

Brian Cherney's String Trio: Transcendent Pedagogy and the Spiritualization of Technique

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Résumé de l'article

L'auteur examine la philosophie pédagogique et compositionnelle de Brian Cherney du point de vue de l'intention transcendante. Tant dans son enseignement de la composition que dans ses propres oeuvres, Cherney insiste sur la technique, le souci du détail, une architecture formelle convaincante et le pouvoir de la musique d'exprimer les émotions et expériences humaines fondamentales. S'inspirant des concepts liés à la « nature du conscient créatif » du philosophe Henri Bergson, l'auteur constate des parallèles frappants entre les idées de Bergson et la musique de Cherney. Il lie des observations analytiques sur le *String Trio* de Cherney à l'approche pédagogique du compositeur, qui a profondément influencé l'auteur comme compositeur et comme enseignant. Le *String Trio* de Cherney présente à l'auditeur une oeuvre dans laquelle l'expression spirituelle d'une impermanence universelle se manifeste dans la musique elle-même de diverses façons qui sont illustrées et explorées au moyen d'exemples musicaux précis.

BRIAN CHERNEY'S STRING TRIO: TRANSCENDENT PEDAGOGY AND THE SPIRITUALIZATION OF TECHNIQUE

Arlan N. Schultz

My introduction to Brian Cherney as a teacher and composer was not face-to-face. I arrived at McGill University in the fall of 1988 to begin a master's degree in composition, and I did not yet know who my supervisor would be. On one wall in the main hallway of the old music building was a small, handwritten list of incoming master's and doctoral students with supervisors' names assigned to each. There I saw listed for the first time Brian Cherney's name next to mine. I am reluctant to say, I was not familiar with Cherney, nor had I heard a note of his music. To rectify this, I did what any product of my generation would do; I sought out the music library to immerse myself in the sound world of my new teacher. I will always remember placing an old LP of his String Trio on the record player for the first time. I recall becoming completely captivated by the expressive power of his music and its depth of meaning. That was the moment the composition lessons began; the String Trio was the lesson and we had not yet met.

This powerful work is located at a unique juncture in his compositional development. Written as a commission for the CBC in the summer of 1976, the work follows his Chamber Concerto for Viola and Ten Players (1975) and precedes his *Group Portrait—with Piano* for piano and woodwind quintet (1978). It is by far the most significant work from this early compositional period and solidifies many of the technical and conceptual processes he would use in later compositions—most notably musical quotations (in this case from Mahler's First and Sixth Symphonies, and quasi-quotations composed by Cherney himself), freely conceived mobile structures, drones, ascending music (expressed by extended passages of music that move from lower to higher registers), use of text (either explicitly or as a guide to performance), and silence among other features. It was also a breakthrough piece of sorts for Cherney. In 1979 the String Trio tied for first place among the "recommended" works at the International Rostrum of Composers in Paris. This prestigious honour led to radio broadcasts worldwide and assisted in solidifying his standing among Canada's

finest composers. Over the years the piece has stood the test of time and has become among his most revered works.¹

Cherney's music and his teaching have had a profound effect upon me over the years and on my concept of what music should be. It was not that his music was assigned to me as his student, but rather it seemed to surround me as a young composer. There were the recordings, of course, but there were also many performances of significant works, which I absorbed.² I was very fortunate to be confronted so early in my creative life with a pedagogue who as a composer was a supreme technician, in full command of his compositional resources and in possession of a depth of perception and integrity that resonated through every note of his scores. I wanted that core of humanity, complexity of expression, and integrity in my scores; in the intervening years, I also searched for a way to pass these qualities on to my own students.

When we did finally meet, I remember finding Cherney to be a warm-hearted, brilliant, extremely exacting, and dare I say a mystical presence. During my five years of study with him, I came to appreciate the depths of his unwavering desire to explore human emotions and experiences through compositional processes and techniques that themselves had meaning. Our lessons together stressed the importance of strong craftsmanship, rigorous attention to details, and construction of convincing formal architecture. As I progressed, I found that I was also increasingly turning to his music for examples of technical processes and as a source of inspiration. It was a revelation to me that, in his music, emotional states seemed to be treated as thematic elements, imbuing his works with a deep sense of humanity and producing a strong sense of connection with his audience. His was a music with a profound guiding *intention* to uncover a deeper reality through all means available to his formidable intelligence.

