Michael Hersch
PNR Composer in Residence

Vénus Khoury-Ghata
Translations by Marilyn Hacker

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A Celebration

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‘All That Needs to Be and Nothing Else’

An Appreciation of Michael Hersch

Marius Kociejowski

The other night I went to a performance of Leoš Janáček’s *Jenůfa*. I wonder if ever there was an opera that so brutally wrenches one from hell to purgatory and onward to uncertain paradise. Dostoevsky could have written the libretto, Sophocles might have staged it, Janáček most definitely composed it. I defy anyone not to be emotionally drained by the ride. One of its great ironies is that the music is never more sublime than at the moment of greatest horror. There is, finally, a species of happiness to be had, though it will have to be shared with snoopy neighbours who are a kind of hell in themselves. As with Greek tragedy, the darkest and the most hopeless in all literature, the opera does not leave one feeling depressed: Janáček takes his music not only through but *above* human suffering. My heart in a sling, my brain elsewhere, I left the opera house without my glasses. I rushed back and was told they’d been found and that I could collect them at the stage door. I got there just in time to see Jenůfa herself leave, so ordinary, so smashing, in her regular street clothes. I wanted to say something to her but couldn’t. All that could be said had already been explored to the extreme in this greatest of twentieth-century operas.

The *greatest* of twentieth-century operas? *Really*? How so? What a fix music puts us in, who love it but have not the words to say how or why it percolates through to some halfway house between mind and heart. Perhaps this is no bad thing, since it is with the musically illiterate that all music has its final resting place. Academic coaxing will not get it there, nor will reduced ticket prices. This is particularly true of new music, much of which seems to be aimed at the intellect only and ignores the heart’s desires. The human mind can absorb only so much cold, unresolved matter and I suspect we have been at saturation point for a while. Which is not to say I’m pining for things as they once were – I don’t want to be fed stuffed toccatas, nor do I seek the powdered spirituality to which one simply adds water and stirs. And with regard to ‘music for relaxation’ – there is a classical radio station devoted to that ghastly premise – it induces feelings of extreme violence in me. We must continue to explore, no matter what, and even upon the most obdurate of surfaces, because if exploration comes to an end our culture will tumble. There’s no getting around the fact that much new music is difficult, at least that which is of substance. What Geoffrey Hill – a difficult poet, a man who scorned easy solutions – had to say in an interview about poetry applies equally to music: ‘We are difficult. Human beings are difficult. We’re difficult to ourselves, we’re difficult to each other. And we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other. One encounters in any ordinary day far more real difficulty than one confronts in the most ‘intellectual’ piece of work. Why is it believed that poetry, prose, painting, music should be less than we are?’

I stare helplessly, as might a primitive at a public notice, at the massive score before me, a reproduction of the composer’s own final manuscript. On one of its pages the notes dangle from the staves like rows of executed human figures. Silly, I know, but this page in particular throbs with violence. *So the flashing knife will split / Memory down the middle*. Translate that, if you will, into music. On second thoughts, no. Do not translate it. Give it expression somewhere within the sonic range of the instrument that asks of one that he capture, by music alone, the dark pull of that line. Can such a thing be done? Apparently it can, with ‘a stabbing chord and a plunging gesture’, according to Andrew Farach-Colton’s liner notes to the Vanguard Classics recording of Michael Hersch’s *The Vanishing Pavilions* (2005), the expansive piano work which draws on this very American composer’s reading of the poetry of the very English Christopher Middleton. It works. I’m at a loss to say *why*, but what I read in Middleton I listen to in Hersch. They are, both the poet’s and the composer’s lines, deeply mysterious, but to apply meaning to them could easily break the spell they create. And yet to say merely that the music *feels* right is to err on the side of cowardice. Though perhaps there is a way. Maybe I can bring to the page something of the charge that both produce in me.

