

**Text to**

# **String Masks**

for voices, viola, violin, Harmonic Canon, Cloud-Chamber Bowls  
and Bass Marimba (2017)

**by Melia Watras**

**Text by Sean Harvey**

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I. Transience: 3 actors, viola, violin, Harmonic Canon and Cloud-Chamber Bowls II

II. Crossing: viola and Bass Marimba —

III. Welcome: voice, viola and Harmonic Canon

**Transience speakers' roles:**

—Actor I: Josef Gingold

—Actor II: Eugène Ysaÿe, Ginette Neveu, Arcangelo Corelli

—Actor III: William Primrose, Niccolò Paganini, Giuseppe Tartini

**Movement I, Transience, text:**

**Actor I** (Gingold):

The cold crawls up my legs.

Where am I?

Who am I?

All the names have unglued from their things.

**Actor II** (Ysaÿe):

Your name is Josef.

**Actor I** (Gingold):

Josef? And you, sir? I can't see you.

**Actor II** (Ysaÿe):

I am your friend. I've been sent to teach your last lesson.

**Actor I** (Gingold):

A teacher! I am a ... a teacher?

**Actor II** (Ysaÿe):

You taught the violin. Do you remember?

**Actor I** (Gingold):

No.

**Actor II** (Ysaÿe):

Once we toured together through Europe

and you were to play one of my sonatas.

Backstage one night, you couldn't remember a single note!

And neither could I when asked.

And we had no music. Ha!

You walked onto that stage

with nothing in your head,

but as you raised your bow, it all

flooded back at the last moment.

Maybe this will be like that.

**Actor I** (Gingold):

Who are you again?

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**Actor II** (Ysaÿe):

Two centuries ago a beautiful woman  
appeared to a blacksmith in a dream.  
She pushed him down and opened her mouth,  
and out came a flood of notes.  
When he awoke a violin hung from a nail in his workshop.  
My family passed it down through many generations  
until finally it came to me,  
and when I play, it sings that woman's song.

**Actor I** (Gingold):

Yes...yes...that's...Ysaÿe told me that story.

**Actor II** (Ysaÿe):

We must go. Death calls you to his orchestra.  
Six of the greatest before you have come to carry you home.

**Actor III** (Primrose):

Friends, let us go down together  
to play Death's one song: silence.  
It is strange there, but you will grow to love  
the quiet of this endless coda.

**Actor I** (Gingold):

You sound familiar, too, but I can't place you.

**Actor III** (Primrose):

The great Hungarian was so taken with my playing  
that he promised to construct me a concerto.  
He died before documenting its final passages,  
an explorer gone down with his ship,  
burying his discovery on the ocean floor.  
It stands today like something Rodin half-clawed out of the stone.  
But I grew slowly deaf over the years. The tones fled one by one,  
stars snuffed out by the dawn.  
And when the white noise of enough of them had departed  
only then could I hear all the unwritten bits of my Bartók concerto...  
church bells tolling without tongues.  
The silence of it was something.  
Let me play it for you.

**Actor II** (Neveu):

Soon, William, soon.  
I wish to introduce myself and pay homage.  
I was used to breaking my way through walls.  
A woman has to fight to rise so high,  
despite the whispering: "she plays like a man...she plays like a man."  
Bah! I played like an angel, and beat them all.  
A villager was found  
sawing away at my Stradivarius,  
but it was thought too old to be of value  
and no one ever saw it again.  
Come let me show you how it sounds.

**Actor III (Paganini):**

Nowhere near as good as if I were to scratch on it, Neveu.  
Rejoice in death, mortal, for the devil's own son  
has come to drag you back with him.  
You have passably mimicked my technique for long enough  
and now it is time to retire,  
a clever variation on my theme.  
In my day they claimed my strings  
were made from the guts of strangled mistresses,  
that you could hear them screaming when I played.  
When one of them snapped like a songbird's neck,  
my long spider fingers  
would pluck out a caprice on what strings remained.  
The church denied me rites when I died.  
And even now on stormy nights,  
the living say they hear my instrument  
moaning an adagio, a duet with the wind.  
Come down with me and join the devil's retinue.

**Actor II (Corelli):**

Basta, Niccolò! This bombastic posturing  
is as distasteful as your screechings in the upper reaches  
of our sublime instrument's range;  
or the prancing about in hot pants  
of one of these present day "rock stars."  
I have seen Death's clockwork reaping  
as I lay in the ground three centuries,  
watching the waves of grass pass over me  
with the relentless logic of a concerto grosso —  
and am now vindicated in treating great and small,  
the many and the one, life and death,  
as seasons that shift into and out of each other  
without being of special importance.  
In that spirit, Corelli welcomes you, sir,  
to play the dead a dance without steps.

**Actor III (Tartini):**

One side, friends, one side.  
Tartini has awoken and must speak  
before he slips back into the womb of blackness.  
Words come only slowly to me now,  
but your playing speaks  
to something within me  
that hasn't rotted completely away.  
My life...so hard to recall.  
My father pegged me for a priest. Yes!  
But I swore I would not fall into their hands  
and married a young woman instead.  
She was loved, if you could call it that, by a rather nasty cardinal.  
His sheriffs hounded me to the door  
of a monastery in Assisi,  
where I was forced to seek asylum.  
So father had his way for a time.  
But violin was the god I worshiped

and I...I prayed to it like a pagan fetish,  
drilling from dusk to dawn in a dank cell.  
When I was done, I traveled the world and proselytized.  
I forget why I bothered. You will forget too. It doesn't matter.  
Let the devil's shake pass through you,  
and at the other end, only peace.

**Actor II (Ysaÿe):**

Time to go. Let us honor you as we head  
over the river of forgetting,  
to play Persephone the one piece she requests  
as she winters under the earth,  
preparing to seed a new crop of the living in the spring.  
Can you play a year of silence in a single bow?  
Let us practice together.

**Actor I (Gingold):**

Go now? Just as it all comes back to me.  
Memory is a weak thing when you are alone.  
Nothing more than notes really, sketchy and ephemeral.  
When you remember with someone it seems so tactile.  
You fill in the blanks with their sight, their touch.  
I feel such love, it fills me with terror.  
They must cross the barren fen without me,  
and God knows what will become of them.  
Please let the memory of me linger in their ears.  
They know I loved them.

**Movement III, Welcome, text:**

**Voice (Death):**

Welcome Professor Gingold.  
How I have longed to reach my boney fingers  
across your neck, insert you into your case,  
and claim you for my collection.  
Welcome, welcome. I hear a great well of grief  
raining down from the world of the living.  
And I must tell you it feels good against my skin;  
it feels like applause.  
Mourn not, for you were mine from the start.  
You are not alone, professor.  
Look out over the subterranean chamber hall  
and see the greatest orchestra ever assembled,  
all of them picked off in a variety of ways, mundane, sudden or cruel.  
Before they died each one expanded the possible,  
dove into the open ocean of human sound and moved it outward  
with a sense of wonder worthy of the great explorers.  
Each made music something more,  
the scaffolding on which its future stands.  
Life belongs to someone else now.  
But we have a place for you here.  
Take your seat, professor, and let us sing death's only song.  
(Majestic, immaculate silence.)  
Take your seat.