

Texts—Textures—Intertexts: Brian Cherney's *Transfiguration* (1990)

Matthew Ricketts

Volume 37, numéro 1, 2017

Illuminations: Essays in Honour of Brian Cherney

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1059894ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1059894ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

1911-0146 (imprimé)

1918-512X (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Ricketts, M. (2017). Texts—Textures—Intertexts: Brian Cherney's *Transfiguration* (1990). *Intersections*, 37(1), 181–200.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1059894ar>

Résumé de l'article

Transfiguration (1990) est une des compositions les plus ambitieuses de Brian Cherney jusqu'à maintenant. Avec une partition destinée à un grand orchestre, l'oeuvre explore le mécanisme par lequel les souvenirs transfigurent la réalité et l'expression musicale de ce processus. Cherney tisse une mise en abyme de citations étourdissante — tirées du répertoire canonique, de simulacres d'airs folkloriques européens et de ses propres oeuvres antérieures (notamment *Shekhinah* pour alto solo de 1988). Les textures orchestrales tour à tour éclipsent et révèlent le matériel directement et indirectement lié à l'Holocauste et inspiré de celui-ci, y compris la photo d'une Juive hongroise internée à Auschwitz qui hante l'oeuvre. La figure fugitive de cette inconnue est représentée dans la manière dont le matériel est transfiguré — perdu, retrouvé puis perdu de nouveau — du début à la fin. Cet article est axé sur *Transfiguration* en tant qu'apothéose de l'intérêt de Cherney pour la relation entre la texture orchestrale et l'intertextualité.

TEXTS—TEXTURES—INTERTEXTS: BRIAN CHERNEY'S *TRANSFIGURATION* (1990)

Matthew Ricketts

INTRODUCTION

Ist dies etwa der Tod?

It this perhaps death?

—Joseph von Eichendorff, "Im Abendrot"

Seele, sprich, ist das der Tod?

Soul, speak: can this be death?

—Johann Gottfried Herder, "Verklärung"

Geh, wilder Knochemann! Ich bin noch jung!

Go, fierce man of bones! I am still young!

—Franz Schubert (after Matthias Claudius), "Der Tod und das Mädchen"

The apostrophic figure of death runs thematically through Western culture, typically represented as a human male—that "fierce man of bones." From Donne's "Death, be not proud" to Dickinson's immortal carriage coachman, the personification of death haunts Western art like an omnipresent spectre. Death, it seems, is too much with us. During the plague-ridden cusp of the Late Middle Ages, when half or more of Europe's population succumbed to the so-called Black Death, death-as-man conceptualizations reached something of an apotheosis with the popular trope of "Danse Macabre" (figure 1), here showing a skeletal figure enacting that dance of death with every member of society from the pope on down.

This body of death tropes was resuscitated by later Romantic figures, particularly Germanic, migrating to the *lieder* of Schubert and Schumann through the poetry of Eichendorff, Herder, Müller, and Goethe. From the *Danse Macabre* assortment of characters, the figure of "Death and the Maiden" (figure 2) was extracted and examined, most famously in Schubert's darkly erotic setting of Matthias Claudius.

At the root of these tropes is a quandary: there are many deaths, but there is also one Death. The incarnation of death as Death is the enactment of a metaphorical model whereby the abstract takes the form of the reified familiar, located conceptually somewhere between personification and synecdoche.



Figure 1. Bernt Notke, Lübeck *Danse Macabre*, detail (ca. 1463); the original tapestry was lost but a copy survived until World War II, when it was destroyed by Allied firebombing campaigns.

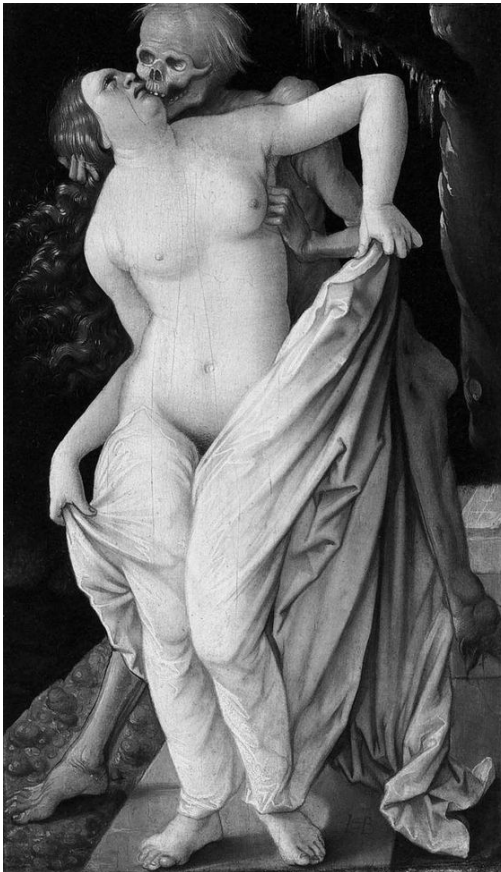


Figure 2. Hans Baldung, *Tod und das Mädchen* (ca. 1520)

The Canadian composer Brian Cherney's *Shekhinah* ([1988] 1992, for solo viola), and its transfigured quotations within his later composition *Transfiguration* ([1990] 1991, for large orchestra) together meditate on the theme of death and its personifications, in light of the inconceivable horrors of the Holocaust. Drawn together through references to Schubert's "Der Tod und das Mädchen," Mahler's "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen," and the photograph of an Auschwitz victim whom Cherney casts in a divine light, the interlinking network of intertextual allusions in *Transfiguration* represents a summation of Cherney's work.

