Michael Kieran Harvey Collection



WAR SONATAS

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WAR SONATAS

composed and performed by Michael Kieran Harvey

1 The Ire of Irina *0'46*

Piano Sonata #8 "P. Singer"

2 Allegro giusto *18'33*
3 Onirico *2'18*
4 Ritmico *4'39*

5 Word War I: Not All Singers Sing from the Same Song-Book *2'55*

Piano Sonata #9 "Sonata da Caemmerer"

6 Zappaesque *11'25*
7 Rubato *4'00*
8 Giusto Tempo *7'28*

9 Word War II: The *Saṃgīta* of Arjuna *1'33*

Sonata #10 "Riding with Death"

10 I - Hallucinations 1-8 *15'12*
11 II - Hammered, relentless *6'47*

12 Word War III: Caught in the Cross-Hairs *1'35*

POETRY written and read by Arjun von Caemmerer

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These three "war" sonatas were composed during the escalation of the 2014 war on Ukraine by Russia beginning on 24 February 2022, the largest attack on a European country since World War II. Many composers have written large works as a response to the insanity of war wielded by aggressive maniacs, a formidable example for piano being Wolpe's *Battlepiece* of 1943-4. Towards the end of completion of these sonatas war in the Middle East again flared. Three entitities helped me negotiate this period and the deep feelings of anger, despair and sorrow I felt for the innocent victims: Peter Singer's writings, my friend and collaborator on many projects Dr Arjun von Caemmerer, and my return to the study of philosophy.

Piano Sonata #8: "P.Singer"

(War Sonata #1)

In 2021 Australian bioethicist and philosopher Peter Singer was awarded the Berggruen Prize for Philosophy and Culture, the equivalent of the Nobel Prize, for promoting his idea of effective altruism. Singer has campaigned against the Vietnam war, founded the Victorian Greens, and is an atheist and prominent activist for the rights of non-human animals. His last human standing thought experiment offers an alternative ethics for the non-human world. *Sonata #8: "P. Singer"* is a homage based on the letters of his name expressed as musical notes. His name in retrograde is "regnis", Latin for "kingdoms", which appears at significant moments through the sonata, the reference being to "death's other kingdom" from T.S. Eliot's The Hollow Men. In keeping with Singer's concern for nature the prime series to 41 provides a background web for the work which is in three broad sections.

Piano Sonata #9: "Sonata da Caemmerer"

(War Sonata #2)

The pun in the title refers to my friend Arjun's regular visits to my studio (or room, "camera" in Italian) over many years where we would plan and implement our next collaborations. The Sonata da camera was a 17th century secular dance suite popularised by Corelli, so the use of ostinato and jazz harmonies are prevalent features of the Sonata da Caemmerer. This somewhat biographical sonata also reflects the animated discussions we would have over the Covid pandemic, climate catastrophe and the Ukraine War amongst many other subjects, and weekly bewilderment at the actions of humans. The spirit of one of our musical enthusiasms, Frank Zappa, permeates the score, as does his arch rival the Indophile John McLaughlin, the prime number associations linking both to Arjun's distinguished mathematical pedigree and sardonic sense of humour. *Sonata #9* is in three main sections.

Piano Sonata #10: "Riding with Death"

(War Sonata #3)

Autonomous AI is on the horizon, driven by war as much as medicine. In this sonata the intuitive hallucinations in movement I are metaphors for the human sense of reality, obliterated by AI in movement II. Unlike other human self-destruction technologies like nuclear weapons, autonomous AI is unlikely to tolerate an off switch in the hands of its creators. It seems it is a technology, to paraphrase Dennett, currently on the horizon and best kept that way.

Michael Kieran Harvey, 2023

the war sonatas / warˢ thanatos

Michael Kieran Harvey's singular and unified triptych composition, **War Sonatas** *(Piano Sonata #8, P.Singer; #9, Sonata da Caemmerer; #10, Riding with Death)* is a major new work. It was composed during the escalation of the 2014 war on Ukraine by Russia, beginning on 24th February 2022, and completed in October 2023, around the time the war in the Middle East flared. And which continues...Forged in this war-walled cauldron, this 'response to the insanity of war' was premiered by the composer at Melbourne's **The Eleventh Hour** on 7 July 2024, in a stunning, compelling and disquieting performance, about which reviewer Julie McErlain wrote: *a tense, dramatic, hypnotic and deeply confronting musical experience*.

