Zeitschrift: Dissonanz = Dissonance

Herausgeber: Schweizerischer Tonkünstlerverein

Band: - (2013)

Heft: 122

Artikel: Representing Benjamin : Brian Ferneyhough's Shadowtime and Philosophy. Part 1

Autor: Fitch, Lois

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-927487

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

Download PDF: 25.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

Representing Benjamin

Brian Ferneyhough's *Shadowtime* and Philosophy

Lois Fitch

'I wonder if it would be possible to listen to Benjamin in a musical rather than a literary way [...] as if his individual writings were fragments of an inclusive score, on the thematic orchestration of his ideas and arguments.' When Peter Demetz mused on the musicality of Benjamin's thought and the 'few intimate leitmotifs that [fascinated] him throughout this life,' he cannot have anticipated that Benjamin himself would become the subject of an opera just over twenty years later (Demetz, cited in Perloff, 89). That Brian Ferneyhough chose the German-Jewish essayist as his protagonist is less surprising than his decision to write an opera at all: having referred to it as a medium of 'grubby compromises', a composer whose name became synonymous early in his career with an uncompromising approach to musical material signaled a new stylistic departure when he undertook to write *Shadowtime*, between 1999 and 2004 (F Fitch, 2006).

Benjamin and his 'leitmotifs' have intrigued and inspired Ferneyhough for many years, as demonstrated in the piano solo work *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* (1980), based on concepts particular to the emblem puzzles of Alciati, which fascinated Benjamin. *Kurze Schatten II* (1983–1989), named after a brief essay of Benjamin's, and *Funérailles* (1969–1980) have likewise been shown to incorporate 'Benjaminian tropes' (Rosser, 2010). *Shadowtime* is not only a meditation on some of Benjamin's most prominent themes but an attempt to explore and experience language and philosophical concepts as though the opera itself were an exemplification of Benjaminian thought.

The work emerges from Ferneyhough's reflection on a Benjaminian maxim: 'it is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation' (Benjamin, 2003: 27). The word representation (with the nuance 're-presentation') will be shown, in this article, to have several relevant connotations. For example, Benjamin was particularly interested in the phenomenon of translation, rejecting in particular the suggestion that its function is merely that of transmitting an original to a new audience. Instead, he contemplates how the poetic aspect of the language of the original text, untranslatable in literal terms, might be brought alive and 're-presented' in translation, the 'afterlife' or renewal of the original text (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 1999: 72). In this sense, Ferneyhough's opera offers a translation of Benjamin's modes of thought — their own 'afterlife' — and plays further on the idea by presenting Benjamin's imagined afterlife pursuant to his untimely suicide at the Spanish border in 1940.

Shadowtime's 'plot' (such as it is) and Ferneyhough's particular 'translation' of Benjamin's ideas will be discussed below, but first it is important to acknowledge that the work itself is a double presentation. According to Ferneyhough, '[t]he most important precondition [...] was my wish that the final libretto would also be able to stand as an independently viable poetic work. This seemed to me essential, if we were to do justice to the key re-presentational aspect of the project' (Perloff, 87). The use of the first person plural refers to Ferneyhough's librettist, Charles Bernstein, whose *Shadowtime* is already the subject of analysis in the field of poetic criticism, such is its capacity to stand alone (it was published independently of Ferneyhough's music in 2005). Thus, Ferneyhough's opera is a 'translation' on this level as well, insofar as the music arguably re-presents Bernstein's text. The whole opera is a form of palimpsest, as Bernstein implies: 'the unintelligibility of the words is a basic condition of most of the opera. At the same time, the words are always there, always being articulated: so you get words that you can hear but not understand, or words that approach the condition of music. But they are still words and the words are bound to the meaning of each scene....in a sense the opera presents a marked translation of the words, just as the text presents a marked translation of motifs in Benjamin' (Perloff, 87).