SOURCES

In the late 1980s Cherney began an intense period of immersion in Holocaust-related literature. Born to a Jewish family in Peterborough, Ontario, in 1942—the same year as initial implementations of the "Final Solution"—Cherney had long felt a disturbing connection to the fate of European Jewry. In the midst of this immersion he happened across a review (Rodal 1988) of a recent publication, *The Holocaust in History* (Marrus 1987). Cherney recalls the moment vividly: "I remember being mesmerized by a photograph [figure 3] which accompanied the review—a group of Hungarian women and children coming off a train onto the ramps at Auschwitz in 1944. One of the women was quite tall and rather young and she reminded me a little of Rivka Golani, the violist for whom I was to write a piece ... Almost immediately I had the idea of writing a piece *for* the woman in the photograph, in an attempt to 'rescue' her from anonymity" (Cherney email communication, 19 February 2017).

That piece for viola would become *Shekhinah*. Cherney focuses on the figure in the photograph as a kind of synecdoche for the Holocaust, as the sheer number of murdered multitudes is literally inconceivable. Cherney's singular but



Figure 3. Auschwitz photograph (Rodal 1988). Cherney was drawn to the tall shawl-wearing woman with her hand at her throat.

unknown woman, like the figure of Death-as-man, comes to represent them all—a naming of the unnameable.

The word *shekhinah* represents the feminine aspect of divinity in Jewish theology; Cherney's solo work honours this symbol with shimmering trills (representing *nefesh* or "throat," later associated with the soul), a lullaby (representing the maternal), and a lilting passage (bar 185ff.) that Cherney refers to as "The Dance" (Cherney 1991, i).¹ To these, he adds an explicit connection to Schubert's young maiden by quoting the vocal melody *Ich bin noch jung!* ("I am still young!") from "Der Tod und das Mädchen" alongside a harmonically sheared version of the opening accompaniment figure, here rendered hollow like a mysterious organum fragment (figure 4). Cherney thus revivifies a lost figure through a double projection: the woman in the photograph comes to personify the *Mädchen* figure of the Christianized *Danse Macabre*, while also serving as a Judaic synecdoche for the Holocaust. By making her both a *someone* and an *everyone*, Cherney combats the stolen personhood of this anonymous figure.

Placing fragments from the solo work into an orchestral context of *Transfiguration*—thereby fashioning a kind of elaborate textural backdrop on which *Shekhinah* is rear-projected—Cherney stages a dramatic foregrounding of a once-hidden figure, which, like the solo viola work, gradually reveals itself. Akin to Freud's concept of "screen memory," the seemingly benign Schubert quotation is revealed to be ironic cover for something truly sinister, which would emerge in German culture a century later, when the same magnificent lineage of Kant and Schiller and Goethe would actively dismantle its "thousand-year history" (in Thomas Mann's chilling words)² and nearly destroy the world in the process. The problematic Jewish relation to German culture is aptly represented by the collapsing together of *shekhinah* and the Teutonic *Mädchen* figure, and furthermore by reference to Mahler (the prototypically



Figure 4. Schubert, "Der Tod und das Mädchen," D.531, bars 1–4, transposed (above); Cherney, *Shekhinah*, bars 112–15 (below)

¹ The passage at bar 185ff. returns verbatim for solo viola in *Transfiguration* starting at bar 233.

² The narrator of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* writes, "Our 'thousand-year' history, refuted, reduced *ad absurdum*, weighed in the balance and found unblest, turns out to be a road leading nowhere, or rather into despair, and unexampled bankruptcy, a *descensus Averno* lighted by the dance of roaring flames" (Mann 1948, 452).

problematic Jewish-German composer). Thus engaging with canonic quotation and self-quotation alike, Cherney's intertexts³ refer back to and across themselves, forming a cohesive but permeable micro-canon of their own within which tropes, topics, and even characters pass freely. Like Mahler's interlinked symphonic worlds, these passageways quite literally open routes of meaning: following Michael Klein's gloss on Umberto Eco—"Musical texts speak among themselves" (Klein 2005, 4)—we are made to overhear this conversation.

FEATURES & FIGURES

Transfiguration for large orchestra was commissioned by Montréal Musiques Actuelles and premiered in November 1990. Cherney's finely honed orchestral tools are here employed in fashioning richly evocative, often densely tangled orchestral textures, which alternately skew, cover, and reveal the intertextual sources. The partitioning of both musical material and orchestral instruments into discrete yet flexible units I call *figure-types* blurs the distinctions between timbral, pitch, and rhythmic parameters; as with all great orchestrators, Cherney's mature command of orchestral writing interlinks the textural "surface" of the music with the musical substructure. Timbre and texture alike—through pitch/rhythmic material and its discursive articulation—become agents of meaning. Like the "musical topics" of Ratner et al., figure-types in Cherney's music gather semiotic currency through repeated use both within and across pieces. The three primary figure-types thus interpenetrate the textural, "linguistic," and formal. They are employed in varying guises, combinations, and layerings throughout *Transfiguration*; each has a specific textural character, linguistic function, and formal role. Two of the three figure-types (*Shimmering, Voice*) grow directly out of the *Shekhinah* source material, here magnified to orchestral proportions.