The three parts of this composition–conceived as one, gestated together, and delivered simultaneously–are clearly intended to form an organic and unitary triune, amply evident aurally. Musicologist Dr Ian Parsons writes: *The three Sonatas, despite the different initial ideas that inform their composition, belong very much together as a single triptych, with an overall unified aesthetic and theme.* On the Australian Music Centre website each of the Sonatas is noted as being 'complemented/ succeeded' by the other two, and each Sonata's score bears an identical end-stamp ' 'Nalya 1/10/2023', the location and date of their completion. ['Nalya' is the farmhouse in Ouse, Tasmania where this work was written - one of its meanings is, apparently, 'Circle of Trees'; to this now can perhaps be added 'Circle of Threes']. This trinity carries the shadows and resonance of both previous world wars, coupled with an ominous portent of the possible next one. Specifically, in *Piano Sonata #8, P. Singer,* Harvey refers to TS Eliot's **The Hollow Men,** whose subject matter concerns the aftermath of WW1; he also cites Stefan Wolpe's *Battlepiece* of 1943/44 as significant to the overall composition, and particularly relevant to the transmutation of his own sympathetic emotional responses, the deep feelings of anger, despair and sorrow at the needless widescale suffering perpetrated by 'aggressive maniacs'.

This composition cannot be viewed outside the context of the composer's other recent works. Like Frank Zappa (another one of the clear and stated influences on this piece, especially within the central section, *Sonata da Caemmerer)* Michael Kieran Harvey is consistent: he sees and comments, fearlessly, on 'the larger picture' - environmental, political, technological, philosophical, musical, humanistic - and he does not resile from articulating, through his compositions and his interviews, his own uncompromising stances. Harvey's recent compositional output is diverse, by turns, celebratory, for example, *Portrait of Bob Brown* (2016), *Astro Labe, Coeur de Lion* (2018) a celebration of Astro 'Funk Knuckle' Labe, *Piano Sonata, #5 Greta* (a homage to Greta Thunberg, 2020); or, can serve as prescient warning, such as in *The Green Brain Cycle* (on AI, 2018), or *Gestalt Climate* (on climate catastrophe, 2019); or, as stringent (and bitingly humorous) critique, evidenced by *Tubby the President* (2018),

Catalogue des Errances Bibliques (2021) and *Death Cap Mushroom* (2021). Leavening these, however, are other works that have been composed in gratitude, friendship, and sympathy, and which, inevitably, are also informed by the composer's wide philosophical learnings and leanings, such as *Patañjali* (2015), based on Patañjali's **Yoga-Sūtra,** and *The Sparrow and The Mead Hall*, (Piano Sonata #7, 2021, dedicated to Mary Pridmore), a piece which engages with a maxim by Epicurus.

Harvey's compositions typically intertwine several disparate but complementary strands, making them complex works, resistant to simple reduction. The **War Sonatas** simultaneously embrace many of the composer's enduring and recurring preoccupations, and in this piece include (but are not limited to) Stefan Wolpe's WWII composition *Battlepiece*; the defiant, scornful and furious words, an epigraph on an epitaph, that Irina Tsybaneva placed on Putin's parents' grave (leading to her incarceration); whimsical and serendipitous word play; the post-WWI and pre-WWII poetry of TS Eliot; Leonardo Da Vinci, particularly his *Illustration for his thoughts on Virtue and Envy,* especially as this then informs Jean-Michael Basquiat's painting *Riding with Death*, the sub-title of *Sonata #10;* philosophers Peter Singer (for his anti-Vietnam War stance, his atheism and his activism) and Daniel Dennett (for his ideas on consciousness and his interrogation of the concept of free will); other composers, here particularly Frank Zappa, John McLaughlin, and Arcangelo Corelli; and, of course, mathematics, carrying another of Harvey's enduring preoccupations (and compositional fodder), the potent and generative prime number series.

The first part of the **War Sonatas**, *Sonata #8, P.Singer,* is dedicated to Australian bioethicist and philosopher Peter Singer. Harvey ingeniously uses the retrograde of 'Singer', 'regnis' (kingdoms) to create a homage to Singer by utilising these letters as musical notes. These make their appearance at significant moments throughout this sonata. Ian Parsons writes:

Each Sonata has its own central compositional idea. The eighth sonata, dedicated to bio-ethicist Peter Singer uses the letters of his surname to form a pitch row that is used throughout the piece: both in forwards and retrograde forms, drawing on but greatly elaborating and often departing from, principles of serialism. To this he adds structural ideas that draw on the prime number series [to 41] as a nod to Singer's passion for the preservation of nature. The most extraordinary aspects of Michael's approach is his manner of working with these foundational materials in ways that do not lead to the cold cerebral music that can sometimes evolve from these sorts of systems, but a work that has incredible energy and vitality, through his use of driving rhythms, ferocious tempi, and harmonic sequences that seek, but defiantly resist, straightforward resolution.