This notion of *intentionality*, which I feel is so crucial to understanding Cherney's music, is about process and genuine inquiry. In his 1934 book *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, the philosopher Henri Bergson discusses the nature of creative consciousness (Bergson 1992). Bergson's philosophical system, which includes discussions of memory, intuition, novelty, and the nature of philosophical problems (all of which concern composers intimately) is unique in that it seeks to understand the world from the point of view of the subject or object under investigation. In a sense, Bergson asks his readers to attain an absolute sympathy with the elements of the world under discussion in order to understand them better. His system demonstrates a manifest *intention* to uncover our "perception" of the way the world actually is—an honest explication of how we experience the reality before us. I raise Bergson's

¹ Cherney's work is among the most significant string trios of the twentieth century. Only Michael Finnissy in his epic String Trio from 1986 (which coincidentally is also based on a Mahler Symphony—the Ninth) and Brian Ferneyhough in his remarkable String Trio from 1995 have been able to rival Cherney's serious approach to the form and his power of expression.

² The remarkable *Shekhnah* (1988) for solo viola, the piano concerto "... *et j'entends la nuit qui chante dans les cloches*" (1990), and the extremely beautiful chamber concerto *Apparitions* (1991) for cello and fourteen players stand out among others.

work here because his approach to philosophy seems in resonance with how I hear significance mapped onto processes and technical procedures in Cherney's music. Ideas such as *impermanence*, *dissolution*, *enlightenment*, *purity of presence*, *longing*, and *searching* are evoked by strong emotional contents and mapped (in very personal ways) onto musical techniques that are woven into the fabric of his scores. This is a difficult notion to discuss (this notion of *intentionality*) and even more difficult to teach, but it is crucial in my view to understand how intention and process conspire in a composer's consciousness to form musical materials.

As I note above, ideas in Cherney's music are often expressed as evocations of emotional states. While this is not unique to composers, what is of interest here is how focused and delimited the emotional pallet becomes in Cherney's music and how intensely the connection between material and meaning develops. I will examine a few examples of correlations between state and material in an effort to unlock the tendrils of connection between his materials and their effects. Among the most significant emotional states that Cherney explores is a profound sense of sadness/loss/impermanence as experienced by one who has encountered death. Cherney has dedicated many of his works to the memory of family members or close friends who have passed away, and he has described to me the keen sense of loss he still carries with him as he moves forward in his own life. This is often explored in his music through formal articulative mechanisms (such as forms that erode or disintegrate) or through the inclusion of drones or silence. There are several other "states" that are of significance in Cherney's music. Among them are reflection/meditation (also manifested as silence or drones), humour (often exhibited as parody), connectedness/remembrance/longing (revealed through nostalgia/quotations), and spirituality (expressed through deliberate and thoughtful transitions/transformations/transfigurations of material). I would like to examine a few these concepts in relation to this most important of works—the String Trio. While less a theoretical exegesis and more a phenomenological investigation, the concepts under discussion are strikingly illustrated by this great piece of music. I have limited myself to only a very few illustrative examples, as this is an extremely rich and complex work.

In his *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, the American neurologist Antonio Damasio presents the notion of a "somatic marker" (1994). This notion proposes that every "rational" decision is made with the input of an "emotional" or somatic response (a physical reaction in the body) to the exigencies of the situation triggering the need for the decision. Thus the emotional mechanisms of the body aid in mapping out the sets of meaningful information required by the brain to make "rational" decisions. According to Damasio, this occurs whether we acknowledge it or not. It is a reflexive mechanism contrived by our evolution into modern humans. The emotional contents of a piece of music may thus be a window into the decision-making processes of the composer. This corollary may be useful in interrogating music with a high emotional connection with the listener.