'OPERA OF IDEAS' (BERNSTEIN, 2006)

Shadowtime is not the first opera in the twentieth century that might be called an 'opera of ideas', nor is it the first to use Benjamin's texts: Luigi Nono's *Prometeo* (rev. 1985) offers

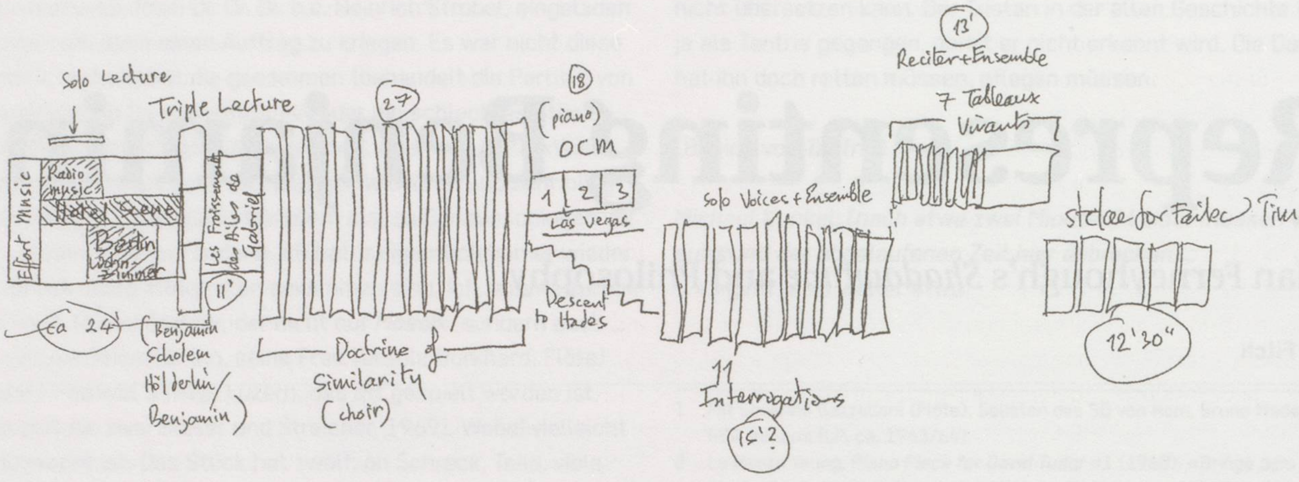


Figure 1: Ferneyhough's sketch of the overall form of "Shadowtime" (in Ferneyhough, 2004)

numerous presentations of the Promethean myth (his libretto includes Benjaminian texts as well as excerpts from Rilke and Aeschylus), none of which is given literally. Nono refers to the work as a *tragedia dell'ascolto* ['a tragedy of/for listening']. In this way, Nono also rejects operatic convention. *Prometeo* effectively consists of nine cantatas, and the singers are not designated as characters. Helmut Lachenmann also offers a subtitle —'Musik mit Bildern' ['music with images'] —for his 'opera' *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* [The Little Match Girl] (1990–1996), which takes as its subject Hans Christian Andersen's macabre fairy tale. Although there are narratival aspects, these are interwoven with references to other music (Stravinsky and Beethoven, for example), literature and history (including extracts from the letters of Gudrun Ensslin, an imprisoned founder of the left-wing militant group *Rote Armee Fraktion*). As in Nono's *Prometeo*, no characters are indicated; the 'images' of the subtitle refer to Lachenmann's use of metaphor (Ensslin's letters become metaphorically entwined with the story of the match-girl), 'sound-images of distress [when solo voices make] fleeting contact with operatic precedent', and the staging, all of which comment indirectly on the match-girl's fate (Whittall, 67). According to John Warnaby, *Das Mädchen* should provoke an 'existential experience' in the audience, enabling it to empathize with the match girl's suffering (Warnaby, 37). *Shadowtime* resonates with this: although Ferneyhough does designate characters, Benjamin himself only appears in the first and fifth scenes, and the most frequently recurring 'character' is the 'Angel of History', a famous Benjaminian concept explored in the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* in which the writer describes an angel with its wings spread, back turned towards the future, surveying the 'catastrophe' of the piled-up wreckage of history (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 1999: 249). The image arose from Benjamin's obsession with Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which he owned for some time. *Shadowtime* also exemplifies 'music with images', as will become clear, and Ferneyhough too seeks an 'existential experience' for his audience:

> Shadowtime [...] can only partly be interpreted as an opera. The entire work is based on the paradigm of ascent and descent, that is, on a covert pyramidal shape. Its first half grows increasingly difficult to perceive, increasingly problematical and static, increasingly abstract and impersonal. The piano piece in Scene 4 takes us up to the very pinnacle. When we walk down the other side everything becomes more readily accessible. I didn't simply want to set a dramatic plot consistently to music in one way or another, but to make the listener truly part of the wearisome ascent and descent of the mountaintop. He palpably experiences Benjamin walking over the mountain, over the Pyrenees to Spain (Meyer, 60).

