

MICHAEL HERSCH

images from a closed ward



The Blair String Quartet

Images From a Closed Ward (2010)

- I 3:41
- II 1:13
- III 3:30
- IV 1:46
- V 2:41
- VI 1:03
- VII 2:55
- VIII 1:16
- IX 4:01
- X 2:01
- XI 9:36
- XII 4:45
- XIII 3:45

-- 42:13 --

The Blair String Quartet:
Christian Teal, violin I
Cornelia Heard, violin II
John Kochanowski, viola
Felix Wang, cello



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IMAGES FROM A CLOSED WARD

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On Michael Hersch's *Images from a Closed Ward*

by Aaron Grad



Michael Hersch's string quartet, *Images from a Closed Ward*, has in its origins an encounter in Rome in 2000. The American artist Michael Mazur (1935-2009) had created a series of etchings to accompany Robert Pinsky's new translation of Dante's *Inferno*, and Mazur's works were on display at the American Academy in Rome while the then 29-year-old Hersch was there as a Rome Prize Fellow. During their time in the Eternal City, Hersch and Mazur seemed to recognize each other as kindred spirits.

In 2003, Mazur provided artwork and commentary for Hersch's first CD release, a collection of his chamber music performed by the String Soloists of the Berlin Philharmonic. In describing the young composer's style, Mazur noted, "I am struck by what might constitute an analogy with painting and with my own work in particular. There is, of course, the overwhelming sense of 'sadness,' which is better than 'doom.' In fact, the 'abyss' in its finality is easy to portray: a rich black says it all ... Dante looked into the abyss but primarily found sadness there. Sadness is a much more complicated and, therefore, interesting human condition."

Mazur began to make his name in the 1960s with two groups of etchings and lithographs, *Closed Ward* and *Locked Ward*. His subject matter involved a different form of confinement than Dante's rings of hell, but his vivid depictions of inmates in a Rhode Island mental asylum peered into an abyss all its own. Reviewing the etchings in 1964 for *The New York Times*, John Canaday

wrote that Mazur's tormented subjects "have the terrible anonymity of individuals who cannot be reached, whose ugly physical presence is only the symptom of a tragic spiritual isolation." It was these images that resonated with Hersch, and that helped to shape what would be his first string quartet since one composed during his student days almost twenty years earlier.

Once he had the work outlined in the summer of 2009, Hersch decided that he would contact the artist with whom he had not spoken in some time. Hersch recalls, "I was extremely excited at the prospect of seeing him again, and sharing the terrain of this new quartet. I felt that he would be surprised and pleased that something he had done had a hand in the shaping of this new work. The day before I planned to write him, I read of his death in a Sunday newspaper."

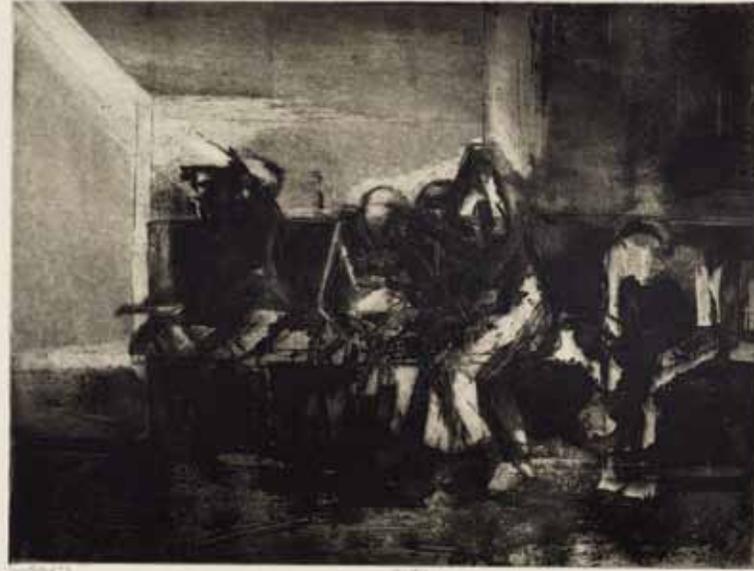
An etching from Mazur's *Closed Ward* series hangs directly over Hersch's writing desk in Pennsylvania. The etching depicts figures seated on a wide bench, back to back. In the foreground, a man is crumpled over with his hands nearly brushing his bare feet; his limbs are clearly outlined, but his head and torso are shaded to a deep, impenetrable black. The person next to him is a



