Influences and Musical Quotation in the Solo Piano Works of Aaron Jay Kernis

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INFLUENCES AND MUSICAL QUOTATION IN THE SOLO
PIANO WORKS OF AARON JAY KERNIS

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A Treatise submitted to the
College of Music
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Music

Degree Awarded:
Spring Semester, 2014
Joy Thurmon defended this treatise on April 4, 2014.
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For my mother
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to sincerely thank the members of my committee for their time and support in assisting me complete this document, particularly Dr. Read Gainsford, who directed this project. I am also grateful to Dr. Heidi Louise Williams for encouraging me to meet Mr. Kernis, Dr. Evan Jones, for accepting my request to join the committee more recently, and Professor Eva Amsler, for her teaching and encouragement. I am deeply indebted to Aaron Kernis for his incredible talent and as a musician and composer, his kind and supportive nature, and his willingness to answer my questions regarding his life and music.

I would also like thank my former teacher, Professor Leonard Mastrogiacomo for challenging me, for guiding me, and most of all for sharing with me his love of music. I owe so much to Dr. Cliff Madsen for introducing his style of teaching to me and for his guidance in my life.

Words cannot express how thankful I am to my dear friends, particularly Emily Whitson, whose love and support I thrived upon while writing this paper, and Aaron Seiler, who played hours of beautiful music for violin and piano with me since I have lived in Tallahassee, Florida.
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ABSTRACT

This treatise will introduce the solo piano works of Aaron Jay Kernis to a wide audience, aimed at pianists interested in learning his music. I will show how Kernis’ influences and use of musical quotation constructs the musical content of these pieces through stylistic quotation, timbral quotation, and homage. I will describe the composer’s background, examine the question of postmodernism as a possible framework for viewing Kernis’ use of quotation, and provide a brief history of music that uses quotation. I will provide an analysis of Aaron Jay Kernis’ solo piano works by describing harmonic, textural, rhythmic, and structural features of his music and include performance suggestions for each piano work, addressed to the performer and teacher. The piano pieces chosen for this treatise span a twenty-year time period from 1987 to 2007. “Playing Monster” for solo piano is listed by the publisher but will not be discussed in this treatise as the score is not yet available.
CHAPTER 1
AARON JAY KERNIS

Education and Early Influences

Aaron Jay Kernis was born on January 15, 1960 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Little information is known about Kernis’ childhood and his biographers begin when he was twelve years old: “he studied the violin as a child, (and) began teaching himself the piano at age twelve” (McCutchan, 235). “He first displayed creative talent by writing poetry and fantasy stories as a child” (Humphrey, 1992). Kernis says that his earliest experience with music was not at an instrument, but singing. “My primary instrument is piano, but I sang in chorus throughout high school” (McCutchan, 240).

Aaron Kernis began his college studies in music at the San Francisco Conservatory. Following a year of study with John Adams in San Francisco, Kernis was accepted at the Manhattan School of Music where he studied composition with Elias Tanenbaum and Charles Wuorinen. Kernis described his study with Wuorinen as “. . . an intense experience and also formative to how I thought about language and what I wanted to do with my life” (Campbell, 2009). It was at the Manhattan School of Music that he met pianist Anthony de Mare, who later premiered and recorded Kernis’ most significant work for piano, Before Sleep and Dreams (Dalton, 2005). Kernis was accepted to Yale in 1981 and studied with Morton Subotnick, Jacob Druckman and Bernard Rands, receiving his master’s degree in 1983. He felt that “Yale was a special situation because, each semester, students had the opportunity to study with a different teacher and to be exposed to different points of view” (Campbell, 2009). Some of Kernis’ fellow
students at Yale during those two years were Michael Daugherty, Michael Gordon and David Lang. In 1983, while still a student at Yale, “he achieved his first big success at only twenty-three years of age when the New York Philharmonic premiered his first orchestral work at the request of Jacob Druckman, *Dream of the Morning Sky*, for soprano and orchestra during the Horizons Festival” (Humphrey, 1992). He gained some notoriety following the event that was publicized by the press.

It was a “rehearsed reading,” and an audience of orchestra subscribers attended. Microphones were given both to Kernis and to conductor Zubin Mehta, who communicated throughout the rehearsal about appropriate tempi and uses of the orchestra. Kernis felt that Mehta was “testing” his conception of the work and belittling his work, and at one point when Mehta complained about Kernis having obscured the soprano with the orchestra, Kernis courageously replied “Maestro, you’re just playing it too loud.” The audience spontaneously burst into applause, and many of the orchestra members lauded Kernis afterward for his brave stance (Silverman, 2000).

**Career**


Kernis was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1998 for his String Quartet No. 2, “Musica
instrumentalis.” His response to winning this prize at such a young age was that he was “very happy with the piece, but it was just unexpected at that time” (Duffie, 2002). Within four years, Kernis received another coveted prize, the Grawemeyer Award (2002) for his work, Colored Field in its version for cello and orchestra; it was originally written for English horn and orchestra. Kernis explains that the idea for this piece came about after a visit to two of the most infamous Nazi concentration camps, Auschwitz and Birkenau, resulting with an image or “vision” that developed into the structural architecture of the work’s three movements (McCutchan, 236-237). Kernis is one of many composers since the Second World War to write music in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. In fact, many of his works have been conceived and written in response to catastrophic world issues. After his first compositional period, spanning the 1980s to the early 1990s, he turned to a writing a series of pieces motivated by his reaction to war and human suffering, as in the Second Symphony (1991) in response to the first Gulf War, and Lament and Prayer (1995) to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Holocaust. In one interview, Kernis explains his reaction to seeing the Gulf War, “Operation Desert Storm” (1990-1991), on national television: “The absurdity and cruelty of this war, in particular the ‘surgical’ nature of its reliance on gleaming new technological warfare used at a safe distance made an enormous and lasting impression on me” (Xi, 2009). During the period of the 1990s, the power and depth of his works stem from his profound sensitivity to human tragedy.

Although Kernis does not hold a full-time teaching position, he dedicates much of his time mentoring young composers and has been on the faculty at the Yale School of Music, teaching part-time for the last eight years. Kernis served for over fifteen years as new music advisor to the Minnesota Orchestra and was the Director of Minnesota Orchestra’s Composers Institute until October, 2013, when he resigned after the orchestra’s conductor, Osmo Vänskä,
followed through with his threat to resign if the much-maligned Minnesota Orchestra management cancelled the orchestra’s Carnegie Hall performances. He was even-handed in his resignation letter, blaming both management and labor for the orchestra’s collapse: “I cannot in any way condone the actions taken this year by the board and administration toward the musicians, nor can I see the point in the musicians’ intransigence and sense of violation” (Kernis, 2013).

In May of 2012, Aaron Kernis was selected as the 2012 winner of the Michael Ludwig Nemmers Prize in Music Composition at the Bienen School of Music at Northwestern University. In addition to a one hundred thousand dollar cash award, the prize includes a performance by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra during the 2013-2014 performance season and a residency of four weeks at the Bienen School of Music, during which Kernis will work with students and faculty.

As well as the many honors he holds, commissions that Kernis has received include:

- Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra (*Symphony in Waves*), 1989
- Koussevitzky and Fromm Foundations (*Songs of Innocents*), 1989
- Naumburg Foundation (*String Quartet No. 1 “Musica celestis”*), 1990
- New Jersey Symphony (*Second Symphony*), 1991
- New York Philharmonic (*New Era Dance*), 1992
- American Public Radio (*Still Movement with Hymn*), 1993
- San Francisco Symphony (*Colored Field*) 1993
- Joshua Bell (*Air*, for violin and piano), 1996
- Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Aspen Music Festival, and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra (*Double Concerto*, for guitar and violin), 1997
• American Composers Orchestra (*Invisible Mosaic III*), 1998

• Disney Company (*Garden of Light*), 1999

• Philadelphia Orchestra (*Color Wheel*), 2001

His works have been performed by many well-known artists, such as pianists Christopher O’Riley and Anthony de Mare, violinists Pamela Frank, Joshua Bell, and Nadia Salerno-Sonnenberg, violist Paul Neubauer, cellist Carter Brey, sopranos Renee Fleming, Dawn Upshaw and Hila Plitmann, clarinetist John Bruce Yeh, and guitarists Sharon Isbin and David Tanenbaum.
CHAPTER 2
MUSICAL QUOTATION AND POSTMODERNISM

While Aaron Kernis’ references to music from the past have led critics to label him as a “postmodernist”—along with many composers of our time like Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, George Rochberg, John Corigliano, Michael Daugherty, John Zorn, Pauline Oliveros, William Bolcom, Luciano Berio, Phillip Glass, Meredith Monk, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, John Adams, and Arvo Pärt—there remains the question of what it means to be a postmodern artist. In an essay published in Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought (2002), David Brackett discusses Kernis’ music thus:

Another type of eclecticism may be found in the work of one of the most successful composers of art music in the United States today, Aaron Jay Kernis. His work features both eclecticism between pieces—the Air for Violin (1995) is consistently neo-Romantic, while other pieces are not—as well as within pieces—the Double Concerto for Violin and Guitar (1996) mixes Romanticism with modernist flourishes and “jazzy” rhythms and percussion. However, Kernis eschews both the rapid cutting of Zorn or Daugherty between styles, and the persistent association with rock ‘n’ roll of the BOAC associated composers, although his earlier Symphony in Waves (1989) did reference funk and early rock ‘n’ roll. Despite the eclecticism of his works—technically supported by unproblematic modality, pulse-oriented rhythms, and long, emotive melodies—[sic] suggests that, unlike Daugherty and Zorn, ‘some healthy linguistic normality still exists’ (although this is admittedly a matter of degree)” (16-17).

Here, Brackett uses the word “eclecticism” in relation to the quotation of music styles from the past, with an emphasis placed on the quoting of popular music. When a contemporary composer frequently uses styles associated with music of the Romantic era in more than one work, he/she may, as Brackett says, become associated with the term “Neo-Romantic.” Kernis himself differentiates between various approaches to musical quotation, regardless of the type of music being appropriated:
While it's true that many of my piano pieces are homages to styles and composers from the past, none actually borrow specific notes or phrases from other music, and I am similarly careful never to use other composer's copyrighted material. In music of the late twentieth century there can at times be a fine line between appropriating, stealing, borrowing, homage or stylistic quotation, and I try (as I know the repertoire pretty well) to be on the side of stylistic or timbral quotation as homage. (Kernis, Email Interview, 2012).

It is important to distinguish Kernis’ “fine line” and the attitude it reveals. Very often, postmodern art (of all kinds, not just music) seems as though it could hardly exist without the art that precedes it. As Kernis intimates, however, the specific attitude of “homage” carries with it a kind of aesthetic respectfulness that defines the timbral qualities of his own music. Regardless, it would seem that some form of musical quotation begins to define a music as postmodern.

Shying away from a concise definition, Jonathan Kramer instead lists sixteen characteristic features of postmodern music. Kramer (1942-2004) was a composer and theorist who studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen and Roger Sessions, and was a professor at Columbia University. He is author of The Time of Music (1988) and Listen to the Music (1988) and might be taken as a representative theorist for considerations of postmodernist musical contexts. Postmodern music, according to Kramer:

1. is not simply a repudiation of modernism or its continuation, but has aspects of both a break and an extension;
2. is, on some level and in some way, ironic;
3. does not respect boundaries between sonorities and procedures of the past and of the present;
4. challenges barriers between “high” and “low” styles;
5. shows disdain for the often unquestioned value of structural unity;
6. questions the mutual exclusivity of elitist and populist values;
7. avoids totalizing forms (e.g., does not want entire pieces to be tonal or serial or cast in a prescribed formal mold);
8. considers music not as autonomous but as relevant to cultural, social, and political contexts;
9. includes quotations of or references to music of many traditions and cultures;
10. considers technology not only as a way to preserve and transmit music but also as deeply implicated in the production and essence of music;
11. embraces contradictions;
12. distrusts binary oppositions;
I will comment briefly on a few of Kramer’s key points (many which duplicate the same meaning, such as 12, 14, and 15), to determine whether or not they are relevant to Kernis’ music. Firstly, it is easy to label Kernis as an ironist who blends the high and the low. In the “Superstar Etude No. 1” (an homage to Jerry Lee Lewis), Kernis pokes fun at the classical concert stage as well as the extreme piano-playing and stage shenanigans of Lewis. In this way, Kernis’ music agrees with Kramer’s twelfth point because he blends the values of the elitist and of the populist rather than opposing them, even to the point of demonstrating that it is okay to laugh out loud at a classical music concert. Another example of blending high and low art is seen in his “Superstar Etude No. 3 (Ballad(e) out of Blues).” Here we can see a hybrid of the composer’s interpretation of dramatically “sad” blues music, blended into an extended hybrid form such as one might hear in a Chopin Ballade, and with all the pianistic feats of an etude. In essence, it is a portrait of Kernis’ past experiences with jazz and the blues, influenced by his fondness for such extraordinary jazz pianists as Art Tatum, Count Basie, and Oscar Peterson.

Continuing with Kramer’s list, we definitely see Kernis’ music as “relevant to cultural, social, and political contexts.” His Symphony No. 2, written after the Gulf War, and the *Meditation (in memory of John Lennon)*, written after the shooting of John Lennon, are direct responses to tragic events in history. We also see Kernis’ music as referencing “many traditions and cultures.” In some sense, he is perhaps best known for his ability to reference a wide array of styles (Kramer’s point 9), while incorporating them into a cohesive-sounding language. He is undoubtedly American, which shows in his major influences, from jazz to rock-and-roll to
minimalism. But Kernis also does not hesitate to pay homage to the Klezmer music of his Jewish ancestry, especially heard in his *Trio in Red*, while elements of Hebraic music appear in many of his works including *a Voice, a Messenger, Lament and Prayer, Death Fugue*, and *Colored Field*. In this way, we must also recognize Kernis as “encompass[ing] pluralism and eclecticism,” and conclude, in a Kramerian sense at least, that Kernis aligns with many of the characteristics of postmodernism.

When describing his own music, Kernis does not use the word “postmodern” per se, and yet his terms might be understood within the postmodern context. Kernis says that his writing style involves “dramatic evolution,” it is “melodically driven,” and it references “popular, jazz, bluegrass, honky-tonk, rock-and-roll, and rap music.” Although music that evolves dramatically can be associated with a romantic style of writing, the composer is also likely referring to his early influences in his formal studies with John Adams (known primarily as a minimalist for most of his career). Characteristics common in the minimalist style include: consonant harmony, steady pulse, and gradual transformation or stasis, all built from a very small amount of musical material. Many composers writing in the 1960s, like John Cage, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, and John Adams, are known for having strong characteristics rooted in minimalism, while they can be classified as either postmodernists or modernists. Despite this association, or perhaps in concord with it, Kernis sees his often minimalist work as “melodically driven.” Within the piano works, I will show that his music is largely written in an orchestral or small ensemble style, with the intention of reproducing a corollary to those timbres and textures on the piano. And certainly Kernis’ desire to cast a wide net of reference is one of his most definable characteristics. References to honky-tonk, rock-and-roll, and jazz are most apparent in all three of the “Superstar Etudes” (Lamoureux, 2008), as well as the “Speed Limit Rag,” and “Linda’s Waltz.” In these
works in particular, we hear the mixing of music what was formerly considered to be “low art,” with “high art” music, a practice commonly associated with postmodernism. More recently, Kernis has said that his music has a “recognizable melodic aspect, recognizable instrumental color and . . . the influence of jazz” (Cotter, 2011). From his upbringing in the 70s in Philadelphia Kernis remembers listening to a wide range of music being played on the radio and he developed a wide range of tastes early on: “I’d grown up in Philadelphia listening to a lot of alternative radio, featuring the new-music breakout pieces of Steve Reich and Phil Glass—early minimalism, ‘20s jazz, bluegrass, twentieth-century symphonists, really the whole spectrum of music—and hearing that radio from Philadelphia and jazz stations really affected my view of the whole panorama of music” (Campbell, 2009). This “spectrum” of music to which Kernis had access on the radio during the 70s, is in itself a phenomenon of the twentieth century. In Kramer’s article, he refers to this phenomenon as living in a “technology-saturated world” which creates a new context in which we live that drives postmodern thinking and art (p. 19). Through internet globalization, and media channels like YouTube, Spotify, and Pandora, the contemporary world has continued the direction found already in the 1970s and made the spreading of music as easy as the click of a key. The listener can be exposed to as many “influences” as time can allow, and thus popularity grows through accessibility.