Shadowtime consists of seven scenes, of which all but the first and fifth can be performed as separate works. Benjamin arrives with his companion Henny Gurland at the Spanish border in Scene I only to be refused entry into Spain, and it can be inferred that his death takes place at the conclusion of the scene (though not depicted explicitly); but the mountainous terrain and the difficulties of his final journey are referenced throughout the first half of the work. In Ferneyhough's sketch of the overall form of the work, the opening material is labeled 'effort music' (see Figure 1: Ferneyhough, 2004). The second half of the opera focuses on Benjamin's descent into Hades (largely implied through metaphor rather than explicitly represented), beginning with the piano solo work *Opus Contra Naturam*, the second movement of which is entitled 'Katabasis'. The term denotes a descent of some kind, and Ferneyhough avails himself of its multiple possible meanings. As a music-rhetorical figure it indicates a gradual (often chromatic) descent, an affect conveying impending death, sadness or tragedy. Such descending figures feature throughout Ferneyhough's opera, often in microtonal increments, as for example at the conclusion of Scene I as Benjamin's death draws near (bars 349–354[1]). Katabasis can also stand for a motion downhill (Benjamin's 'descent [from] the mountaintop'), a trip to the underworld, or a journey from the interior of a country to the coast, such as

Benjamin made towards the coastal town of Port Bou, his intended point of passage into Spain. Ferneyhough's decision to devote the second half of the opera to Benjamin's descent into Hades and his interrogation there by various figures (Scene V, 'Pools of Darkness: 11 interrogations') implicitly acknowledges a historical precedent at some considerable remove from the late-twentieth century exemplars noted above: for the most part, Ferneyhough bypasses nearly 400 years of the development of the operatic genre, preferring to return to its earliest manifestations, and particularly the story of Orpheus as told in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607). Monteverdi's use of the Greek chorus, commenting on the dramatic action, is emulated in Ferneyhough's own chorus, which takes on the role of the Angel(s) of History in four scenes. Furthermore, early examples of Oratorio, such as Emilio di Cavalieri's *Rappresentatione di Anima e di Corpo* (1600), include allegorical characters such as 'Soul' and 'Intellect', akin to Ferneyhough's 'Angel of History as Melancholia' in Scenes VI and VII, after the dejected angel of Albrecht Dürer's allegorical *Melencolia* (1514). The importance of allegorical representation is fundamental to Bernstein and Ferneyhough's work, and draws together both an interest in the earliest forms of opera and a cornerstone of Benjamin's theoretical approach.

