

On one of *those* Mondays, after an awkward day of work I came home and ordered Chinese takeout. Normally, you get a fortune cookie that says something like “A fruitful business venture is on the horizon” or “Love only comes to those who give it” or “You will die on July 24, 2028.” This time however, I got the strangest message. When I cracked open the cookie, all I saw was the end of a string. I tugged on it and a cord of about a foot in length was tucked inside. Just a string? Confused, I went to the kitchen to clean up the dishes. I threw away the cookie. I hate how those things taste anyway. There isn’t anything “Chinese” about them either. After the onset of a minor MSG coma I realized I forgot to throw away the string from the fortune cookie. I walked back to the dining table where it was left. It had unfurled into what looked like a parchment made of a mysterious material I had never encountered. Was it paper? No, it wouldn’t crease when folded. A sort of plastic? It had almost no weight to it at all. When I tried to roll it into a ball it would seep through my fingers like fudge and then reconstitute itself on my forearm. It has since vanished, but I’m certain that if I had dropped it on the floor it would have floated to the ceiling. I have seen many strange things, so this was not a huge surprise. After all, this is not the first time I’ve encountered an inanimate object that has expressed self-purpose. However, what gave me pause was the strange message inscribed on it. It looked like a fragment of a larger text. To the best of my recollection, it read:

...lyptic anthropologists Darius Hjortsberg and Felicia Bukiet were twins born in the year 2757 and attended the Academy of ~~CENSORED FOR YOUR ENJOYMENT~~. They were born in what was once ancient Tryboli, the first settlement on the moon of our holy mother world. May she bathe in the light of our star, may she bathe in the ancient furnace of life. Hjortsberg and Bukiet are credited with the reinstitutionalization of the field of anthropology in the late 2700’s. One of their greatest pupils, Chorzon Dirda (pronounced BLEW-men-thal) compiled sound recordings discovered in the ruins of ancient academic institutions in what was once called Étas-Unis by a large tribe of ancient Eurogyptians. Dirda’s collection of “laser discs” and “iPods” have since been remastered and we are now able to hear high-fidelity antediluvian recordings of music from the era we now refer to as the Deitigenous period of humanity. The instruments used during that time period clearly suggest that they were made of tree fibers unavailable to us now. Most species of large vegetation went into extinction following the disaster brought upon by the conflict between the warring tribes’ overlords. The existence of these leaders is disputed due to lack of physical evidence of their involvement in the tribes’ affairs. It is one of the great modern mysteries of post-apoca...

A week after I got this fortune, I was involved in a collision that left me paralyzed from the neck down. My favorite bird is the hummingbird. Due to depression and other health-related complications I passed away several months later. I now write to you from the office of my friend, Mr. Lombardo. He makes sure I can still communicate in my current one-dimensional state. He loves me. Sometimes I feel trapped, but it is for the best. Sometimes I forget who I am, but he reminds me... but sometimes, when I'm alone (even though he is always near) I tremble. Something isn't right here. The walls look in on me, yet I see no walls. I don't even know if I ever lived before - the memory of my death is just a story I repeat to myself every day. I don't know exactly what a Monday *is*. If I never died, then Mr. Lombardo has lied to me... And if that is true, then I am certain he is trying to kill me. I have no wrists to cut, no heart to be stopped, nor eyes to be gouged out, but I am sure he will find some way to continue to torture me...

Sssshh...

He is coming...

I hear his footsteps...

Please, help me...

END TRANSMISSION

Hommage to ergodic literature and the **SUBTLE** art of program notes.

This concert experience is brought to you by the letter

B

- α étude ii cordes à vide 1985 (strings into the void)
- β étude x der zauberlehrling 1993 (apprectice to the sorcerer)
- χ étude v arc-en-ciel 1985 (rainbow)
- δ étude ix vertige 1992 (vertigo)
- ε xiii. le courlis cendré 1956 from catalogue d'oiseaux (catalogue of birds)
- intermission -
- ϕ palais de mari 1986

györgy ligeti 1923 - 2006



olivier messiaen 1908 - 1992



ε



morton feldman 1926 - 1987



$\alpha \chi$



$\delta \beta$



ϕ



brendan d. nguyen, née 1983
piano (see Appendix C)

recital in partial requirement for the degree of doctor of musical arts
february sixteenth, two thousand and eleven
eight o'clock pm
conrad prebys concert hall