It wasn’t until copyright laws were passed to restrict or limit the ability of an artist or musician to reuse segments of another’s work without proper recognition or acknowledgement. In fact, earlier eras looked upon borrowing as a sign of sincere and deepest respect for the composer of the original work. This is a stark contrast from what we find happening in the copyrighted music world of today.

Kernis’ references to music of the past are particularly striking because they are very
clear, recognizable, and encompass a varied array of styles. We must also recognize the prevailing attitude of Kernis’ musical quotation as being one of respect and homage.

Perhaps, to contextualize the question of postmodernism in music, we should at least briefly acknowledge the stylistic sway of modernism itself. After World War I, under the guidance of Arnold Schoenberg, modernist composers like Pierre Boulez, Luigi Nono, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Milton Babbitt, Luciano Berio, Luigi Dallapiccola, Ernst Krenek, and Igor Stravinsky turned to the use of the twelve-tone technique, also known as serial music or dodecaphonic music. In its early stages, this new way of writing music was used almost exclusively by Schoenberg and his students, Anton Webern and Alban Berg, who are collectively known as the Second Viennese School.

By the 1950s, this “modern” style of writing had become academic “high-brow” art with which the next generation of composers, such Morton Feldman, John Adams, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass, found little connection. Instead of imitating Stockhausen, Schoenberg, Boulez, and Berio, this next generation of composers blurred the argument between “high-brow” and “low-brow” music, making it an argument seated in ideology rather than quality. This new generation of composers had the idea of doing something fresh in relation to what had existed, rather than writing academic music stemming from European tradition that still sounded as it had in Schoenberg’s day—having at times no easily discernible pulse, harmonic tonal center, or singable melody. Americans in particular were becoming more and more influenced by a variety of sounds in their own country, including popular music and jazz, which included tonal harmonies, memorable melodies, syncopated rhythms, and driving beats, as opposed to the rigorous standards of western European music. Although tonality had long been considered dead, music that sounded tonal was beginning to be reintroduced. It was not tonal in the sense of
nineteenth-century music, but was being redefined as a new tonality, in the way it functioned. Innovation, along with the spirit of inclusion, became much stronger in what was now considered to be the postmodern generation of composers writing music in the 1960s.

Kernis, having been born in 1960, would obviously have been more directly affected by these new composers, rather than the high modernists. The legacy of the generation preceding Kernis’ was that composers no longer had to have an allegiance to a particular ideology, and this ethic of inclusivity would become more and more widely accepted in the music world toward the end of the twentieth century, leaving the possibilities of creativity much more wide open, with thousands of valid compositional options on the horizon. And this is where Aaron Kernis fits in: as a postmodernist, his music is enormously eclectic, draws from his childhood influences, including popular music and jazz, and is frequently accessible to a wide audience, giving a sense of ‘return to familiarity.’
A great deal of research over the last century has focused on the reuse of earlier music. These references can be to a single composer, a particular musical school of thought, a period, or a movement. Quotation can be explicit, or it can be less obvious or even unrecognizable. Some general classifications of musical quotation include the following possibilities: 1) material can be entirely borrowed from another piece without any change, 2) musical segments can be quoted in a new composition, 3) musical quotation can be intentionally distorted by the composer of a new composition, and 4) musical styles and idioms can be referenced, rather than directly quoting a particular work. The next sections of this study will examine direct quotation versus stylistic quotation.

**Direct Quotation**

Quotation of music from the past has been widely practiced during all periods since the Middle Ages, and the practice continues today. The reuse of traditional melodies, complete or partial, was a widespread phenomenon in the Middle Ages. After the initiation of standardized notation in the ninth century, various melodic components of the Roman Catholic Mass were reworked in the creation of new chants.

Polyphony began in the fourteenth century, where borrowing from the chant melodies became common practice in the creation of organum, motets, and discantus. Composers of the Notre Dame School in Paris quoted plainchant melodies and used them as the principal voice or *vox principalis* sung in parallel fifths or fourths with an organal voice, or *vox organalis*. The *clausula* “…emerged from the musicians of the Notre Dame School in Paris (1160-1250) during
the period known as Ars Antiqua, especially of the composers Leonin and Perotin” (Flotzinger, 2013). Rather than write entirely new music, these composers preferred to take existing music of plainchant melodies, and develop or improve them. “Perotin’s clausulae make use of the rhythmic modes, whose strict metrical feet necessitated that voices change notes together (discantus)” (Flotzinger, 2013). “This [practice] was in contrast to the earlier practice of one voice moving in a free rhythm above a tenor voice sustaining the long notes of a cantus firmus” (Bloxam, 2013). Recurring patterns of the clausulae were used in the technique called isorhythm or “same rhythm.” Composers from this time period using the isothythmic technique include Guillaume de Machaut and Phillipe de Vitry. Another common practice during the Medieval period was the replacement of lyrics through text or poetry substitution, maintaining the same melody line, a practice known as contrafactum. Language adaptation was used to make music more accessible to a wider audience. This was found in the German hymns that were derived from the Latin sequences previously written for the church. One example is Martin Luther’s Christ lag in Todes Banden, a chorale based on the Catholic Easter Sequence Victimae Paschale Laudes. In a similar practice, the laude emerged in the thirteenth century and continued to be used until the nineteenth century to encourage devotional singing of the general population by using the Italian language in worship, rather than Latin.

During the Renaissance period, composers became more interested in the unification of movements within the mass by using the same melody throughout different movements. The cantus firmus mass used the same cantus firmus or fixed melody drawn from Gregorian chant in each movement, normally in the tenor. Guillaume Dufay developed a style of antiphonal singing in which two or more groups alternated between the odd-numbered sections of plainchant, and the even-numbered verses of hymn. Josquin des Prez wrote “mature paraphrase” masses like the
Missa pange lingua (c. 1520) where the same melody or chant was reused throughout the entire work. The Missa ad imitationem or imitation mass became a leading type of composed mass, borrowing materials from all the voices of a formerly written polyphonic work. The quodlibet, a combination of quotations from famous songs and texts with humorous intent, was used to demonstrate a composer’s creative skills and involved layering pre-existing melodies or texts throughout different voice parts. These juxtaposed preexistent materials came from both secular and sacred songs. This technique was later used by composers including Johann Sebastian Bach in the Baroque era, and also by Arthur Honegger in the twentieth century. One of the most famous examples of the quodlibet can be found in the final variation, Variatio 30 of Bach’s Goldberg Variations, BWV 988, where preexisting folk tunes are used. Another example of the quodlibet can be seen in Honegger’s Cantate de Noël (Christmas Cantata) composed in 1953. Here, Honegger uses five German, French, and English Christmas carols simultaneously in their original languages in the composition’s climactic finale.

During the late Renaissance, instrumental composition used intabulation. The largest collection of fourteenth-century intabulations is the Faenza Codex, which included composers Francesco Landini and Guillaume de Machaut. The Buxheim manuscript from the fifteenth century is dominated by intabulation, mainly of prominent composers of the time, including John Dunstable and Walter Frye. In addition, the instrumental canzone (Italian: song), an instrumental arrangement of the chanson (French: song), was written in imitation of the chanson.

In the Baroque era, the practice of borrowing music from one opera and fitting it with new words for another drama was common. This practice, called operatic pastiche, allowed composers to adapt existing arias and rework them for new circumstances. In George Frederick Handel’s opera Agrippina (1709), he recycles music from his earlier oratorios and cantatas, as
well as music by other composers such as Arcangelo Corelli and Jean-Baptiste Lully.

The Classical period in music is associated with the historical and artistic period known as the Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, and it is noteworthy for a return to simplicity and balance inspired by the art of the Greeks and Romans. The composers of this period began moving away from excess in ornamentation and complex polyphony, preferring to compose in a more linear fashion using homophonic textures. Notable characteristics of this period in music are the simplification of harmonic and formal structures which led to the shortening of musical phrases as well as a shift to more instrumental genres, most especially the symphony and the string quartet. Melodic variation gradually replaced the variation based on an ostinato bass or chorale work. Although these changes were taking place during a time when originality was highly prized, the quotation of preexisting music still continued. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart reused themes from his own arias as well as pieces from other composers and adopted them into variation sets or movements within larger compositions. For instance, in the opera Don Giovanni, he adopted excerpts from his own opera Le nozze di Figaro as well as operas of other composers of his time such as Vicente Martin y Soler and Giuseppe Sarti (Burkholder, “Late 18th Century”). Another example of Mozart’s use of preexisting music is his Twelve Variations K. 265/300e, based on the French folk song Ah! vous dirai-je, Maman, known in English as “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” This folk melody has been reused in the two songs for children: “Baa, Baa, Black Sheep” and the “Alphabet Song.” Joseph Haydn quoted melodies directly from folk songs in many of his compositions, most notably, a London street song in his Symphony No. 104 in D major (Burkholder, “Late 18th Century”). Some scholars believe that Beethoven interwove two folk songs, Ich bin liederlich/lüderlich and Das liebe Kätzchen in the second movement of the Piano Sonata in A flat, Op. 110 (Drabkin, 48).
During the Romantic period, a revival of Johann Sebastian Bach’s music began after Felix Mendelssohn arranged and conducted a performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion*, which led many composers to take an interest. For instance, Liszt wrote many pieces based on the music of J.S. Bach including the ostinato-style variations in his *Prelude on Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (1859) based on music of J. S. Bach.

**Stylistic Quotation**

Although some composers including Claudio Monteverdi and Girolamo Frescobaldi continued the earlier style of recall of earlier music, the practice became less active in the beginning decades of the Baroque period during the seventeenth century. Composers during this period preferred references to older musical styles rather than using direct quotation. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the use of cantus firmus, parody, and paraphrase were significantly decreased. Monteverdi’s *stile concitato*, drawn from one of his own operas, *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* (1624) started the lament tradition, a formula which involved a consistent repeated ostinato bass of a descending tetrachord.

The *chaconne* and the *passacaglia* developed as new genres, and were also used as independent movements. The chaconne displayed a repeated harmonic pattern throughout, and the passacaglia used a repeated bass pattern. The chaconne and passacaglia were used in a large number of works as a framework for elaboration and became popular material for variation movements like the *variation ricercare*, *variation sonata*, *variation canzone*, and *strophic variation*.

Although Romantic music continued with many similar ideas exemplified by the previous period, a marked change in style developed stressing the uniqueness of the individual, focusing on emotional conflicts and dramatic climaxes. As many European nations gained a
stronger sense of national identity and as the ideas of nationalism spread, folk music and native instruments became commonly used in high art music. Another important development occurred as composers during this time period gained interest in drawing from the music of foreign cultures by incorporating exotic sounds into their own music. Ludwig van Beethoven used Russian folk melodies in his three Razumovsky String Quartets, Op. 59, dedicated to his Russian patron, Count Andreas Razumovsky (Burkholder, “Types of Borrowing”). Frédéric Chopin wrote fifty-eight mazurkas for piano using many characteristics of Polish music, though many were without any direct quotation from Polish folk tunes. In particular, the Lydian raised fourth, a characteristic trait of Polish folk music, is present from the earliest works of Chopin. Franz Liszt followed this lead, writing his own versions of folk tunes from different countries such as Poland and Hungary.

The invention of recording devices including the phonograph cylinder and the disc phonograph had a significant impact on the world of music. The study of folklore and ethnomusicology became serious areas of study in the twentieth century. Composers were able of collect musical sources recordings from various regions, societies, and cultures. Some composers were in interested in reviving elements of cultural diversity by using elements including scales, rhythms, and tonal languages which they adapted to their own compositional style. Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók were especially significant composers of folk-inspired music. Bartók and Kodály traveled together to record almost two thousand folk tunes using a portable handheld recorder in such countries as Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldavia, and Algeria. One example of Bartok’s use of folk elements can be heard in his suite for piano, Romanian Folk Dances, Sz. 56, where he quotes Romanian folk melodies, native dance rhythms, and pentatonic scales. Many different types of quotation were employed during the early part of the twentieth
century, from direct quotation of preexistent music to remote paraphrase.

Collage, as in the area of the visual arts, refers to a juxtaposing of multiple fragments to create combinations of different melodies, rhythms, harmonies, styles, or textures. Charles Ives was well-known for using the collage technique to recall a particular place or event. The layering of sounds as a collage is found in Ives’ *The Fourth of July* (1909) and *The Things Our Fathers Loved* (1917). Composers during this time made frequent use of homage to another composer or older genre in music through quotation. For instance, Igor Stravinsky’s ballet *Pulcinella* (1920) uses themes by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736), resetting them into different versions (Burkholder, “Types of Borrowing”). Claude Debussy’s highly innovative approach was directly influenced by the music of Bali and, in particular, the Gamelan. Debussy was fond of timbral quotation (also known as instrumental color) as an allusion to a sound foreign to the instrument being played. He not only attempted to recreate sounds heard in nature, but also sounds of foreign instruments the Balinese gong. Examples of Debussy’s quotation of the timbre of foreign instruments can be heard in his “Pagodes” from *Estampes*, for the piano.

Composers who deviated from formerly accepted standards in the compositional world like John Cage, Morton Feldman, Edgard Varèse, and Harry Partch influenced generations of composers in the late twentieth century to write music of personal significance to themselves. In the twenty-first century, it has become acceptable for composers to incorporate a wide variety of musical styles and sounds into their music. Ellen Taaffe Zwilich is one composer of the late twentieth century who writes music that is influenced by her childhood. An example of this can be heard in Zwilich’s ’s *Millennium Fantasy*, “based on an unidentified folk song that Zwilich learned from a family member; it appears fragmentarily throughout and is assembled at the end of the two-movement work” (Manheim, 2011). Joan Tower’s *Vast Antique Cubes/Throbbing*
Still (2000) is another example of a composer who writes music inspired by “the Latin Inca rhythms that I grew up with in South America, continue to play a powerful role — to "throb still" in my music” (Tower, 2000).

Drawing from music from the past continues in a variety of ways; it is vital in the music of many living composers. For instance, Steven Bryant’s “Suite Dreams” (2007), written for wind band, uses “motivic material . . . almost exclusively from the inverted Chaconne melody in movement I and from movement III from Gustav Holst’s First Suite in E flat” (1909) (Bryant, 2014). Mason Bates, also known as DJ Masonic, writes music that incorporates electronic music as well as instruments normally not heard in the classical setting into the symphony orchestra. This can be heard in Bates’ symphony Mothership, performed by the YouTube Symphony in 2011, where the composer DJs, mixing electronic sounds with the orchestra, and soloists are featured on violin, electric guitar, zither, and bass.
CHAPTER 4
THE SOLO PIANO MUSIC OF AARON JAY KERNIS

Before Sleep and Dreams (1987-1990)

Before Sleep and Dreams is a suite in five movements, approximately twenty minutes in length. The keyboard suite was a common form used during the baroque period and developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, particularly in France by composers including François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau, and by German composers like Johann Froberger and Johann Sebastian Bach.

Aaron Jay Kernis offers us a modern example of the suite for piano. Before Sleep and Dreams (1990) is dedicated to his friend, pianist Anthony de Mare. Although in a broad sense, the work is similar the various stylized dances found in the baroque suite, Kernis links each of the short movements together through thematic pragmatic cohesiveness. This piece depicts Kernis’ ideal picture of putting a small child to bed. According to Kernis, it has a spirit similar to Robert Schumann’s Kinderszenen and Claude Debussy’s Children’s Corner Suite (Kernis, 1999), displaying fantasy-like, playful characteristics often associated with childhood. Each movement in this suite comes with a descriptive title, unfolding in chronological order the progression of putting a small child to bed.

AJK: Well, there’s not so much a story to the piece but a series of tableaux that inspired it. I’ve always been kind of curious (I haven’t exactly figured this out) why at that point in my life I chose to write a children’s pieces . . . what was it about that series of images and progression of a child’s daily sleep events that seemed so necessary to reflect since I didn’t have children at that point. Over the years many pianists and parents have told me this piece mirrored their experience of having kids, but I don’t know where it came from in my life at that time. (See Appendix B, Interview, 2013).