Harvey points out that 'kingdoms' refers to TS Eliot's phrase 'death's other Kingdom' from his 1925 poem **The Hollow Men.** This poem's title, indicating the folly of the war-impulse and its human cost, is bracketed between Eliot's **The Waste Land** (1922) and **Ash-Wednesday** (1930), so is sandwiched between 'waste' and 'ash', the cost and detritus, the other-consequences of war. Thus, another trinity is implied, here of these three consecutive war-inflected poems, reinforced by the infamous thrice-intoned line, apposite to these *War Sonatas,* that concludes **The Hollow Men**:

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang, but a whimper.

The second part of the **War Sonatas**, *Sonata #9, Sonata da Caemmerer,* also makes adept use of word play (on Corelli's 'Sonata da camera'), and is essentially a homage to friendship, to comrades in arms, to *camaraderie* (I am tempted here to write caemmeraderie). Harvey also composed *48 Fugues for Frank* (2010), his unmatched homage to Zappa, in such a spirit of kinship, coincidentally matching Zappa's technique of cross-referencing compositions that are separated in time. The music in this section channels the combined musical spirits of composers Frank Zappa and *his arch rival Indophile* John Mclaughlin. Zappa's ambivalent comment on McLaughlin: *you've got to admire a guy who has learned to operate a guitar like a machine gun* (Zappa,1978) points backwards, perhaps serendipitously, to the machine-gun like elements that streak and strafe though the first part of Sonata #8. Ian Parsons notes:

The ninth Sonata ('Sonata da Caemmerer') draws on its dedicatee's name to forge a cheeky reference to the Corelli 'Sonata da Camera', a 17th century set of dance pieces. But

here that concept is then transformed through use of wild pulsating rhythms and skilful references to jazz rhythms that are energetically developed and extended into rapidly-changing lines of complex time signatures and rhythms and counter rhythms, all notated precisely in the score, despite the sense of wild rebellion they produce in performance. Again, prime numbers also play an important role in both micro- and macro-structural formations.

The third part of the **War Sonatas**, *Sonata #10, Riding with Death*, like his earlier *The Green Brain Cycle,* returns to Harvey's abiding foreboding regarding AI. Significantly, this composition was completed before the widespread use of AI-drone technology was adopted (and which is now being continually adapted) in the Ukraine-Russia conflict. About this sonata Harvey writes: *Autonomous AI is on the horizon, driven by war as much as medicine. In this sonata the intuitive hallucinations in movement 1 are metaphors for the human sense of reality, obliterated by AI in movement II. Unlike other human self-destruction technologies like nuclear weapons, autonomous AI is unlikely to tolerate an off switch in the hands of its creators. It seems it is a technology, to paraphrase Dennett, currently on the horizon and best kept that way.* What to make of Havey's title and the reproduction of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Illustration for his thoughts on Virtue and Envy* in the printed score? The sonata's title refers to Jean-Michael Basquiat's painting *Riding with Death* (1988). How to decipher this combination? Da Vinci's illustration portrays 'Envy' riding upon a humanoid, horse-like (hearse-like?) 'Death'. In his Notebooks he considers 'Envy' the born and sworn enemy of 'Virtue': *No sooner is Virtue born than Envy comes into the world to attack it; and sooner will there be a body without a shadow than Virtue without Envy.* Envy rides on Death *because Envy, never dying, never tires of ruling.* Like AI, which uses an existent template to leapfrog off, Basquait's painting is clearly leap-forged from Da Vinci's illustration. The modifications are significant: the female figure astride the skeleton has become androgynous, brown (? a self-reference) and the blacked-out eyes of the skeletal carriage-creature are transformed into a pure concrete poetry representation for the finality of death, bearing the symbol for infinity, ∞, crossed with the letter ***x***. I think Harvey's choice of this title for the third part of his work is significant also in the light of the knowledge that, shortly after completing this work, Basquait committed suicide. Reading all of this together, my conclusion is that Harvey refers to these images because he sees the development of AI *(which never tires of ruling)* as akin to our seemingly collective suicide-impulse, where our foolishness in allowing AI to go unchecked, especially in the realm of weapons technology, is likely to be instrumental in our final undoing. Ian Parsons comments:

The tenth Sonata deals with the issue of AI, and its growing role in shaping human consciousness and dreams. Its first movement conjures up hallucinatory images through impressionistic flows and timbres, all very much in the more complex tonalities of the 21st century, but these then are sabotaged by unrelenting, constantly forward-pushing, ostinato rhythmic and chordal density in the final movement, leaving the dreamings, and the music itself, breathless.