Often young composers are concerned with the feeling a composition will evoke when they start a new piece. What will the emotional impact of the piece be? That is a valid concern. But it is not always a foundation strong enough upon which to build an entire work. As I discussed above, emotions are a component of a process that brings significance to a musical work. Musical materials also require that the composer adopt an attitude to be successfully projected into a musical work. This notion binds together strong decision-making, emotional contents, and the significance of one's materials. Whether or not composers are willing to admit it, all music represents the attitude of the composer to the materials he or she employs. Some will be more aware of this than others, but learning the significance of one's techniques—what “values” they express—can help one better focus the impact of one's work. As I have alluded above, a work's *intention* is formed from the background thought systems, emotions, and values that give rise to its creative genesis. A composition may utilize disparate techniques and “styles” but may be unified by the composer's *intention* to uncover some thread of meaning that winds its way through the labyrinth.

As a rudimentary example, in the often-discussed finale to Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, listeners are often puzzled by the extremely discursive nature of this movement. Why would Beethoven move from theme to theme without overt development or sense of clear connection? It is almost as though he were asking the orchestra to guide him to a more perfect expression. Indeed, when the double bass solo enters not long before the first human vocalization, we have a nearly speech-like prosody to this recitative-like passage. This “speech resemblance” or *Sprachähnlichkeit* is the last utterance we hear from the orchestra before the singers intervene and truly give voice to what has been simmering all the while—the overwhelming *longing* for human connection and “brotherhood.” It is this *intentional* connection between technical process (thematic meanderings, incomplete recitative, instrumental imitation of human speech patterns) and emotional contents (longing for connection) that could explain why such material discursions exist.

For Cherney there has always been an essential *Klang* or emotional signature associated with his musical materials—a trait inherited from his admiration of Bernd Alois Zimmermann (and very much akin to Damasio's notion of a “somatic marker”). It is through this mystical association of powerful ideas and human emotions with specific sonic events that we uncover meaning in his music. In Cherney's String Trio there appears to be a transcendent intentionality, a guiding background organizational principle that supersedes all others. In this work we are confronted with a spiritual expression of a universal impermanence. I say this because nothing about the work is permanent; it is always in a state of change or discursion and always engaged in processes that ultimately dissolve or re-form materials. The reason for the moniker “spiritual” is that the musical materials appear to have deep symbolic significance (such as meditative drones, profoundly nostalgic “quasi-quotations,” etc.), which resonates emotionally and (according to Damasio) somatically, with a very real, physical connection to our humanity.

From the beginning of the piece (figure 1), the open fifth drones in the strings (starting with a sustained A, passed from violin and cello to viola, punctuated with left-hand pizzicati on E and D, eventually becoming part of the sustained drones, etc.) constitute an emotional marker. They feel like a “tuning-up” of the ensemble and at the same time present a meditative coalescing of the sonic fabric from which the entire piece emerges. Here we also find the birth and death of figural elements in the piece. I say this because there is a clear juxtaposition within this first six bars of the piece between static musical objects (drones) and mobile objects (small figural alternations—like at bar 3 in the cello—between fifth intervals), where the mobile objects are extremely restricted from development and do not yet have a chance to bloom into full-blown figures. This first system constitutes a primordial background from which all other material is twisting, distorting, ripping, submerging, emerging, engaging, ignoring, ending, and accepting—an elemental distillation of the contents of the entire work.

Figure 1 clearly shows the gradual building of this beautifully engaging texture through the first and into the second systems. When distinctive mobile objects do appear (as the figures at the opening of the second system in the cello), they are tensile, flexible, always in slight fluctuation, containing the seeds of their own transfiguration or dissolution. It is in this second system that we see figures emerge as defined musical profiles (albeit meandering), which then become subsumed by the prevailing fifth drones halfway through this same system. This oscillation between the birth and death of figuration suggest

STRING TRIO

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Figure 1. Cherny String Trio, opening

that, in this work, musical materials are “becoming”—becoming transformed, eroded, dissolved, and remade. In support of this notion, Cherney himself states that over the course of the work the instruments themselves are purposefully transformed: the violin into a flute, the viola into a French horn, and the cello into a drum (Cherney 1983). When he says this, he is referring to the general approach to playing comportment exhibited by each instrument and its conceptual transformation over the course of the work. The violin utilizes flute-like harmonics (see the violin in figure 5 from the end of the work), the viola exhibits horn-like double-stopped passages (see the viola in the second system of figure 4), and the cello performs a continuous drum-like, repeated D to the end of the piece (see figure 5). These compositional techniques are reifications of a mystical *intentionality*—an all-pervasive guiding idea with symbolic meaning—which suffuses the piece from beginning to end.