Shimmering (figure 5), the first figure-type, typically involves diffusely divided sound-masses, string predominant and often canonically staggered, filled with interlaced bundles of gently charged sonic filaments. While the speed and width of the oscillations vary, the general feature is an incandescent flickering whereby harmonic fields are illuminated with motion and life. Shimmering textures may slowly move (as in the "Ascending Music" passage, a perennial topic in Cherney's music since the 1970s, which occupies the medial span of the piece) or remain fixed, embodying Cherney's interest in stillness and quietude.

The second figure-type (*Voice↔Voices*, figure 6) concerns the linear, lyrical aspect of music common to folksong, lieder, and the majestically contrapuntal world of Bach. As with *Shimmering*, a harmonic field is activated by moving

³ The intertext concept was first developed by Julia Kristeva to describe, in poststructuralist terms, the interpenetrating and promiscuous play of signs and codes, in and between *texts* (i.e., works of art), which both constitute and defer signification (Kristeva 1980). Related to—but distinct from—quotation, intertexts represent moments of striking disjuncture within an artwork whereby the "text" suddenly seems to open up into another text, a kind of artistic portal between distinct worlds. If the poststructuralist usage of *intertext* suggests a plurality of meanings arising from a text's porousness, musical intertexts can likewise be understood as suggestive sites where signification occurs not *in* a work but *across* multiple works via quotation, allusion, recurring musical topics (see Ratner 1980), etc.

Figure 5 shows a musical score for four instruments: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello. The score is in 4/4 time and features a dense, shimmering texture. The Violin I part starts with a [con sord.] marking and a *pp* dynamic. The Violin II part also has a [con sord.] marking and a *pp* dynamic. The Viola and Cello parts have [con sord.] markings and a *pp* dynamic. The score includes various articulations such as accents, slurs, and dynamic markings like *p*, *mp*, and *pp*.

Figure 5. Example of *Shimmering* figure-type (bars 170–3)

Figure 6 shows a musical score for Violin I. The score is in 4/4 time and features a *Voice↔Voices* figure-type. The score is divided into two sections: *VOICE (monophony)* and *VOICES (heterophony–polyphony)*. The *VOICE* section starts with a *f* dynamic and a *ff* dynamic. The *VOICES* section starts with a *ff* dynamic and a *mf* dynamic. The score includes various articulations such as accents, slurs, and dynamic markings like *f*, *ff*, and *mf*.

Figure 6. Example of *Voice↔Voices* “figure-type” (bars 74–7)

melodic figures, but with a greater sense of contrapuntal distinctness and clarity. Stepwise motion, a mid-level rhythmic vocabulary and limited ambitus characterize these vocal-esque figure-types in *Transfiguration*—the prototype being the explicitly texted vocal quotation drawn from Schubert, which occurs in several different guises throughout.

Not entirely distinct categories, the first two figure-types are presented on a continuum (figure 7). Individual lines may proliferate, dissolving into textural masses (*Shimmering*) or alternately distill, congealing into monophonic blocks (*Voice*). Between these a wide variety of contrapuntal textures—heterophony, polyphony, micropolyphony—are presented, moving from direct vocal clarity to luminous textural shimmer.

Punctuation (figure 8), the third figure-type, plays an articulative role, tearing fissures in the texture, interrupting melodic momentum or setting contrary figures into motion. It also represents coalescing points: rare tutti moments of unity that puncture the prevailing mood. In the context of a largely nebulous sound-world (ranging from tangled Ives-ian cacophony to the gently diaphanous) these pointedly direct moments are potently forceful and generally brass- and percussion-predominant.

Figure 7 is a musical score for a string ensemble, divided into two systems. The first system (measures 90-115) features Violin I (div.), Violin II (div.), Viola (div.), Cello (div.), and Double Bass (div.). The second system (measures 115-140) includes Violin I, II, Viola, Cello, Double Bass, and a woodwind section (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Contrabassoon). The score is annotated with dynamic markings such as *ppp*, *pp*, *p*, *f*, and *fff*. A vertical arrow on the right side of the score indicates a continuum from 'TEXTURE (Shimmer)' at the top to 'VOICE' at the bottom, with '[COUNTERPOINT]' in the middle.

Figure 7. Texture—Counterpoint continuum

Figure 8 is a musical score for a large ensemble, starting at measure 100. The instruments listed are Flutes, Oboe, Clarinets, Bassoon 2, Contrabassoon, Horns, Harp, Piano, Violins, Violas, Cellos, and Tam-tam (low). The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like *ff*, *f*, *mp*, and *etc.*. A bracket labeled 'Puncture + frenetic taper' spans measures 100 to 110. Annotations include '*slap low strings with palm of hand' for the Harp and '*gliss on low strings with fingers of L.H.' for the Piano. The Tam-tam part includes a 'gliss.' marking.