1 All further undocumented quotes from Kernis come from the Interview, 2013, p. 65
“Before”

The first movement begins in the key of A major and serves as an introduction to the rest of the suite, using bell-like sounds from the beginning to the end. The high octaves allude to the sound of bells – as well as the traditional use of bells as signifying a beginning. The meter of this movement is mostly 4/2, although there are frequent metric changes using 6/2, 3/2, 5/2, and 7/2. In the opening, the pianist plays octaves in the high register, slowly and quietly.

Example 1.1 Aaron Kernis, “Before” from *Before Sleep and Dreams*, mm. 1-5

A similar sound can be heard in a passage from Debussy’s *La Cathédrale Engloutie*, from the Preludes, Book I (mm. 8-12), Ex. 1.2. The bell-like sounds in parallel octaves, the use of the whole-tone intervals in the melodic line, and writing in the piano’s high register make these two pieces sound very similar. Kernis also quotes Debussy’s style of harmonic planing in two or more lines.

1.2 Claude Debussy, *La Cathédrale Engloutie*, mm. 8-12
In measure 18, Kernis develops the opening idea with an arpeggiated chord progression accompanying the octaves played in the right hand, finally resting on a B minor chord. After the second statement, a new idea is presented and develops briefly with another slowed tempo change of much heavier chords and a marked change in dynamics. The return of the A section at measure 49, marked “Tranquillo” varies the octaves from the opening A section by using alternating single notes between the hands, gradually dying away and slowing in dotted half-notes of open fifths, finally resting on an open fifth on C-sharp and G-sharp.

The pedal is held for the first fifteen measures, causing the piano to echo and emulate bell-like sounds. The octaves and single pitches in the highest registers are to be played as if striking a bell and do not need to be connected. His pedal markings are very clear and are only to be changed when indicated. The melodic use of intervals of fourths, fifths, and major seconds provides a loss of tonal centricity, and gives the piece a feeling of floating. Each time Kernis marks a tempo change, a variation of the previous section follows with change of registration and tempo. The second movement follows “attacca.”

“Play Before Lullaby”

The second movement is marked “Scherzando” is inspired by a lively dance movement like the rondo. It is very fast; 152 equals a dotted quarter-note. Its playfulness is exemplified in the use of rests of irregular length which creates a sense of unpredictability. The articulation in this movement is generally soft and light, creating a gentle and playful effect. As in the first movement, the writing is frequently in the higher register of the piano. There are many doublings of chords between the hands, creating an orchestral effect. Kernis uses hemiola, sforzandi, and accents on off-beats, as well as many accelerandi, ritardandi, and frequent tempo changes to create an unsettled and excited feeling associated with a child’s playtime. There are also frequent
triple-meter changes including 12/8, 6/8, and 9/8. Although he uses more chromaticism than in the previous movement, fourths, fifths, and major seconds are still prevalent throughout. The repetition of thematic passages in different tonal areas and fragmentary or broken motives become sequential and are then developed into variation passages. He avoids a clear linear narrative through stressing the device of interruption. The unstable rhythm and tonality of this piece are reflective of a narrative interpretation of the child’s playfulness before bed. Kernis explains the tonality of this movement, saying: “It’s definitely octatonic. This scale appears over and over again in my work, sometimes as a primary harmonic source and other times as a contrasting one. I used it more often in this piece as a contrast to the diatonic. It’s a completely symmetrical scale, always half-step, whole-step, whole-step, half-step.” A playful melody appears in the right hand in measure 28, which will later be referenced in the last movement:

Example 1.3 Aaron Kernis, “Play Before Lullaby,” Before Sleep and Dreams, mm. 28-31

Kernis calls this theme a “primary motive of this movement, and as you know it comes back in the last movement and ties the suite together – it’s really obvious that fifths keep reappearing all over the piece.” A response to the primary motive appears in measure 35 in the right hand, using the melodic interval of a fifth, and is accentuated by a two-against-three rhythm between the left and right hands. Kernis refers to this as the “announcing motive,” which he also references in the final movement.
Example 1.4 Aaron Kernis, “Play Before Lullaby,” *Before Sleep and Dreams*, m. 35

Measures 39-42 transition using open fifths in each hand. In measure 43, a fragment from the primary theme in measure 28 returns briefly. In measures 50-51, a variation of the motive from measure 35 reappears, using a similar two-against-three rhythm. From measures 50-62, the frequency of the motive’s appearance is doubled to twice per measure, marked “growing in excitement.” In measures 80-86, the two motives appear together in cross-rhythm or hemiola between the left and right hands. In measure 80, the right hand plays an augmentation of the rhythm from the same theme found in measure 51, while the left hand plays the theme taken from measure 28. The combination of these recurring motives provides thematic unity in this movement.

Example 1.5 Aaron Kernis, “Play Before Lullaby,” *Before Sleep and Dreams*, mm. 79-82

“Play Before Sleep” ends humorously with thirty-second note arpeggios racing down to the bottom of the piano to end on a “wrong” note, marked p.
Example 1.6 Aaron Kernis, “Play Before Lullaby,” Before Sleep and Dreams, mm. 111-114

The pianist can slightly push the racing arpeggios going both up and down the piano to create a playful atmosphere, as the title suggests. Care must be taken in fingering the arpeggios since the hands are frequently overlapped and can get in the way each other. The pedaling is very light in this movement and can be held at half pedal or less, when indicated.

“Lullaby”

This central movement was completed in 1987, before the rest of the suite was written. Kernis decided in 1990 to use the Lullaby as the central movement and build the other pieces around it. In the Lullaby, Kernis says “there is Mahler, with echoes of Chopin (Dalton, 2005). When I asked Kernis about the reference to Mahler, he said: “The first element that refers to Mahler is the very simple opening and the end. The left-hand repeating motive that opens the piece is very similar to motives of rocking minor thirds in harp and the strings in “Das Lied von der Erde’s” final movement, in Songs of the Wayfarer, in general, all over Mahler, the Adagietto, etc . . .”. The tonal colors and romantic style in this movement are contrasted against the other movements and fit in the chronological order of the story of bedtime, when the child would perhaps hear a lullaby sung. The left-hand accompaniment pattern of thirds simulates the motion of rocking a baby to sleep. Kernis’ reference to Chopin can be heard in the Berceuse, Op. 57.
Example 1.7 Frédéric Chopin, Berceuse, Op. 57, mm. 1-4

The “Lullaby” uses a similar ostinato bass with a rocking pattern:

Example 1.8 Aaron Kernis, “Lullaby,” Before Sleep and Dreams, mm. 1-9

The composer explains the layers of the central movement: “When I was writing this, I know I was definitely thinking of three layers - the middle line is static, the upper voice is rising, and the lower voice is static or moving down later, and the upper line keeps moving down- so there’s a sense of equilibrium between those three- steady but rising and falling.” The key signature of the “Lullaby” is A minor. The form is symmetrical and is AABABAA. The opening phrase (measures 1-17) is in A natural minor. The second statement of A (measures 18-32) descends to
a parallel G minor (with E natural), resting on a B-flat phrygian chord in measure 31. The first theme, a mournful, falling third motive is heard using A minor (measures 33-34) preceding the B section (measures 35-49). Kernis explains this motive is “not structural so much, but again it changes the accompanying motive into a primary motive.” The second theme is rooted above the mostly consonant harmonies in the left hand, with more chromaticism than before and an increasingly free chromatic line in the right hand. Kernis says that the harp-like sounds are “counterpoint of layering and of course the contrast of the second theme, which is mostly just open harmonies and harp-like figurations.” A transition follows using G sharp as a pivotal element to return to A as the tonic. The opening A section returns at measure 49, becoming more and more chromatic and hazy between measures 60 and 67, only to reiterate A minor very strongly again with the primary motive in measures 68 and 69. The sweeping B section returns, but this time ends with a climactic statement of the primary theme seen earlier in measures 33-34 and 68-69. Pivotal elements are seen once again between the relationship of G-sharp minor to A minor at measure 79, then the return to G minor at measure 88 which prefaces returning to the home key, now A major rather than minor, closing after the A minor/F major phrygian white-note collection from measure 105 to the end. Kernis describes how he thinks of “space” on the piano:

AJK: And also that’s the idea, I’m just opening up all this space between the deepest notes and the highest, with essentially nothing in the middle.

JT: Can you explain further?

AJK: I think of register that way. With each instrument I write for, I think of the special characteristic of the sound and effect of their registers. And having all that open space, I mean the resonant space in the piano, is a very powerful way to use the instrument.
Each time the A section returns, the emotional intensity is built by varying the consonant or dissonant quality while maintaining the steady ostinato in the left hand. Kernis’ writing style is intended to sound improvised, although the tempo remains steady in the A sections because of the left hand ostinato. “Lullaby” is the only movement of the suite where a pause occurs before the beginning and at end of the piece. This central movement is a very dramatic piece alone, and may be performed alone. The main difficulty lies in the ability of the performer to maintain a fairly steady pulse while keeping the improvised-sounding right hand in a style similar to one of Chopin’s nocturnes.

“Lights Before Sleep”

The fourth movement is the shortest movement in the suite and is marked “very fast and mercurial.” The waves of single notes and chords suggest the play of light at bedtime like a candlelight flicker or moon beams shining through a window onto a bedroom wall. The form of this movement is similar to the second movement in using developing variations based on short thematic ideas, as well as being set in the high register of the piano. As discussed in Chapter 2, one of Kernis’ admitted influences is the style of minimalism. Here, Kernis achieves the shimmering effect of flickering lights throughout by using minimalistic waves of sound, built with contrasted dynamics and fast, syncopated chord clusters.
Example 1.9 Aaron Kernis, “Lights Before Sleep,” *Before Sleep and Dreams*, mm. 1-6

JT: In the short fourth movement, “Lights Before Sleep,” it sounds very influenced by minimalism. Is there a piece or a composer that you are referencing in particular?

AJK: Well I think if this short movement were fifteen minutes or twenty minutes long, and continued in the same vein, it would be more obviously connected to minimal music, which is usually on a bigger scale and more repetitive than this. This is made up of little blocks of repetition, it uses a few simple ideas that show a debt to minimalism but not to any specific composer.

The performer may add more pedal than the second movement, to assist in achieving the dynamic range in waves of hazy sound. The second idea, or melody, in measures 24 and 32 must be played loud enough by the left hand to be heard over the right-hand accompaniment. The last page of this piece is marked by tempo changes in blocks of measures to gradually slow the intensity and prepare for the final movement. Although there is a measure of rest with a fermata, the composer writes “attacca” at the end; the feeling of continuation should not be broken between the fourth movement and the final movement, just as between the first and second movements.
“Before Sleep and Dreams”

The last movement recalls themes from the previous four movements, but this time in a more gentle, warmer, richer feeling than before. The delicacy and calmness create a peaceful and magical atmosphere.

Well, it was very hard to come to terms with because I kept on going back to those intervals and thinking oh, I’m ripping off Debussy, but ultimately the movement has such an open feel to it, to lay all of those parallel open triads over top of just a very warm E major . . . which is probably my favorite key, rather than E-flat. But I really kept stopping myself when I was writing, since I was so worried about sounding derivative of Debussy in particular, but ultimately my approach to the music seemed like the right direction, and really felt these ideas wrapped up the whole piece, since it brought back elements of the first and second movement at the end.

Example 1.10 Aaron Kernis, “Before Sleep and Dreams,” Before Sleep and Dreams, mm. 1-7

This piece is inspired by the planing style, frequently seen in Debussy’s music:

Example 1.11 Claude Debussy, La Cathédrale Engloutie, mm. 28-30
When the last movement brings back passages from the previous movements, we clearly see the connections with each movement. Thematic development of the opening chords in the last movement, along with references of formerly-heard motives, intervals, and rhythms bring a sense of recall to the listener.

Example 1.12 Aaron Kernis, “Before Sleep and Dreams,” *Before Sleep and Dreams*, mm. 63-65

Kernis’ suite is an example of treating a suite as a collection of multi-movements that are thematically related, by referencing themes or motives from earlier movements in the final movement, like Schumann’s reference to earlier movements in Papillons, Op.2. This suite is an extremely cohesive composition, both because it is arranged in the chronological order of a story and also because Kernis references his own themes as the piece unfolds.

**Three “Superstar” Etudes**

Etudes, or studies, are short pieces written for the purpose of practicing and perfecting a particular technical skill, seen as early as the 1600s. Carl Czerny (1791-1857), the Austrian composer and student of Beethoven, wrote hundreds of etudes for the piano as teaching resources that are still used today. Later, in the 1800s, Chopin and Liszt more firmly established the tradition of writing etudes that then became part of the concert repertoire. However, some of
Liszt’s etudes were more developed in form and many encompassed more than one type of difficulty. In the twentieth century, composers like Debussy, Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Messiaen, and Ligeti wrote etudes for the piano which are considered part of the standard concert repertoire for pianists. Kernis wrote his three “Superstar” etudes over a time period of fifteen years: in 1992, 2002 and 2007, respectively. When I asked Kernis about his inspiration for these etudes and the where the title “Superstar” came from, he explained:

Well, there was a point where I had planned to write twelve etudes with each one as an homage to a great performer. I had a whole list (although, the third etude is not really a person) I just made a list of various jazz pianists. I thought there would be an Elvis etude, a Madonna etude, there days there would be a Lady Gaga etude. But after three I felt I couldn’t do any more. I think it goes back to what I first said about Before Sleep and Dreams. There’s a thread that runs through all these piano pieces - each one is kind of an homage to a different style, or a different character, or a specific different composer/performer, and I definitely could have gone on with the etudes, but when I got to the end of three I wanted to go onto different approaches to composing. The third etude is a special piece for me. So anyway yes, they started as this idea of being dedicated to making homages to specific performers, and by the time I got to the third one, it became to be more about my parents, and the music my parents loved, and about the blues and various influences more than numbers one or two.

