

LAMENT AND LAMENT WITH GHOSTS

A COLLABORATION WITH HELEN CALLUS

by Joel Feigin

When Helen Callus arrived at the University of California, Santa Barbara, it was as if a dynamo had come—she had more energy than the rest of us put together, and she quickly built up a first-class viola studio.

This development was particularly wonderful since I have always loved the viola: it is obvious to me why Gluck said, “The viola never lies.”

It took me a while to screw up my courage to ask Helen if she would be interested in my writing for her and her studio. Fortunately she responded with enthusiasm, and our collaboration has borne fruit in two performances of new viola works—*Lament*, a virtuosic solo piece for Helen; and *Lament with Ghosts*, in which a consort of six violas is used as an accompaniment for the original solo piece, turning it into a concerto-like work. The six-violas “accompaniment” is designed to form yet a third piece, *Ghosts*, which can, like the other two, be performed as an independent work. And, in listening again to these pieces in preparation for this article, I am increasingly intrigued by an idea Helen and I have tossed around—a fourth piece in which all three versions would be played successively as one larger work.

I began these works immediately after finishing *Twelfth Night*, a very tonal and melodic opera based on Shakespeare’s comedy, which had occupied me for several years. Now I hoped to

explore very different musical possibilities, and a *Lament* seemed a natural place to start. Indeed as its title implies, these pieces are expressions of passionate, even operatic grief. The ensemble represents “ghosts,” fragments of feeling and action that lie behind the solo as its disembodied reflection, perhaps the cause of its grief.

With these ideas in mind, in my first meeting with Helen we explored a long list of extended techniques. She was very patient indeed; we went through each possibility and quickly agreed that many of them were simply ineffective. There remained some that worked very well, most of which had been explored in the first half of the twentieth century—*col legno* (if time is allowed to replace bows!), *ponticello*, various kinds of *pizzicato* and harmonics, *glissandi*, and quarter-tone trills. And, although I am not fond of over-bowing in most circumstances, it proved to be useful in some of places of extreme anguish.

Then, shyly, Helen said: “You know, what I really like are beautiful, smooth melodies.” Relieved, and confident after my experience with the opera and earlier vocal music, I said, “Oh, in that case, don’t worry—I can do that easily!”

So I was left with two very different ideas for the work: a dark lament with mysterious and strange sounds, and Helen’s desire for beautiful melodies. It was really quite a quandary! I had already jotted down a short snippet of

anguished music, beginning with *fortissimo* quadruple stops, which we agreed worked fine; but its closest approach to a melody was a slow, legato, three-note phrase that I had stolen from Bach's F Minor Three-part Invention—a dark piece if ever there was one. It might be very nice, but a melody it wasn't. So I began to think of the possibility of writing a different piece altogether, and I came up with a simple, folk-like melody in C-sharp major—almost like a spiritual—that I liked very much (ex. 1). I had no idea what it might have to do with the ideas I had previously sketched. A few weeks later, while on vacation in the Blue Ridge Mountains, I was going over my three-note melodic fragment in my head, and I found that by raising one note a half-step, it formed the beginning of a quiet A-

major melody, similar to the folk-like melodies that can be found in the lieder of Schubert and Brahms (ex. 2). Now the piece began to take shape—anguished writing, using quartertone-trills and *glissandi* to heighten the intensity, is set off by two melodic sections of the utmost simplicity.

Both the simple melodies and the anguished quartertone trills take place against a background of silence. Especially at the beginning and ending of the work, vast stretches of silence encompass the anguish: the initial quadruple stop emerges like a scream from empty space, and at the end quiet, fragmentary phrases die away until only the soloist is left, her quiet *pizzicati* fading back into the all-encompassing silence.

Example 1. Feigin, Lament, mm. 35–48.

Adagio (♩=50)
cantabile e molto espressivo

36 37 38 39 40

41 42 43 44 45

46 47 48

p *ten.* *cresc.* *harm. vibr.*

Example 2. Feigin, Lament, mm. 109–32.