Figure 8. Example of Punctuation “figure-type” (bar 100)

Transfiguration begins in a state of maximal density (figure 9), only gradually separating into more distinguishable strata. Quite literally buried within this sound-mass lie the first hints of quotation from *Shekinah*, sounding in three solo violas offset from the rest of the section. Pitch salience throughout this passage is alternately obscured and clarified (note how the chromatic cluster in the Violins *div. a* 12 solidifies into the E^b unison of bar 3, only to split apart again into another amorphous glissando complex). A slow coalescence into distinct figure-types is reached by bar 68 where the first *Punctuation* cuts through the filigree, suddenly revealing the moderate *cantabile* melody (*Voice*) in the first violins, a monophonic line that splinters into heterophony, then full-on polyphony (*Voices*).

The layering of figure-types here has syntactical connotations: brass/percussion *Punctuations* cut through the *Shimmering* texture in the strings and winds; relieved of such active filigree, the *Voice* arc in the violins now sings clearly, revealed in the gaps between puncture points (figure 10).

This initiating move from indistinct to distinct, like a sudden onslaught of unprocessed memories that gradually cohere into narrative, is mirrored throughout *Transfiguration* in the treatment of Immediacy—Distance, *Tutti*—Solo, Disparity—Unity. Cherney engineers a sense of distance (both temporal and spatial) through the implementation of mass orchestral textures, which draw together the preceding three dichotomies. The large-scale orchestra, as with Berlioz and Wagner and Mahler, is employed to “three-dimensionalize” sound and thereby create spectacular distance effects. As aforementioned, an overarching gestalt in *Transfiguration* involves the move from hazy saturation toward monophonic clarity; paradoxically, these gradually revealed moments of clarity are also the most *temporally distant* (being quotations from extant works, ranging from the more recent *Shekinah* to Mahler and Schubert), yet these remain aptly shrouded in a cloak of blue-hazed remoteness (that is, *acoustically distant*). It is as though the more closely we approach such artifacts, the more distant they become. I label this move from cacophonous immediacy to “focused distance” a kind of *sonic archaeology*, which is enacted throughout *Transfiguration*; fittingly, these archaeological uncoverings (of *Shekinah* and of Schubert) involve dramatic descents into distant worlds—not unlike the dissolved manuscript pages from Cherney’s *Seven Images for 22 Players* (figure 11) though here enacted sonically (indeed this score features no unusual notational choices).

TRANSFIGURATION

BRIAN CHERNEY
1990

The musical score is written in 6/4 time with a tempo marking of quarter note = 90. It is a handwritten manuscript for a large ensemble. The instruments listed on the left include: Flute 1, Flute 2, Oboe 1, English Horn, Clarinet 1, Clarinet 2, Bassoon, Contrabassoon, Horns I & II, Trumpets I & II, Trombones I & II, Tuba, Violins I & II, Violas, Cellos, and Double Basses. There are also vocal parts for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The score is divided into three systems. The first system includes parts for Flute 1, Flute 2, Oboe 1, English Horn, Clarinet 1, Clarinet 2, Bassoon, Contrabassoon, Horns I & II, Trumpets I & II, Trombones I & II, Tuba, and various vocal parts. The second system includes Harp and Piano. The third system includes Violins I & II, Violas, Cellos, and Double Basses. A specific passage in the Violin I part is boxed, showing a complex rhythmic and melodic figure.

Figure 9. *Transfiguration* opening (the first *Shekinah* citation is boxed)



Figure 10. *Transfiguration*, first arrival point (layering/emergence of figure-types)

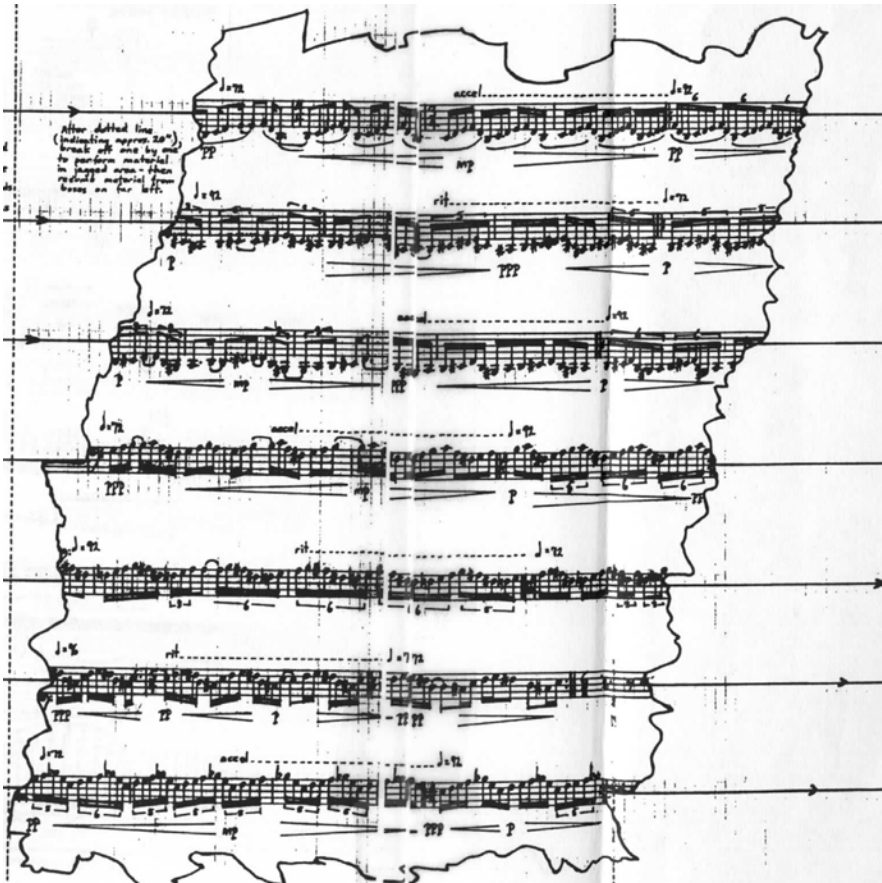


Figure 11. *Seven Images for 22 Players* (1971), with the dissolved panels revealing seemingly older music beneath