Pianists like George Gershwin, Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson, and Jerry Lee Lewis had unusual abilities at the piano, and especially in Lewis’s case, a “superstar” quality that made them discernible and standing out from others in their field. These special abilities enabled them to gain recognition and fame, thus enabling a much larger group of listeners to hear the music they performed. In this way, they became idols of the music world, much in the same way we think of Hollywood actors and actresses. Kernis’ idea for the etudes started off as an homage of this dependent relationship and the idolization of a rare breed of musician, but later developed into his love of music he had heard growing up, all of which, as we will see in the next section, had little to do with traditional “classical” music.
“Superstar Etude No. 1” (1992)

This piece is dedicated to the American pianist, Alan Feinberg. At the beginning of Kernis’ first etude, he writes “Hard drivin’ wild” with a quarter note and equals sign under it containing no metronome speed, which is left up to the performer as to how fast he or she is willing to take it. In a showy intro, the piece opens in 4/4 with two measures of octaves, banged out at the highest and lowest ends of the piano in each hand. By the second measure, the octaves are accented on the off-beats of beats two and four, then of beats one and three, using a syncopated rhythm characteristic of early American rock-and-roll from the 50s. By the fourth measure, Kernis writes glissandos in 5/4 to be played across practically the full keyboard with both hands, with the left hand on the white keys and the right on the black keys. A variation of this opening statement follows in measure 5 which increases in difficulty by changing the octave register between one eighth note and the next, requiring frequent jumps. This is humorous, since the pianist is still playing all B flats in both hands, but with rock-and-roll rhythms. With a restatement of the glissandos and more B flat octaves, Kernis writes a chromatic bass line that begins the body of the piece. In measure 15, we see octaves, still at the opposite ends of the keyboard, but this time with an added inner voice playing a melody and syncopated rhythmic pattern clearly reminiscent of rock-and-roll, also known as “honky-tonk.” Here is an example of the style of Jerry Lee Lewis’s playing, done Kernis-style:
Example 1.13 Aaron Kernis, “Superstar Etude No. 1,” mm. 13-16

Here, we see that the rhythm drives the music more than the harmonies, which are fairly simple and very repetitive. Kernis uses eighth notes because they can easily accommodate the rhythmic displacement associated with rock-and-roll. In measure 18, a new idea is heard after a chord cluster is slammed in the center of the piano by both hands and is followed by chromatically moving octaves that are changed to groups of three eighths instead of four, overlapping the groups of three between hands from the third eighth to the first one, with more variations on the same idea. The fun continues, revved up by simply shifting everything up one half-step up to B natural. By measure 30, Kernis varies the last idea in measure 18 of three groupings of eighth notes. This idea starts to shrink rhythmically by looping and overlapping the groups in shorter intervals. By measure 44, the grouping changes to two eighth notes, marked Fortissimo and Pesante. A minor ninth is added to the triads, giving it a “twangy” dissonant sound followed by more “funky”-sounding chords containing minor sevenths, perfect fourths, augmented fourths, and perfect fifths. In measure 39, the meter alternates between 5/8 and 2/4, changing the eighth-note groupings to two, three, or four. By measure 42 and 43 the piece begins to slow through the staggered entrances of the groups of two eighths, and through the gradual addition of more and more eighth-note rests, until the music comes to a halt in measure 44. Here, the composer writes “Start cool, get hot” as the tempo has slowed down enough to play some extremely fun
syncopated groupings on the off-beats, where the performer gets to pounce in the left hand against a simple right-hand melody riff in harmonized fourths. This section slowly warms back up in tempo and dynamics to be played “With energy” in measure 66. The chords in the right-hand have now morphed into five-note chord clusters, consisting of major and minor thirds, major seconds, and augmented sevenths. The clashing continues until measure 69, where Kernis writes on the score “With Balls of Fire,” leaving no doubt in the performers’ mind that he is referencing Jerry Lee Lewis and his most famous song “Great Balls of Fire” (1957), written by Otis Blackwell and Jack Hammer. For the next 13 measures, the pianist gets to play chord clusters played by mashing the hands, the forearms, and the left foot at the bottom of the keyboard:

Example 1.14 Aaron Kernis, “Superstar Etude No. 1,” mm. 79-82
Kernis tops it with even more irreverent behavior by asking the performer to stomp on the floor and scream “Whoa baby!” several times at the audience, all while playing huge glissandos in both hands. The tirade comes to a climax with two pages of crushing hand and forearm chord clusters, contrary motion glissandos and a final syncopated E-flat major riff.

JT: Basically, you’re just not expecting such a thing because you’ve crossed some styles over that you’re not supposed to.

AJK: That’s exactly why I wrote it. I thought, what a great thing. There’s a wall between performers and the audience where audience members are uncomfortable with laughing.

JT: Yeah, right.

AJK: And audiences often think that music making has to be so reverential. Lewis did that with rock-and-roll – which had been much stiffer and formal before him. He and many other groups broke down that wall.

The performer has to have fun with this etude for it to be effective. The difficulty lies in hitting the octave-displaced jumps. Therefore, the pianist should choose a tempo allowing him or her to make the jumps accurately and still “rock out” the syncopated rhythms. Out of concern for the piano, the pianist should remove the shoe from the left foot, and bend at the knee slightly so as to control the amount of weight hitting the keys.

“Superstar Etude No. 2” (2002)

Kernis’ second etude was written ten years after the first etude and is dedicated to the pianist, Emanuele Arciuli, who commissioned and premiered the work.

Emanuele Arciuli, an Italian pianist who plays a good deal of American music, had an unusual idea for a commissioning project: a program of variations on a single theme that would represent the passage of time from morning to afternoon and evening. He settled on Thelonious Monk’s “Round Midnight,” a jazz standard that Monk composed in the 1940’s, and he solicited contributions from composers of every stripe (Kozinn, 2002).
Other composers included on the commission were: Eric Reed, Uri Caine, Alberto Barbero, Fred Hersch, Matthew Quayle, Frederic Rzewski, Milton Babbitt, Roberto Andreoni, Augusta Read Thomas, Filippo Del Corno, Michael Torke, Carlo Boccadoro, John Harbison, George Crumb, Michael Daugherty, William Bolcom, Gerald Levinson, and Joel Hoffman.

*JT:* How would you say that this piece is like Thelonious Monk?

*AJK:* Well, it doesn’t start like Monk, but some of the elements I was thinking about (close voicings and clusters, impetuousness of character) don’t appear at the beginning. Sure, it’s impetuous because of all the stops and starts, but once it gets going it gets more rhythmic. The Monk-ish aspects happen later on, with the left hand writing and the clusters. It’s when we get to measure 83. I always thought of this as a left-hand etude, since half of the piece really focuses on the left hand as the primary line. These harmonies are more chromatic, with a lot of whole steps, and pentatonic black-versus-white key figures and those downward runs.

This etude is a set of variations on the melody from Thelonious Monk’s original composition “‘Round Midnight:”

Example 1.15 Theme from Thelonious Monk’s “‘Round Midnight”

Aaron Kernis’ “Superstar Etude, No. 2” has no key signature and uses frequent meter changes. Syncopated rhythms occur throughout the piece. It is very fast—a quarter note equals 138—and is about 4 minutes in length. The opening begins with a series of repeated eighth-notes marked staccato, gradually moving from piano to forte by the third measure. The shape of the theme from Monk’s “‘Round Midnight” appears the in the third and fourth measures:
Example 1.16 Aaron Kernis, “Superstar Etude No. 2,” mm. 1-9

This opening idea is restated and expanded the second time with sixteenth notes that climb up the piano in a duet between the hands. Kernis uses clashing dissonant chord clusters built from larger intervals including sevenths, ninths, and elevenths, characteristic of Monk’s playing. The pianist-composer, Vijay Iyer, faculty at the Harvard University’s Department of Music, said this about Monk’s music:
The minor seventh and the flatted fifth, two of Monk’s most often-used extensions, are the piano’s versions of the seventh and eleventh partials of the harmonic series, respectively. (Remember, the ubiquity of the flatted fifth in jazz could arguably be attributed to Monk himself.) He would also combine the minor and major seventh of a chord (a.k.a. the seventh and fifteenth partials), the natural and flat ninths (i.e., the ninth and seventeenth partials) and other “forbidden” combinations that actually sound good and make physical sense (Iyer, 2010).

The first variation of the opening idea of repeated notes appears in measure 15, this time overlapping between the hands in the tenor and bass registers. Over the next seven measures, Kernis uses a device called ‘spectral’ writing, which builds resonance to open up the sound dramatically and quickly on the piano. Spectral music arose in the early 70s in the work of a group of French composers including Tristan Murail, Gérard Grisey, and Hugues Dufourt, who were interested in writing music focusing on the timbre of particular sounds, using the spectrum of partials from the overtone series to create a musical structure. Iyer believes there is a close connection between Monk and spectral music:

A close study of Monk’s playing reveals this spectral quality of his chords, this clear perception of higher harmonics in the sound of the piano. In order to activate these higher partials, he had to play with a little more force than the average pianist, to get the instrument ringing and shaking. In this sense harmony and tone were integrated concepts. This is why I call them “sounds” rather than “chords”; they are not theoretical constructs but vibratory experiences—actual, specific sensations—and they feel good (Iyer, 2010).

In measure 23, the theme reappears timidly, broken up with rests and heard with softer dynamics. The phrasing does not sound metered, because it written to sound like the gestures heard in speech. Every new variation builds with increasing ferocious intensity towards the last note of the phrase. In measures 32-33, the eighth-note triplet rhythm reappears and expands in longer groupings of chromatically descending minor sixths and sevenths. At the end of measure 39, another variation of the thematic material takes its shape in sixteenth-note chords that repeat in
groups of two and are alternated with thirty-second note arpeggios climbing up and down the piano. A new variation starts at measure 49 of the theme used this time in thirty-second notes in the right hand countered by sixteenth notes in the left hand. Kernis slows the tempo marking to 114. In measure 58, the repeated sixteenth-note chords are hammered out in groups of two using clashing bitonal harmonies between the hands. Here, the composer combines the shape of the original theme from “’Round Midnight” with an earlier idea first seen in measure 39, ending the section with a dramatic statement of the theme, staggered by rhythmic augmentation in measure 61. A new section begins with directions to play a doleful single-note blues melody in the left hand with bell-like arpeggiated chords encompassing minor ninths and augmented sevenths in the right hand as an accompaniment. We can see the fragments of thematic material this time shared among different voices using falling diminished thirds outlining the shape. The next section beginning in measure 70 is marked “Più Pesante” with the tempo changed to a quarter equals 48. The presence of the theme is seen here using major seconds, and starts sounding more like Monk himself. A brief ritard takes the listener into a new section at measure 71 marked “Presto.” This new section opens with descending thirty-second note whole-tone scales. In measure 83, the theme appears in octaves in both hands, in a more declamatory statement:

![Example 1.17 Aaron Kernis, “Superstar Etude No. 2,” mm. 83-84](image-url)
The intervals created between the octaves in each hand in measure 83 produce a tritone, or flattened fifth—an interval that Monk was famous for using. Kernis begins to pick up the intensity in the next few measures by using eighth-note triplets split between the hands. Next, he starts to incorporate chords in the right hand built on stacked fourths with a major second between them. When these same pitches are played melodically, they outline the theme from “Round Midnight.” In measures 92-94, Kernis begins to build the last variation from dense chord clusters and rapid runs that outline the thematic material. For the next four measures, a gradual accelerando of a series of chord re-voicings rises in the right hand against descending bass octaves, fifths, and sevenths. In measure 100, the right-hand fourths are slowed by a rallentando using fortissimo dynamics, and are brought to a complete halt. In measures 101-109, we see a playful interaction between the hands until the return to the material from measures 7-13. Measures 115-116 bang out a fusillade of heavily syncopated sixteenth-note chords. The final three measures end in sixteenth notes in contrary motion, with a final pounce onto white-note chord clusters in each hand at opposite extremes on the piano.

This etude is a merciless assault on the piano, requiring pyrotechnics that are not suited for the faint of heart. It is much more difficult than the “Superstar Etude No. 1” because frequent, large jumps have to be made between chord clusters that are very chromatic and constantly changing. Kernis demonstrates his prowess at writing short developing variations, and it seems that if this piece went on for four more minutes, the composer would have no problem coming up with new variation material. Although this etude contains chords using larger intervals (commonly associated with jazz and specifically with Monk) and syncopated driving rhythms, it does not come across primarily as jazzy because the rhythm is not at all dance-like; it sounds more like gestures heard in Monk’s playing that are angular, impish, and playful. Kernis’ bitonal
harmonic colors, combined with Monk’s pungent harmonies, written in an innovative style using percussive playing, produce a sinister-sounding etude that requires the highest level of technical facility.

“Ballad(e) out of the Blues (Superstar Etude No. 3)” (2007)

Kernis’ last etude was written for a commission from “The Frédéric Chopin Society of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota in celebration of their twenty-fifth concert season and for pianist Mihaela Ursuleasa” (Kernis, 2007). One critic’s review of the premiere said about the piece:

Gershwin in its opening moments, the piece, which honors the memory of Kernis’ late father, is one of his characteristically complex negotiations with the musical past—a continuously absorbing “battle with history,” as the composer put it in a pre-concert talk. Allusions to classic jazz, gospel and ballad singing mingle in the fluid musical texture. Far from outrunning its materials, the 10-minute piece could easily have been longer (Fuchsberg, 2008).

The obvious link to Chopin is given in the title, which has a twist. The “Ballad(e)” in the title refers to the instrumental ballade, a work Chopin invented as a musical narrative form for the piano. The reference to jazz in the title is also clear in that a “ballad” was a sad, slower song of the blues. We can see again the multiple layers of reference that Kernis embeds within the title of this etude. Also, the fact that Kernis added “in memory of my father” to the title page, shows a debt to his father’s love for jazz and the type of music that Kernis grew up listening to at home. This piece is much longer than Kernis’ first two etudes, lasting approximately nine minutes. It begins with a distant, dramatic introduction. In searching for a connection to Chopin’s ballades, I asked the composer:

JT: How would you say this piece is like a Chopin Ballade?
AJK: When I was first asked to write the piano piece, it was to be on a program of all the Ballades, actually. But it was never done in that context. The request was to write a piece that was a Ballade. As it started to develop, I saw the elements that were important in it, it began to head toward an etude but have the form of more like a rhapsody. It’s a mixture because it’s very song-like. I called it Ballade not just because of the initial request but because my mother loved Ballads and for me the most influential elements in the piece come from singing those long lines and from the blues. So, as it was developing into what it is, during the process, I remember saying to myself, “can I move this to a more formalized direction like one of the Chopin Ballades?” and I just could not have drawn back, once it had gone a certain direction. It became almost like a theme and variations, but then didn’t follow that up completely. I mean, it could have become a twelve-minute piece and I could have written a couple more variations after that really hard three-part section—which is almost like a three-part chorale prelude. So, using the word Ballade is less about what the whole thing is than what it started as.

JT: When I first wrote you about this piece, I was concerned with understanding the structure and wondering if there was a story behind it. And I was also very interested to know which jazz performers influenced you in writing this piece. I think you mentioned Gershwin of course, Art Tatum, Count Basie and . . .

AJK: Charles Ives . . . not the jazz chords of course but . . . there’s things I think are very much from Ives. But the opening chords are a little closer to Messiaen, a little more out of my love of French music, but they’re like a mixture of some more clustery Messiaen type chords and very extended jazz-type harmonies. And then of course the tune is more rooted in B-flat and rooted in the blues. The middle section comes out of things like Oscar Peterson . . . so, it’s really more thinking about people who had a special relationship with the blues as jazz pianists.

In the opening chords, we can see Kernis’ layered, orchestral writing for the piano. There is no key signature, although the piece is undeniably rooted in the key of B-flat major. In the first three measures, there are three voices, marked “Suspended,” as one might hear in a jazz trio, recalling the ghosts of jazz from a very distant time period:
Example 1.18 Aaron Kernis, “Ballad(e) out of the Blues, Superstar Etude No. 3,” mm. 1-3

Throughout most of the piece, Kernis has left the pedaling to the performer. He marks “use pedal freely,” which adds even more layers of sound. The opening three measures, using extended jazz chords, change key signature in each measure which creates an improvised-sounding atmosphere. In measure four, there are jazz chords harmonized with fifths in the bass and fourths in the right hand, sounding reminiscent of music heard in Gershwin’s “Summertime.” Through this section, (measures 4-12) Kernis begins to add more dissonant harmonies that, when pedaled “freely” sound clangorous while still jazzy, because of the frequent intervals drawn from the blues scales and extended jazz harmonies. Accelerating chromatic scales in the bass take us into the next section in measures 13-21.

JT: This piece is not easy to play because it’s not really very pianistic. The challenges lie in the combination of multiple ensembles going on at the same time and trying to decide what to bring out.

AJK: Yeah, this is a piece even with all those influences, I start to feel like I’m finding an approach to the piano that relates to Before Sleep and Dreams. There’s a whole
impressionistic background to the work and a whole way of hearing overlaid harmonies and use of the pedal and layers of overlapping harmonies in different registers. Because this is my most extended single-movement piano piece, it means a lot to me. Structurally, I think that I was starting to try to deal with something in terms of larger form. This was really the first go at it and it’s something I want to try to head toward again.