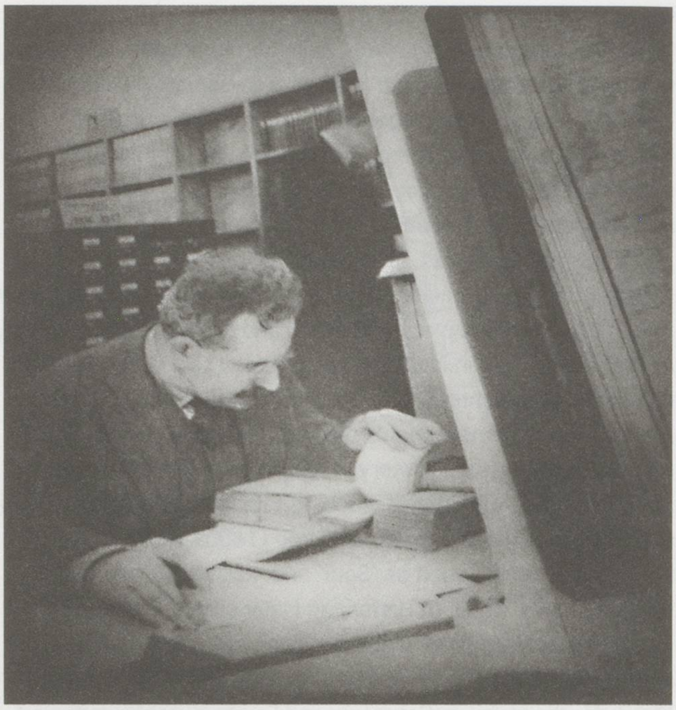
ALLEGORY

In Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 1925], the Baroque mourning play – a rather obscure genre – is compared with Greek classical drama, the latter typically telling the story of heroic endurance in the face of tragedy, and the former presenting as its protagonist a fallen hero, whose flaws are laid bare and who dies without redemption. By contrast, the classical hero is elevated to the status of a God, becomes a mythical figure, and '[displaces] the anguish of life with images of stabilized harmony and eternal perfection' (Koepnick, 1996: 68). Whereas the classical hero is subsumed into a historical narrative that equates his sacrifice with the restoration of order, and therefore progress, the fallen hero of the mourning play stands for the suffering of the world and is banished from this construction of History. Aristotelean catharsis is there experienced differently: 'its plot, like that of tragedy, must to some extent aim for tragic effect on the audience, even if, as Benjamin argues, the Trauerspiel's effect is confined primarily to "participation in the fate of the most outstanding characters".' (Alms, 14). According to Ferneyhough's paradigm of ascent and descent, noted earlier, *Shadowtime* itself becomes a kind of mourning play, the audience participating in the tragic hero's fate. Indeed, Ferneyhough casts Benjamin in the role of flawed hero:

> I chose [Benjamin] because he seems to me not to have been a dishonest person, whereas many intellectuals in the 20s and 30s sought their own advantage [... and] seem not to have tried to change the situation. Benjamin also was responsible for the moral quagmire of this period, behaving as though nothing should apply to him. So he would go to the Bibliothèque Nationale as the Nazis marched on Paris; but he was then thrown into a camp. There are those who act out of bad faith to protect themselves, and those who, like him, were authentic enough to live out their lack of realism (Ferneyhough, trans. F Fitch, 2004: 7).

Benjamin's *Tragic Drama* opposed allegory to the Romantic symbol (related to the Classical symbol), which is idealizing and constructs a perfect, transcendent, eternal world. The Romantic fragment contains the promise of completeness, but an allegorical work is, according to Benjamin, a pile-up of fragments with no clear goal (Hanssen and A Benjamin eds. 2002: 108). Benjamin's own writing is characterized by 'pile-ups' of aphoristic fragments and quotations, which combine to create works as substantial as *Tragic Drama* and the incomplete *Arcades Project*. 'Meaning' is conveyed by what is *not* said as much as by the fragments themselves.