TRANSFIGURATION AND TRANSFIGURATION

The formal shape of *Transfiguration* (figure 12) involves the sonic archaeology of hidden elements: tracing the shifting presence and absence of *Shekhinah*, and the relationship between solo intertext and orchestral context, reveals one of the major formal trajectories at work in *Transfiguration*. The two main reveals of intertextual source material (the first, Schubert, is historical; the second, *Shekhinah*, personal) occur after dramatic fissures: the “Collapse” in bar 97, and the accumulation of *punctuation* points in bar 232. The archaeological element thus involves a violent split that cuts into the orchestral texture, revealing sonic substrata. Other formal trajectories are registrally and spatially based, respectively, although all are involved in the transfiguring of source material throughout. Figure 12 maps these trajectories and other important aspects.

The boxed text in figure 13 details the evolving role of source materials throughout *Transfiguration*, primarily *Shekhinah*—typically distributed between three offset solo violas. Cherney alternately thickens or thins, obscures or focuses this intertextual material: solo viola or viola trio, viola septet, *gli al-tri* viola section or full string section control both the focus and presence of the source material against its larger orchestral backdrop. *Shekhinah* thus undergoes four primary types of citation: direct quotation (single viola), thickened quotation (the entire viola section in unison), “blurred quotation” (the original melody spread canonically among three soloists), and finally projected onto the entire string section. The result is not just a matter of sonic prominence but has pointedly affective connotations: when the solo viola alone finally intones the Schubert quotation it enacts a singular, almost lonely presence within its greater orchestral world (figure 13). Later, when this figure is taken up by the entire string section, the connotations are strikingly different (figure 14)—the communal uplifting of a frail voice by its community, or perhaps the “infection” of that community by a ghostly presence.

Transfiguration thus does not treat its intertexts as hermetically sealed artifacts; although the first presentation (bar 3) is buried within an orchestral cacophony indifferent to its presence, the quotation is later placed in more porous contexts. The musical relationship between intertext and context thus shifts throughout *Transfiguration*, another formal trajectory: pitches and contours begin to migrate freely between quotation and the surrounding orchestral tissue (figure 15). Symmetrical harmonies expand outward from the implied D tonic of *Shekhinah*; its trill figures are widened into oscillating augmented seconds and thirds; wider melodic arcs rise and fall from D, which in turn is given a chromatic double-neighbour harmonization, and so on.

Those chromatic neighbour figures around tonic pitches D + A in *Shekhinah* are particularly prevalent throughout *Transfiguration* and begin to inform the general melodic/harmonic tendencies of the piece; symmetrical harmonic arrays around D are also common as a sort of recurring referential sonority (figure 16). The source material is thus organically abstracted, transfused into the orchestral tissue, finally living again. *Shekhinah*, and the memory of the unknown woman in the photograph, gradually feeds into the orchestral world