The music of Michael Hersch first came to me through my friendship with the poet, whose mighty gift was to be able to pique one’s interest with a mere mention of whatever excited him at the time. The greatest attribute any teacher possesses – and here I mean ‘teacher’ in the widest possible sense – is *enthusiasm*. Middleton had it in abundance, increasingly so with age, even though for many people life diminishes in strength with the years. So potent was that gift that twenty years ago, without intending to, he set me off on a trajectory that was to last for over a decade, and all because one day in June 1995, over fishcakes in Cambridge, he pulled from his pocket a coin from Antioch and asked me what I thought of it. Antioch, to which I’d given no thought at all, became a place I simply had to go to. Middleton’s was a mind with alchemical properties and the most powerful elixir in his vocabulary was *activate*. *Art must seek to activate*. Yet it must do so without force. I am put in mind of W.B. Yeats when he writes of J.M. Synge, ‘Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not persuade, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible.’ The man who asserts too much is bound to be ignored. Christopher Middleton, who died on 29 November 2015, continues to address me, as I should think is the case with anyone fortunate enough to have met him. And because one thing sparks another, it is of another head he turned that I now write.

In the autumn of 2001, Middleton was a residential Fellow of the American Academy in Berlin. There,

over breakfast, he had daily conversations with another Fellow, a shy, young American composer who would disappear into his room for hours on end to produce another bar or two of what would turn out to be his *Second Symphony*. My own experience of Christopher, as I shall now address him, was that he would come to our breakfast table fully primed with arcane knowledge. This would be tantamount to pouring lead into one's porridge were it not that he did so with an effervescence that teased the comatose brain cells to life. Actually, his and Hersch's first conversation was not at table but on a boat on Lake Wannsee, and it was about how best to translate part of a line from Hölderlin's poem '*Hälfte des Lebens*': '*im Winde / Klirren die Fahnen*'. An hour later, they settled on the version that goes 'in the wind / weathervanes clatter', which to both minds captured best the metallic sound the interaction between wind and object makes. This was not some academic exercise: they had netted each other's sensibilities. At the Academy Christopher would later act as moderator for Hersch, who gave a public presentation of his musical project. Though it was rather more than that: it was a poet speaking for a composer, speaking for his music. That exchange was to spark a revolution in the composer's mind.

What was that strange music of which Christopher wrote to me? 'I think you'd be bowled over by its richness, its exploration of altogether hitherto unheard reaches of tonality.' This coming from a man who, when I played him the music that enthused me, would often say, 'That's enough' – not necessarily because he disliked it, although sometimes this really was the case, but because, somewhat to my annoyance, he preferred to absorb music in small bites. Also his was a most particular palate, much given to the light-dappled music of 'Les Six' or the Catalan composer Federico Mompou. What he wanted was music with a hint of spumescence. It was no good trying to throw Wagner at him. Opera he didn't get at all and symphonies put him in a yoke. I will hazard his snorts of derision and say that musically my friend with the hard poetical eye was a sentimentalist at heart. That he should have responded as positively as he did to the dark and tragic sonorities of Michael Hersch when he preferred to be tickled rather than bludgeoned by music is still something of a mystery to me, and it was strange, too, that a man given to small bites should have responded so to a composer who, even in his music for solo instrument, writes on an epic scale.

Christopher's enthusiasm was enough for me to order a copy of *Chamber Music* (Vanguard Classics) with Hersch himself at the piano and with other pieces performed by members of the Berlin Philharmonic. I began with the last piece, *Octet for Strings*. I'd looked at the programme notes first and saw that Hersch was inspired by his reading of Georg Trakl a number of whose poems, 'Helian' in particular, Christopher has superbly translated. The *Octet*, which draws on Trakl's poem 'Im Dorf' (In the Village), begins with thick swathes of sound, a bit like the paint Leon Kossoff applies to his canvases, whose patterns slowly emerge. This layering of sound in single bold strokes was an aspect of Hersch's music that would soon captivate me. The music moved from low to high, from morose to ecstatic. This was music I *needed*. It was music that restored my faith, which admittedly had begun to wane a little, in the new. Also this was Trakl as Trakl might have been had he turned to music