Adagio ♩=50

This use of silence is, for me, the most important new aspect of the *Lament* cycle, and of course it would not have been possible without the influence of John Cage. My own background has been in a very different tradition than Cage, and I had never been particularly interested in the “happenings” that he was engaged in as I was starting to compose. But, about ten years ago I discovered the “number pieces”—his last works, in which each player is directed to play short, quiet, melodic

fragments written in fully traditional notation, beginning and ending at any point within a designated time-span, say, twenty-five seconds or so. The result is that the vast majority of the pieces consist of silence, and that the performers, having so little to do, play their short fragments with the utmost expressivity and concentration. I found the results not only extraordinarily beautiful, but also the closest expression in music to the experience of “samadhi,” or meditative concentration, at least

as I was beginning to experience it in my Zen practice. There are brief periods of time in meditation in which thoughts arise and disappear, but without leading to a *train* of thought—they are experienced against the background of silence, and whether painful or joyous, they can be felt to be “OK” somehow, because they are simply emanations from silence. Of course, *Lament* is very far from the indeterminacy of events in Cage's number pieces, and there are trains of thoughts and ideas—melodies and anguished trills that continue for pages. This is closer to my own experience that meditation is filled with many thoughts and strong emotions, the moments of concentration being few and far between.

Cage had one other related influence on the *Lament* pieces. After one of my students heard about my idea he said, “You’re aware that you’re doing ‘modular composition,’ aren’t you?” Indeed I was not—I had only a vague idea what was meant by the term, and I certainly had never dreamed of writing such a piece myself! He explained that in this form of composition, a group of independent pieces arises when the separate parts of an ensemble piece can be performed in their own right. So, apparently I was doing “modular composition” after all! For me, it is the use of silence that allows this possibility to be actualized: when there are vast lengths of silence, these silences can be filled by many very different kinds of music—and these different “musics” can thus form continuities of their own; sometimes far removed from that of the other musics around them. For example, in the solo version, the C-sharp major “spiritual” is heard on its own, in total simplicity, with vast silences between each phrase. But in the concerto-like version, *Lament with Ghosts*, the accompanying “ghosts” fill in these rests with very quiet and simple diatonic

descending scales, like sobs in Italian opera, *non-vibrato ponticello* tremolos against simple *ponticello* harmonics. But in the six-violin version, *Ghosts*, this disembodied music is heard by itself, interspersed with silences, where originally the solo violin played its “spiritual.” Thus, despite their common derivation, *Ghosts* is bound to be a quite different piece than its companions—it never uses the “spiritual” at all! And, the A-major melody never appears as such, either. What is heard is the accompaniment that in *Lament with Ghosts* turns the unaccompanied melody into a quiet chorale: *Ghosts* has the chorale without the chorale melody. Further, since in the concerto-like *Lament with Ghosts*, the solo naturally has quite extended sections all to itself, the amount of silence in *Ghosts* is far larger than in either of the other works. It is the most radical of the three works, and we haven’t been able to bring it to performance yet. Even though the actual notes are already there in *Lament with Ghosts*, the entire flow of the piece is totally different, and it needs to be learned as if it is a totally new piece, which indeed it is.

The descending “sobbing” scales I mention above are the only survival of one of my original ideas for the piece: the “ghosts” would play snippets of the violin repertory using strange, distorting techniques—the repertory itself being the “ghosts” haunting the solo player. The only remnant of this idea is at mm. 60 to 64: here the six accompanying violins play a version of the opening theme of Mozart’s G-minor violin quintet (ex. 3 and 3a). The descending half-step motive derived from Mozart then becomes the basis of the disembodied sobbing scales that have so often represented tears and grief, and which perhaps represent them in Mozart as well.

Example 3. Feigin, Ghosts, mm. 60–4.