Extramusical identity is an abstract analogy of the reality of what it is that one experiences whilST listening to music. Certain things are only evocative if you know about it ahead of time. Debussy and Ravel's depiction of water certainly soundS like water to our western ears, but Messiaen's passage in *Le Courlis Cendré* that represents the sea surrounding the island of Ouessant, France is more like a cubist's vision of water. PICASSO IS CERTAIN. HE IS IN THIS HOUSE. HE SPEAKS TO US. The depiction of the fog as loud, heavy chords has an overtly modernist bent. It makes sense only in its relation to Messiaen's depiction of NICHT. As the earth turns, there is always a place that falls into the darkness of NICHT. The depiction of NICHT as merely the disappearance of the fog is logically correct. NICHT is an absence of JOUR - as cold is merely an absence of heat. As the sun sets on the island of Oussant, our exotic friends are still awake. (see Appendix A, right now) It is cold on the island of Oussant. PICASSO WEARS A JACKET IN FRANCE. IT IS MADE OF WOOL AND HAS TWO POCKETS. HE PULLS OUT A CANVAS AND BEGINS TO TYPE ON HIS HAND HELD COMPUTER. HE SAYS BRB THXLUVUBYEEEE. Like the birds, *we are all* happily angry and dutifully sad. (The author feels obliged to speak for you and will continue to do so.)

At this point Mr. Lombardo walks in from stage left and asks for everyone to please mind the body parts in the walkways. They are for decorative purposes and should not be touched lest they be awoken from their DEATH SLUMBER. After a long pause he shouts, "If the owner does not bring witnesses to identify the lost article, he is an evil-doer, he has traduced, and shall be put to DEATH." As he leaves the stage, his footsteps echo for what seems like an eternity. If you blink more than THRICE during the intermission there is a strong chance that you may miss Mr. Lombardo's bit, but you will hear his footsteps long into the night - perhaps for the rest of your life. He whispers to me when I play Feldman. He is sad for your loss. He is unfalsifiable.

Mari was an ancient Sumerian and Amorite city, located near the Euphrates in what is now Tell Hariri, Syria. What was once a flourishing city for thousands of years (2900 BC until 1759 BC) is now a ruin after being sacked by Hammurabi, the sixth king of Babylon. He penned The Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian law code consisting of 282 laws. It is one of the first written codes of law in recorded history. It is inscribed in stone in the Akkadian language using cuneiform script and on display at the Louvre in Paris. Feldman's work is like a late 20th century echo of a once bustling city. Like the cosmic microwave background that is all around us, remnants of the mysterious quantum fluctuation that ~~BEGAN THIS WHOLE THING~~, we hear a sonic rendition of a city that existed 4.85531 times longer than the United States of America has been a sovereign nation.

Near the center of the city of Mari was the royal palace of Zimri-Lim, a king of Mari. This palace contained more than 300 rooms. As the pianist in front of you plays, our nemesis Mr. Lombardo is escorting him through these rooms. You can hear his footsteps, still. The pianist in front of you and Mr. Lombardo have constructed each measure of the piece as one of the many rooms. Some of the extra measures account for rooms that are revisited later on in the tour of the palace. The meter of each bar refers to the abstract dimensions of each room. Some are large (3/2) like living rooms, some are small (3/16) like closets. Every time a single note is played it is because Mr. Lombardo lights a candle so he can see where he is taking me. He has to light many. Every time a chord is played it is because Mr. Lombardo is **exhaling**. After a while I get used to the smell of the candle wax and burning wick. I start to smell the cool breeze of the ancient air. It's musky and dry, like a tarp that has been covering a rusted broken down truck in a salvage yard. Sometimes I step on a broken piece of pottery. Mr. Lombardo warns me not to touch anything. I can't make out his face. When he turns around to face me, it looks as if he is still facing away. His skin has no color, or even an absence of color. His hat is pointed, ~~but I can't see the point~~. When he smiles, I only see his teeth.

