

Matthew Barnson

# VANITAS



## The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying

(Memento Mori after Gerhard Richter) (2012)

1. **Praeludium** 6:04
2. **Ricercar** 6:53
3. **Passacaglia** 10:22  
The Yale Orchestra  
Paolo Bortolameolli, conductor
4. **I Crossed the Samuel Beckett Bridge at Dusk** (2018) 9:56  
Fanny Wyrick-Flax, flutes; Hannah Lash, harp

## Vanitas (2018)

(Ars Moriendi: Pieces for Violoncello and Marimba, Book I)

5. **Vanitas (Towards a Prélude)** 3:56
6. **Kleine Sonate auf (Dopple)concertenart**  
(a Dies Irae Remembering Benjamin Britten) 3:21
7. **Sarabande (The Real Deal)** 5:17
8. **Arsis/Thesis (Not-a-Bourée I - Not-a-Bourée II - Not-a-Bourée I)** 4:44
9. **Thesis/Arsis (Not-a-Gavotte I - Not-a-Gavotte II - Not-a-Gavotte I)** 4:46
10. **Vertigo (A Gigue Descendent)** 2:13
11. **Air (Towards the End)** 9:43  
New Morse Code:  
Hannah Collins, cello; Michael Compitello, marimba & vibraphone

— 67:17 —





**The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying**  
**(Memento Mori after Gerhard Richter)**  
(2012)

**I. Praeludium**

**II. Ricercar**

**III. Passacaglia**

The Yale Orchestra  
Paolo Bortolameolli, conductor  
Ani Kavañian, violin solo  
Wendy Sharp, violin solo  
Raul Garcia, viola solo  
Laura Usiskin, cello solo

The Yale Orchestra:  
Violin I  
Ani Kavañian, concertmaster  
Geoffrey Herd  
Kyung Yu  
Sunmi Chang  
Holly Piccoli

Violin II  
Wendy Sharp  
Edson Scheid  
Alissa Cheung  
Jiwon Evelyn Kwark  
Choha Kim

Viola  
Raul Garcia

Edwin Kaplan  
Yi-Ping Yang  
Anne Lanzilotti  
Eve Tang

Cello  
Laura Usiskin  
Yan Ming Alvin Wong  
Jacques Wood  
Hannah Collins  
Soojin Chung

Double Bass  
Nicholas Jones  
Paul Nemeth  
Nathaniel Chase

**The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying**  
(1651)

*A man is a bubble, said the Greek proverb, which Lucian represents with advantages and its proper circumstances, to this purpose; saying, that all the world is a storm, and men rise up in their several generations, like bubbles descending à Jove pluvio, from God and the dew of heaven, from a tear and drop of rain, from nature and Providence; and some of these instantly sink into the deluge of their first parent, and are hidden in a sheet of water, having had no other business in the world, but to be born, that they might be able to die: others float up*



*and down two or three turns, and suddenly disappear and give their place to others: and they that live longest upon the face of the waters are in perpetual motion, restless and uneasy; and being crushed with a great drop of a cloud, sink into flatness and a froth; the change not being great, it being hardly possible it should be more a nothing that it was before.*

—Jeremy Taylor

I reread this exquisite sentence, which opens Jeremy Taylor's book *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, throughout the process of composing this piece. Taylor's rhetoric, which veers between violence and delicacy, and structure, which moves inexorably forward in spite of numerous pauses, inspired me to write a *memento mori*. Giving abstract music prosaic titles is rare for me, and titling works is in any case a tricky process. But in the wake of recent losses, both personal and national, I was moved by Taylor's text, a potent reminder of the precariousness of life.

**The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying** is a summation of my writing for strings over a decade—in particular, my three string quartets for the Arditti and JACK Quartets. It is marked by a gradual introduction of different playing techniques: glassy harmonics, skittish string-crossings, snap pizzicato, and brutal sawing,

often resolving to an uneasy calm. Pulsing rhythms push this high-drama work towards extremes of fragility and brutality.