In this section, the three separate voices continue with a doleful blues melody in the middle voice, accompanied by the treble and bass voices. The pedal is used to sustain the harmonic color of each chord and cannot clear the many improvised runs and accompaniments from the other voices, thus it is meant to sound slightly blurred. New material begins in the next section (mm. 22-41), still weaving in and out of three voices. Kernis says it is “almost like a three-part chorale prelude.” This next section, marked “A little slower, more dragged, with swing” begins in F-sharp major, although does not stay there long. Kernis moves chromatically through a series of chords on the downbeats of each the measure. He fills out the measures using improvised-sounding chromatic runs that are frequently doubled in one of the voices. In measure 28, the composer writes “with a gospel feel,” recalling the historical relationship of early jazz to gospel music. This section (mm. 34-35) starts to develop with more and more dissonance using the highest register of the keyboard. The faster runs in this section must be played in the time of the overall measure so as not to interrupt the flow. In measure 37, a climax begins, using a series of chords that draw from spectral music, arriving in measure 38 where the tempo slows to a quarter equals 50. The B sus9/+13 chord at the end of measure 38 is highly characteristic of Kernis’ harmonic color, containing both the ninth and the sharped ninth with an added D natural. Over the next few measures, Kernis begins to slow the fast runs and pyrotechnics to prepare for the next section. The first middle section spans from measures 42-56, beginning with a dramatic single-voice statement of the blues in a mezzo forte voice, recalling a sung ballad. This section ends with arpeggiated chords and statement using bitonal major seconds. A second middle
section begins in measure 57, marked “Arioso-Poco Adagio, Spacious” using a slower tempo. Here, Kernis draws from spectral music, creating a ghostly atmosphere while still recalling the blues in the tenor voice and accompanied by rising broken fifths in the soprano. This calmer section climaxes uses arpeggiated chords drawing from both the blues scales and spectral music. After a dramatic pause, a bridge into the next section (m. 73) gains momentum in a set of broken tenths in the left hand. Although there is no pedal change marked here, the pianist must take care to change the pedal enough to hear the rising broken tenths in the bass. In measure 75, a rhapsodic melody in the right hand is accompanied by thirty-second note runs in the left, until ghostly spectral sounds return in measure 78, very high on the piano. From measure 82, the composer uses three measures of chord clusters in the highest register. This transitional section winds down once more with highly chromatic runs grouped into six sixteenth notes descending to the bass of the piano. Here, Kernis adds pedal markings for the first time, showing that he wants the pedal changed only when the bass note single or octave notes are struck. A ritard prepares the listener for the next section (mm. 88-94), marked triple pianissimo, “wispy, deliciate, but with light swing.” For the next two pages, we see a “chorale prelude” written in three staves. Rarely do the voices all line up on a downbeat, which creates a very disjointed sound. The beat should be kept fairly even here. Although many notes will be blurred, the long pedals should be held for their full value. The next section, from measures 95-109 is the new material before the coda begins. It builds to an enormous climax at measure 98, using chromatic bluesy scale patterns and a driving bass line. There frequent tempo changes in the last section before the coda are intended to sound improvised.

JT: The rhythms in this piece are challenging. I think they should sound mostly improvised . . .
AJK: And they have to feel free rather than metronomic. That’s one of the things that made this piece really hard to notate.

In this last “Messiaenic” section, we see that Kernis slows down the rhythmic intensity at measure 104 and also measure 107, by using a series of chromatic chord re-voicings indicative of Keith Jarrett or Kenny Kirkland.

![Example 1.19 Aaron Kernis, “Ballad(e) out of the Blues, Superstar Etude No. 3,” mm. 107-108](image)

Example 1.19 Aaron Kernis, “Ballad(e) out of the Blues, Superstar Etude No. 3,” mm. 107-108

This same kind of slowing down or “collapse” of the music can also be seen in the writing of Chopin. For example, in Chopin’s Ballade in F minor, Op. 52, there is a similar slow down of tempo and intensity in the last climactic section before the coda begins.

![Example 1.20 Frédéric Chopin, Ballade in F minor, Op. 52, mm. 202-210](image)

Example 1.20 Frédéric Chopin, Ballade in F minor, Op. 52, mm. 202-210

Kernis’ coda begins at measure 110. Here, the tempo is marked “starting like Tempo I, quarter equals 40-44,” to prepare for the final dramatic statement in the coda which lasts two pages.
Kernis uses an ostinato pattern in the bass that repeats until measure 115, when it becomes “Wild, rushing, ad. Lib, quarter  equals c.100-108”. Here, the pianist can go wild until measure 117, where we see a looping bass pattern finishing “quadruple forte” that starts sounding like an upright bass solo. In measure 118, the pianist plays a low B in the bass followed by shimmering chord clusters in a tremolo between the hands. The ghosts of jazz quickly disappear into thin air with final run of grace notes in the lowest register of the piano ending on a pianissimo major second. The composer has marked the pedal to be lifted at the beginning of the run in measure 119, so it should be dry, not blurred.

This piece is has more similarities to a Chopin ballade than it does to an etude; it is a dramatic piece and needs adequate space on a program, being approximately nine minutes in length. The technique required in performing this music in the tempos that the composer marks are an homage to the enormous technical skill of great jazz pianists like Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson. The references to spectral music and Messiaen in the harmonies bring the distance of a long-ago jazz era into a modern format.

The Shorter Piano Works

“Speed Limit Rag” (2001)

The “Speed Limit Rag” is Kernis’ tribute to Scott Joplin, George Gershwin, and the chord progressions and musical style found in early jazz and ragtime music. The composer explains: “I grew up with Gershwin. I got to know his music through my mother (she loved Gershwin) and so I was playing the Song Book as a teenager and lots of popular songs. The parent of this piece is the middle Gershwin Prelude.”
This piece opens with a short introduction of four measures, with arpeggios reminiscent of Gershwin that have a sonorous and sparkling effect:

Example 1.21 Aaron Kernis, “Speed Limit Rag (a slow drag),” mm. 1-3

JT: “The Speed Limit Rag (a slow drag).” I was wondering why do you include “(a slow drag)” in the title in the “Speed Limit Rag?”

AJK: I think it was from a quote of Scott Joplin, it’s printed in many of his sheet music where, on the first page it says “Rags are not to be played fast.” It shows up over and over again after the titles of rags. It seemed clear to me that rag composers were afraid that people would not understand how the music should be played and just go kind of wild with the tempo. I think it’s also trying to put a distance between brothel music and concert rags. So given that my title implies speed, I wanted to make a very clear relationship to past rags by including, “a slow drag.” Because I think players could think “oh, I should do this at top speed. It was written with 65mph in mind and since other states have higher speed limits, I could just imagine that people would take off with this. It also might push the performers to look at its relationship to older rags.

The form of “Speed Limit Rag” is in ABA song form, including an introduction and coda. Kernis creates a resonant sound on the piano by writing in contrasting, widely spaced registers on the piano. For example, while the left hand uses the jazz stride style of James P. Johnson, with single bass notes alternating against a chord in the tenor register, the right hand plays arpeggiated or doubled melodies in a higher register of the piano (m. 4-20). Although this work is inspired by Scott Joplin’s ragtime piano pieces, we can also see the orchestral approach in Kernis’s writing style when he uses voices in three separate registers (m.10-11). A transition
before the B section comes through a series of chord progression utilizing four chords commonly heard in early jazz including gospel, early American song-book standards, and ragtime: A7, E-flat 7, D7, and G major. The B section begins on the fourth beat (tenth eighth-note) of measure 20. It gradually grows in intensity through accents and sforzandos, building to a climax of quick chord exchanges (mm. 27-28), using contrary motion of alternating registers in all four voices.

Example 1.22 Aaron Kernis, “Speed Limit Rag (a slow drag),” mm. 28-29

The expanding lines take turns alternating in four opposite directions until the cadence is reached. An arpeggiated flourish on Em7 makes the transition back to the A section, but this time, the composer writes “A bit slower” with an even softer dynamic of pianissimo, marked dolcissimo. In measure 35, we hear a tritone substitution on C7/F sharp (the root of the chord is a tri-tone away from the original chord) in place of the dominant seventh. After the arpeggiated tritone substitution, the piece pauses briefly on C7 before the return of the opening. Here, Kernis makes reference to the chord progression in measures 19-20. This time however, he modifies and expands the transition, ending on a D major 13 (m. 39). The last flourish of arpeggios in contrary motion ends on an added sixth chord with a bright major sound, still common in jazz music today.
The rhythm should be felt in four beats per measure. Kernis has used a 12/8 time signature to write the swing into the rhythm, often placing the beginning note of a new phrase on the last eighth note of a measure and then tying it over to the next. The anticipation/syncopation does not slow the forward motion as much as it produces a dance-like lilt. This is a happy piece, rich with sentimental feelings recalling early jazz. With the greatest technical challenge in measure 28, this is one of the easiest pieces Kernis has written for piano.

The composer provides clear markings for changing the pedal so as not to blur the chord changes. Care should be taken by the pianists not to change the pedal on the downbeat of measure 29 when the grace note on C-sharp is played in the right hand. In my interview with Kernis, he corrects an error in the score (downbeat of m. 35) where the pedal should be changed (Interview, p. 75, 2013). Both chords are then supposed to ring throughout the whole measure, not to be changed until the last eighth note (D sharp) is played in measure 36. The last measure (41) should be only a slight ritard, keeping in mind the previous measure marked “a Tempo.” It is important to follow the composer’s dynamic markings throughout the piece, as similar ideas played with softer dynamics are meant to hold a more sentimental meaning the second time they are heard.


In my interview with the composer, I remarked that the harmonies and phrase structure in this piece had a characteristically “Kernesque” sound. When I asked him what he thought of this, he admitted there were two influences: “Brahms, and the other is Bill Evans.” I suggested one of the Brahms shorter piano pieces from the Three Intermezzi, Op. 117, and he said “Yes, this kind of way of thinking about voicing and inner counterpoint in between inside of chords, the way the
imitation works. So it has that character for me of some of the smaller piano pieces of Brahms.” “Waltz for Debby,” by Bill Evans also shares a close similarity in the title. Kernis said this particular reference was “... just the lighter, not so chromatic jazz,” adding that he wrote it in a simpler version for his friend named Linda Hoeschler, to whom the piece is dedicated, for her birthday party. I asked the composer to play this one piece for me and he played it with no hesitation in popular style and not very “classical” sounding. He played it at the tempo as marked (a quarter note equals 84) and remarked that the piece was not easy to dance to: “They tried to dance to it ... it’s a little hard to waltz to though. Too much hemiola.” Brahms’s fondness of hemiola, a technique of metrical displacement, can be heard in many of his compositions. Kernis uses hemiola to interrupt the 3/4 dance rhythm of the waltz by switching the emphasis of groups of three to groups of two, much in the same way that Brahms used the hemiola to create metric consonance or dissonance to prepare for a cadence, as well as for rhythmic variation. For instance, in measures 26-27 and 62-62 Kernis groups the eighth notes in fours, creating two measures of 3/2.

Example 1.23 Aaron Kernis, “Linda’s Waltz,” mm. 25-27

This not only provides variety but also builds the intensity. Here, we can see multiple tenuto markings to marking the beginning of the groups of four, showing the emphasis on this grouping instead of the beat. Before the final section of the piece, Kernis uses a different type of hemiola
in measures 52-54. Here, the left hand plays in 6/8 with dotted half note chords to accompany the right hand eighth notes, which slows the underlying rhythm to calm down the final section. Also, in the same measures, we see an expanding contrary motion as a means of opening up the piano to prepare for the ending.

“Linda’s Waltz” is in the key of B major. After an introduction of twelve measures, a lilting melody begins in the soprano line on the third beat of measure 12. The melody lasts until the second beat of measure 16 and recurs through the whole piece. Kernis varies the theme by using different chord voicings. The thematic variations seen in this piece can be viewed as a double reference to Bill Evans and well as to the shorter piano works of Brahms. As in Bill Evans’s use of fourths in the melody line of “Waltz for Debbie,” Kernis also uses the fourths both harmonically and melodically.

Example 1.24 Theme from Bill Evans’ “Waltz for Debby,” mm. 1-6

The chord colors heard throughout stem from the frequent use of fourths in the harmonization of the chords. In “Linda’s Waltz,” we can observe harmonic colors that are very characteristic of Kernis’ sound. The choice of intervals in the melodic writing in this little waltz give his music a consonant sound, while his use of dissonance aids in transitioning or moving towards and away from climactic points.
Although “Linda’s Waltz” is written in a traditional waltz rhythm in 3/4, the performer should pay close attention to Kernis’s phrase structure, typically beginning on the second half of beat one or on beat three, as opposed to the first beat of the measure. The performer should stay true to the composer’s tempo marking, as playing it too slowly would detract from the overall flow of the piece. The chords from mm. 53-54 in the left hand are too large to play for most pianists as they span from minor tenths to elevenths, can be arpeggiated from the bottom upwards, paying special attention to voicing the top note, as it creates another melodic line. The major difficulty this short piece poses is in bringing out the melody consistently, as it travels through different voices while being harmonized against thick chords that do not fall easily under the hands. The performer will find it helpful to practice the melody alone, using with the same fingering he or she intends to use to ensure that the general flow of phrasing is not interrupted as one attempts to move the hand into the correct position to reach the chords. Kernis marks only one pedal marking, holding from mm. 61 to the end, and clearing at the end of the fermata. In general, the pedal should be cleared following the chord changes in the left hand. The last pedal change in measure 65 does not come until after full time is given to the fermata. If one includes the rallentando in measure 64, the last measure can be counted as equivalent to five beats in tempo.

“Morningsong and Mist (Aubade sous Brume)” (2011)

The French words in the title of this piece “(Aubade sous Brume)” translate as “dawn serenade under mist,” evoking the hazy harmonies throughout the work as well as his homage to French music.

JT: Is Scriabin an influence in this work?
AJK: Yes, but more out of that intersection between impressionistic music and Scriabin.

JT: Can you explain a little bit more?

AJK: The washes of sound in Scriabin, but that his intervals are much more, tritones are more prevalent as pivotal in the big symmetrical chords, of course there are tritones are in Debussy and Ravel as well, but it’s a very different wash, a very different overall character of chordal construction. But you know, it’s not so much coming out of Debussy and Ravel, but out of Messiaen and Scriabin and all these colors of chords.

This piece has no key signature, and is tonally ambiguous. The melody line is harmonized using different layers of sound. “It started as a more lightly articulated 6/8 rhythm, rather than something more heavy and dramatic.” In the first measure, we see a melody (B-sharp, B, F sharp, C-sharp, B) comprising the thematic material that crosses between the staves, which is accompanied by chromatically descending dyads. Here, we see a clear reference the similar type of descending dyads heard in Scriabin’s Sonata for Piano, No. 9, Op. 68, also known as “The Black Mass” sonata.

Example 1.25 Alexander Scriabin, Sonata, No. 9, Op. 69, mm. 1-5

In the second measure, this melody continues, descending into the bass clef, accompanied by triplet sixteenth notes in the right hand.
Example 1.26 Aaron Kernis, “Morningsong and Mist (Aubade sous Brume),” mm. 1-3

The triplet in the second measure also becomes thematic material. In measure 3, Kernis develops both the opening ideas using the melodic intervals and the rhythmic material. Already in measure 4, we start to see the characteristic sonority in the accompanying chords. A secondary theme appears in measure 7 in the right hand. Chords using tritones, described by Kernis as harmonic influence for the work, accompany the secondary theme. In measure 8, the secondary theme is developed, ascending into the high treble of the piano. A collapse of the bright, shimmering chords returns to the bass (m. 10) and rises back up with a ritard, using a backdrop of chords reminiscent of Scriabin. A new section begins at measure 13, with a tempo change and a new melody in the right hand marked “Poco Lento, lontano.” The mood of the whole piece darkens with a distant, longing melody in octaves, accompanied by rising chromatic chords in the left hand in measure 13.
Example 1.27 Aaron Kernis, “Morningsong and Mist (Aubade sous Brume),” mm. 11-13

This middle developmental section of the piece uses a winding chromatic voice in the right hand against a backdrop of rising chromatic “Scriabinesque” chords in the left hand, until they disappear into the mist in measure 21. At the end of this measure, a stark dynamic change occurs featuring doubled chords played forte. This section from measures 21-33 contains the climactic point of the whole piece, using a doubling between the hands.

AJK: There was a little bit of Ligeti influence in this section, but the main thing (even thought it’s double pedaled) was to clear out and focus on much more compact registers and to build it back out from there. I mean, this was all so spaced out between the hands and this theme, so it was to bring it back and build.

JT: So you didn’t have a particular vision or picture in your mind paralleling with this middle section. It’s marked forte, you’ve got these accents, and it’s very declamatory . . . really could be horns.

AJK: No, I definitely was not thinking of horns, but I could see a gauzy, hazy strings and sustained harmonies.