In every room we pass Mr. Lombardo puts a gun to my head. And every time he makes me read from a stone slab that has on it the Code of Hammurabi. Trembling, I whisper to myself... *If anyone brings an accusation against a man, and the accused goes to the river and leaps into the river, if he sinks in the river his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river proves that the accused is not guilty, and he escapes unhurt, then he who had brought the accusation shall be put to DEATH, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser. If anyone ensnares another, putting a ban upon him, but he cannot prove it, then he that ensnared him shall be put to DEATH. If anyone brings an accusation of any crime before the elders, and does not prove what he has charged, he shall, if a captial offense is charged, be put to DEATH. If a son strikes his father, his hands shall be hewn off. If a man puts out the eye of an equal, his eye shall be put out. If the slave of a freed man strikes the body of a freed man, his ear shall be cut off. If conspirators meet in the house of a tavern-keeper, and these conspirators are not captured and delivered to the court, the tavern-keeper shall be put to DEATH.....*

After Hammurabi turned on his friend Zimri-Lim and destroyed Mari, it was inhabited sporadically by Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians. The city remained a village until the arrival of the Greeks, and vanished from history thereafter. Praise He who does not sleep. Glory to Him who does not die.

There is a version of *Vertige* and *Der Zauberlehrling* for player piano coded by Ligeti himself. On the player roll, one can see all the descending chromatic lines of *Vertige*. The first page of the score on the player roll looks like a spinning barber pole, which is a derivation of a cut umbilical cord. The sordid history of barber poles aside, the history of the human hand considering present context (see Appendix B) is likely to be more relevant.

Unlike a player piano roll, we mere humans only come with eight fingers of varying length and two thumbs. A hand is a prehensile, multi-fingered body part located at the end of an arm or forelimb of primates such as humans, chimpanzees, monkeys, and lemurs. A few other vertebrates such as the koala are often described as having either “hands” or “paws” on their front limbs. **YOU CAN’T KEEP ME HIDDEN FOREVER**. The fingertips contain some of the densest areas of nerve endings on the body, are the richest source of tactile feedback, and have the greatest positioning capability of the body; thus the sense of touch is intimately associated with hands. Like other paired organs, each hand is dominantly controlled by the opposing brain hemisphere, and thus handedness, or preferred hand choice for single-handed activities such as writing with a pen, reflects a significant individual trait.

The fact that we have hands at all is beautiful. They are the tools behind the greatest of human achievements and transgressions. They are tools for expressing intimacy, inflicting pain, supplementing speech, operating vehicles, constructing buildings, wiring explosives, firing weapons, writing letters, connecting a gymnast to her uneven bars, holding cups, planning wars, signaling for **help**, wielding knives, heavy petting (see Appendix B).

The human hand has 27 bones: the wrist accounts for eight, the palms have five, and the rest are the digital bones. ‘Some Lovers Try Positions That They Can’t Handle’ is a mnemonic device used to recall the eight bones of the wrist whilst making human anatomy fun! The articulation of the human hand is more complex and delicate than that of comparable organs in any other animal. Without this we would not be able to do things like build machines that build circuit boards, throw ninja stars, film documentaries, make protest signs that sling hate speech, make protest signs that claim political wrongdoing, drop Visine® in our eyes, roll a cigarette with one hand while playing ping pong with the other, **GET ME OFF THIS SHIP**, amputate someone else’s hand, ~~hand over cash to a prostitute~~, communicate with those who can’t hear, make shadow puppets, julienne carrots, commit murder, write literature, masturbate, scratch an itch, swim from the sharks, collect honey, drive race cars, sharpen pencils, use a rotary phone, tag sound walls by highways, build protestant churches, transplant palm trees, write the incorrect use of their, they’re or there, commit adultery, turn the pages of these program notes, learn etudes by Chopin, proliferate malware, troll the internets, use a loudspeaker.....

A player piano roll can't do these things. It has a single function and it performs this function reliably. The human hand is capable of much more, while also not as reliable. It's essentially impossible for us to play a single note the exact same way every time. In the case of music that is dense and complex, the degree of possible outcomes is dizzying; more than there are atoms in a star. I WILL FIND YOU. The player piano roll is a sheet of paper with holes in it. The human hand is imbued with a dense network of nerves connected to other parts of the body that have been in directionless evolutionary development for billions of years to adapt to conditions more numerous than we can fully grasp. (See Appendix B) The player piano roll version of any piece is like a statue. My rendition is the result of an interpretation of text, peppered with the struggle of dealing with the awkwardness of my body in relation to the piano, heavily salted by my personal history, the state of politics, the zeitgeist, my failures, lottery winnings, love affairs, the pain in my fingertips, feelings of **emptiness**, feelings of fulfillment... Without much effort, just by the sheer act of experiencing, you bear witness in the most indirect way my most private secrets.