The subtitle is a nod to the painter Gerhard Richter, a constant source of inspiration. While watching a documentary on Richter's process, I was struck by the aural similarities between his technique of running a scraper across a canvas of freshly-applied paint and the "scraping" sounds I often request from performers. Both strategies employ grit to reveal novel textures and colors, a means of discovery that is important in my music.

The idea for this work first arose after I was asked to compose a work to accompany Richard Strauss' *Metamorphosen* for 23 solo strings shortly after my grandfather's passing. It is impossible for me to think of either Strauss or my grandfather without thinking of Munich in the spring of 1945, when Strauss was finishing (and a bit too ambiguously dedicating) *Metamorphosen*. Only a few miles away, American soldiers had liberated Dachau. My grandfather was among the soldiers who aided the victims and then escorted them south through Strauss' Garmisch, to Salzburg and on to the Hungarian border. It is dedicated to him and to my grandmother, who passed away shortly before I finished this piece.



**I Crossed the Samuel Beckett Bridge at Dusk (2018)**

Fanny Wyrick-Flax, flutes; Hannah Lash, harp

**I Crossed the Samuel Beckett Bridge at Dusk** was composed for two performers, a harpist and a single flute player playing piccolo, alto flute, and bass flute. The piece began to take shape during my professorship at Trinity College, Dublin between 2012 and 2014. Home of the *Book of Kells*, the college is one of the most famous tourist sites in Dublin, and my office window looked onto its square. Looking back, I remember that there were two dueling buskers, a tin whistle player and an Irish harp player, both of whom I could clearly hear from my window, and who may have provided some impetus for the piece.

The piece draws its name from one of my great discoveries in Dublin: the Samuel Beckett Bridge, designed by the architect Santiago Calatrava, located in the newer tech hub by the harbor. A Calatrava bridge seems to be the sign that a European city has “arrived.” Cynics have observed that the Beckett bridge, which looks like a harp on its side, resembles the Guinness beer harp. At night, the area around the bridge is mostly deserted. As an observer, you are alone with the harbor fog. I distinctly remember looking up

at its suspension cables (the “harp strings”) and imagining a music (for harp). At the same time, I was working on a number of pieces that used obsessive ostinatos, some of which also made it into this work.

—Matthew Barnson

**Vanitas (2018)**

**(Ars Moriendi: Pieces for Violoncello and Marimba, Book I)**

**I. Vanitas (Towards a Prélude)**

**II. Kleine Sonate auf (Dopple)concerte-nart (a Dies Irae Remembering Benjamin Britten)**

**III. Sarabande (The Real Deal)**

**IV. Arsis/Thesis (Not-a-Bourée I - Not-a-Bourée II - Not-a-Bourée I)**

**V. Thesis/Arsis (Not-a-Gavotte I - Not-a-Gavotte II - Not-a-Gavotte I)**

**VI. Vertigo (A Gigue Descendent)**

**VII. Air (Towards the End)**

New Morse Code:

Hannah Collins, cello

Michael Compitello, marimba & vibraphone

**Vanitas** is a suite of pieces for cello and marimba that I composed over the last four years. I began writing them as a homage to



the 17th-century French composer Marin Marais, who wrote fantastic suites for viola da gamba and continuo. György Kurtág's *Jelek* and *Játékok* as well as Bach's dance suites provided further inspiration. For me, they are a means of experimenting with ideas of rhythm, meter, form, and time. The title is taken from the still-life paintings common in the Netherlands during the 17th century containing symbols of time and change.

**Vanitas** was not conceived of as a whole, but rather as an accumulation. Rather than hold myself to a strict deadline, duration, or number of pieces, I decided to work freely with various ideas and form a suite from the resulting pieces. This may be the final form, or it may not. In some ways, I imagined each piece standing on its own, but I find that when I listen to each individually I want the

context of the others. Two slow movements seem to have imbued the original playfulness with an earnestness that is also beyond my original intention, but which that I have embraced.