bundled sack of gray, the face distorted. Behind them are hooded figures and a ghostly partial image. There is a sooty, Dickensian objectivity to the scene, and yet the image is surreal and fragile, like a partially remembered dream.

Images from a Closed Ward uses thirteen separate movements to convey a disquieting reality from multiple vantage points. Music, unlike art, requires time to unfold, and Hersch stretches out the unveiling with glacially slow tempos. The work never creeps higher

than 66 beats per minute (like a resting heart rate) and it drops to as low as 30 beats per minute, obscuring any sense of pulse. Another distinctive trait of the quartet is how, apart from the climactic counterpoint of the 11th movement, the four players often work together in formations of massed sonorities. Although distinctly modern, these homophonic or quasi-homophonic textures hearken back to Renaissance and earlier church traditions, a connection reinforced by open harmonies that avoid stylized triads and tonal expectations. Hersch's ancient, pre-tonal tendencies are most apparent in the pale chorale texture of the first movement, which functions as a prelude to the work as a whole.



The players maintain rhythmic lockstep throughout the second and fourth movements, issuing loud and ferocious bursts of chattering chords. These two aggressive sections bookend the haunting third movement, marked with an expressive indication of "longing; quiet, restrained grief." The plucked cello provides a dirge-like foundation for the understated and strangely heroic melodies. The fifth movement brings the first taste of brittle counterpoint. The sixth movement also divides the ensemble, with two pairs sparring in opposing strata of slow and fast motion. The seventh movement looks back to the smooth chords of the first movement, but the sound takes on greater urgency and motion, propelled by a ceaseless cello line. The eighth movement reduces the work's violent streak to dry attacks, the players assaulting their strings with the wooden bow-sticks. The ninth movement returns to the aching purity of long-tones, with a performance instruction of "haunted; stricken." The following movement, marked "frozen," drops the quartet into total stasis, a cold darkness reinforced by the use of mutes.

From this point of maximal tension, the eleventh movement erupts with ferocious, unrelenting rage. Gone are the targeted jabs of the second and fourth movements, in which the instruments moved together. For almost ten minutes, the four voices engage in a battle of ripping, gouging, and stabbing counterpoint, followed by an arresting silence. The twelfth movement combines the worlds of the first and second movements, while the ending, thirteenth, section, reprises the wistful music of the third movement; the melody provides solace, but not relief, as it once again leaves the final phrase unresolved.

Mazur's final thoughts about Hersch's early chamber music seem to apply well to *Images from a Closed Ward*: "These compositions are filled sometimes with frightening sounds. They are unrelenting, nearly without hope. ... But no artwork can be without hope since it is in the very nature of creative work to be optimistic, if only in as much as we continue to work through everything but our own death."

— Aaron Grad has been Program Annotator for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra since 2005. He also contributes program notes to the New World Symphony, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Celebrity Series of Boston, Columbia Artists, and others. His concert reviews have appeared in *The Washington Post*, and *PlaybillArts* regularly publishes his feature articles and interviews online.



THE BLAIR QUARTET

Known for combining “technical expertise and emotional fire,” the Blair Quartet has established itself as among the strongest quartets performing today. Over the past several decades it has enhanced its national reputation through appearances at the Library of Congress, the Kennedy Center, New York’s 92nd Street Y, Merkin Concert Hall, and Carnegie Recital Hall. Residencies have included those at the Aspen Music Festival, the Sedona Chamber Music Festival, the Colorado Music Festival, the Sewanee Music Festival, Music Mountain in Connecticut and the Maverick Concert Series in Woodstock, New York. They have been the Quartet-in-Residence for the Classical Fellowship Awards competition of the American Pianists Association, and the Irving S. Gilmore International Keyboard Festival.