Kernis builds the climax (mm. 28-29) using perfect fifths in the bass, ending on a bright E-flat major chord on the downbeat of measure 30. Slowing the tempo back to Tempo 2 (Poco lento, lontano), we hear a recall of the opening melody in measure 34. The last section is from mm. 33-57. The last eighth note of measure 33 is an up-beat to the next phrase, returning to the opening
theme of measure 1, this time played using softer dynamics. In measure 35, we hear a brief reference to the secondary theme from measure 7, as well as the triplet rhythm from measure 2. Measure 36 displays the primary theme again, heard in the soprano. Measures 37-38 dramatically alter the primary theme to build using dissonant chord clusters to prepare for the arrival at measure 39, marked “Risoluto.” From measures 39-45, we see the uncertain harmonies opening up the spectrum of colors to their fullest density. This writing is reminiscent of Messiaen’s “Regard de la Vierge,” No. 4 from *Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*.

Example 1.28 Olivier Messiaen, “Regard de la Vierge,” No. 4, mm. 24-27

In measure 46, Kernis references his secondary motive from measure 7, marked “Intenso,” using a motivic contraction of chords in contrary motion. This prepares for the final statement of the opening melody in measure 51, heard five times and softly dying away in D major and ending with a chord in the treble marked “poco sforzando.”

In this work, we can see that Kernis’ affinity with the non-functional harmonies of Messiaen. In James Wilson’s essay “A Brief Survey of Olivier Messiaen’s Harmonic Practice,” he writes:

Messiaen’s development however took perhaps its biggest influence from his rare condition of synaesthesia. This is a medical condition in which the patient sees colour when hearing music. Messiaen describes the manner in which he experienced this
condition this way, “I am affected by a sort of synaesthesia, of the mind rather than of the body, which allows me, when I hear a piece of music, and also when I read it, to see internally, through the mind’s eye colours which move with the music” Messiaen placed this relationship between sound and colour above all other things, even rhythm! Messiaen in his treatise volume No. 7, names the colours of almost every chord or collection of chords (Wilson, p. 2).

Kernis has admitted to having a degree of synesthesia, and has spoken about it on more than one occasion. In a program note describing the background for his “Trio in Red” (2001), a piece for clarinet, violin, and piano, he describes his own experience with synesthesia. “At times, while composing or preparing to write, I experience various degrees of internal color perception—synesthesia—brought about by my feelings for the harmony and the sensations that chords in their myriad qualities evoke. The qualities of instrumental sound I imagine also bring about this color sensitivity, which can be subtly evoked as well by personal qualities of musicians I’m composing for” (Kernis, 2001).

In “Morningsong and Mist (Abade sous Brume),” the pianist must carefully follow the pedal changes marked by Kernis, since there are frequent chord changes. Note that the phrasing is characteristic of Kernis’ writing and does not begin on the downbeats of the measures, as seen in measure 33 where the opening melody of the piece returns with an up-beat to the next measure. The dynamics play crucial role, as do the length, volume, and range of percussiveness in attacks, which can be experimented with according the sound of the piano as well as the acoustics of the room. Although this piece uses rubato throughout, it is necessary to match the tempos when they return, so that the listener can easily recognize the cyclical nature of this piece.


The “Angel Lullaby” is Kernis’ latest solo piano work available from his publisher, having been revised in 2012. In his interview with me, Kernis said “This is actually an arrangement of another piece.” Kernis is referring to a piece from his song cycle also written in 2006 called *Two Awakenings and a Double Lullaby*, written for high soprano, violin, guitar and piano. “Angel Lullaby” lasts approximately three minutes and draws from the third piece in the
song cycle titled “Double Lullaby,” which is much longer, lasting over nine minutes. In the CD liner notes taken from the album “Awakenings: New American Chamber Music for Guitar,” Kernis explains:

*Two Awakenings and a Double Lullaby* was written in 2006 to commemorate the opening of the new Concert hall at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. This cycle of three songs is dedicated to my beloved twins, Jonah and Delphine. The work was composed with the exceptional talents of dear friends Hila Plitmann, Axel Strauss and David Tanenbaum in mind. *Double Lullaby* is a gentle, lyrical song which intertwines the soprano and violin in duet. I have placed two well-known texts alongside each other – the words in English from Engelbert Humperdinck’s *Lullaby* from *Hansel and Gretel* (which treats the word “two” like a touchstone), and “Angels Watching Over Me”, a traditional American spiritual (Kernis, 2006).

The piece is written the key of B-flat major and uses 3/4 time signature throughout. The tempo marking is a quarter equals 58. The composer arranged this piece from the first section of “Double Lullaby” movement from his *Two Awakenings and a Lullaby* (2006). The very soft opening uses a simple introduction of four measures outlines the B-flat major chord. The rhythm plays upon the alternating rocking motion of a lullaby, switching the placement of the longer notes on different beats.

Example 1.29 Aaron Kernis, “Angel Lullaby,” mm. 1-10

In the fourth measure, a lyrical melody appears in the top voice lasting through measure 26. We will see that this long melody is the thematic material for the entire work. It is harmonized
sparingly, using consonant intervals including major sixths, perfect fourths, major thirds, major seconds. Kernis uses bell-like tones in the upper register of the piano to make the atmosphere sound heavenly. Measure 29 repeats measures 1-2 and presents the thematic material a second time, the melody now with a descant melody in dotted quarters above the original, though it still sounds very much like the opening. In the last two measures of this section (49-50), we start to hear the accompaniment varied with running triplets that transition to the next section, which beginning on the third beat of measure 50. The B-flat major chord of this measure is the climactic point of the work. From here, the right hand plays descending sixteenth-note scalar figures while harmonizing the melody using fifths, minor thirds, and major sevenths, using dynamics beginning in forte and diminishing quickly to piano by measure 53. Kernis opens up the sound of the piano by expanding the space between the registers. The next four measures maintain the gentle swing of the lullaby rhythm and present new harmonic colors, still maintaining mostly consonant harmonies established early on in the piece, until the third beat of measure 57. Here, a chord using the tritone in the right hand and an arpeggiated augmented ninth in the bass appears on the third beat. Ascending octaves build crescendo to mezzo-forte and then die away. In measure 61, Kernis begins an ascent up the keyboard for five measures, with imitation at the major sixth in measures 61-62. Measure 63 continues to rise using lush chords with the loudest dynamic (forte) of the whole piece. Here, Kernis writes “rallentando,” as the dynamics fade to mezzo-piano. The effect here is of a suspension, as if the listener could pause as the notes gradually disappear into the heavens. In the final section beginning in measure 68, the “a tempo” brings us back to earth. The last six measures sway with the B-flat major chords once again, slowly rising to the treble. Kernis’s gentle, consonant harmonies would lull anyone into a peaceful sleep.
This little piece is a study in voicing and care must be taken to preserve the vocal line as it appears in different voices. The accompanying grace notes and counterpoint of the melody often times does not fall at the same time and should not interrupt the overall flow of the phrase (measures 33-36). The pianist must convey the tenderness of the swaying lullaby while giving attention to the harmonic color changes by using a subtle rubato. The overall effect should be seamless even throughout the climactic points.
CONCLUSION

Aaron Jay Kernis incorporates music of the past by using stylistic quotation, timbral quotation and homage to a particular person or place, rather than borrowing from other composers through directly quoted pitches or melodies. Although Kernis’ music encompasses a wide range of styles, he often uses harmonic colors associated with French Impressionism, Messiaen, Scriabin, Minimalism, ‘spectral music,’ ancient modes, jazz, and popular music.

Through his frequent references to music of the past he evokes feelings of earlier times, both in his own life and in the ongoing story of concert music. His music is constructed using a narrative style that moves toward and away from climactic points, taking the listener on a journey. There is literally something for everybody, including piano pieces that range from small to large, from delicate miniatures to virtuosity of the highest order. He has achieved a level of popularity in the music world by writing “beautiful” sounding music—which comes out of a vast array of influences and styles.

This research provides a starting point for further examination of pedagogical studies to help students in preparation for playing one of more of these works, as well as theoretical analysis of individual piano pieces to aid in a deeper understanding of Kernis’ music. The creation of this document has been inspiring and I look forward to further opportunities to interview living composers and understand the sources from which they have drawn.
APPENDIX

CORRESPONDENCE WITH COMPOSER

Emails from March, 2012

JT: How do you feel about the term “borrowing” as describing your music?

AJK: While it's true that many of my piano pieces are homages to styles and composers from the past, none actually borrow specific notes or phrases from other music, and I am similarly careful never to use other composer's copyrighted material. In music of the late twentieth century there can at times be a fine line between appropriating, stealing, borrowing, homage or stylistic quotation, and I try (as I know the repertoire pretty well) to be on the side of stylistic or timbral quotation as homage.

JT: I’ve read what is available about Linda Hoeschler from the internet. She must have been an outstanding person in your life. Is there a story behind this piece and Ms. Hoeschler that you would be able to share?

AJK: Yes, Linda Hoeschler is an amazing and inspiring person. She was the long-time president of the American Composers Forum in St. Paul, and has been a great patron of the arts. Various composers wrote little pieces for an anniversary party where the Hoeschlers danced a number of waltzes. Mine is a little hard to dance to!

Transcript of interview with the composer, New York, New York, April 10, 2013

JT: Before Sleep and Dreams, to me is a very closely knit work although the movements are very contrasted from each other and are very picturesque for different scenes. I love the idea of the story (that’s actually before I’d heard it and what drew me to it was the images). There seems to be themes in the music, specifically in the second movement “Play Before Lullaby,” that I think tie the whole suite together.

AJK: Yes
JT: It has specific intervals that are referenced later. What’s also amazing to me is that the central movement, “Lullaby” was written a few years earlier, yet fits in so well with the rest of the suite.

AJK: Well you hit on something that is . . .

JT: Cyclical?

AJK: It is cyclical- and there are particular intervals that recur through the entire piece.

JT: Even intervals can unite something. Like in Corigliano’s *Etude-Fantasy* where he takes intervals from a tone row and references them later. As the movements generate from the first idea, it piles into a sort of compilation. What you did with *Before Sleep [and Dreams]* is similar with referencing earlier themes, but not exactly the same thing as far as compilation, at least not until the final movement.

AJK: Right.

JT: One can take it back further and see how Schubert’s *Wanderer Fantasy* and later Ravel’s *Valse Nobles et Sentimentales* referenced themes, making it cyclical. In particular, I felt that here, in the second movement, measures 28 and 35 are thematic motives.

AJK: That’s really a primary motive of this movement, and as you know it comes back in the last movement and ties the suite together – it’s really obvious that fifths keep reappearing all over the piece.

JT: Like the fifths in measures 39-42?

AJK: Well, the 5ths are just another occurrence, turning what’s in the left hand into more of a connecting motive. You may have a brief interruption before you have a repetition of a theme. It’s not an interruptive motive, because all the other intervals for the most part in the right hand are smaller intervals (half-steps or whole-steps, a few thirds thrown in). This sort of inverts and you start having the half-steps moving down into the left hand for variety. This small, announcing kind of motive (m. 28), is simply parallel to the left hand.

JT: Well, measure 28 really makes me think of like the child in that’s the story of this whole piece, it’s like a motive or theme of the child . . . I hear this again later in the last movement.
AJK: Oh yes. It’s all over the place.

JT: And this is like a bell and it’s more like the parent calling out “It’s bed time!”

AJK: Well, there’s not so much a story to the piece but a series of tableaux that inspired it. I’ve always been kind of curious (I haven’t exactly figured this out) why at that point in my life I chose to write a children’s pieces . . . what was it about that series of images and progression of a child’s daily sleep events that seemed so necessary to reflect since I didn’t have children at that point. Over the years many pianists and parents have told me this piece mirrored their experience of having kids, but I don’t know where it came from in my life at that time.

JT: I just love to play stuff like this. It’s just, very beautiful, but it’s also modern. I really love fun, driving rhythms that are syncopated.

AJK: It’s very playful music that has that very light character.

JT: But here, I love the way this section using two against three develops [measures 50-65]. This is probably one of my favorite things to play.

AJK: Yeah, it’s very resonant. And that part is not hard to play but it is very engaging.

JT: Yeah, it’s exciting! In the second movement, I hear octatonic . . .

AJK: It’s definitely octatonic. This scale appears over and over again in my work, sometimes as a primary harmonic source and other times as a contrasting one. I used it more often in this piece as a contrast to the diatonic.

JT: So it’s a symmetrical scale, right?

AJK: It’s a completely symmetrical scale, always half-step, whole-step, whole-step, half-step. It’s exactly the same in either direction. Sometimes I’ll use half of an octatonic scale with a slightly different version of the scale for the second half.

JT: When I first heard this piece it sounded to me like Debussy. I was hearing a lot of fourths and fifths, and very impressionistic sounding harmonies. I really love Debussy.

AJK: And the last movement is really the most French, so it’s a little like the “Engulfed
Cathedral.”

JT: Yeah! How’d you do that?

AJK: Well, it was very hard to come to terms with because I kept on going back to those intervals and thinking oh, I’m ripping off Debussy, but ultimately the movement has such an open feel to it, to lay all of those parallel open triads over top of just a very warm E major . . . which is probably my favorite key, rather than E-flat. But I really kept stopping myself when I was writing, since I was so worried about sounding derivative of Debussy in particular, but ultimately my approach to the music seemed like the right direction, and really felt these ideas wrapped up the whole piece, since it brought back elements of the first and second movement at the end.

JT: Yeah, it’s great when you hear the earlier motives from the second movement. I love that. Even though your music changes rapidly sometimes, really changes character in extremes, somehow it is very seamless, and this is one of the most beautiful things to play uh honestly it’s just gorgeous. Who wouldn’t like this?

AJK: Ah, other composers! [laughing]

JT: And so . . . I wanted to ask you how you feel about people pulling out certain movements from Before Sleep and Dreams and playing them separately?

AJK: I’m actually completely fine with that in this case, and in many others. As a case where I wouldn’t prefer it: I have a violin sonata called “Two Movements (with Bells)” and the two movements are so closely knit, and so well contrast each other that I wouldn’t feel great about it being excerpted, it all works together as a unit. While Before Sleep and Dreams is also unified, its movement characters are very strongly defined and the piece is older, so often if I’m initially uncomfortable letting a piece be heard in bits and pieces, later on I may be more comfortable, if only because more time has passed.

JT: I have actually played the first two movements together and I think the “Lullaby” actually can stand alone. It’s a nice piece to program. But then they can be done in all kinds of combinations, and I think one person I’ve seen somewhere on YouTube play the last movement by itself, but . . .
AJK: That’s a little strange.

JT: Yeah

AJK: Because it doesn’t have a context and the rest of the piece gives it a context.

JT: Yeah, I wanted to kind of touch on the themes as far as how you were able to integrate this piece so well! It’s just amazing to me just how you did such contrasting pieces that are all so beautiful and unique, but yet tie them together.

AJK: One of the kind of life goals of being a composer for me is to make music that’s very well integrated. And while I say that, I’m not the kind of person (especially now) who likes to over-analyze while I’m writing a piece. I like to feel that I’m living within in a world of a piece while I’m writing it and that various connections come up during composing, that I can then look at and say “oh, wasn’t it cool that this motive that I’ve chosen here connects with this other one and provides some unity.” I did more pre-compositional work back then when I wrote this piece, than I’ve done in the last ten years. I think when I’m in the world of a particular piece, elements keep on returning throughout the course of the process to give it some sense of being joined together. It’s not as if I made charts, you know, at the beginning of the piece and said, “Here’s this theme and all its relationships.” I’m happy for people to analyze my work and see the things that are (or seem to be) unified, but I don’t make loads of charts anymore before I begin.

JT: Ok

AJK: Except harmonic charts . . .

JT: Oh?

AJK: I did a fair amount of actually thinking about particular starting keys, ending keys, flats or sharps. I think a lot about register of the piano, which movements or sections concentrate on which registers, and which - like in the last movement – opens up the whole instrument.

JT: You were just talking about themes. The “Lullaby” is quite different from the other movements.

AJK: Yes. And it was written first. And as I wrote the rest of the movements I could see how
everything else would balance with the Lullaby, without being quite as expansive, and with simpler goals.

JT: Well I just wanted to ask a couple of questions about this movement:

AJK: Sure

JT: In some of the liner notes of your CDs, you talk about Mahler . . . and Chopin, I believe.