M. H. composing © Sam Oberter

rather than poetry, the anguish and visionary aspect of a deeply tormented man now faithfully rendered in pure sound. I would suggest to anyone curious about Hersch's work that he begin here, although, to be honest, what I really want is to recreate in other people my own first experience of this masterpiece. I must do so without force. When I listened to *After Hölderlin's Hälfte des Lebens* for viola and cello I realised that here was someone whose dedication to poetry was profound and that it informed his music more than any other composer I'd heard of late. (Other poets to have entered his music include Zbigniew Herbert, Czesław Miłosz, Ezra Pound, Thomas Hardy, W. G. Sebald, Jean Follain and somebody called Dante. Bruno Schulz is a rare prose presence although surely it's the poet in him who captivates.) If the *Octet* remains a favourite of mine it is not because it is necessarily Hersch's best work – he has dismissed as juvenilia much of what he wrote before 2005 and is rarely, if ever, happy with anything he pens – but because it was my point of entry into his sonic world: this was music that made me possessive of it. Also, and it's where I like music to put me, it made me feel *absolutely alone*. It is difficult too, but then why should music be less than we are?

The next work I listened to, which was the fruit of those eight months Hersch spent in Berlin, was the Naxos recording of the *Second Symphony*, performed by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Marin Alsop, a work that is both strident

and elegiac. Although it would be reckless to apply a specific programme to it, its composition coincided with the shocking event of September 2001. I wonder if there is a single musical work that more accurately captures that historical moment. Where others might recoil from its dissonance, I took pleasure in its lyricism and indeed the symphony is at its most profound in its most tranquil moments. The opening assault of the symphony – and it gives one no time to prepare, no time to fasten one's mental armour – gives over to elegy, which at times becomes almost a whisper, and then, as if too much tenderness would be unbearable, there comes yet again another explosion of sound, a species of sonic rage. This running battle between the strident and the lyrical is an aspect that can be applied to the composer's *oeuvre* as a whole. When, not long ago, I tried to press the work upon a notable music critic he said, wearily, that the symphony as a form no longer has any place in modern music. Surely, though, what he meant is that the symphony is dormant only when there is no call for it, when there is nothing left to be said with it, when, in the face of too much knowledge, the epic forms curl up and die.

This is perhaps the moment to relate to the uninitiated something of the early days of a career that has gone from strength to strength. While it is quite true it was not until the age of eighteen that, while listening to Beethoven's Fifth, Hersch had, so to speak, an epiphany and right there and then knew he would become a composer, as explanations go this is probably a shade simplistic. We love a legend, of course, but must resist it when it becomes more important than what it describes. Numerous articles relate Hersch's meteoric development as a musician, his progression within two years from playing no piano at all to being able to perform at concert level. Within weeks of hearing the Beethoven, he had already mastered the basics of compositional theory and was writing his own music. Again, we must not allow ourselves to be seduced by the overly remarkable. We celebrate not Beethoven's deafness but his music. Soon after, Hersch was admitted to the Peabody Institute of Music and there attended a composer's workshop where he met the composer George Rochberg, who remarked on how he 'sounds the dark places of the human heart' and that, at twenty-three, 'his voice, his signature was already unmistakably there.' At the age of twenty-five he was one of the youngest people ever to be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and from then on he would receive any number of prestigious prizes and fellowships, including the Berlin Prize and the Rome Prize, both before the age of thirty. There is perhaps something just a little tedious in relating a man's curriculum vitae. Maybe what impresses me more is that Hersch's *Fourteen Pieces for Unaccompanied Violin* had its world première in Janáček's house in Brno, Czech Republic. This is where music should be, in small rooms inhabited by mighty ghosts. The word 'genius' has been bandied about although I have, on occasion, heard the opposite. It is much to the composer's credit that he ignores both praise and censure.