The musical score consists of six staves, labeled Viola 1 through Viola 6. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The music is divided into measures 60, 61, 62, 63, and 64. Above the staves, performance instructions are provided: *arco* for measures 60 and 61, *pizz.* for measures 61 and 62, and *arco, pont.* for measures 62, 63, and 64. Dynamics are indicated by *ff* (fortissimo), *sf* (sforzando), *p* (piano), and *pp* (pianissimo). The score shows a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The overall texture is dense, with multiple violas playing similar parts.

Example 3a. Mozart, *String Quintet in G Minor, movt. I, Viola I, mm. 8–10.*



I wrote most of the *Lament* pieces in the summer of 2006, my first major work after *Twelfth Night*. The most challenging aspect of the project was to imagine the three different versions at once. I therefore started with what ultimately became *Lament with Ghosts*, which brings together all the elements of the cycle. When I had a fairly advanced draft, I began to focus on *Lament*, perfecting the solo part as best I could, so that Helen could start working on it.

From the beginning, I emphasized that my intention was to write a piece that, however difficult, would feel like it had been written by a violist. I have found that fine performers are often very reluctant to suggest changes, and so I have a few techniques I use to make them feel permitted to suggest changes, and thus inform me of unidiomatic passages. I always mention Brahms's playful threat to Joachim to take the Violin Concerto to a "stricter player" who would be more honest in his or her criticism—indeed, I feel that the openness of Brahms to Joachim's advice is a wonderful model for composers in relation to the performers for whom they write.

Once Helen understood my attitude, we had a great time (or a least I did!) in making some changes so that every phrase of the piece was

really idiomatic. A lot of this had to do with notation—the very first chord, as I had written it, suggested to Helen a bowing that wouldn't allow her to achieve the dramatic intensity that I intended. Eventually we worked out the bowing indications that now stand in the score. When I first heard Helen play it this way, I immediately said, "Yes! That's the sound I heard!" (See ex. 4.) Helen suggested the fingering in measures 30–33, and the bowing marks throughout have either been suggested by her or (at least) didn't give rise to complaint. I find it important to notate so as to give permission to players to play as they would if the composer wasn't present; when, eventually, a performer achieves my exact intent in a passage, I always ask "how could I have notated that so you would have done it immediately?" I have learned a tremendous amount by asking good players this question through the years. Of course, performers have different reactions to the same marks, but nevertheless, it is illuminating to ask, and I always take the advice (sometimes to the annoyance of the next player!)

Example 4. Feigin, Lament with Ghosts, mm. 1–3.

Grave ♩=50
senza misura

Allegro furioso
♩=150
martellato e staccatissimo;
choke sound

Solo Viola
ff *p* *n.* *ff* *p* *n.* *sff* *sff*

Grave ♩=50
martellato e staccatissimo;
choke sound

Allegro furioso
♩=150

Viola 1
ff ferocé *sff* *sff*

Viola 2
martellato e staccatissimo;
choke sound
ff ferocé *sff* *sff*

Viola 3
martellato e staccatissimo;
choke sound
ff ferocé *sff* *sff*

Grave ♩=50
martellato e staccatissimo;
choke sound

Allegro furioso
♩=150

Viola 4
ff ferocé *sff* *sff*

Viola 5
martellato e staccatissimo;
choke sound
ff ferocé *sff* *sff*

Viola 6
1 2 3
ff ferocé *sff* *sff*

The most illuminating exchange concerned *pizzicati*. I love the dramatic power of *fortissimo pizzicati*. I have always wanted to steal the violin *pizzicato* chord immediately before the first quiet episode of Schoenberg's String Trio

(although I haven't pulled it off yet!) But Helen pointed out that, on the viola, *pizzicati* as strong as I had imagined can pull strings out of tune. (And I remembered that in my only piece with such *pizzicati*—*Echoes from the Holocaust*, for

viola, oboe, and piano—the *pizzicato* passage is at the very end of the piece, making that danger irrelevant.) Therefore, we changed a lot of *pizzicati* to very short *fortissimo* chords, marked *martellato e staccatissimo*, and with an additional indication to choke the sound, as in measure 3 (see the previous example).