This notion of impermanence is further expressed by the imperfect memorization of the past, a humanization (so to speak) of the past with all its attendant plasticity and imperfection. At about eight minutes into this extremely complex twenty-one-minute piece, a facsimile of a “romantic” minuet is uncovered like a found object beneath the main score (see figure 2, halfway through the first system and again halfway through the second system). There is an implication here that the score itself is impermanent, transcending time itself, and at the same time subject to its effects—it is presented quite graphically as a tear in the fabric of the score, with another piece of music hidden underneath. The quotation is followed by a visceral distortion of the musical fabric that also acts as a transformative process—subsuming the quotation back into the work. In figure 2, halfway through the second system, the sustained E^b in the viola and the D in the cello (initially part of the minuet structure) are joined by extremely dissonant pitches that cluster around them (E^b adds an F in the viola, and D adds an E^b and a G^b). This dissonance pulls the listener out of the momentary “memory” of the minuet and back into the progress of the trio. It is worth pointing out that this “quotation” in and of itself is a memory—Cherney does not use an extant piece, but rather mobilizes his own memory of what a minuet should sound like and places this into the fabric of the work (Cherney 1983).

It is this type of transformative treatment of musical material through the deliberate manipulation of processual trajectory and the covert acknowledgment of memorial plasticity that energizes both the technical and emotional fabric of the music. The quotation does not again present itself as a rip in the fabric of the score. With its dissonant absorption into the music (as described above), it resurfaces near the end of the piece as a transitional passage into the work’s complete dissolution of figural and indeed thematic material (see figure 3). The playing techniques change radically at the end of the first system, and figural elements become ghost-like and ephemeral, dissolving into the background of the piece. By the third system, the ensemble disintegrates into varying noise classes produced by assorted extended playing techniques. Figure 3 clearly traces the transition from the “assimilated” quotation to the obliteration of linear figural elements and the suppression of previously utilized thematic materials.

This musical score page, numbered 7, depicts the initial entry of a minuet into a larger composition. It features a complex arrangement of staves for various instruments, including strings and woodwinds. The notation is dense, with numerous dynamic markings such as *pp*, *f*, and *mf*, and articulation symbols like accents and slurs. A prominent feature is the use of irregular, hand-drawn shapes that enclose specific musical phrases, suggesting a process of fragmentation or 'distortion' of the original minuet melody. The score includes tempo markings like *Allegretto* and *Andante*, and various performance instructions.

Figure 2. Cherney String Trio, first appearance of the minuet and its subsequent distortion

This musical score page, numbered 12, illustrates the integration and eventual dissolution of the minuet. It shows a more integrated and complex texture with multiple staves for different instruments. The notation is highly detailed, featuring a variety of rhythmic patterns, dynamic markings, and articulation. The score includes tempo markings such as *Allegretto* and *Andante*, and performance instructions like *al tacete*. The overall structure is more intricate than in Figure 2, with a focus on the interplay between different instrumental parts and the gradual breakdown of the minuet's original form.

Figure 3. Cherney String Trio, minuet integration and subsequent dissolution

The piece never quite recovers from this moment of dissolution. We witness the breakdown of the tensions and materials that until this point have characterized the progress of the piece (linear figures, harmonic passages, fabricated quotations, dense counterpoint, etc.). The impression of organization in the work, and indeed memory, must be led back somehow to coherent expression. Just before the end of the work, Cherney brilliantly includes a mobile-form section, where performers are invited to take part in composing the work (see figure 4). Here at last there is an admission that true chance operations (albeit restrained somewhat), true momentary impermanence (inserted at the hands of the performers themselves), must be admitted into the piece for it to continue. This is an extremely discursive segment, juxtaposing melodic identities, extended techniques, frozen chords, and reminiscences of the opening drones. When the mobile ends, all we have left are shadowy, imperfect memories of what has gone before. In fact, the mobile segment acts as a kind of memory repository, dredging up recombined materials from earlier in the piece—albeit in a fluctuating context.