M.H. performing *The Vanishing Pavilions* © Richard Anderson

A shade simplistic is the biography of any artist, in that the true creative life cannot be delineated. Good thing too. It's probably why I detest biopics, for their reductionism. It wasn't as if, aged eighteen, Hersch had suddenly opened his ears for the first time. He had always loved music of one kind or another – heavy metal, for example, and bluegrass – but at an early age he had already developed an antipathy for the trite. A bit of documentary evidence comes in the shape of a photograph of the young boy in anguish, covering his ears at the sound of 'Happy Birthday' being sung to him. The boy was soon to become a graduate of the slaughterhouse. As biographical anecdote goes, this ought not to be lightly dismissed. His father had a farm, deep in Appalachia, near the West Virginia border. A city man hungry for other pastures, he was in the meat trade. Hersch describes a childhood visit to a slaughterhouse: 'I have this awful memory of going with my father into one and holding his hand while being at eyelevel with the waist of the man he was talking to, who had on his belt all these different knives. The floor had about half an inch of blood across it and I remember lifting my shoes and noticing how the consistency wasn't quite like water. It was sticky.' I, too, grew up on the farm and there can be no erasing memories of the darker side of that existence. I've seen an evil bug move through a herd of cattle. I've seen a new-born calf die in my father's arms. 'One incident that upset me as a child,' Hersch continues, 'was when a cow that had just had a calf got lockjaw and there I was, looking at this baby. We had them in the barnyard and the mother was going berserk, foaming at the mouth, arching her back. She died then and there. I was convinced that calf knew what had just happened. Of course I had no idea what was going through the calf's mind, but as a small child I projected myself into the situation and considered the loss of a parent as about the most terrifying situation one could conceive of.' A childhood spent in the vicinity of the abattoir does stick to one's adulthood, and the blood seeps through into whatever one creates.

There is in much of Hersch's recent music a confrontation with bodily destruction. Some of it, such as his recent monodrama in two acts, *On the Threshold of Winter* (2012), based on the poems of the dying Marin Sorescu, draws on the composer's own struggles with cancer, and with the death of a close friend from the same disease. A similarly dark note runs through his extraordinary *Last Autumn* for Horn and Cello (2008) and *Images from a Closed Ward* for String Quartet (2010).

The music is unflinching, almost too much so at times, for there isn't any hymn of joy to be had in the release from pain, such as one finds in Beethoven's *String Quartet in A Minor* – there is, rather, a trailing off into silence. This, I believe, is the single most disturbing aspect of Hersch's music, the absence of resolution, the sure knowledge that we must all deteriorate. I suspect this is a matter he'll have to address in the next stage of his career, the fact that we are rather more than our physical selves. Suffering is not of itself resolution. Janáček, who knew a thing or two about sorrow above all things, knew this. I would not say any of this to a man of lesser talent; I write of a composer in whom my greatest hopes reside. A few years later, when I got to know him, I expressed my concerns, asking him how he goes so deep into the darkness without returning from it permanently scarred. And given that I spend so much of my own time in darkness, finding there luminous foliage, the question was a serious one. I'm not sure I ever got a straight response, although most likely it lies in the fact that the works keep coming, and that even in the face of serious illness there has been no quelling of his energies. That said, I challenge him to compose a gavotte.

What was still under wraps was the piano sonata, which Hersch describes as 'a shattered song cycle without words'. An immense work lasting two and a half hours – some fifty movements, divided into two books – *The Vanishing Pavilions*, the composer's musical exploration of the poetry of Christopher Middleton, shall be the focus of my enquiries, most specifically in the relationship between word and music. Although for Hersch it marks the beginning of his great musical enterprise, there is nothing to be taken lightly or dismissed in the music leading up to it. The poet was present at the composer's premiere on 14 October 2006 at Saint Mark's Church in Philadelphia. Hersch played the entire 339-page work from memory. I was soon to receive Christopher's reaction:

> A totally 'monstrous' work! Hardly anyone else could perform it, hardly any music organisation would risk launching it? Yet there was never a dull moment ... It has taken him 4 years to write, and the last of the four in transcribing the score (a very thick book). In effect, he releases from the piano possibilities unheard till now; he has altered, I'd wager, the atlas of the piano as an expressive instrument. As for the emotional range of the composition – marvellous delicate intricate notations of emotion of the darkest and most resplendent Truth – absolutely no histrionics. There's rage in it, wrenching rage, & sweetness that's surprising. Not a lot of it is tonal. But the disharmonies are exhilarating. The poor devil – he's only 35 now – and critics have already been comparing him to Beethoven and Shostakovich.