There are parallels between Harvey's three **War Sonatas** and TS Eliot's **Four Quartets** (1935-1942). Both are works in which each part can, and does, stand independently, but read as a unitary whole, become vaster than the sum of their individual parts. That this is intentional here is clear with the cross-referencing between the different Sonatas and their movements: for example, as noted earlier the barrage of machine-gun like exchanges that pepper the beginning of *Sonata #8;* these reiterate, re-echo, are AI re-machined in the concluding section of *Sonata #10,* recalling Eliot's words from **Four Quartets**: *In my beginning is my end… In my end is my beginning.* Similarly, resonances occur between the 'Onirico' (fantastic, unreal, dream-like visions) of *Sonata #8* and the 'Hallucinations' of *Sonata #10;* likewise, between the several 'Permutations' which end *Sonata #8* and the 'Hallucinations' which start *Sonata #10.* Further, there is a significant correspondence between the central argument of *Sonata #10,* Human vs Machine, with the contrasting compositional processes of Zappa and McLaughlin hinted at in *Sonata #9,* Zappa here a cipher for the more associative, dream-like, unplanned; and McLaughlin typifying an approach that is more machine-like, controlled, calculated. The musical result amplifies both facets synergistically, moving beyond this apparent dichotomy.

As Ian Parsons concludes:

The three War Sonatas show Michael Kieran Harvey's incredible virtuosity and sense of creative invention for which he has been widely recognised both as a composer and as a pianist. The Sonatas use particularly inventive compositional devices in the ways in which they draw on innovative thematic ideas that then develop into full-scale works of rich rhythmic, harmonic, textural, and dynamic material.

One of the especially astonishing aspects of these three sonatas is the way they all draw on different initial ideas but then build into sonatas that have a strong sense of belonging together. They draw their different thematic bases together as strong and articulate protests against the savagery of war in ways that totally eschew the more sentimental and obvious tropes that can still shape a lot of anti-war music being composed today.

This is through Michael's trademark innovative use of rhythm and harmony, along with his capacity to write and perform music of fiendish complexity and virtuosity, that create scores of such exceptional invention and power.

The notated scores are very clear in what they ask the performer to do and, despite what may come across to the listener as extremely spontaneous virtuosity, each bar has been meticulously notated, drawing on often highly unconventional time signatures to ensure that the performer knows exactly what is expected of them to create the music's remarkable energy and drive.

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Sincere thanks to Dr Ian Parsons for his generous comments, included by permission. Thanks also to Andrew Byrne (of Astra) and Michael Finnissy for their help and encouragement.

Julie McErlain reviewed Michael Kieran Harvey's Birthday Concert piano recital, "The War Sonatas", given at Eleventh Hour Theatre, Fitzroy, on 7 July 2024 – classicmelbourne.com.au/michael-kieran-harvey-the-war-sonatas/

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Piano recording at Move Records studio, late 2024
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Cover image: Leonardo Da Vinci: Illustration for his thoughts on Virtue and Envy (15th/16th century) (public domain) the inspiration for Jean-Michel Basquiat's "Riding with Death" painting of 1988, subtitle of Piano Sonata #10

Photo of dead crow (13 May 2023 Nalya, Ouse) by Michael Kieran Harvey



The Ire of Irina

Parents of a maniac, take him to your place.
He causes so much pain and trouble.
The whole world prays for his death. Death to Putin.
You raised a freak and a killer.

(Irina Tsybaneva, 6th October 2022)

The War of the Words

3 poems

Word War I: Not all Singers Sing from the Same Songbook

I was a Baltimore Strolling Player. And I was a great inventor! But did you know it?

1839: I patent *a machine for drilling rock* –
1849: I patent *a machine for carving wood and metal* –
1851: I patent *an improved machine for sewing seams in cloth and other substances* –

1851: I forge We: ***IM Singer & Co.***
1852: Thanks to Colt & Whitney guns, We pioneer mass production using *interchangeable parts* –
1882: (Clydebank) We build the World's largest factory &
the World's tallest 4-sided clock-tower!
1905: After their 10 000 'strong' walkout, We fire 400 'workers'
and all of the strike leaders.

1914-1918: We manufacture all manner of munitions (also, 361 000 horseshoes) –
1939-1945: We supply bomb sights, rifle receivers,
'Colt Government' semi-automatics –
[1941: The Clydebank Blitz killed 39 of Our workers.
But We, resolute, rebuilt and restocked.]