The ensemble has performed widely on NPR and was featured for a number of years on a public television series called “Recital Hall.” The group’s recordings have been praised internationally by such publications as Gramophone, BBC Music Magazine, American Record Guide, and Stereo Review. They have recorded for labels such as Warner Brothers and New World Records. Their release of the String Quartets of Charles Ives on the Naxos label has been widely acclaimed. Well known as interpreters of the standard repertoire, the Blair Quartet has also championed music by contemporary American composers, including works written for them by George Tsontakis, Morton Subotnick, Ellsworth Milburn, Michael Alec Rose, Rodney Lister, and Michael Kurek. The ensemble has worked closely with many other composers of our time, including Elliott Carter, John Harbison, George Rochberg, Steve Mackey, Ezra Laderman, Leon Kirchner, Steven Stucky, Joan Tower, Robert Sirota, and Alan Hovhaness. The Quintet for Banjo and String Quartet, com

posed for them by Edgar Meyer and Bela Fleck, has been featured nationally on the PBS series, Lonesome Pine Special, and remains in their touring repertoire.

The Blair Quartet has presented cycles of the complete quartets of Beethoven and Bartok. They have appeared with many renowned artists including pianists Leon Fleisher, Lee Luvisi, Rolf Gothoni, David Owen Norris, Christopher Taylor, and Frederic Chiu, clarinetist David Krakauer, violinists Robert Mann and Joseph Silverstein, violists Walter Trampler and Samuel Rhodes, cellist Norman Fischer, and bassist Edgar Meyer. The Blair Quartet has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Southern Arts Federation, the Tennessee Arts Commission and Chamber Music America's C. Michael Paul Residency Program. The Blair String Quartet is in residence at the Blair School of Music of Vanderbilt University.

Christian Teal is internationally known through concerts, recordings, and radio broadcasts as the first violinist of the Blair String Quartet. As soloist, he has appeared with numerous orchestras, including the Madeira Bach Festival Orchestra, the Richmond Symphony, the Colorado Philharmonic, the Nashville Symphony Orchestra and the Nashville Chamber Orchestra. He has appeared in concert at the Killington Music Festival in Vermont and the Rocky Mountain Summer Music Conservatory in Colorado. Through recordings he can be heard on the Pantheon, New World, Vox, Varese Sarabande, Redmark, Warner Brothers and Naxos labels. In 2007/08, Mr. Teal presented the Six Sonatas and Partitas for Unaccompanied Violin by Johann Sebastian Bach in the Sacred Space for the City series at Christ Church Cathedral in Nashville.

During his undergraduate years at Indiana University, he was a pupil of Josef Gingold, followed by graduate study with Dorothy DeLay. He studied chamber music with members of the Juilliard, Hungarian, and Berkshire Quartets, as well as William Primrose, Janos Starker, and Gyorgy Sebok. Mr. Teal has held faculty positions at the Aspen Music Festival, the Meadowmount School of Music, the Rocky Mountain Summer Conservatory, the Rocky Ridge Music Center and the Congress of Strings. He is currently the Joseph Joachim Professor of Violin at the Blair School of Music of Vanderbilt University.



Cornelia Heard earned her Bachelor and Master of Music degrees at the Julliard School, where she studied with Dorothy DeLay and Robert Mann of the Julliard String Quartet. Other coaches have included Felix Galimir, Earl Carlyss, Samuel Rhodes, Ruth Laredo, Michael Rudiakov, and members of the Cleveland Quartet. As a member of the Blair String Quartet, she has toured extensively and recorded for the Warner Brothers, New World, Naxos and Pantheon labels.