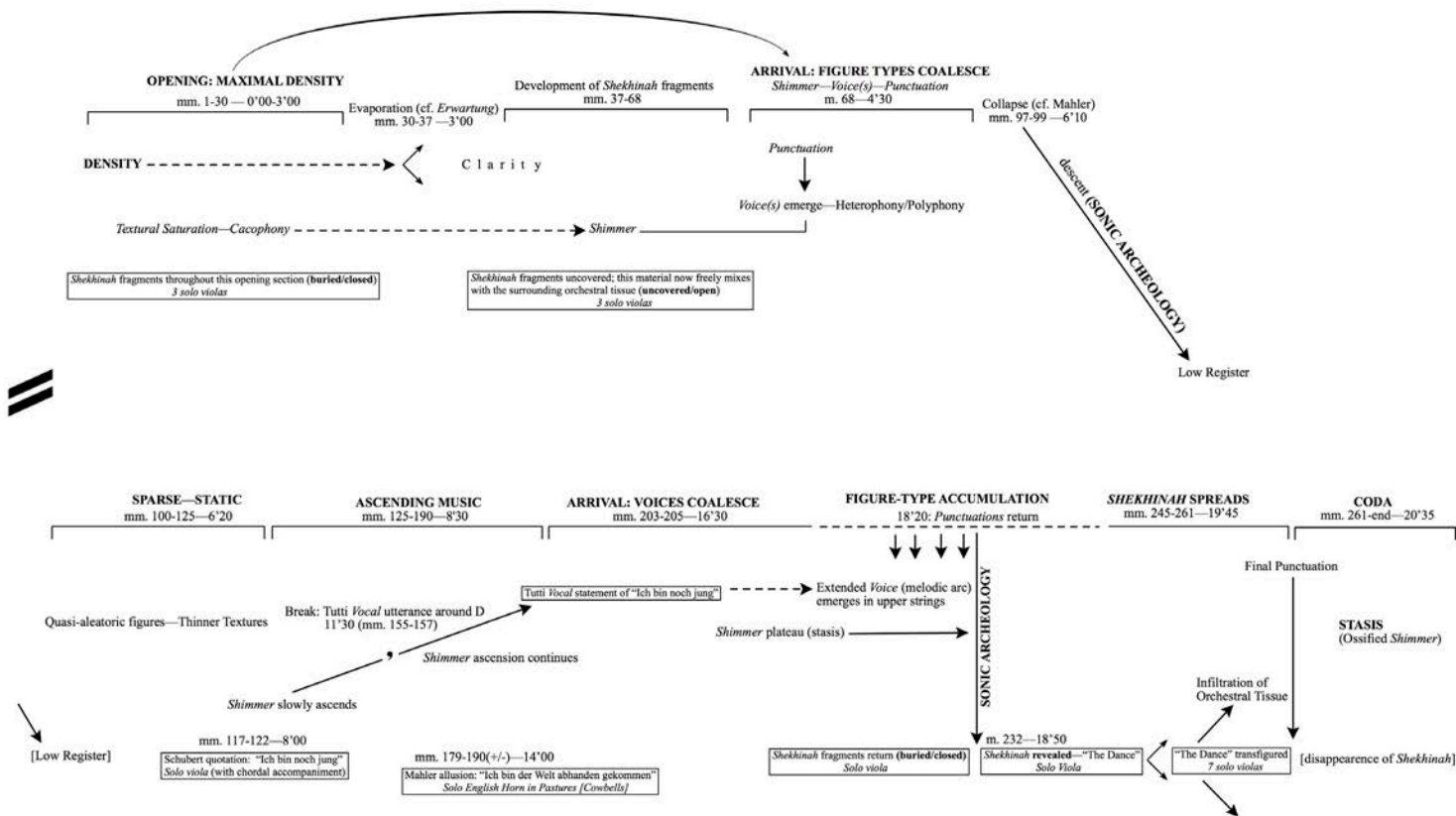


Figure 12. Transfiguration, formal shape, and internal trajectories

Figure 13 shows a musical score for Schubert's "Der Tod und das Mädchen," D. 531, bars 12–14. The top system features a Solo Viola part with lyrics "Ich bin noch jung" and dynamic markings *mp*, *ff*, *pp*, *mp*, *mf*, and *mp*. Below it, a Bassoon 1, Trombone 3, Tuba, Violas, and Double Basses part is shown with a (8-7) (Contrabassoon) and D.B. (div.) marking. The bottom system shows a vocal part with lyrics "...Ich bin noch jung..." and a piano accompaniment.

Figure 13. *Transfiguration*, Schubert quotation, via *Shekhinah* (above); see the original source, from Schubert "Der Tod und das Mädchen," D. 531, bars 12–14 (below)

Figure 14 shows a magnified string tutti section of Schubert's "Der Tod und das Mädchen," D. 531, bars 12–14. The top system features Harp and Piano parts with dynamic markings *mf* and *f*. The bottom system shows Violin I-II, Viola, and Cello parts with lyrics "Ich bin noch jung" and dynamic markings *mf*, *f*, *mf*, *pp subito*, and *etc.*

Figure 14. *Transfiguration*, Schubert quotation magnified (string tutti)

at large and is in turn sustained by it, symbiotically reviving the past while grounding the present in its own collective memory.

An allusion to Mahler emerges in the solo cor anglais (figure 17); where does this passageway lead? The allusion's source text (here, Rückert) forms a pun with Schubert's Claudius setting: *Ich bin noch jung!* is shifted to *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen*—the tragic irony of "I am still young!" modulates to the resignation of "I am lost to the world." The Mahler reference (like the Schubert) is also mediated through a personal intertext: the transfigured vocal contour outlined in cor anglais features prominently in Cherney's earlier chamber work *River of Fire* (1983) (Thorburn 2003, 3–5). The orchestral context of this double allusion constitutes a particularly static moment of calm within *Transfiguration*—one that emerges in the aftermath of the "Ascending Music" passage encompassing the middle span of the piece. The prolonged, shimmering

The image displays a page from a musical score, specifically bars 38 through 43. The score is arranged in five systems, each representing a different orchestral instrument. The first system is for Flute 1-3, showing rapid sixteenth-note passages. The second system is for Maracas/Vibraphone, featuring a steady, rhythmic pattern. The third system is for Viola 1-2, with a similar rhythmic texture. The fourth system is for 3 Solo Viola, showing a more melodic line. The fifth system is for Double Bass, with a simple, rhythmic pattern. The score includes various dynamic markings such as ppp (pianississimo), mp (mezzo-piano), and f (forte), as well as articulation marks like accents and slurs. The notation is complex, with many beamed notes and rests.

Figure 15. *Transfiguration*, *Shekhinah* infiltrates surrounding orchestral tissue (bars 38–43)


sweep gradually clears out the lower and middle registers, creating a sort of empty foreground out of which the Mahler allusion emerges.