In other places, I had to encourage Helen to exaggerate some of my markings—for example, I had imagined the *ritenuto* in measure 82 as

very extreme indeed—enough so that the harmonics can be played with total confidence (ex. 5). I find that I very often have to encourage players and singers to use enough *rubato* for my music—despite including notes on performance that basically summarize romantic performance practices involving *rubato*, tempo modification, and long lines. (The best model for performance of the solo part of *Lament*, especially the anguished sections, is Maria Callas singing Verdi at his most passionate.)

Example 5. Feigin, Lament with Ghosts, mm. 81–88.

The musical score for Example 5, Feigin, Lament with Ghosts, mm. 81–88, is presented for six violas. The score is divided into four measures (81, 82, 83, 84) and includes various performance markings and dynamics.

- Solo Viola:** Starts with a *ritenuto* marking. Measure 82 features a *pp* *dolciss.* dynamic. Measure 83 includes a *harm.* marking with a natural sign (*n.*) and a triplet of notes.
- Viola 1:** Measure 82 has a *pp* *non vibr.* dynamic. Measure 83 includes a *harm.* marking with an 8va octave sign and a natural sign (*n.*). Measure 84 has a *pp* *dolciss.* dynamic.
- Viola 2:** Measure 84 has a *pp* *dolciss.* dynamic.
- Viola 4:** Measure 81 has a *pp* dynamic. Measure 82 has a *ritenuto* marking. Measure 83 includes a *harm.* marking with a natural sign (*n.*) and a triplet of notes. Measure 84 has a *pp* *dolciss.* dynamic.
- Viola 5:** Measure 81 has a *pp* dynamic. Measure 83 has a *pp* *dolciss.* dynamic.
- Viola 6:** Measure 81 has a *pp* dynamic. Measure 83 has a *pp* *dolciss.* dynamic.

Additional markings include *harm.* (harmonics) and *8va* (octave) signs, as well as *ritenuto* (ritardando) and *pp* (pianissimo) dynamics. Some measures also include *pont. ansioso* (ponticello, anxious) and *harm. modo ord.* (harmonics, normal mode) markings.

Allegro

Solo Vla.

Allegro

Vla. 1

Vla. 2

Vla. 3

harm.
(#)

pont.

pp dolciss.

p agitato

Allegro

Vla. 4

Vla. 5

Vla. 6

pont.

ppp

85 86 87 88

The aspect of the piece that Helen and I worked on the most were the silences, which are far longer and more frequent than in any of my

previous works, and which I think Helen found more challenging than the most virtuosic passages. The key here was to realize that the

music and thus the performance continues without a break through the silences—and to extend them far longer than one would at first imagine them, and to be able to stay with the tension until it is vividly palpable for the audience.

After Helen performed the premiere of *Lament* magnificently in June 2007, I set to work on refining *Lament with Ghosts* and *Ghosts* to make them ready for performance by her class the next year. I was frankly a bit nervous about this, since to express the anxiety and pain of the “ghosts” (the six accompanying violas), I used far more extended techniques than I ever had previously; I needed to go out on lots of limbs. Another very difficult matter was realizing the accompaniment so that it could stand as an independent piece—and a different piece than the other two—without any compromise in the effectiveness of *Lament with Ghosts* itself. For example, while the six accompanying violas all play the first chord of the work, the second chord is left for the soloist alone (see ex. 4). It would have been perfectly possible to have the entire ensemble play the second chord, but I found that this greatly diminishes the effectiveness of the ensemble entry in measure 15, which arrives after a very long silence. Somehow, the second chord suggested that the music had “gone somewhere” and after that long silence, it proved more dramatic for the audience to realize that, at least in *Ghosts*, the music had not gone anywhere yet, rendering the harmonic motion of the succeeding passage much more mysterious. At the same time, in *Lament with Ghosts*, having the soloist play the second chord alone served to assert his or her dominance all the more powerfully.