She has performed as a chamber musician on concert series at the Library of Congress and New York's 92nd Street Y, as well as at Lincoln Center, the Kennedy Center, Merkin Hall, and Carnegie Recital Hall, and has performed extensively on public radio and television. Ms. Heard has served as artist-in-residence at both the Aspen Music Festival and the Sedona Music Festival, and previously on the faculty of the Sewanee Music Festival. Ms. Heard has appeared as soloist with the North Carolina Symphony, the Nashville Symphony (as a member of the Blair Quartet), the Municipal Chamber Orchestra in New York, the Vanderbilt Orchestra, and the Aspen Brandenburg Ensemble. In the summer of 2002, Ms. Heard joined the faculty of the Killington Music Festival in Vermont.

John Kochanowski was born in South Bend, Indiana. He attended the Interlochen Arts Academy and the Juilliard School where his principal teachers were Walter Trampler and Robert Mann. He also studied at the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, Italy, with Bruno Giuranna.

From 1971 to 1987, he was the violist and founding member of the famed Concord String Quartet, which performed more than 1,000 concerts on major chamber music series throughout the

U.S. and Europe. In 1972 the quartet was awarded the Walter W. Naumburg Chamber Music Award. The ConCORDs presented the complete quartets of Beethoven thirty-two times and the complete quartets of Bartok fourteen times. The quartet premiered more than sixty works, many on commission from such composers as Penderecki, Henze, Johnston, Bolcom, Druckman, Foss, Diamond, and Rochberg. They recorded more than 40 works on RCA-Red Seal, Nonesuch, Vox, Turnabout, and the CRI labels. The Concord Quartet was in residence at Dartmouth College from 1973 to 1987. Mr. Kochanowski joined the Blair Quartet in 1987.

In addition to being the coordinator of chamber music at the Blair School and his concerts with the quartet, he has also given solo recitals, concerto appearances, and has been a guest artist with the Brentano, Cassatt, and Chiara Quartets. He has adjudicated competitions including the Fischhoff Chamber Music and Naumburg Viola competitions. Since 2005 he has been a quartet instructor in Charles Castleman's summer festival, The Quartet Program.

Blair String Quartet cellist **Felix Wang** is also a founding member of the Blakemore Trio and co-principal cellist of the IRIS Orchestra under the direction of Michael Stern. He has performed throughout the United States and Canada as a chamber musician, soloist, and in recital.

Mr. Wang has been the winner of several esteemed competitions, including the National Society of Arts and Letters Cello Competition, where he appeared with the Phoenix Symphony. Judges included Mstislav Rostropovich, Raya Garbousova and Laszlo Varga. He has been heard on NPR stations across the country and has recorded for the Naxos and Centaur labels.



Chamber music festival appearances include the Tucson Winter Chamber Music Festival, Strings in the Mountains Festival, the Garth Newel Chamber Music Festival, the Highlands Chamber Music Festival and the Roycroft Chamber Music Festival.

Mr. Wang is currently Associate Professor of Cello at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He is also on the faculty of the Brevard Music Center, where director Keith Lockhart recently appointed him co-principal cellist. He has served on faculties of the Banff Centre Youth Arts Festival, the Interlochen Center for the Arts, the Rocky Mountain Summer Conservatory, the National Music Festival and the Killington Music Festival.

Recipient of a Doctorate of Musical Arts from the University of Michigan, a Master of Music from the New England Conservatory, and a Bachelor of Music from the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, Mr. Wang was also a recipient of the prestigious Frank Huntington Beebe Grant for study abroad, using it to study in London with William Pleeth. His teachers have included Erling Blondal Bengtsson, Laurence Lesser, Stephen Kates, Jeffrey Solow and Louis Potter, Jr.



MICHAEL HERSCH

If the symmetries and proportions of Mr. Hersch's music evoke the grounded fixity of architecture, its dynamism and spontaneous evolution are those of the natural world. Its somber eloquence sings of truths that are personal yet not confessional ... within the sober palette, the expressive power and range are vast.