This lied allusion and its orchestral nesting connect to Mahler: the high, static *Shimmering* texture above and the sudden entry of cowbells in the percussion below both allude to a special episode in the first movement of Mahler's Sixth Symphony (figures 18 and 19). In the Mahler, static harmonies combine with textural shimmer to form a backdrop on which the *Heerdenglocken* enter for the first time, an extension of the traditional pastoral (out-of-doors) topic. Cherney alludes to this orchestral backdrop of the symphony but places the lied allusion within it, assigning a transfigured and fragmented "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" to the cor anglais, another pastoral topic—here marked *en dehors*, literally "outside." It is as if the gradually unfolding reference to Mahler's lied (and Cherney's *River of Fire*) has been placed within the "outdoor" texture of Mahler's Sixth—relocating the song's vision of "stillen Gebiet" (quiet realm) to a kind of Elysian sound-field. Musical texture-as-canvas here becomes an open-air stage on which the vocal intertext resounds.


Towards the end of *Transfiguration*, a violent series of *punctuations* cut across the entire orchestra, finally exposing a solo viola intoning "The Dance" (from *Shekhinah*) in the most extensive and unconcealed quotation yet (figure 20).

The overall tone of *Transfiguration* ranges from intense, eruptive, dense, to resigned, mysterious, contemplative—yet this moment of revelation is decidedly jovial, even blithe, though still rendered in "distant focus" (sounding, with the celesta in mechanized sixteenths, almost like a tiny music box). "The Dance" builds on the D tonic established earlier, now modulated to radiant Lydian. The scoring is translucent: celesta, harp, and delicate touches of percussion accompany the solo viola; slowly, the upper strings (including six other


Shekhinah, oscillating thirds (e.g. quoted in mm. 45-46, *Transfiguration*)



Transfiguration, m. 49 (Celesta): oscillating thirds, symmetrical around D




Shekhinah, double chromatic neighbors around D/A (e.g. quoted in mm. 49-50, *Transfiguration*)

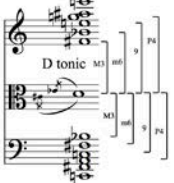


(Schubert)

“Ich bin noch jung”



Symmetrical array on D (e.g. m. 8)



Melody anchored to D tonic (e.g. mm. 155-156)




Figure 16. *Transfiguration*, melodic-harmonic orchestral figures abstracted/extracted from *Shekhinah*

Mahler, “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen”



Transfiguration, mm. 179-190

[180]

English Horn

pp < *mp* > *pp* *pp* < *mp* > *pp* *pp* < *mp* > *pp* *sim.*



[185]

en dehors

f *p* *cic.*



Figure 17. *Transfiguration*, allusion to Mahler, “Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen”

solo violas and violins, tutti) join and echo the solo intertext in a joyous display of imitation, magnification, exultation.

The *Shekhinah* figure has thus been *stellified* (the human made mythical) as her spirit disperses among the masses, taken up by the section at large. And at the height of hushed polyphonic string jubilation, a final *punctuation* (figure 21) clears away all traces of *Shekhinah* material once and for all. Throughout the final coda that follows, no further reference is made to *Shekhinah* (or Schubert, or Mahler), while a symmetrical harmony array suspended around that same D continues to resound, the omnipresent D itself now absent. Thus

This musical score page features ten staves. The top five staves are for Flute 1-3, Oboe, English Horn, Clarinet 1-2, and Cowbells. The bottom five staves are for Violin I-II, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The Flute, Oboe, and Clarinet parts are marked *pp* and feature complex rhythmic patterns with many beamed sixteenth notes. The English Horn part has a *ritardando* marking and a dynamic shift from *f* to *p*. The Cowbells part starts with a *p* dynamic and includes a *ppp* section. The string section (Violin, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass) is marked *ppp* and includes a *non crescendo* instruction.

Figure 18. *Transfiguration*, allusion in context (bars 188–99)

This musical score page shows three staves. The top staff is for Heerdenglocken (Cowbells), with a treble clef and a series of beamed sixteenth notes. The middle staff is for Violin I-II, with a treble clef and a *morendo* marking. The bottom staff is for Double Bass, Cello, and Contrabassoon, with a bass clef and a *pp* marking. A *ppp* marking is also present for the Violin I-II staff. The score includes a *ritardando* marking and a *ppp* marking.

Figure 19. Mahler, *Symphony no. 6*, mvt. I (after rehearsal no. 21)

This musical score page, labeled (235) in the top right, covers bars 231 to 235. It features five staves: Tami (Orchestra), Celesta, Solo Viola, and two percussion staves (Tami-tam, Tenor Drum, Bass Drum and Triangle). The Tami (Orchestra) staff begins with a '(PUNCTUATION)' marking and a *ff* dynamic. The Solo Viola staff starts with a *p* dynamic and includes a 'gracioso' marking. The percussion staves show rhythmic patterns with *ff* dynamics. The Celesta staff has a *pp* dynamic. The Triangle staff has a *pp* dynamic. The score concludes with a *pp* dynamic.

Figure 20. *Transfiguration*, “The Dance” unveiled (bars 231–5)

This musical score page, labeled (260) in the top right, covers the coda of *Transfiguration*. It features seven staves: Violin I-II, Winds, Brass, Cello, Double Bass; Harp, Piano, Percussion; 3 Tam-tams; and 7 Solo Violins. The Violin I-II, Winds, Brass, Cello, Double Bass staff starts with a *pp* dynamic and includes a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 75$. The Harp, Piano, Percussion staff has a *pp* dynamic. The 3 Tam-tams staff has a *p* dynamic and includes a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 60$. The 7 Solo Violins staff has a *pp* dynamic. The score concludes with a *pp* dynamic and a '(dampen immediately)' marking.