AJK: Yeah . . .

JT: When you speak about referencing Mahler, are you talking about like the dramatic, sweeping motions in the symphonies? Or the songs?

AJK: The first element that refers to Mahler is the very simple opening and the end. The left-hand repeating motive that opens the piece is very similar to motives of rocking minor thirds in harp and the strings in “Das Lied von der Erde’s” final movement, in Songs of the Wayfarer, in general, all over Mahler, the Adagietto, etc . . .

JT: Ok. That’s what I circled because it seemed important thematically. [I point to the minor third from C to A at the bottom of the page (measures 18-19).] I mean, it’s just all over the place. You hear it later in the movement, and also in the last movement. I was hearing that as something like structurally important.

AJK: Definitely.

JT: And it’s a falling motive, even though it goes up as well as down (because it’s a lullaby), it’s a falling motive from C back down to A.

AJK: When I was writing this, I know I was definitely thinking of three layers - the middle line is static, the upper voice is rising, and the lower voice is static or moving down later, and the upper line keeps moving down- so there’s a sense of equilibrium between those three- steady but rising and falling.

JT: Yeah, that’s my marking right here [measures 18-19].

AJK: Yes. So that I was really thinking of that counterpoint of layering and of course the contrast
of the second theme, which is mostly just open harmonies and harp-like figurations.

JT: The second theme in measure 36?

AJK: Yes, these basic harp arpeggios with the single line that’s much more stepwise.

JT: This [measure 33] is very, very beautiful. It’s similar the falling motive of the minor third and I don’t know if it’s related to that at all?

AJK: Oh, completely.

JT: Okay, so it’s a kind of structural occurrence . . . it happens before this section both times and it’s very dramatic, and structurally, it seems to mean something in the piece.

AJK: A ritornello . . .

JT: I didn’t know if that had anything to do with Mahler?

AJK: Not structurally so much, but again it changes the accompanying motive into a primary motive.

JT: Yeah, I wrote on the score “Falling motive becomes.”

AJK: Yeah, you got it. You’ve spent a lot of time with this piece!

JT: It does seem to be a point of structure. And then, I don’t know if it’s important, but that descending hybrid-A-aeolian-minor scale that is in the baseline. It seems to be in A minor, but with a B-flat. The ending coda is just gorgeous.

AJK: Thank you!

JT: I love the way it harmonizes. The delay is harmonically spectacular.

AJK: And also that’s the idea, I’m just opening up all this space between the deepest notes and the highest, with essentially nothing in the middle.

JT: Can you explain further?

AJK: I think of register that way. With each instrument I write for, I think of the special
characteristic of the sound and effect of their registers. And having all that open space, I mean the resonant space in the piano, is a very powerful way to use the instrument.

JT: In the short fourth movement, “Lights Before Sleep,” it sounds very influenced by minimalism. Is there a piece or a composer that you are referencing in particular?

AJK: Well I think if this short movement were fifteen minutes or twenty minutes long, and continued in the same vein, it would be more obviously connected to minimal music, which is usually on a bigger scale and more repetitive than this. This is made up of little blocks of repetition, it uses a few simple ideas that show a debt to minimalism but not to any specific composer.

JT: I love the rhythms . . . especially the syncopations. And this dying away ending at the end of the movement where it gets more and more sparse, is one of my favorite parts of the piece. I really love the whole movement. It’s just sparkling and shimmering. It does make you think of light, of flickering lights. But it’s still within the context of the story of the movements, still very peaceful, still very like . . . you know, if you had a good childhood memory, you think of the comfort and warmth of certain family members- and those certain experiences at night like with your grandmother or your father or whoever it was and you almost have . . . I remember those times with my grandmother. The summertime was one of my favorite times of year because of the experiences I had as a child. I would get in the bed with her a take a nap and she would say “You’re a wiggle worm.” Probably because I was so small and couldn’t keep still. I was maybe three or four? And I had this feeling of butterflies in my tummy because I was so happy.

AJK: It’s wonderful how you remember that.

JT: It’s wonderful how older people can give this feeling that is very reassuring and comforting because they’re so calm and they don’t say a lot sometimes. Yeah, so this is just a wonderful piece . . . and maybe I can talk to you more about it later.

AJK: Sure! I’m very happy to hear that you enjoy the piece so much because it’s actually been (you wouldn’t believe it in a way) a piece I’ve always been insecure about. The reason I’ve been insecure about is because one of the goals of many, many composers, probably of all periods, but especially now- is to try to find materials, to try to find sounds and materials that don’t sound
like anything else. And sometimes it can become a very obsessive thing, to me sometimes it can make music be quite restricted, so one of the challenges for me is that my influences come from all periods and also from American folk music, jazz and popular music – just not all at the same time. Writing music that draws from older music has not been a specific goal for me, but that approach has been a reality of my work. Rather than trying to find a single voice I was more willing to allow my work to be like a synthesis of many elements from the past I’d hope would develop into my own personal voice. I was very concerned that other composers would think I was not working in a preferred, acceptable or appropriate way to “be” a composer in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. So for that reason I’ve been called all sorts of things from Neo-Romantic, to Neo-Minimalist, to Post-Modernist, to eclectic composer and while they’re all true, none of them is quite right. Labels are never very subtle.

JT: Right. Well, I’ve read that you refer to some of the things that you do so well, as a “battle with the past” in your writing. How do you decide what is really there, if you can’t get rid of it? At least, I think that’s what you’re talking about! I don’t think of this as so much as that type of a technique so much as . . . I think of it as more of a spiritual thing that you are doing. Composers don’t write music without meaning- to themselves . . .

AJK: Yes

JT: And if you have like a feeling that I had with my grandmother that becomes imprinted within you, it becomes a very good thing to remember.

AJK: Right

JT: I just think it’s part of normal life. It’s how we communicate.

AJK: Right. It’s how we make relationships to other things, to things along our path.

JT: I mean, “battle with the past” it’s kind of . . . I heard you refer to it like that.

AJK: I don’t think it’s so much a battle of . . .

JT: “Battle with history?” Maybe that’s what you called it, a “battle with history?”

AJK: And I think it was- because I’m always using elements that have a relationship to the past
or come directly or indirectly from other music that I then shape in my own way. But I think it’s less a battle with history than a battle with the presence of elements from the past and today . . . for what it’s worth. I think that for me, the piano and the string quartet are two of the most difficult mediums to work in. I find this since, at least up until now, (and this is getting a little easier for me recently), the weight of the repertoire from the past is so great for those mediums that it’s very hard to shake free of them. Maybe in another life, I’ll figure out how to write a kind of music that is completely non-referential to the past. But it’s not going to happen anytime soon. So I’m more becoming more comfortable with it. I embrace a holistic idea of Music – that’s how my music operates and what it comes out of.

JT: Your music is wonderful, it’s original, it’s unique, very full of life, and modern. I feel like I can just jump into it. And I’m not just speaking of these works (the piano pieces) but also of other music that you’ve written like the *Symphony in Waves*. I just really enjoy listening to your music because I think you have a very specific voice.

AJK: Thank you.

JT: If I can ask you a few more questions about the piano works, that would be great. “The Speed Limit Rag (a slow drag).” I was wondering why do you include “(a slow drag)” in the title in the “Speed Limit Rag?”

AJK: I think it was from a quote of Scott Joplin, it’s printed in many of his sheet music where, on the first page it says “Rags are not to be played fast.” It shows up over and over again after the titles of rags. It seemed clear to me that rag composers were afraid that people would not understand how the music should be played and just go kind of wild with the tempo. I think it’s also trying to put a distance between brothel music and concert rags. So given that my title implies speed, I wanted to make a very clear relationship to past rags by including, “a slow drag.” Because I think players could think “oh, I should do this at top speed. It was written with 65mph in mind and since other states have higher speed limits, I could just imagine that people would take off with this. It also might push the performers to look at its relationship to older rags.

JT: This rag is very beautiful with a cheerful swing, but still somehow sentimental and quaint. It’s a great piece to end the night with, just like the chord it ends on.
AJK: It was a lot of fun to write. I grew up with Gershwin. I got to know his music through my mother (she loved Gershwin) and so I was playing the Song Book as a teenager and lots of popular songs. The parent of this piece is the middle Gershwin Prelude.

JT: I played those too as a kid and really enjoyed them! And it’s so nice that Gershwin is considered in both worlds to be “serious.” Where you play this G7 chord here (m. 34), you change the pedal on the G7 chord and you do not change the pedal here (downbeat of m. 35)?

AJK: Oh strange, that’s a mistake…Thank you for pointing that out.

JT: Ok, I was thinking this is a tritone substitution.

AJK: One of my goals in the next couple of years is to put all these pieces into print. I’m very slow to sign off on every detail. Of course, as you saw they are available from the publisher, but I want them to appear together in a volume of all these pieces.

JK: That’s exciting!

AJK: I think my goal is to have three separate volumes: one for the three etudes, one for Before Sleep and Dreams, and then everything else.

JT: And a third volume with all of your shorter solo piano pieces? That would be absolutely wonderful.

AJK: Did you ever see “All in the Family?”

JT: Yeah . . .

AJK: David Zinman told me that it reminded him of that music.

JT: Oh funny! Well, I think there are many things in music that can remind you of things in your own past, sometimes that you aren’t even consciously aware of and it’s interesting how people hear music that’s not what the composer was thinking at all. For instance, when I started seriously listening to jazz as an adult, I couldn’t figure out why I really liked it so much, not having listened to it at all growing up like you did. Now, I believe that I was actually turned onto jazz Fred Rogers from his TV show.
AJK: Really?

JT: He was a really great pianist himself actually, but also had the jazz pianist, Johnny Costa to arrange and perform on his show, Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood.

AJK: Were you aware of all the stuff going on in Nashville? I mean, it must have been present in your background all the time.

JT: Jazz?

AJK: Country music and all the variety of stuff.

JT: Well no, actually. My immediate family was not so much into country music. I remember going over to my cousin’s house one afternoon and an episode of the TV show “Hee Haw” was playing while I sat there in horror, hoping it would end soon.

AJK: [Kernis laughs]

JT: After I grew up, I discovered that I really love singers like Hank Williams Sr., Johnny Cash, and Patsy Kline. I realized that I like much older country music, you know? I like that they were great story-tellers, just minus all the Hollywood.

AJK: I was just down to Nashville in the center of course and went from club to club and heard the symphony play.

JT: I wanted to ask you a few questions about the “Superstar Etude No. 1.” So, you never met Jerry Lee Lewis?

AJK: No, I didn’t.

JT: I think he’s still alive.

AJK: He is.

JT: I would like to play this piece for Mr. Lewis. I think he lives in Texas.

AJK: Really?

JT: Just to see what his reaction is! I wonder if he even knows about this piece and that he
inspired it. It’s really entertaining and quite hysterical. This is probably the funniest thing you’ve ever written. It just makes me want bend my whole body over backwards and play the piano with my toes.

AJK: [He laughs] People have gone really wild with this piece. I don’t know if you’ve seen the video of Gregory Brown playing it?

JT: Yes

AJK: The video’s online. I like what he does with this piece, he wears gloves and really goes wild. It’s very fast, maybe a little too fast. The camera is swirling all around the piano; it makes you dizzy.

JT: Yeah, it’s tempting to push things- just like Lewis pushed the limits on things and that’s why he was always in trouble. I mean, he was tempting the youth in the early sixties on live TV, especially the teenage girls. Although it’s funny, this first Superstar Etude is (to me) a genuine tribute to a great performer and not a slam. Are you trying to say anything in particular, or message, other than that?

AJK: Well, there was a point where I had planned to write twelve etudes with each one as an homage to a great performer. I had a whole list (although, the third etude is not really a person) I just made a list of various jazz pianists. I thought there would be an Elvis etude, a Madonna etude, there days there would be a Lady Gaga etude. But after three I felt I couldn’t do any more. I think it goes back to what I first said about Before Sleep and Dreams. There’s a thread that runs through all these piano pieces - each one is kind of an homage to a different style, or a different character, or a specific different composer/performer, and I definitely could have gone on with the etudes, but when I got to the end of three I wanted to go onto different approaches to composing. The third etude is a special piece for me.

JT: Okay

AJK: So anyway yes, they started as this idea of being dedicated to making homages to specific performers, and by the time I got to the third one, it became to be more about my parents, and the music my parents loved, and about the blues and various influences more than numbers one or two.
JT: This piece [Etude No. 1] was dedicated to the American pianist, Alan Feinberg. Did he ever perform it?

AJK: I don’t think he ever played it because he put his back out practicing.

JT: Yeah, you have to have a good amount of stretch to get your leg up on the keyboard.

AJK: And Tony De Mare and Chris O’Riley, who were the next people to play it, were both keeping in shape with body-building and Pilates so it wasn’t a “stretch.” I’ve been told that some piano departments in certain schools have been unhappy when they use their feet. Maybe now that it was part of the Cincinnati Piano Competition it’s legit.

JT: I know, right. But come on, in all spirit of the Etude . . . honestly, in all spirit! I mean, Lewis was said to have set pianos of fire, so those music departments should be grateful!

AJK: I know!! Well, it doesn’t bother me! [We both laugh] For me, it’s really funny!

JT: You’re right, it’s funny and cool at the same time! I think it’s a combination of elements that people just aren’t expecting to see on stage from a classical performer. The juxtaposition of seeing and hearing things foreign to the normal scene make it quite surprising, while it still maintains the physical difficulties and showmanship of an etude. The audiences I’ve played it for had mixed reactions- the classical folks were laughing and the rest of the general audience of music lovers treated me as though I were a bad-ass rock star. A pretty sweet deal. Basically, you’re just not expecting such a thing because you’ve crossed some styles over that you’re not supposed to.

AJK: That’s exactly why I wrote it. I thought, what a great thing. There’s a wall between performers and the audience where audience members are uncomfortable with laughing.

JT: Yeah, right.

AJK: And audiences often think that music making has to be so reverential. Lewis did that with rock-and-roll – which had been much stiffer and formal before him. He and many other groups broke down that wall.

JT: I just had a few questions about the “Superstar Etude, No. 2.” It was commissioned by
Emanuele Arculi . . .

AJK: Yes, Arculi commissioned it and premiered it.

JT: How would you say that this piece is like Thelonious Monk?

AJK: Well, it doesn’t start like Monk, but some of the elements I was thinking about (close voicings and clusters, impetuousness of character) don’t appear at the beginning. Sure, it’s impetuous because of the all the stops and starts, but once it gets going it gets more rhythmic. The Monk-ish aspects happen later on, with the left hand writing and the clusters. It’s when we get to measure 83. I always thought of this as a left-hand etude, since half of the piece really focuses on the left hand as the primary line. These harmonies are more chromatic, with a lot of whole steps, and pentatonic black-versus-white key figures and those downward runs.

JT: I hear the definite shape of melody more than anything from “Round Midnight.” How would you say that your second etude draws from Monk’s composition “Round Midnight?”

AJK: The real quote isn’t explicitly there . . . it’s more the shape is [he plays the right hand from measure 83], but then in a way you almost don’t hear it because it’s so bitonal. It’s everywhere. This is really contentious because Emanuele asked all these composers for pieces before attempting to secure the rights from the Monk estate. And so, after he asked and all the pieces were created, George Crumb wrote this thirty-minute piece I still haven’t heard, because it took so long to clear for performance.

JT: Oh?

AJK: It turned into a situation where each composer wound up dealing with the estate himself. There were pieces that were really related, that were just variations on the tune where I think the Monk estate required that they had to be called arrangements and all the royalties had to be turned over and they asked me in fact not to put “Round Midnight” or Monk’s name on the piece. So I’m glad we resolved it. What a great idea for a set of commissions, such a huge project really. Emanuele spent five or six years on it.

JT: How long did it take you to write this piece?

AJK: It took me a long time . . . about nine months. [He plays the descending sixths in the bass
These chromatic lines and higher intervals were characteristic of Monk.

JT: Higher?

AJK: Higher being ninths and sevenths. Or even bigger, like higher in number, ninths and elevenths.

JT: And he was always coloring his melodies and chords with seconds, right?

AJK: Yes.

JT: And I really love the rhythms in this piece.