— The New York Times

Widely considered among the most gifted composers of his generation, Michael Hersch's (b. 1971) work has been performed in the U.S. and abroad under conductors including Mariss Jansons, Alan Gilbert, Marin Alsop, Robert Spano, Carlos Kalmar, Yuri Temirkanov, Giancarlo Guerrero, and James DePreist; with the major orchestras of Cleveland, Saint Louis, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Baltimore, Dallas, Cincinnati, Seattle, and Oregon, among others; and ensembles including the String Soloists of the Berlin Philharmonic, the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia, the Kreutzer Quartet, and the Network for New Music Ensemble. He has written for such soloists as Thomas Hampson, Midori, Garrick Ohlsson, Boris Pergamenschikow, Shai Wosner, Walter Boeykens, Peter Sheppard-Skaerved, Michael Sachs, and Daniel Gaisford.

His solo and chamber works have appeared on programs throughout the world - from the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall in the U.S., to Germany's Schloss Neu-hardenberg Festival in Brandenburg and the Philharmonie in Berlin; from the U.K.'s Dartington New Music Festival and British Museum, to Italy's Romaeuropa and Nuova Consonanza Festivals. Performances in the far east include those with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and Japan's Pacific Music Festival.



Recent and upcoming performances include *Night Pieces*, commissioned and premiered by the Cleveland Orchestra, and a song cycle for baritone and piano, *Domicilium*, premiered by Thomas Hampson and Wolfgang Rieger on San Francisco Performances (commissioned by Mr. Hampson and the ASCAP Kingsford Commissions for Art Song), the European premieres of his string quartet, *Images From a Closed Ward*, at London's Waterloo Festival, and his concerto for piano and orchestra, *along the ravines*, with the Deutsche Radio Philharmonie (Shai Wosner, piano/ Tito Munoz, conducting) in Germany, and in Romania (Timisoara and Bucharest) as part of the George Enescu International Festival with pianist Matei Varga. Mr. Wosner premiered *along the ravines* during the spring of 2012 with the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. Pianist Garrick Ohlsson premiered *Tenebrae* for solo piano as part of the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, and Soheil Nasserli gave NY premieres of *Tenebrae* and *Two Lullabies* with additional performances at the International Beethoven Festival in Chicago. In 2014, a work for solo violin commissioned by the New York Philharmonic will premiere at the orchestra's Biennial, and Mr. Hersch's chamber opera, *On the Threshold of Winter*, will be given its long awaited premiere in New York by NUNC (Miranda Cuckson, Artistic Director).

Major premieres scheduled for 2014/15 include a new concerto for trombone and ensemble, *Black Untitled*, for Holland's Ensemble Klang, a program-length work for violin and piano, *Zwischen Leben und Tod: twenty-two pieces after images of Peter Weiss*, commissioned by Vanderbilt University for Carolyn Huebl and Mark Wait, and a new work for Philadelphia's Network for New Music.

During the summer of 2010, Mr. Hersch's Symphony No. 3 was premiered by Marin Alsop and the Cabrillo Contemporary Music Festival Orchestra, a festival commission. Other recent works include *A Forest of Attics*, composed for the Network for New Music's 25th anniversary season, which premiered during the spring of 2010, and was selected as one of the year's most important classical music events by The Philadelphia Inquirer. The paper said of the work, "A Forest of Attics threw a Molotov cocktail into the concert: Everything before it paled in comparison ... the music felt like war, with gestures erupting like sirens, high wind writing that sounded like

screaming and rapid-fire percussion - all deployed with the control of a master ... Hersch has written some towering works in recent years; this is yet another.”

His music increasingly recorded, Vanguard Classics has released five Hersch recordings over the past decade. In 2009, a recording of his Sonatas Nos. 1 & 2 for Unaccompanied Cello was released, and his complete works for violin the following year. In 2007, Vanguard Classics/Musical Concepts released the landmark boxed-set of Hersch’s 140-minute *The Vanishing Pavilions*, with the composer at the keyboard. Mr. Hersch’s second disc for the label, featuring the composer performing his own works in addition to those of Feldman, Rihm and Josquin, was selected by The Washington Post and Newsday as among the notable recordings of 2004-05. That disc followed-up his first, released in 2003, which features Mr. Hersch performing his *Two Pieces for Piano* and *Recordatio*, with additional performances of Mr. Hersch’s chamber works for strings by the String Soloists of the Berlin Philharmonic. In 2006, a recording of Mr. Hersch’s early orchestral works, including his Symphonies Nos. 1 & 2, was released on the Naxos American Classics series with Marin Alsop conducting the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra.