Figure 21. *Transfiguration*, coda (*Punctuation* and final dissolution of *Shekhinah* material)

encasing an absent core, the disappearance of *Shekhinah* is rewritten as presence in the form of the harmonic radiance it leaves behind—*the memory itself is all that remains*.

EPILOGUE

From the state of chaotic intensity of the opening pages to its introspective close, *Transfiguration* presents a journey like that of life itself—or perhaps, more fittingly, a journey toward death, e.g., the Kübler-Ross model of grief stages associated with the dying process, moving from denial to eventual acceptance, through anger, bargaining, and depression (Kübler-Ross 1969). What begins firmly rooted in the German Romantic tradition of death anxiety and apprehension ends in a state of spiritual repose: no more the ghostly spectres of Claudius or Schubert or Baldung, but a resigned absence—peaceful, exquisite blankness (indeed, a vision of the afterlife more Judaic than Christian).

Transfiguration is dedicated to the memory of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish Schindler-figure who saved the lives of roughly 100,000 Jews during the Holocaust. Like the woman in the photograph, the actual fate of Wallenberg is not known: he disappeared mysteriously at the end of the Holocaust, perhaps incarcerated in Soviet prisons, and was finally declared dead in absentia by the Swedish government as late as 2016. Cherney honours these manifold missing persons throughout *Transfiguration* with a musical presence paradoxically *never quite present*—a presence whose significance is forever displaced by intertextual passageways always leading elsewhere. The problem of representing absence thus becomes for Cherney productively entangled within problems of representation and signification in general. Drawing on a rich history of textual-imagistic representational strategies (synecdoche, personification, symbolism) and combined with Cherney's expressively charged musical language (drawing together poetic texts, orchestral textures, and musical intertexts), *Transfiguration* seems to accomplish the impossible: to transfigure what can only be prefigured, to sing into existence an absence so terrible it can barely be conceived, let alone represented, so that it might be remembered.

REFERENCES

- Cherney, Brian. 1991. *Transfiguration* for large orchestra. Saint-Nicolas, QC: Dobberman-Yppan (composed 1990).
- . 1992. *Shekhinah* for solo viola. Saint-Nicolas, QC: Dobberman-Yppan (composed in 1988, revised in 1989).
- Klein, Michael L. 2005. *Intertextuality in Western Art Music*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Kristeva, Julia. 1980. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez; trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. 1969. *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, the Clergy, and Their Own Families*. New York: Macmillan.

- Mann, Thomas. 1948. *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Marrus, Michael R. 1987. *The Holocaust in History*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, for Brandeis University Press.
- Ratner, Leonard. 1980. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- Rodal, Alti. 1988. "Finding Truth through History: The First Survey of Holocaust Historians Helps Dispel the Myths about a Horror beyond Belief." *Montreal Gazette*, 19 March. [Review of Marrus 1987.]
- Thorburn, Sandy. 2003. "Like Ghosts from an Enchanter Fleeing: Melodic Quotations as Recognizable Signifiers in the Works of Cherney." *Institute for Canadian Music Newsletter* 1 (1): 3–7.

ABSTRACT

Transfiguration ([1990] 1991) is one of Brian Cherney's most ambitious compositions. Scored for large orchestra, the piece explores how memories transfigure reality and what that process might sound like. Cherney weaves together a dizzying *mise en abyme* of quotations—from the canonic repertoire, simulacra of European folk tunes, and his own earlier music (including most prominently *Shekhinah* for solo viola from [1988] 1992). Orchestral textures alternatively obscure and reveal material both directly and indirectly related to and inspired by the Holocaust, including the photograph of a Hungarian Jewish woman at Auschwitz who haunts the work. The fleeting figure of this unknown woman is represented in the way that material is transfigured—lost, re-emerging, and lost again—throughout. This article focuses on *Transfiguration* as an apotheosis of Cherney's interest in the relationship between orchestral texture and intertextuality.

RÉSUMÉ

Transfiguration (1990) est une des compositions les plus ambitieuses de Brian Cherney jusqu'à maintenant. Avec une partition destinée à un grand orchestre, l'œuvre explore le mécanisme par lequel les souvenirs transfigurent la réalité et l'expression musicale de ce processus. Cherney tisse une mise en abyme de citations étourdissante — tirées du répertoire canonique, de simulacres d'airs folkloriques européens et de ses propres œuvres antérieures (notamment *Shekhinah* pour alto solo de 1988). Les textures orchestrales tour à tour éclipsent et révèlent le matériel directement et indirectement lié à l'Holocauste et inspiré de celui-ci, y compris la photo d'une Juive hongroise internée à Auschwitz qui hante l'œuvre. La figure fugitive de cette inconnue est représentée dans la manière dont le matériel est transfiguré – perdu, retrouvé puis perdu de nouveau – du début à la fin. Cet article est axé sur *Transfiguration* en tant qu'apothéose de l'intérêt de Cherney pour la relation entre la texture orchestrale et l'intertextualité.

BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Ricketts (b. 1986, British Columbia) is a Canadian composer based in New York City. He studied with Brian Cherney, Chris Paul Harman, and John Rea at McGill University and recently completed a DMA at Columbia University with George Lewis and Fred Lerdahl. He is a core lecturer at Columbia University.