This mobile is subject to the whim of the performers and changeable in the next performance. The recapturing of our memory and indeed the reassertion of the trio's sonic identity (in terms of its representation of previously heard abstract counterpoint and densely conceived musical textures) never really occurs. Rather, we become lost in a dream world of nostalgic memory iconically represented in the score by the re-emergence and strikingly beautiful re-orchestration of the minuet (see figure 5). This is the moment—the end of the work—where the notion of a transcendent impermanence, perhaps even the immanence or divine transfiguration of death itself, is most palpable. It is as though we were invited into the realm of an ungraspable past (for the quotation has been altered yet again in its presentation and orchestration) and suffused with an unbearable sense of longing, and perhaps paradoxically, arrival. It is the tension between these two states that is reified by the exquisite deployment of these musical materials. This “field” of expressive potential is the result of a spiritualization of technical procedure—an acknowledgment of the deep symbolic significance of materials whose meaning transcends their surface presentation.

This mystical conception of impermanence is a primary compositional strategy throughout the work. If one returns for a moment to consider the open fifth drones found at the beginning of the piece (see figure 1, first system), we see that as the music unfolds, the trio uses this emotionally charged resource not only to introduce the work, but also to insinuate the transformation of musical perspective throughout the piece. There is a sense that the work as a whole emerges as a meditation from these drones and that lapses of attention (part of the human experience in the meditative act) are captured by perspectival shifts in material presentation. Cherney uses very specific means to trace this trajectory. Figure 6, for instance, presents the transition of background drone-like materials (presented at the beginning of the second and third systems as sustained semi-chromatic clusters) into foreground elements (articulated at the beginning of the second system, as small motivic left-hand pizzicati, and in

Figure 6. Cherney String Trio, background to middle-ground transformation

the opening of the third system, second bar, as actual figural passages).³ This example also traces the emergence, from the same drone-like material, of middle-ground materials. This is expressed at the end of both systems as close-position, textural combinations of chromatic figures (with sustained pitches), conveying an impression of movement inside a harmonic construct.

The trio is replete with examples of perspectival distortion or the free zooming in and out of musical materials to produce a multiplexing of our perception. The mobile section in figure 4, discussed above, is a strong example. Not only do we hear this as a memory repository, dredging up recombined materials from earlier in the piece, but we hear it as juxtaposition of variant musical perspectives—background harmonic drones (see figure 4, section A in the viola and cello), middle-ground light figural passages with attendant sustained harmonies (see figure 4, section C), and highly figural foreground materials (see figure 4, section B in the violin and cello and section D in the violin). The drone is not employed simply as a background element in the work; rather it is used as an all-pervasive, transformative structure—a meditation on impermanence—that makes its presence felt throughout the piece. In turn, the music itself traces the imperfect act of meditation by guiding our attention through musical wanderings.

³ The notion of background, middle-ground, and foreground levels of musical structure are well defined by music theorists, specifically in the works of Heinrich Schenker. I am proposing that this terminology be used here in the visual-art sense of perspective, where background, middle-ground, and foreground refer to perspectival layers within a painting—or in this case the orchestral expression of the material.

into octuplets while sustained pitches are slowly added. There is a clear relationship between this material and the opening drones of the piece (in essence, it is a figured drone-like passage), but more importantly, this material foreshadows the appearance of the minuet quotation by dissolving the fabric of the micropolyphonic texture into fluorescing sustained harmonics and momentary drones (see figure 7, the third system, bar 2 in the cello, then bars 3 and 4 in the viola, and finally bar 5 in the violin). The effect of this evocation is nostalgic in the extreme, since as the material more closely comes to resemble the minuet, the emotional connection with it increases. This is most certainly a composer's ploy to craftily instantiate an abstraction of the quotation into the musical structure, but perhaps more importantly, to multiplex our experience of the meditation-like passage that this transition implies.