In 2013, Innova Recordings released a live concert recording of Mr. Hersch in recital - his first public appearance as a pianist in New York City in over a decade. The recording is a special CD/DVD package featuring not only film and an audio recording of the recital, but the acclaimed documentary about Mr. Hersch’s life and work for the piano, *The Sudden Pianist*, directed by Richard Anderson. The film was an official selection of both the 2013 American Documentary Film Festival and the New York City Independent Film Festival.

Past highlights include the completion of his Symphony No. 2, completed in 2001 while the composer was living in Germany, written for Mariss Jansons and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. It was the second Hersch work which Jansons and the orchestra toured with to Carnegie Hall. A work for clarinet and cello written for clarinetist Walter Boeykens was premiered at the Pantheon in Rome that year as part of the Romaeuropa Festival. During the summer of 2002, Hersch’s Octet for Strings, commissioned by Boris Pergamenschikow and the Kronberg

Akademie, was given its premiere at the Schloss Neuhardenberg Festival in Brandenburg. For the 2002/03 season Mr. Hersch was selected as the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's resident composer by Music Director Mariss Jansons. Mr. Hersch's Piano Concerto, commissioned by Garrick Ohlsson and the orchestras of St. Louis, Oregon and Pittsburgh, was premiered during the fall 2002. In early 2003, at the Philharmonie in Berlin, the String Soloists of the Berlin Philharmonic performed two of Hersch's works including the Octet for Strings and the premiere of his Duo for viola and cello. Later that year Mr. Hersch gave the world premiere of his *Recordatio* and *Two Pieces* at the Musica XXI Romaeuropa Festival in Italy. In the fall of 2004, his work for violin and piano, *the wreckage of flowers*, which was commissioned by Midori, was given performances by the violinist and pianist Robert McDonald in Lisbon, London and New York. *Arraché*, commissioned by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for the opening of their new concert hall, was premiered in early 2005. On October 14th, 2006 in Philadelphia, Hersch gave the world premiere of *The Vanishing Pavilions*. In 2009, also in Philadelphia, Hersch's two-hour work for horn and cello, *Last Autumn*, premiered. The work was written for and premiered by hornist Jamie Hersch and cellist Daniel Gaisford. A recording of the work is scheduled for a fall 2014 release.

Also regarded among today's most formidable pianists, Mr. Hersch has appeared on the Van Cliburn Foundation's Modern at the Modern Series, the Romaeuropa Festival, the Phillips Collection in Washington D.C., Cleveland's Reinberger Chamber Hall, the Festival of Contemporary Music Nuova Consonanza, the Warhol Museum, the Network for New Music Concert Series, the Left Bank Concert Society, the American Academy in Berlin Series, Festa Europea della Musica, St. Louis' Sheldon Concert Hall, and in New York City at Merkin Concert Hall, the 92nd St. Y - Tisch Center for the Performing Arts, and Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall, among others.

Born in Washington D.C. in 1971, Michael Hersch first came to international attention at age twenty-five, when he was awarded First Prize in the Concordia American Composers Awards. The award resulted in a performance of his *Elegy*, conducted by Marin Alsop in New York's Alice Tully Hall in early 1997. Later that year he became one of the youngest recipients ever of a Guggenheim Fellowship in Composition. Mr. Hersch has also been the recipient of the Rome Prize

(2000), the Berlin Prize (2001) and both the Charles Ives Scholarship (1996) and Goddard Lieberman Fellowship (2006) from the American Academy of Arts & Letters, among many other honors. He was a fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center, the Norfolk Festival for Contemporary Music, and the Pacific Music Festival in Sapporo, Japan. His primary studies were at the Peabody Institute of Music in Baltimore under Moshe Cotel, with additional studies at the Moscow Conservatory in Russia. Mr. Hersch currently heads the Department of Composition at the Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University.

CREDITS

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