempo is increased, going from mm.76 in bar 18 to mm.150 in 42, and then the music progressively disintegrates into the apparently uncoordinated jumble of bars 73 and 74, before finally collapsing in two downward cascades (see Example 10). Once again the music has a clear narrative arc, the written-out *accelerando* evoking a march into absurdity (the quick-march tempo of the armies of Canada and the US is mm.120).

I suggested earlier that *sew me into a shroud of leaves* is the work in which Hersch most completely reveals his creative personality, and I have chosen to discuss it at the end, rather than at the beginning, of this article because it seems to explain why works like *the script of storms* and *Poppaea* are as they are. Hersch is a composer whose imagination thrives on personal interaction, with favourite performers, such as the soprano Ah Young Hong, and, above all, with his own instrument, the piano. In October 2006 Hersch premiered *The Vanishing Pavilions*, playing the two-hour work entirely from memory, and he recorded it two months later for a two-CD album.¹⁰ For the Wien Modern premiere of the complete *sew me into a shroud of leaves* it was again Hersch who played the opening part of the cycle, although it was Jacob Rhodebeck who premiered *one day may become menace*, and *sew me into a shroud of leaves* as a whole feels like an enormous piano recital, with a short intermezzo for horn and cello.

¹⁰ Michael Hersch, *The Vanishing Pavilions*. 2007, Vanguard Classics/Musical Concepts, MC-101; now available from New Focus Recordings (2022, fcr335), <https://michael-hersch.com/albums/TheVanishingPavilions.html> (accessed 22 November 2022).

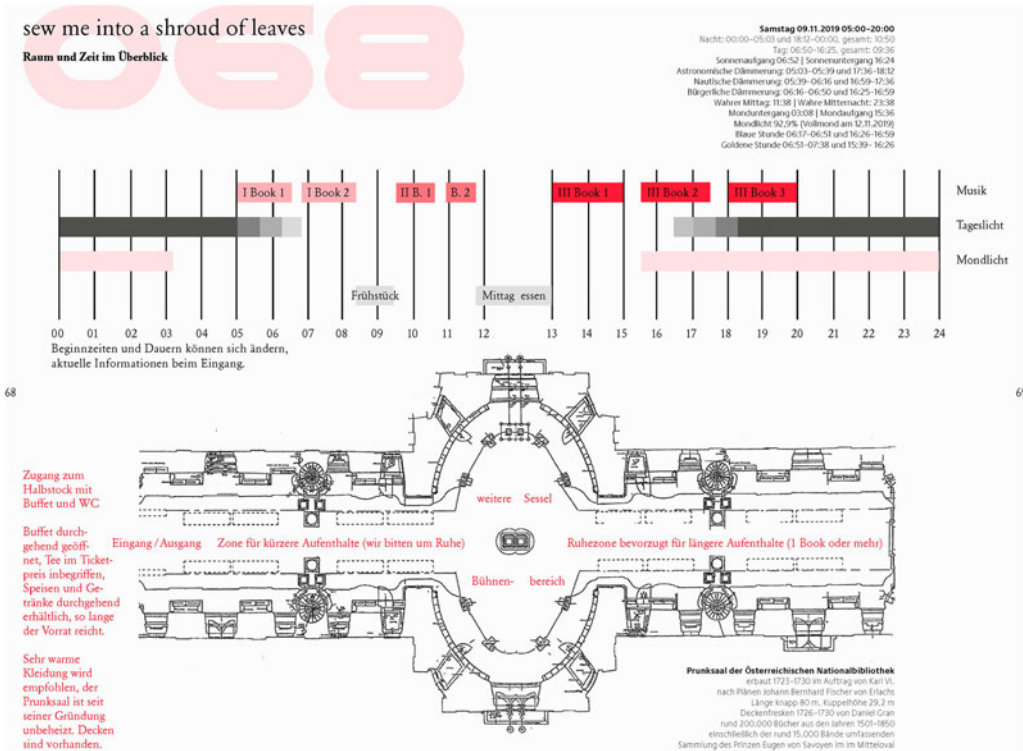


Figure 1:
 Wien Modern performance
 arrangements for *sew me into a shroud
 of leaves*.

Figure 1 shows the diagram from the Wien Modern programme book that laid out both the temporal and spatial arrangements for the performance. *The Vanishing Pavilions* began at 5am; later there was time allocated for breakfast, around 9am, and for lunch, between the end of *Last Autumn* and the beginning of *one day may become menace*. The performance area was in the central space of the Prunksaal, with the left wing designated as a 'zone for shorter stays' and the right wing a 'zone for longer stays (one book or more)'. In the bottom left-hand corner of the diagram there is also a cautionary note: 'Very warm clothing is recommended, the Prunksaal has been unheated since its foundation.'

But, aside from the practicalities of eating, drinking and keeping warm, how does one experience a work conceived on such a scale? A few weeks after the event Hersch described his experience of the Vienna performance to me as 'surreal', going on to say that it would take him time 'to process hearing some fifteen years of work presented as intended' and that he had 'never had the kind of care and conscientiousness shown my work that I did at this festival. Nothing comparable in my 30 years of doing this thing we do.' As to the work's immediate reception, he said that 'while many people came in and out over the course of the morning/day/evening, I believe there were five people (six if I include myself) who were present for the work in its entirety.

One was the artistic director of the festival¹¹ and another was Stephanie Fleischmann, preparing herself for work on the libretto of *Poppaea*.

At the beginning of this article I suggested that getting to know a composer's work is like entering a room, gradually discovering its limits and coming to understand what characterises its contents; being present at the Wien Modern performance of *sew me into a shroud of leaves* is perhaps as close as one might come to having such an experience in real time and in a real room. At the end of the article I am, however, acutely conscious of how little I have revealed of the contents in the virtual room that is Michael Hersch's complete oeuvre, even though I have devoted many words to describing the three works on which the article has focused. Nevertheless, I hope that I have drawn attention to some of the characteristics of these extraordinary musical objects and their subjects. It seems to me that Hersch's music demonstrates that an uncompromisingly modernist musical vocabulary can still be used to powerfully expressive effect by a composer for whom subjective expressivity, rather than a preoccupation with formalist innovation, is a vital concern. Few of us will live our lives without discovering that at some point they can be turned upside down by some arbitrary shift in social order or by a mutation in the cells of our own body and it is these catastrophic existential changes that are the recurrent subject of Hersch's music. Above all his is music that demonstrates how art can be as all-enveloping, disruptive as life itself.

¹¹ Email correspondence with Michael Hersch, 7 December 2019.