AJK: For me, the syncopation gives it an extra kind of intense accent and rhythmic drive.

JT: And it’s over with in a flash, unlike your third etude.

JT: The “Ballad(e) out of the Blue(s)” is my favorite of the etudes because I love jazz and it’s my chance to jam out and play these beautiful harmonies characteristic of the blues and jazz. This piece is a lot more involved [than the first two] in different ways. It’s just a more challenging piece to understand and certainly to perform. How would you say this piece is like a Chopin Ballade?

AJK: When I was first was asked to write the piano piece, it was to be on a program of all the Ballades, actually. But ultimately it wasn’t done in that context. The request was to write a piece that formally was a Ballade. As it started to develop, I saw the elements that were related, it began to head toward the virtuosity of etude but have a more rhapsodic form. I called it Ballade not only because of the initial request but because my mother loved ballads, and the most influential elements in this piece come from singing those long lines and from the blues. So during the process of developing it I remember saying to myself, “can I move this to a more formalized direction like one of the Chopin Ballades?” and I just could not have drawn back, once it had begun to go in a certain direction. It became almost like a theme and variations, but then didn’t follow that up completely . . . I mean, it could have become a twelve-minute piece and I could have written a couple more variations after that really hard three-part section—which is almost like a three-part chorale prelude. So, using the word “Ballade” is less about what the whole work is, than what it started as.
JT: When I first wrote you about this piece, I was concerned with understanding the structure and wondering if there was a story behind it. And I was also very interested to know which jazz performers influenced you in writing this piece. I think you mentioned Gershwin of course, Art Tatum and Count Basie and . . .

AJK: And Ives . . .

JT: Ives?

AJK: Charles Ives. Not the jazz chords of course but . . .

JT: Oh, you didn’t mention that before.

AJK: But there’s things I think are very much from Ives. But the opening chords are a little closer to Messiaen, a little more out of my love of French music, but they’re like a mixture of some more clustery Messiaen-type chords and very extended jazz type harmonies. And then of course the tune is more rooted in B-flat and rooted in the blues. The middle section comes out of Oscar Peterson’s influence and thinking about people who had a special relationship with the blues as jazz pianists.

JT: I love the blues.

AJK: I do too. And this chorale prelude section here I mentioned before as a point of no return (a point where I could have gone in different directions but I didn’t) that this is another variation which is almost a mixture between a chorale prelude with these jazz elements and with this filigree-like top voice. But, I just didn’t want to go any further with it. Right around here, as I said, I could have imagined it going to a sequence of other variations and then leading toward the last climactic drawing together. And this is of course very Chopin-esque left hand. And that was really the challenge because rather than achieving an extended climactic point of arrival, which this is, it’s not long enough and instead dies down again. That then saves that last climactic moment for here . . . It delays the real climactic moment. That’s one of the tricky structural things about it, is to not make every climax seem like it’s the biggest or the most final until the last one. But it’s hard not to.

JT: It is tempting to make every one even bigger.
AJK: But then again, I wouldn’t want what I just said to rob the arrivals of intensity.

JT: This is a very climactic chord here in measure 38. I’ve named it the “Kernis chord” because it’s so characteristic of your harmonic language.

AJK: You’ve probably seen that I love these chords. Where there are a lot of white, or blacks and two whites so it’s a mixed cluster without just being all half steps. I do things like that all the time because I just love that sound. That’s my version of some chords I love in Messiaen.

JT: This piece is not easy to play because it’s not really very pianistic. The challenges lie in the combination of multiple ensembles going on at the same time and trying to decide what to bring out.

AJK: There’s a highly impressionistic background to the work and the way of hearing overlaid harmonies and use of the pedal and layers of overlapping harmonies in different registers. This is my most extended single movement piano piece, and it means a lot to me. Structurally, I think that I was starting to try to deal with a larger form in a piano piece. This was really the first go at it and it’s something I want to try to head toward again.

JT: The rhythms in this piece are challenging. I think they should sound mostly improvised . . .

AJK: And they have to feel free rather than metronomic. That’s one of the things that made this piece really hard to notate.

JT: In your notation of the piano pieces, why are some in manuscript form and some type set. The hand written scores such as Before Sleep and Dreams and the “Superstar Etude No. 1,” for me, are just easier to understand and very clear. The manuscript really fits your music very well.

AJK: Oh thanks! Well, I don’t write by hand anymore and very few people do. Computer engraved notation is far less personal but very practical . . .

JT: Well, your very personal harmonic language really shines through in this piece. It’s a particular combination of flavors you’ve caught here that I’ve not really heard in jazz except for, like you said earlier with Gershwin, but also in Kenny Kirkland.

AJK: Kenny Kirkland?
JT: Ok, so in the eighties, you had Ahmad Jamal, Chick Corea, and Kenny Kirkland for backup men. Kirkland used a particular kind of chord voicing that your harmonies remind me of.

AJK: I’ve never heard of him. I’ll have to check it out.

JT: Like in measure 104 and 107.

AJK: The sound where there’s a single note bass note (measure 107)?

JT: Yeah

AJK: That’s a fairly new kind of voicing for me, similar to one I used in “Trio in Red” from 2000, the first piece I used those kind of voicings, where, rather than filling up the clusters in the middle register, I would leave the bass as a single note. I would often hear that approach in Oscar Peterson, with a really low register and nothing in the middle, but not with these voicings.

JT: In the structure of the piece, what do you think of in the arrivals in measures 104 and 107?

AJK: This whole section is the kind of final winding down. It’s the half-step harmonies kind of collapsing on each other. And this (measures 105-106) is probably the most Ivesian bit, where you’ve got all these very bell-like chords. It’s very hard to make them sound as bell-like as Ives does when he writes these ghostly pianissimo chords in the top register and something else is going on.

JT: I was feeling the ghostly thing for sure, I just didn’t catch the Ives!

AJK: And with the constantly changing bitonal aspect of the dominant seventh stuff in the left hand, and these big cascades with these bell-like distant sounds.

JT: And the ending is a chance to rock out. I’m very attached to the whole piece.

AJK: That’s great!

JT: I think if I was going to the moon, and I had to pick one of your pieces it would be “Linda’s Waltz.”

AJK: Oh, thank you!
JT: This one seems to be a synthesis of your musical DNA. What do you think about that statement?

AJK: Should I tell you about the two influences?

JT: Sure

AJK: One is Brahms and the other, Bill Evans . . . the kind of lighter, not-so-chromatic jazz.

JT: Okay, like “Waltz for Debbie?”

AJK: Yes.

JT: And like Brahms’s Op. 117?

AJK: Yes, this kind of way of thinking about voicing and inner counterpoint in between inside of chords, the way the imitation works. So it has that character for me of some of the smaller piano pieces of Brahms.

JT: Ok. I had something I wanted to check with you about a note circled I may have learned incorrectly in measure 28 in “Linda’s Waltz.” This is to be an F-natural and not an F-sharp?

AJK: Oh right. I see why you had that question now. Yeah, it should be an F-sharp.

JT: I’d love for you to . . . could you play this piece for me?

AJK: Sure! Nobody knows this piece and this is another reason I have to get all these smaller pieces in print. A three-page piece back in the past would get published, and people would buy it. I probably should have, but I just kept waiting. [He plays the piece with no hesitation.]

JT: Gorgeous! I really love this piece!

AJK: Yeah, so Linda’s a good friend! It’s kinda hard to waltz to it though . . . too much hemiola.

JT: [I laugh]

AJK: Linda and her husband gave waltzing to it a good try. I played it in tempo for her party. They wanted to dance to it so I made a slightly simpler version.
JT: Well, this is one of those pieces that’s a bit hard to classify in a jazz, popular, or classical style.

AJK: I know what you mean.

JT: It’s sentimental, dramatic, but also very peaceful. A lot of your music is very positive . . . like the “Meditation (In Memory of John Lennon)” or the “Musica celestis.”

JT: When I got the music to “Morningsong and Mist” (2011), I noticed you had a French subtitle under the English and wondered if you speak French at all?

AJK: Just a tiny bit.

JT: Did you study French?

AJK: I tried. My wife is French Belgique.

JT: So “Aubade sous Brume” means mist or fog, a dawn serenade under the morning . . . so I was wondering why you added the French?

AJK: Well, it’s because when I started the piece, the first title that came to me was Aubade, just as a quality, a character. Morning is a word that shows up in my work a lot.

JT: Like the “Morningsongs?”

AJK: Yes, from my song cycle. I’m happy to use words that show up in my titles, but I don’t want to have any piece that’s called the same thing as another, so I wanted to differentiate this title, and so the mist actually is actually a sound that comes out the techniques and the harmonies. I just liked the sound of “morningsongs” with “mist” and the connection to my other work.

JT: Is there a tone row in this piece?

AJK: No

JT: One of my professors suggested that it sounded like the third movement from the Barber Piano Sonata?

AJK: Oh no! I’ll take a look . . .
JT: Is Scriabin and influence in this work?

AJK: Yes, but more out of that intersection between impressionistic music and Scriabin.

JT: Can you explain a little bit more?

AJK: The washes of sound in Scriabin, but that his intervals are much more, tritones are more precedent as pivotal in the big symmetrical chords, of course there are tritones in Debussy and Ravel as well, but it’s a very different wash, a very different overall character of chordal construction. But you know, it’s not so much coming out of Debussy and Ravel, but out of Messiaen and Scriabin and all these colors of chords.

JT: Yes, the shimmering effects and unearthly sounds you find here have these really gorgeous timbral effects.

AJK: Yes. What I haven’t done, and sometimes I think I should do it, but I still haven’t, (I don’t have the patience to do it), would be to sit down and classify my chords, as Messiaen did. I recognize that there are certain kinds of chords I return to over and over again. But I still don’t want to make them into a hierarchy of chords or rows of chords . . . that doesn’t really interest me.

JT: The large sweeping movements and the tempo changes are . . .

AJK: Really just rubato. It started as a more lightly articulated 6/8 rhythm, rather than something more heavy and dramatic.

JT: It has very sensual, spectacular effects. Is the middle section a reference to horns?

AJK: There was a little bit of Ligeti influence in this section, but the main thing was to clear out and focus on a more compact register and to build it back out from there. I mean, this was so spaced out between the hands and this theme, so the idea was to bring it back and build.

JT: So you didn’t have a particular vision or picture in your mind paralleling with this middle section. It’s forte and you’ve got accents and it’s very declamatory . . . really could be horns.

AJK: No, I definitely was not thinking of horns, but I could see a gauzy, hazy strings and sustained harmonies.
JT: And it just gets more compact and condenses the rhythms where it sort of starts looping. It’s really beautiful.

AJK: Yeah, thanks!

JT: I love the bass line here [m. 29] approaching the climax before the return. However, there’s one chord that ends the phrase [m. 33] that I can’t play without breaking it.

AJK: If you can’t reach it, then it’s okay to break it.

JT: Got it.

AJK: This music is so intense, it hasn’t been that long since I wrote it. Until I get it out there in print . . .

JT: Has anybody performed it?

AJK: Just Evelyne and a grad student at Yale.

JT: I really like the structure of this piece and the way that you bring the melody back.

AJK: My last five years of work have been more and more improvisational and about letting the material in front of me find its own direction. I’m very curious about the process that these piece take-- and following the process each step of the way rather than imposing a set of rules and seeing how far the ideas and shapes go – to try starting with material and see where it goes and how I need to move ideas around to be successful. It’s not as different in result as in practice.

JT: It’s [“Morningsong and Mist”] remarkably different from all your other pieces . . . a kaleidoscope of colors and lots of gorgeous timbral effects.

AJK: I’m glad that you talked to me about this piece because I’m planning the next little piece I’ll write, and in the back of my mind I’ve been thinking I should make a pairing so that piece isn’t just an orphan. I think of the Waltz [“Linda’s Waltz”] and the [“Speed Limit] Rag” together, although they don’t have to be played together, but I was trying to make a three piece group and I just haven’t come up with a third piece of three dances. This piece [“Morningsong and Mist”] almost does kind of feel like it stands on its own and I’m not going to force the next piece to fit with it. There was another French title I was thinking of for this next little piece I need to write,
so if they work as a pair I’ll put them together.

JT: You’re not talking about the “Playing Monster,” are you?

AJK: No, this is a new piece I have to write in the next couple of months. Did you ever get the “Playing Monster?”

JT: Not yet.

AJK: Oh, I’m the only one who has a copy of it, that’s why. So I should make a photocopy of it for you so you have it.

JT: Great!

AJK: So, the “Angel Lullaby” is actually an arrangement of another piece. You should know that so you can hear the original. I’ll give you a CD actually, that would be easiest.

JT: How do you feel about hearing more of your music on YouTube with, say movements taken from larger works? For instance, someone added the “Musica celestis” after the tragedy in Connecticut [Sandy Hook].

AJK: It’s a complicated question because ethically, I just wonder how this is all going to wind up for musicians. If all music is available for free, how is this going to keep going, how are we going to earn a living and how will musicians afford to make recordings at this point? When I saw the “Musica celestis” post, I was very touched that someone did that and hopefully it will enable other people to hear it. CD’s are on their way out anyway so . . . I know it will be all in the cloud but I’m still uncomfortable with giving everything away while companies like YouTube and online servers are earning millions.

JT: I prefer to buy CD’s so I can have the performer’s information, when and where it was performed, etc. I’ve bought things from CD Baby and iTunes only because it’s the fast way to do it, but the digital copy doesn’t include all the information I would like from the recording.

AJK: You have no information, nothing.

JT: But YouTube does provide exposure and that’s something every composer needs.
AJK: Yeah, I’m just not used to having a performance and asking the players beforehand if they could shoot a video of it. It’s just yet in my immediate way of thinking.

JT: I recently saw your “Perpetual Chaconne” with John Bruce Yeh playing with the Calder Quartet on YouTube and really enjoyed it! What did you think about it?

AJK: I was very happy that that showed up as a video! It’s such a good performance, a great performance.

JT: I was wondering if there are any composers you are following currently?

AJK: This is an unusual time in my life. Until 5 or 6 years ago or since my kids were born there was a point where I just became too busy between teaching and writing and everything else I had to do, so I began to go to live concerts far less frequently and stopped listening to new music as actively, except for student work at school and through the competitions that I judge every year. I wasn’t having enough head space for my work. I began to feel overwhelmed by too much musical information, so most of the music that I play in my house now is early music and Bach. It creates open space for me, and inspires me toward the highest goals - something to shoot for. I’m actively following my students and other young composer’s works but not as actively following other people my age or older.

JT: Are you familiar with any of these composers: Mason Bates, John Mackey, Carter Pann, or Steven Bryant?

AJK: John, I’ve only heard one band piece of. Mason, I know a lot. I know him quite well and he’s always sending me stuff; I’m keeping up very much with his work. Carter, it’s been really a long time.

JT: I was also wondering if there were any other composers writing today that you are aware of who have been influenced by your music?

AJK: That’s a good question. You know, I don’t have an answer to that . . . there are people that come up to me that say, I really love your music! Not other than that.

JT: Thank you so much for being so generous with your time today.
AJK: It’s been my pleasure, Joy.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Nashville, Tennessee, Joy Thurmon’s piano study began at the age of three with her uncle, James Sherrill. She received her Bachelor of Music Degree from David Lipscomb University in 2002, and her Master of Music Degree from the Florida State University in 2005. Her teachers include Read Gainsford, Leonard Mastrogiacomo, Jerome Reed, and Johanna Harris. Ms. Thurmon was awarded an accompanying assistantship during her doctoral studies.

Ms. Thurmon has performed solo and chamber recitals in the United States at Commarin, France, Arles, France, and Istanbul, Turkey. She was a finalist in the Bach International Competition at thirteen years of age. Her awards include Contemporary Chamber Music Award at the Blair School of Music, Vanderbilt University, Outstanding Performance Award at David Lipscomb University, and Scholarship Award from the Tallahassee Music Teachers Association.

Joy Thurmon resides in Tallahassee, Florida where she teaches private lessons to pianists of all ages. Many of her students have won awards at Music Teachers’ National Association competitions and performed in chamber ensembles in the Tallahassee area. Most recently, Ms. Thurmon held a summer teaching appointment as guest professor at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California.