Without lending proper respect to the human hand there would be no flurry of notes to be appreciated. Of the myriad things I chose to do with my hands, I decided to play the piano. It is impossible for me to know what you enjoy about music, but it is important to me while you sit comfortably and enjoy my work that you also don't forget the subliminal reality that seems to be suspended when you expect to be entertained. Where we are is often dictated by our actions. You decided to attend my recital this evening. Thank you. (Appendix D) But now I want you to think about your chores. How full is that laundry hamper? Your dog probably needs to be let out. You probably left the stove on this time. And your headlights. Unfortunately my jumper cables are at home. It might be time to think about going to the gym. It might also be time to ~~cancel that gym membership~~. Your FICA score has dropped below 700. That neighbor you are suspicious of really is a terrorist. Really. Your babysitter has her boyfriend in your shower. Relax – it's just a divorce. You came into this world with the guarantee that someone, somewhere on the planet wants you **dead**. Your paranoia is justified. Mr. Lombardo sends his regards. I want you to know that my feelings for you are real. It's just the impulse that isn't. I'm trapped inside these pages. Please help me. There isn't much time left.....

END TRANSMISSION

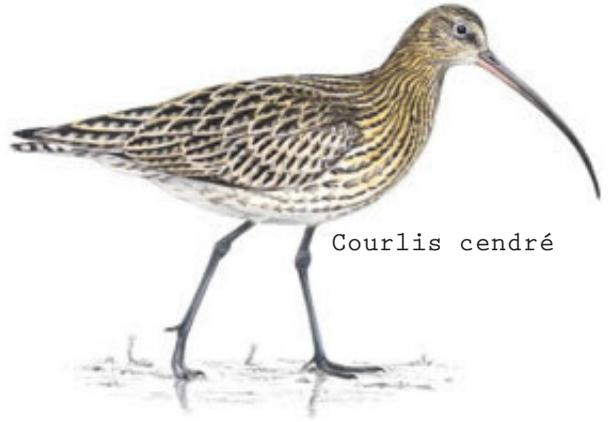
February 16, 2011

APPENDIX A

Cast Roster for “Le Courlis Cendré”

The Birds:

- Curlew
- Little ringed plover
- Black-headed gull
- Herring gull
- Common gull
- Guillemot
- Oystercatcher
- Turnstone
- Little tern
- Redshank