When the ensemble rehearsals reached the point where I could hear the piece, I was

delighted that a few changes enabled the passages I had worried about the most to sound very well. For example, I changed some *col legno* attacks to very short, accented *arco* attacks, just as with the *pizzicati* Helen and I had changed the year before. I also asked all the players to pile up their entrances on the high B in measure 4, and similarly, I asked that the players play the climatic phrase of measures 225 to 227 out of synchronization. In the spring, the entire studio performed the work with great success, and I was all the more impressed when I listened to a recording of the performance once again in preparing this article.

The *Lament* pieces are very dramatic, and Helen and I have found that lighting can enhance their effectiveness. The lighting we used, designed by the lighting-designer at UCSB, Mark Somerfield, began and ended with total darkness. The two melodic sections were lit in warmer tones than the rest of the piece, and the final fade-out was very long, Helen playing the last pizzicato notes from memory in total darkness. We also experimented with simple movement ideas: at the end of *Lament with Ghosts*, I directed the ensemble players to turn off the lights on their music stands and leave slowly and quietly as their music comes to an end. This proved very effective, and I would like to find ways to extend movement to other sections of the piece, thus providing a more organic basis for this conclusion. It would be wonderful if a stage director or choreographer could join us!

From the beginning, I hoped that the *Lament* pieces would be practical pieces for violists and their studios. The *Lament* itself is a large-scale (seventeen minute) solo work for a master player, requiring passion, dramatic projection, and great virtuosity. But the other two works are designed for the teaching studio of such a

performer. They will introduce players at various levels to contemporary techniques, but above all they are very serious pieces indeed; each, naturally, on the same large time-scale as the solo work. The six violists in the accompanying viola consort of *Lament with Ghosts* are divided into two groups: the first and fourth parts are written for advanced

students, who join the soloist to form virtuoso trios (ex. 6). The second and fifth players need less experience and the third and sixth still less. The work is unquestionably a major project for a studio, and the ensemble is sometimes quite difficult. At the same time, the most difficult sections need not be played with absolute synchronization.

Example 6. Feigin, *Lament with Ghosts*, mm. 112–14.

The musical score for Example 6, Feigin, *Lament with Ghosts*, mm. 112–14, is presented for five parts: Solo Viola, Viola 1, Viola 2, Viola 4, and Viola 5. The Solo Viola part is in treble clef and features a melodic line with dynamics *f* and *sfp molto passionato*. Viola 1 is in treble clef with dynamics *mf* and *f*, and includes a trill (*tr 1/4*). Viola 2 is in bass clef with dynamics *f* and a trill (*tr 1/4*). Viola 4 is in bass clef with dynamics *mf* and *f*, and includes a trill (*tr*). Viola 5 is in bass clef with dynamics *f* and a trill (*tr 1/4*). The score is numbered 112, 113, and 114 at the bottom of the staves.

Altogether, my collaboration with Helen Callus and her studio on these pieces was one of the most rewarding I have enjoyed with any performers. They brought all their passion and technique, not to mention a lot of sheer hard work to making this project a reality, and I am deeply grateful to them all—and to the wonderful instrument that inspired these works—the viola.

Joel Feigin (b: New York, City, 1951) is a composer whose music has been heard across the U.S. and abroad, from France and Germany to Taiwan and Korea. His latest work is a piano concerto for Yael Weiss commissioned by the Fromm Music Foundation at Harvard. A student of Nadia Boulanger at Fontainebleau and Roger Sessions at Juilliard, he currently is Professor of Composition at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

Links to sound files:

[Lament recording](#)

Helen Callus, viola

[Lament with Ghosts recording](#)

Helen Callus, solo viola

UCSB Viola Ensemble:

Kevin Bishop

Bridget Callahan

Alex Chang

Shannon McCue

Hillary Schoap

Linda Shaver