Most tellingly, in the same letter, Christopher's memory reduces the performance to about a third of its actual length. What is surprising is how, even at its most abstract, so much the music is memorable. I will not say it is hummable, but whole bars of it come back to haunt one at unexpected moments, and even what is seemingly familiar in it reveals, with each hearing, fresh discoveries. It works as only the best poetry does.

I had yet to meet Hersch. We had corresponded several times, and I wondered at the mind of a man who stapled together the pages of his letters to me. I had been warned that he was one of the most taciturn of people, a musical Samuel Beckett of sorts, given to lengthy silences. I met his wife Karen first, a classical scholar, who described to me how once in Rome, in the early days of their relationship, she found him leaning against an outside wall, a look of sheer agony in his face. Clearly some tragedy had just befallen him. What had happened was that he'd received a dinner invitation.

When he finally came to London I didn't know what to feed him or what to say. What I got was a man of hearty appetite, who spoke as if someone had pulled the stopper out of the Aswan Dam, a torrent of speech charged with boyish enthusiasm. I daresay he was even jolly at times. There seemed to be some inexplicable distance between the man and the dark tonalities of his music. And yet there is something of the pathologically shy about him. When he performs he asks that the piano be turned at an angle so that people can't observe his hands as if they were, in his words, 'some kind of scientific curiosity'. There is this need to shelter himself against outside forces, whatever they may be. With respect to his own music he was to prove, in conversation, the most generous of people, happy to field my enquiries.

What was of particular interest to me was to get his side of the story with respect to Christopher's attendance at the premiere of *The Vanishing Pavilions*, which he describes as 'one of the greatest moments of artistic terror' in his life:

> Throughout those four years of composition Christopher had explicitly not asked to see what I was doing within the piece regarding his poetry. I had mentioned that apart from one poem, the poetry which companioned the music within the score was in fragments. I was initially surprised that he seemed comfortable with my doing this. I didn't know what to make of his engagement, or lack thereof. Perhaps he trusted me. Perhaps he did not care. All I knew was that an artist far greater than I seemed to be providing the space for his words to co-exist with music without standing over my shoulder. Over the first year of my work on the piece I would periodically inquire if he would like to see how his words figured into the score. He never really responded directly, so I stopped asking. Okay, I thought, I'm just going to do this. Over the next few years I went on to complete the piece without having shown or performed any of it for him. The evening before the première in Philadelphia I remember sitting in the lobby of the hotel where he was staying. Christopher has just given me this wonderful gift, a binder that his father had used for choral music [when he was music master at St John's College, Cambridge]. I then presented him a copy of the score for the first time, which included all the accompanying texts. He sat there for what seemed an eternity. After some time he smiled, rose, and patted me on the back. He seemed happy. On some level I think he was simply intrigued to see his poetry distilled in this way. It was not that I had done anything special, far from it. It was that these fragments allowed him to, possibly, see his work through another prism. We never really spoke of it again.

I wondered at how the reading of words on a page,

especially when broken down into fragments, could translate into musical expression. When I put this to Hersch he was most succinct on the matter:

It's a strange process to try and explain, but because I love literature so much, especially poetry, I have lots of it swimming around in my mind in a kind of near-constant hum. Human minds are complicated things, obviously, with many component parts, and these parts feel to me very much like distinct compartments. I can almost feel them as if they were spaces within a house. My love of poetry breaks sometimes into the abstract musical spaces where I compose. The words can then become something like companions. Even though I'm not usually setting the text to be audibly communicated, the text and music begin to bleed together in my mind. It's as if the words become tangled up in the notes, in the rests, bars, and beams ... the words get stuck inside there and it becomes difficult to extract them. They – the music and the text – become one thing even though the text remains silent. My approach to text that I actually set is different. But the majority of pieces that I write which involve text are instrumental only, with no audible singing or speaking taking place. To try and be more succinct about it: I'll be composing, I enter a certain emotional or psychological space, and then certain poetical texts come to mind, unbidden.