Allegory is present in every scene of *Shadowtime*, but nowhere is it more fundamental to a work's form than in Scene II, *Les Froissements des Ailes de Gabriel*. The piece comprises 124 tiny fragments of material —tiny in terms of duration rather than substance, since the orchestration is rich, and varies with each fragment, resulting in a rapid turnover of instrumental 'colour groups' (essentially chamber sub-groups of the total ensemble). Gabriel, the angel of the annunciation, 'arrives' in the opera, allegorically symbolized in the musical form and instrumentation, shortly after the moment in Scene I in which Benjamin laments the failure of the promised Messiah to appear (bar 335): the end of Scene I and the beginning of *Les Froissements* overlap. A guitar 'concerto' in which the solo instrument is not always prominent against the ensemble, *Les Froissements* contains neither dramatic action nor vocal material. The relationship between the soloist and a second guitar in the ensemble tuned a quartertone lower suggests an image of the beating wings of the angel, especially in fragment 13, in which the directional, rapidly ascending then descending gesture in the solo guitar is shadowed by the ensemble guitar at a slight delay. The fast turnover of fragments undermines the perception of any long-term processes: the musical surface is purposely rendered discontinuous. The composer inserts pauses of a few seconds' duration between certain fragments, thereby drawing attention to contrasting neighbouring textures: for example, fragment 27 is essentially quiet and lyrical, and after a three-second pause, fragment 28 announces a new tempo, a much higher register and rapid accented pitches at a considerably louder dynamic. Some fragments are so very brief that the listener can barely register the configuration of instruments before new material is initiated at yet another tempo: not only does the fragment form offer a musical 'reading' of Benjamin's approach to writing (the 'pile-up' of aphorisms), but it is itself an allegory for the relationship between angels and time: angels 'are alleged to act within time but [are] oblivious to it' (Toop, 2010: 13). The instrumentation changes with each fragment, resulting in what Richard Toop has characterized as a 'glittering' array of texture types (Ibid.). The composer attempts to avoid 'a meaningless string of elements,' however, arguing that 'two sections differing fundamentally in technique can nevertheless relate through similar instrumentation or a common element' (Meyer, 52). There is an obvious relationship between the piece's first two fragments, each of which features tiny microtonal fluctuations around a 'core' pitch in the oboe, violin, and latterly cello, as well as a figure picked out in harmonics by the soloist. (The oboe material in fragments 1 and 2 resembles the same instrument's intervention at the very beginning of the opera, in Scene I. It would not be surprising, given his emphasis on 're-presentation', if Ferneyhough had 're-read' the material of one scene when composing another, Scene I having been composed last of all). After the first two fragments, such obvious correspondences sink beneath the surface, although the microtonal gestures reappear periodically (fragments 21 (trumpet), 23 (flute), and 24 (clarinet), the latter exemplifying the katabasis figure noted above). Strings of repeated pitches recur throughout the piece: having emerged from the pitch material of the opening two fragments, they continue into fragments 3 (contrabass clarinet), 4 (solo guitar) and 5 (ensemble guitar). Later, these transform into pervasive regular impulses or small rhythmic ostinati as in fragments 39, 42, 50, 52 and 54. The presence of repeated pitches intensifies towards the end of the piece (notably from fragment 87 onwards) in various instruments, and the texture thins, allowing various flourishes to stand out, such as the imitative gesture between trumpet and contrabass clarinet in fragment 105 or between the two guitars in 109 (representing, perhaps, final flaps of Gabriel's wings). Ostinato figures appear in great number at the piece's conclusion, particularly for the soloist (for example the last bar of fragment 115, and the very brief fragment 120), before the guitar is finally locked in a repetitive triplet pattern in fragments 123 and 124. Apart from the fact that these ostinati are a fairly recent feature of Ferneyhough's music (which is not known for repetitive gestures), they reprise similarly regular, repetitive figures and regular pulses in Scene I, where they represent the ticking of a clock, the passage of time, and Benjamin's heartbeat. Benjamin's line in Scene I, '[the] future seems certain to go [on] without us' (bars 291-6), is characterized by single dotted demisemiquavers separated by rests of equal length, reinforcing the impression of a ticking clock, although the impulses become more distant from one another as the phrase continues. Benjamin had a weak, irregular heartbeat, and Ferneyhough consolidates the idea of the audience palpably experiencing Benjamin's journey over the mountains by revisiting this subtle but effective 'motif' throughout the first half of the opera. Further examples of 'heartbeat' material include the chorus' intervention in bars 255-258 and 283-284, the first of these being accompanied by ostinato figures in the strings. Independent layers of musical and textual material relating to very different periods in Benjamin's life are simultaneously present in Scene I, collapsing the history of a life into the present: the drama at the Spanish border is counterpointed with a lyrical love duet between a young Benjamin and his wife, Dora, whilst the chorus sings nursery rhymes (a reference to Benjamin's son).



Walter Benjamin in Paris. © Gisèle Freund

THE 'DOUBLE' WORK
THE DOCTRINE OF SIMILARITY: (THIRTEEN CANONS)

The six scenes besides *Les Froissements* incorporate Bernstein's text. Ferneyhough first provided Bernstein with a set of numerical constraints, whose most significant manifestation in the opera remains the organization of the sections according to prime numbers (13 canons; 11 interrogations; seven tableaux; five *stelae*). Bernstein's text reckons with the kinds of constraints that Ferneyhough typically imposes on himself as a composer, the elements of citation in Bernstein's libretto further complicating matters since the rhythms of Heine, Hölderlin and Mallarmé (to name but a few upon whose texts Bernstein draws) are each distinctive and must be made to map onto Benjamin's own expression, characterized by puns and soundplay (Perloff, 89).