From a pedagogical perspective, learning to clarify the intentionality of a composition is a life-long pursuit, as is the puzzling out of the appropriate techniques to use in working out the piece. This is an essential "problem" (in the scientific sense) of a piece. This is one of the great lessons Cherney's music teaches—that clear intention (partnered with integrity) is key to a work's depth of expression. His work teaches us about the "spiritualization" of technique. It ascribes a spiritual meaning to technical procedures. Not necessarily in the religious sense, though it certainly can be mystical, but rather in the philosophical sense—the sense that technique for a composer is much like technique for a yogi or any practitioner of holistic disciplines (like composers). It is a means to enlightenment and results in a more perfect realization of an inner creative impulse. Technique for the composer is as creativity to imagination, where imagination is the purview of the inner world of dreams, thoughts, and invention. Creativity is the mobilization of imagination, the physical act of harnessing the power of imagination to make something wonderful. This is my meaning when I say technique is the *doing*, not just the thinking and imagining. In Cherney's music, technique is a carrier of spiritual significance. Cherney's String Trio is a remarkable example of this spiritualization of technical processes for the purpose of mystical expression.

As I note above, my compositional training was deeply affected by my connection with this amazing music. My relationship to the String Trio is admittedly quite personal, and the work has been the accompaniment to many events throughout my creative life. As with all great works, there is some element of timelessness about this piece, and a sense that with every hearing there is something new to uncover. To conclude on a personal note, somehow the music, the composition lessons, and the man himself conspire to create an approach to compositional pedagogy that marks students' souls as well as their music. Certainly this was true for me as one of his many students. All of Cherney's students carry with them the impact of that transcendent pedagogy found in the music itself, each unique and singular. A most valuable lesson I learned from Cherney is that the soul of teaching composition, truly engaging with other artists in their formation, transcends the teacher and indeed the student. In the best instances, something rare happens where imagination, mobilized by creativity, and enabled by the dialectical world of pedagogy,

forms another artist. It is not just the weekly meetings, the contact hours, and academic hand-holding, nor really the gift of mentorship; rather it is a relationship formed from one incandescent soul to another bonded over that most mystical of arts—music.

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ABSTRACT

Brian Cherney's pedagogical and compositional philosophy is examined from the perspective of transcendent intention. Both in teaching composition and in his own works, Cherney emphasizes technique, attention to details, a convincing formal architecture, and the power of music to give expression to fundamental human emotions and experiences. Drawing upon the philosopher Henri Bergson's concepts about the "nature of creative consciousness," the author finds striking parallels between Bergson's ideas and Cherney's music. Analytical observations on Cherney's String Trio are tied to the composer's pedagogical approach, which profoundly influenced the author both as a composer and as a teacher. Cherney's String Trio confronts the listener with a work in which the spiritual expression of a universal impermanence is manifested in the music itself in various ways that are illuminated and discussed using specific musical examples.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur examine la philosophie pédagogique et compositionnelle de Brian Cherney du point de vue de l'intention transcendante. Tant dans son enseignement de la composition que dans ses propres œuvres, Cherney insiste sur la technique, le souci du détail, une architecture formelle convaincante et le pouvoir de la musique d'exprimer les émotions et expériences humaines fondamentales. S'inspirant des concepts liés à la « nature du conscient créatif » du philosophe Henri Bergson, l'auteur constate des parallèles frappants entre les idées de Bergson et la musique de Cherney. Il lie des observations analytiques sur le *String Trio* de Cherney à l'approche pédagogique du compositeur, qui a profondément influencé l'auteur comme compositeur et comme enseignant. Le *String Trio* de Cherney présente à l'auditeur une œuvre dans laquelle l'expression spirituelle d'une impermanence universelle se manifeste dans la musique

elle-même de diverses façons qui sont illustrées et explorées au moyen d'exemples musicaux précis.

BIOGRAPHY

Arlan N. Schultz is an associate professor of composition, theory, and digital audio arts at the University of Lethbridge and he is chair of the music department. His composition teachers have included Brian Ferneyhough, Roger Reynolds, Chinary Ung, Harvey Solberger, Michael Matthews, and Brian Cherney. He has won many awards both for his academic work and for his compositional activity. His music has been heard in performances and broadcasts in Canada, the United States, France, Germany, Austria, Greece, Poland, and Hungary.