Coming into contact with Christopher's poetry was a central element of my education. Without question Christopher's poetry helped me to grow up, especially in terms of clarifying my relationship with the written word. It provided me a bridge to a greater sense of what it was I wanted to say musically. An odd calmness came over me that autumn of 2001, in Berlin, which of course was a time of global chaos. It was a surreal juxtaposition being in the midst of what was for much of the world, broadly speaking, a time of violence and disquieting uncertainty, and of beginning to see a way forward as a composer. The scaffolding for that clarity was Christopher's poetry. I don't know if it would have happened without him, but it happened in that moment and in many ways everything I have written since stems more from Christopher's influence than from any other artist. That relationship with poetry started in earnest then. I had just turned thirty and I set out on this new path for myself. There were difficult decisions to be made, and to some people it seemed as though I'd thrown away a lot of opportunity, but it all felt so right to me.

Hersch composes his poetry-based pieces – and this has remained his *modus operandi* – not in response to poems in their entirety but to fragments taken from them. What the fragment does is invite the mind to make it complete. What will come of it, however, is not the thing as it once was but something brand new. And there is the sense too, such as we get when inside the remains of an abbey open to the skies, that, at least where imagination is concerned, there is nothing more complete than a ruin. We might mentally construct, and try to complete, those arches, but they resist our finest efforts, saying *we are what we are, you would not be here otherwise.* The poet and amateur archaeologist Gustaf Sobin speaks of 'luminous debris', which may be said to describe the whole of his literary enterprise, the construction of a world upon a single fragment. In one passage in which he meditates on a Bronze Age earring of lunar shape, he writes, 'Aren't we always, indeed, witness to artefact, to the muffled discourse of the inanimate, to the irresonant world of vestige?'

It is a very powerful, evocative, word, *fragment*. *Fragment* seems to reside at the heart of how I approach poetical text, which is in stark opposition to how I generally approach music. However, for me the reactions I'm having to these moments within a larger poem are as if these fragments are not fragments at all. They constitute an entirety for me, a complete verbal world which draws me into them specifically for their totality. I realise of course I'm working with fragments of a larger whole, the whole as conceived of by the poet, but to me these text fragments have become a *new* whole, misguided as I may be.

When I asked Hersch whether he was recreating the poem in music the answer was an emphatic *no*.

More often than not the poem seems to be expressing in words something similar to what I am already trying to say through pitches, rhythms and silences. As I mentioned before, it becomes a companion and it is right there with me. I really do not feel I'm setting the poem in or to music; I am already composing, or more accurately put, attempting to compose what it is I want to say, but the text fragment seems to mirror in my own mind that thing I wish to express, and often does it far better than I. There are plenty of examples of composers engaging with a poem or a poetical fragment, and then writing something which attempts to set the given poem to sound. I'm not attempting to do that. One of the reasons it took me some twenty years to finally settle on something for the stage, or why I write song cycles so infrequently, is that I need to feel I can give/add something to those texts. The last few years have been something of an exception as a result of my working with the soprano Ah Young Hong [who premiered the sole role in Hersch's *On the Threshold of Winter*]. Working with a singer that I trust so wholly has been a tremendous motivating force for me to do more with the setting of poetry to be sung. For most of my musical life I was convinced the texts I responded to didn't require anything other than their presence on the page, that even if I wanted to engage it was highly unlikely I could have truly added anything to them. In the purely instrumental works companioned with text I often struggle over whether to share the accompanying text fragments with an audience as the relationship between word and music feels much more part of an intimate conversation between myself and poet rather than something for public consumption.

'It's something almost akin to a kinetic process then,' I suggested. 'A phrase jumps up at you, sparks into sound.'

It either sparks into sound or, as is more often the case, the sound sparks the word in the sense that I'm writing music and then the words appear in my mind. These words are already somewhere in the recesses of my memory. All of a sudden what I'm writing triggers the memory of a poem or, as is more often the case, the fragment of a poem, that inhabits a similar psychological or emotional space.