Bernstein's language is at its most musical in *The Doctrine of Similarity* (Scene III), which is entirely concerned with the sounds of language. The title is itself similar to Benjamin's 'The Doctrine of the Similar' (1933), a brief essay in which he considers the mimetic faculty, insofar as 'we must assume in principle that processes in the sky were imitable, both collectively and individually, by people who lived in earlier times'. According to Benjamin, humans have progressively lost this capacity for imitating nature ('we no longer possess in our perception whatever once made it possible to speak of a similarity which might exist between a constellation of stars and a human'), but imitative behaviour has passed into language as its onomatopoetic element (Benjamin, ed. Jennings, 1999: 695–696). Although onomatopoeia itself appears in Bernstein's text only rarely, many of the thirteen poems of *The Doctrine of Similarity* exploit various sound similarities in language. The onomatopoetic element passes into the musical language, as in 'Amphibolies I', in which the opening percussion ostinato reflects the sound of walking (the first words are 'walk slowly'), and at the mention of thick shadows (bars 13-17), the piano and vibraphone hold chords and use the pedal to sustain resonance, recalling passages in Ferneyhough's earlier *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* in which the Icon section – also described by the composer as an exploration of shadows and objects – is characterized by sustained chords (objects) and effective pedal resonance (Toop, 1990). Musical onomatopoeia is also important in the last of the thirteen songs, 'Salute', based on a poem by Mallarmé ('Salut'), the subject of which is sailing: Ferneyhough's bass clarinet accompaniment includes an oscillating figure of a seventh — sometimes micro-tonally stretched — or a close interval trill, often alongside the word 'sail', suggesting in its *fluido* and *legato* articulation rolling waves or the listing of the boat mentioned in Mallarmé's poem. Bernstein's text for 'Salute' plays on the notion of translation and the implicit meanings of Mallarmé's poem, whose title is ambiguous: the French *salut* is variously a toast, a military salute, a greeting (either formal or informal) and, additionally, indicates salvation. The last verse is most relevant to Bernstein's 'borrowing' or 're-presentation' of Mallarmé's text:

> Solitude, récif, étoile
> A n'importe ce qui valut
> Le blanc souci de notre toile
>
> [Solitude, rocky shoal, bright star
> To whatsoever may be worth
> Our sheet's white care in setting forth]
> (Mallarmé, trans. Weinfield, 1994: 3)

Bernstein's poem is given below:

> The blank sail of our soul [toll]
> The blank toil of our sail [veil]
> The blank soul of our toil [soil]
> (Bernstein, 2005: 75)

Rather than choose the most apposite translation of a word, Bernstein often draws on the sonic similarities between English words and those in Mallarmé's original. For example, for 'blanc' ('white'), Bernstein uses 'blank' (as in 'empty', another meaning of the French *blanc*); 'solitude' becomes 'soil', which is similar to 'toil', drawn from the French 'toile' [sail], into which Bernstein incorporates 'soul', surely an oblique reference to salvation ['salut']. Other aspects of Mallarmé's poem, albeit not directly referred to in Bernstein's appropriation of its final lines, also apply to a reading of 'Salute', and by extension to Ferneyhough's vision of Benjamin's demise. Translated, Mallarmé's lines include the following: 'We navigate, O my diverse / Friends, myself already on the poop / You the sumptuous prow to cut / Through winter wave and lightening burst'. This might be read as an allegory for Benjamin's final experience as depicted in Scene I of *Shadowtime*, the reference to the 'poop' deck implying that the poem's narrator finds himself at the stern (the back) of the ship, leaving it to others ('my diverse friends') to chart the way forward from the front of the vessel (the prow is the part of the bow that cuts through water): from the moment his transit visa was refused, Benjamin found himself left behind ('on the poop') while his fellow travellers were permitted to cross into Spain the next day, after his suicide. Finally, it may not be too fanciful to suggest that Bernstein's use of the word 'toll' in 'Salute' (set in bars 14-17) makes implicit reference to the scene in *L'Orfeo* in which the protagonist persuades Caronte, the toll-collecting ferryman, to convey him across the river Styx to Hades. As the last of the thirteen canons, 'Salute' and its nautical references occur at the juncture of *Shadowtime* at which it might be inferred that Benjamin crosses the Styx to face interrogation (not by Pluto but by an eclectic collection of eleven masked, historical figures in Scene V). The notion of journey implicit in both 'Salut' and 'Salute' (*salut* also means 'farewell') consolidates the other journeys presented in the opera, from Benjamin's travel on foot over the Pyrenees to the recurring katabasis figures throughout in the musical material that presage his descent into the underworld (as in 'Salute', Alto 2, bars 7-8). Finally, 'Salute' manifests a global 'katabasis' in terms of vocal register, which falls progressively over some two octaves from start to finish.