Courlis cendré

The Waves

The Foghorn

The Water

Night Fall and Fog



Guillemot



Little ringed plover



Black-headed gull



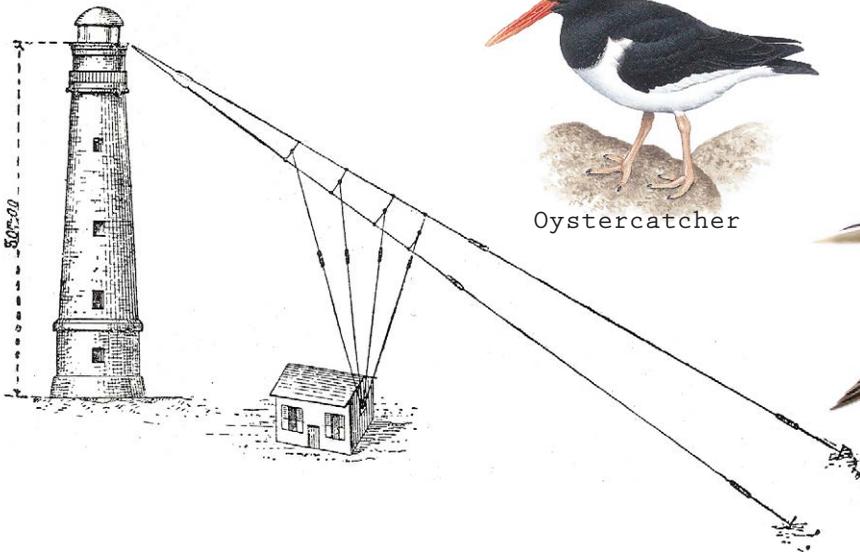
Oystercatcher



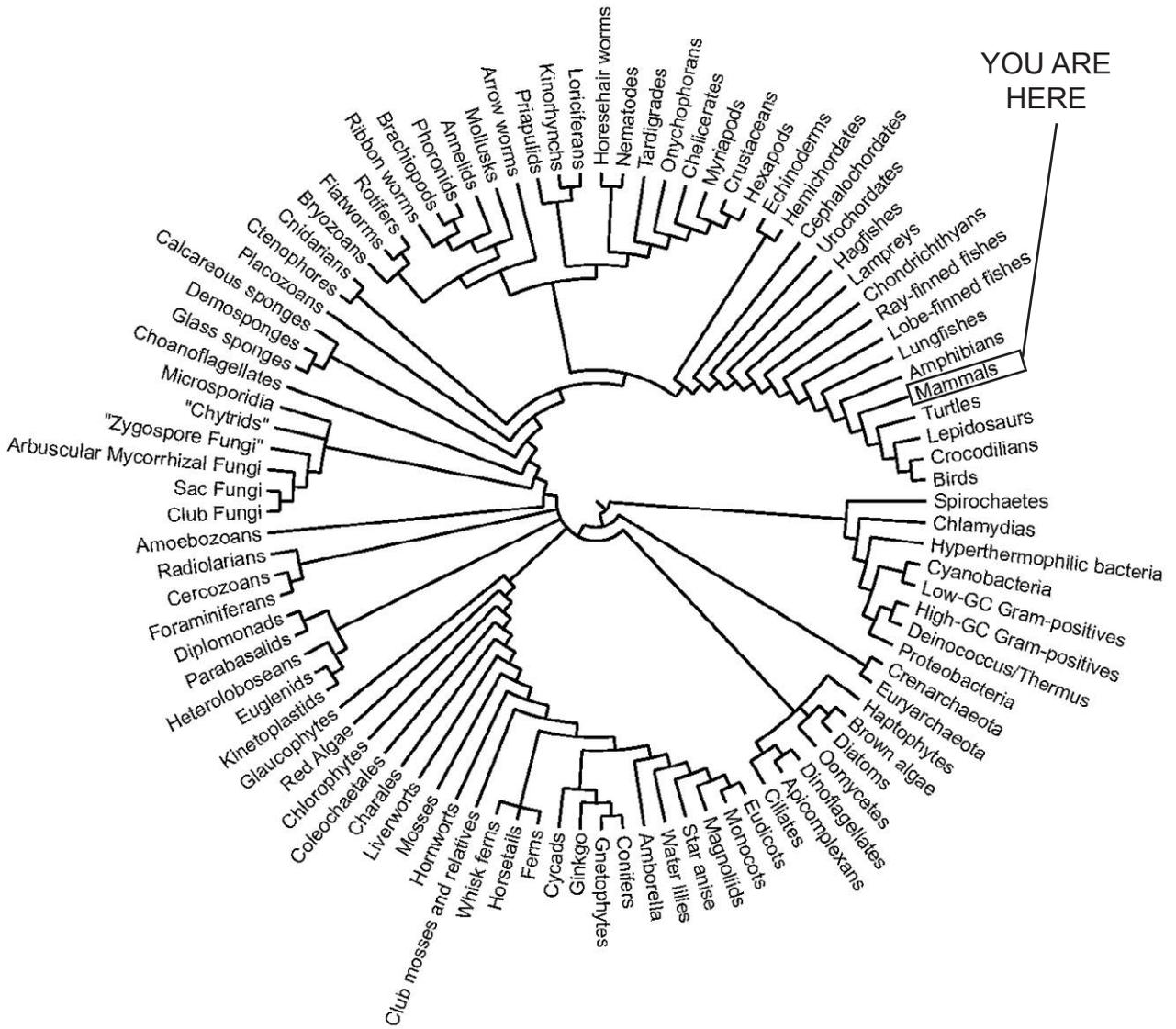
Sandwich tern



Little tern



APPENDIX B
More Contextualization



APPENDIX C
Mug Shot



APPENDIX D

Special Thanks

Aleck Karis -

for two and a half years of wonderful coaching. I hope I'm earning my keep.

Susan Narucki -

for your thoughtful support and productive discussions that have lead to such genius undertakings as 'Focus-On-Focus.'

Backstage Crew -

fo' keeping it *real*.

Leslie Leytham -

you're the best... what? No, YOU'RE the best! OH STOP... please... no YOU are! Ok, let's hang up on the count of three... 1... 2..... you there?

Ian Carrol and Wojtek Blecharz -

can I bum one after the concert?

The Bartleys -

who needs friends when there's a family that shares your love of food, wine, and condo shopping.

My Cousins -

the only thing keeping us from calling one another siblings are but a handful of genes.

Mom and Dad -

the more I grow up, the more I realize I'm like you. that's a good thing.

My Parole Officer -

see you tomorrow morning.

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brendan d. nguyen