'There is a lovely line Christopher quotes from Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, "It must happen unknowingly." Only then is one fit to inherit the Grail. It *is* involuntary. I am not poring over a text, looking for

something specific. I like to read and I search for like-minded poets because it simply makes me feel less lonely in the world. For me the barrier between words and music is very porous. When I consider those two worlds in my imagination, the part that loves words is constantly in dialogue with the musical part of me.

And where does the music come from? Was it akin to the idea of Michelangelo revealing the sculpture already buried in the stone? There is a letter Giacometti wrote to Pierre Matisse in which he describes whittling away at a sculpture until it disintegrates in front of his eyes, which for me has always been a fine expression of artistic terror.

The question is what to do with all that havoc. I attempt to give it voice simply to stay sane. A lot of these impulses are chaotic. Making music is for me the primary way to quiet things within. You attempt to put these demons into sound and silence ... the stakes are high ... high not in how other people will respond, that's not part of it, but high with respect to getting through life. Life provides plenty of challenges. In an idealised world I prefer to deal with musical challenges rather than with those unavoidable ones in the external world. That world, the outside world, is far more terrifying.

Another thing that astonished me, though perhaps it ought not to have, is that throughout the four-year period of composition Hersch didn't perform a single movement of the fifty that make up *The Vanishing Pavilions*. As one who constantly needs to see how what I write appears on the page, the question I wanted to put to him was not so much *how* he managed to compose in silence but, rather, a simple *why.*

I was convinced that if I'd worked at the piano then no matter what I did my fingers would start to dictate what I was composing. In order to write the best piece I was capable of for the piano, I knew I needed to avoid the instrument itself. I knew that if I sat at the piano I ran the risk of writing only within the limits of my own ability to *play* the instrument rather than *write* for it. I needed to reside within my ear and not in the musculature of my back, arms, wrists and fingers. I needed as much discipline as possible. Ultimately, playing through the work while I was writing it would have been a distraction. It would have simply caused anxiety regarding the upcoming performance of it, and how I would go about physically learning it. I think the piece is better for it having been done solely in my mind. Splitting the process between composing and physically learning it was the right one for me.

'And so how would you summarise your relationship to poetry?'

What the poets I love have accomplished with their poetry is what I am after in my own work. It is a never-ending journey. There is always this struggle to get rid of what is not necessary. I think part of my attraction to words is that somehow I feel I'm able to see that which is necessary more clearly in poetry. It is a struggle. I would like to get to the bones of my own work. I want things distilled, though I'm not against ornament. It is very much a work-in-progress.

'*Spare* is the word, is it not?' I asked. Hersch paused for a moment.

But 'spare' is a tricky word too. *Spare* is like *fragment*. It is easily misinterpreted. It conjures up the idea of *less* in an absolute sense. That's not necessarily what I'm after. I just want *all that needs to be and nothing else*. I doubt I'll ever be able to achieve that.

M. H. in Cairns studio, 2014 © Sam Oberter

Michael Hersch is very much his own man, not given to any musical fashion or movement, and when I asked him about influences I was astonished that he listed not a single twentieth-century composer citing instead Josquin des Prez, Carlo Gesualdo, William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons and, to my surprise, Mahler. Expressionism, although he is reluctant to say it, is at the core of his music. The meaning of the word is wide open, however: it applies to every artist he responds to and so as a term he feels it is not terribly useful. The fact that an artist lived five hundred years ago means nothing to him, not when he feels he sees the world through the same eyes. And yet he distrusts the idea of timelessness.

I think it's fair to say that Hersch's music divides audiences – often, as with his recent *a tower in air* for soprano and horn (2016), right down the middle. This is no bad thing given that new music has hardly got an audience to divide, those who attend to it being, for the most part, already partisan in their sympathies. The ability to delight or outrage is the best thing a composer can have. With respect to Hersch's music I have yet to discover a case of indifference.

As a composer he will not give what he is not prepared to give. I'll risk the wrath of the furies and say that when he does not bewilder me, which is often enough, I believe him to be one of the most significant composers of our time. Such reservations as I have, and they are few, I have expressed to him and he takes them with good humour. Actually I don't think he much cares. What he does he does because he has to. That's as it should be, although – perhaps just a little optimistically – I'm still waiting for that gavotte.