THE 'DOUBLE' WORK
BENJAMIN'S DESCENT TO THE UNDERWORLD

From the beginning of Scene IV, Ferneyhough further 'opens up' the work to specifically musical references, layering these on top of the already-present Monteverdian 'backdrop'. Alban Berg's *Lulu* features a film at its midpoint, and similarly, Ferneyhough instructs that a silent film be projected at the midpoint of *Shadowtime*, *Opus Contra Naturam* (Scene IV), 'encompassing the chaotic intersection of scenes from fin-de-siècle Berlin cabaret, medieval labyrinths and images from the hyper-dissimulatory environment of present-day Las Vegas' (Ferneyhough, *Opus Contra Naturam* [score]). In this parodic piece, the pianist is a Liberace-like figure, Ferneyhough likening the piano to a parody of the Freudian id, which the performer (the ego) seeks to control, but the 'lewd and rebellious unconscious lurking in the piano [...] constantly blurts out these slightly accelerated and disfigured echoes of romantic piano music that the pianist has to suppress' (Meyer, 58). The pianistic gestures 'blurted out' are *simulacra*, similar to romantic figurations but mere representations of them, in another reference to Benjamin's theories of representation and his critique of the romantic symbol. Ferneyhough remarks that he 'spent months reassimilating old romantic turns of phrase', an ironic pursuit for a composer who as a teenager '[sat] for days and

Brian Ferneyhough, 2012. © Kai Bienert / Berliner Festspiele

days [...] at the piano and played the most vile dissonances that I could possibly find [...] until I had worked these ghastly diatonic chords out of my head' (Riggins, 136).

Scene V ('Pools of Darkness: 11 interrogations') features another reference to Berg: as in *Wozzeck*, each of its eleven short pieces is based on a musical form or (more often) technique from the past. The scene is the complement of *The Doctrine of Similarity*: where the latter emphasized darkness turning to light —'the leaves turn dark before the trees are shot with light' ('Dust to Dusk') —in Scene V light 'spills into pools of darkness' ('Four Furies: Fugato'). It is not only to Berg and the classical music tradition that Ferneyhough's musical language turns: in the third 'interrogation', Benjamin faces the three-headed *kerberos* that guards the gates to hell in Greek mythology ('Kerberos: Hoquetus-Melodrama'). Ferneyhough's three incongruous heads are Harpo, Groucho and Karl Marx, whose passages in hocket serve to reinforce the absurdity of their 'relationship' in this scene as they complete each others' sentences. The second instrumental gesture in 'Kerberos' (descending *tremoli* in the woodwind, bars 1–2) resembles melodramatic incidental music from a film, and Ferneyhough continues to exploit texture-types in different instrumental groups throughout the scene. In the subsequent 'Dramatic Madrigal a due: Pope Pius XII', brief but characteristic instrumental 'incidental' gestures punctuate the ends and beginnings of the singers' phrases (bars 122–123 and 132–133), reinforcing the already comedic tone of Pius' uncontrolled pitch fluctuation. The 'Rebus' (Interrogation VI) is characterized by such slow-moving, barely audible instrumental lines that it creates an impression, retained for much of the rest of the opera, of a prevailing slow speed, even though the tempo markings are little different from those in earlier scenes. The effect of time slowed down is brought about through Ferneyhough's use of longer note values and homophonic textures, which creates a thorough contrast between textures typical of Scenes V to VII and the brief, flitting fragments of *Les Froissements*.

If in Scene V Ferneyhough reads Berg reading historical forms, then Scene VI is a counterpart in which Bernstein 'reads' Benjamin 'reading' historical poets, including Heine. This is reinforced by the absence of singers, here replaced by the solo speaker from Scene I in a new guise. Bernstein generates text from some of Benjamin's most famous essays, including the third tableau, 'Hashish in Marseilles' (1932). Benjamin describes situations that 'can become so compulsively hilarious that the hashish eater for minutes on end is capable of nothing except laughing' (Benjamin, ed. Jennings, 1999: 673). The surreal aspects of Benjamin's experience, in which he recalls hearing car horns that he mistook for a brass band, are echoed in Ferneyhough's treatment of string timbre, in which no note is unornamented, producing atypical otherworldly textures, a glassy sound not unlike the recurring silvery harmonics in the contemporaneous Fifth String Quartet. In the subsequent fourth tableau, 'After Heine', a belligerent brass fanfare is heard as the text offers a reading of Heine's famous *Der Tod, das ist die kühle Nacht*, itself set by many nineteenth century composers of Lieder.