1875: My funeral was grand! So many mourners!! 80 horse-drawn carriages!!! –
I'm interred, in marble, in the triple coffin of my own design - satin on cedar; lead; silver on oak.

I manufactured machines. For drilling, carving, sewing.
For rock, wood, metal, cloth. For bone, flesh, sinew.

[after Ernest H. Crosby 'War & Hell', 1898]

Word War II: The Saṃgīta of Arjuna

For Prem & Co.

Thee, Me, We
Saṃ Sums Three

Who Flower, Who Flourish, Who Fade
Who Fend, Who Falter, Who Fall…

As Tomorrow's Yesterday
Unthreads Throughout Today

May *Praṇā, Prajñā* & *Praśānta*
Gird, Guide & Guard Us

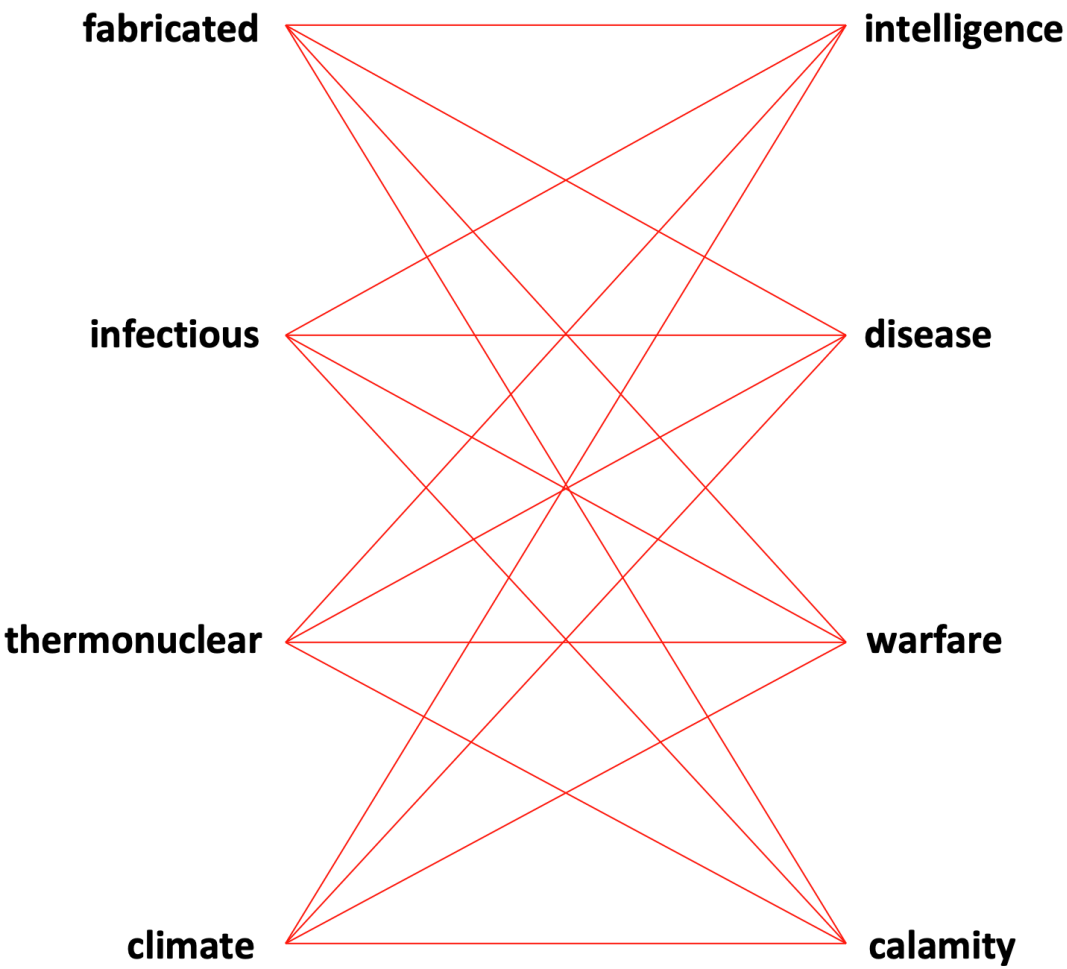
As We Front & Face The Fray

Arjuna: the warrior whose battlefield dilemma – whether to fight or not? –
forms the subject of **The Bhagavad Gīta**
Saṃ: complete conjunction
Gīta: song
Praṇā: energy
Prajñā: wisdom/insight
Praśānta: peace

Word War III: Caught in the Cross-Hairs

'Thank Heaven for science!', said old Yacob…
H.G. Wells, The Country of the Blind (1904)

ANTHROPOGENIC



FOLLY