New Morse Code commissioned **Vanitas**, with support provided to the composers by a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. Residencies for the composer and/or performers at Copland House, the Millay Colony, and Avaloch Farms provided time and space to work and collaborate. A grant from Stony Brook University through Faculty in the Arts, Humanities and lettered Social Sciences, the Offices of the Provost, and the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences provided funds supporting these performances.

—Matthew Barnson



## BIOS

Winner of a 2015 Guggenheim fellowship, **Matthew Barnson** composes for orchestras, choirs, string quartets, voices, chamber ensembles, dancers, and computers. His music has been performed at Carnegie Hall, the Museum of Modern Art, the Kennedy Center, the Aldeburgh Festival, the Royal Academy of Music, the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, ISCM World Music Days, MATA, Wigmore Hall, Aspen, the San Francisco War Memorial, and other venues throughout the United States and Europe. His work has been recognized with awards and commissions from the Barlow Endowment, Aaron Copland House, NewMusicUSA, Jerome Foundation, Yale University, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, among others, and at residencies at a number of artist colonies in the United States and abroad.

He studied at Eastman, the University of Pennsylvania, IRCAM, and Yale with Christopher Rouse, Joseph Schwantner, Steven Stucky, Augusta Read Thomas, Martin Bresnick, Ezra Laderman, Ingram Marshall, and David Lang. Studies with Wolfgang Rihm at Acanthes were brief but influential. Large-scale works have been commissioned by, and performed in recent seasons by Third

Coast Percussion, the Yale School of Music, the JACK Quartet, and Valti.

Barnson teaches composition, electronic music, theory, and the history of music after 1945. He has taught at Yale College, chaired the composition and theory department at New York's Third Street Music School Settlement, served as assistant professor of composition at Trinity College Dublin, and currently serves as an assistant professor of composition at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His album of string quartets, *Sibyl Tones*, was released on Tzadik in 2014.

Chilean conductor **Paolo Bortolameolli** is assistant conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. [paolobortolameolli.com](http://paolobortolameolli.com)

**New Morse Cose (Hannah Collins and Michael Compitello)** activates the unexpected range and unique sonic world of cello and percussion to catalyze and champion the compelling works of young composers. [newmorsecode.com](http://newmorsecode.com)

**Fanya Wyrick-Flax** is a freelance musician in the New York tristate area and Boston, and the core flutist of Contemporaneous. [fannywyrickflax.com](http://fannywyrickflax.com)



Composer and harpist **Hannah Lash** has been praised for her “technical wizardry” (Birmingham News) and musical depth of expression. Her music has been commissioned and performed by the LA Philharmonic, Carnegie Hall, the JACK Quartet, and others.

*hannahlash.com*

Violinist **Ani Kavafian** enjoys a prolific career as a soloist, recitalist, and chamber musician. She has performed with virtually all of America’s leading orchestras and is professor of violin at the Yale School of Music.

Violinist **Wendy Sharp** performs frequently as a recitalist and a chamber musician. She is currently director of chamber music at the Yale School of Music, where she has also served on the violin faculty since 1997.

Cellist **Laura Usiskin** enjoys a versatile career that spans solo to orchestral playing and early to 21st-century music. Her award-winning album *Reimagining Bach* features music of J.S. Bach as well as two commissioned works. She is on faculty at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and Birmingham-Southern College.

## CREDITS

Producer: Matthew Barnson

Recorded by: Ryan Streber (*Vanitas*, March 2019) at Oktaven Studios; Eugene Kimball (*Rule & Exercises*, February 2013), Matthew LeFevre (*I Crossed the Samuel Beckett Bridge at Dusk*, March 2019) at Yale School of Music, Sprague Hall.

Support was provided by a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. Residencies for composer and/or performers at Copland House, the Millay Colony, and Avaloch Farms provided time and space to compose and collaborate. A grant from Stony Brook University through Faculty in the Arts, Humanities and lettered Social Sciences, the Offices of the Provost, and the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences provided funds supporting these recordings.

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