Scenes VI and VII envisage the Angel of History as Dürer's *Melencolia*, an image in which a downcast angel sits surrounded by disused scientific instruments. The Benjaminian concept of melancholy equates to a relationship to the world, seeking meaning in obsolete things (much as Benjamin sought out 'worthless' bric-a-brac at flea markets). Accordingly, the instruments at the angel's feet 'are stripped of practical utility and become allegories of melancholy so that they have to be encoded now and read' (Goebel, 58). Ferneyhough incorporates musical gestures similarly 'stripped of their utility' in the final scenes of *Shadowtime*: the brass is once again prominent in the seventh tableau, intoning an ironic inverted fanfare in microtonal steps (bars 200–202), 'a descending riff straight out of a low-brow comedy soundtrack' (F Fitch, 2006), which is at the same time an ironic reference to the recurring katabasis figure. As Scene VI concludes, Ferneyhough reintroduces the fragment form of Scene II, each fragment being separated by a few seconds' silence and initiating a complete textural change after every double barline. Far from being 'glittering', as Toop describes the fragments in Scene II, these are bold and brash (bars 198–200), rapid up-down glissandi at an extremely loud dynamic evoking, perhaps, the cacophony of car horns Benjamin heard in Marseilles. This contrasts with the quiet *col legno* and breath sounds of bars 202–204, which anticipate Ferneyhough's treatment of the voices as vocal 'percussion' in the final Scene VII *(Stelae for Failed Time)*, for twelve voices and pre-recorded sound. By its conclusion, *Stelae* resembles *Time and Motion Study III* for sixteen voices and live transformation (1974) both notationally and sonically.

A *stele* is a gravestone or a boundary marker, and the use of such imagery at the end of the opera creates another overarching formal symmetry, returning the listener to the border and death of the very beginning. Scene VII is in five parts following on from each other continuously and tracing a gradual trajectory from pitched vocal sounds to breath sounds or phonetic translations of the children's rhymes in Scene I. Each section is 30 bars long and is a variation on the metrical scheme of the first *stele* (the metrical scheme being symmetrical about the midpoint, bars 15–16). The piece includes prerecorded metallic and percussive sounds, which begin before the singers enter. Although some of the rhythmic material of the prerecorded sound, as notated, preserves Ferneyhough's typically complex irrational tuplets, the singers' material is rhythmically rather simple, and cast (initially at least) in homophonic textures that allow the texts to be conveyed to the listener (two texts being presented simultaneously by the choir). Recall Ferneyhough's description of the first half of the opera as 'effort music', in which the listener palpably experiences Benjamin's climb: like Nono's ***tragedia dell'ascolto***, it requires that the listener work in order to engage with the material, whereas past the midpoint, 'everything becomes more readily accessible'. *Stelae* also includes a solo for the composer himself, whose electronically treated, recorded voice is heard reciting text (also taken from the nursery rhymes of Scene I) in a language of his own invention: the ultimate translation as 're-presentation'. This disembodied voice becomes increasingly prominent as *Stelae* continues, until it is the only sound remaining.

The last two *stelae* address two of Benjamin's greatest concerns, history and 'now time' *[Jetztzeit]*. The scene ends with the phrase 'now time is stone': Benjamin conceived 'now time' as an eternal present in which events would break out of the 'grand narrative' and explode the continuum of history (again there is symmetry with Scene I, in which periods of Benjamin's life are presented simultaneously). An 'explosion' occurs at the beginning of the fifth *stele*, marked 'tumultuoso', as different voice types adopt contrasting, percussive texture-types. However by the end the music is slow, the stone having become an allegory for the petrification of time: notwithstanding the hints to the contrary in the earlier 'Salute' of Scene III, there is to be no salvation for Benjamin. The *stelae* also 'mark' a new departure for Ferneyhough as composer. Many initiatives of the opera, be they the tiny fragments of *Les Froissements* or the openness to musical references atypical of his style to that point, assume an increasing significance in his output after 2000[2].

---

1 A complete score of *Shadowtime* can be viewed online at http://issuu.com/editionpeters/docs/shadowtime

2 These most recent works will be the subject of a second article on Ferneyhough's music, to be published in this journal later this year.

References, p. 91