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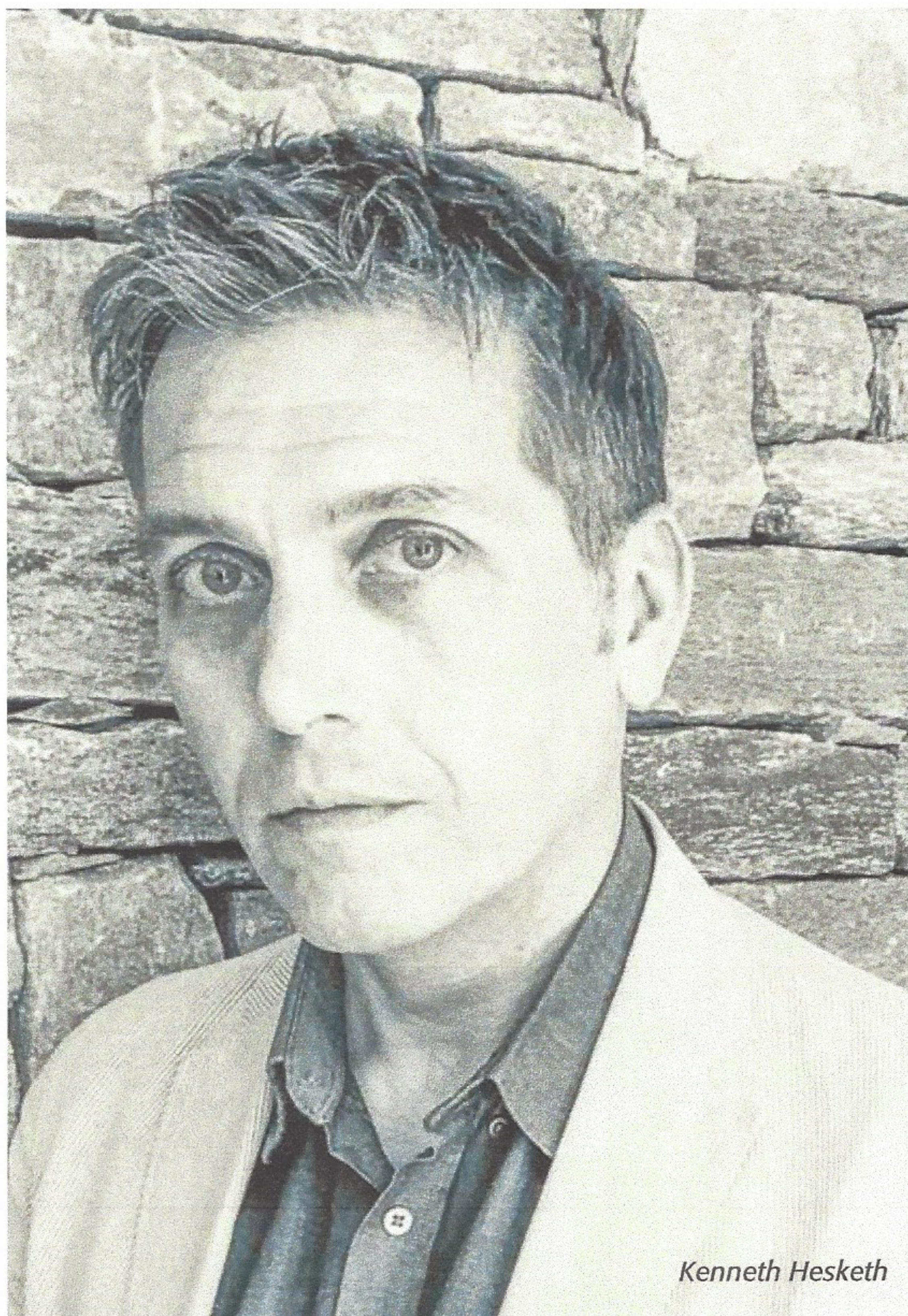
A new acceptance of time

A 50th birthday tribute to Kenneth Hesketh by Guy Rickards

2018 has been, more than usually, a year of anniversaries, and particularly emotive ones, too, largely due to the centenary of the Great War's final year, and the legion of associated commemorations, from the Black Day of the German Army (August 8th) to the death of Wilfred Owen (4th November), just a week before the Armistice. For composers, too, there are some remarkable centenaries, whether of the premiere of *The Planets*, the birth of Leonard Bernstein – a multiple celebration, given his overlapping careers as composer, pianist, educator and conductor – or the deaths of Debussy, Lili Boulanger, Parry, Morfydd Owen and many others.

One unfortunate side-effect of these high-profile events, all marked with considerable fanfare at this year's Proms, for instance, is that many of the anniversaries of the living have been eclipsed, for example of two of Britain's most important composers: Robin Holloway's 75th birthday (marked in the *January-March* issue), and Kenneth Hesketh's 50th. Neither composer had so much as a note performed during the eight weeks of the festival, unlike Thea Musgrave, whose 90th birthday was celebrated by a performance on August 7th of her recent tone poem *Phoenix Rising*, or Hesketh's close contemporary Olga Neuwirth, whose 'ballet mécanomorphe' *Aello* received its UK premiere two days earlier.

Hesketh has been featured twice at the Proms, but not for a while: his chamber ensemble piece *The Circling Canopy of Night* (1999, the final panel of his chamber cycle *Trinita*) was performed in 2001, and his vibrant orchestral show-piece *Graven Image* (2008) was composed to a Proms co-commission with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, for whom Liverpool-born Hesketh had been 'Composer in the House' (2007-8). In the ensuing ten years, Hesketh has not been programmed again, a poor state of affairs for a composer who has received many international commissions, whose orchestral music has been conducted and performed by the likes of Vasily Petrenko, Susana Malkki, the late Oliver Knussen,



Kenneth Hesketh

Photo by Liz Thornton

Sir Simon Rattle, Pascal Rophé, Claire Booth, Clio Gould and Clare Hammond, among many others. It is worth noting that the orchestral *At God speeded Summer's end* (2000) had also been commissioned by the BBC which, in a co-commission with the RLPO, will premiere *Uncoiling the River*, a piano concerto for Clare Hammond, at the start of 2019. Furthermore, a series of recordings are forthcoming from various labels, the first of

which – with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales – is previewed below.

Hesketh's output is remarkably broad in scope but falls into quite distinct groups – which tend to have separate publishers. His work for wind bands (with Faber) and some two-dozen Yuletide-seasonal choral pieces (with Music Sales) are occasional, though skilfully done, pieces. His more serious, and most authentic, utterances are handled either by Schott's or – for his



in Hesketh's output, most obviously finding an outlet in his various arrangements of pieces by Debussy, Ravel and Dutilleux. Perhaps the most profound influence from the French is the precision of sound that infuses all of Hesketh's scores, for whatever combinations of instruments. The precision of sound is also a mani-festation of the composer's longstanding interest in things mechanical, clockwork not least, which are reflected in works right throughout his output. "Much of my non-music theory reading these days is scientific," the composer has commented, "especially with regard to pathology (and this chimes with an idea I've spoken about many times, namely the concept of the 'Unreliable Machine' in my work). Such reading feeds directly into my thoughts on systems degradation, pathways, and perception amongst others, and these concepts find outlet and expression in technical ways." So, too, with Children's literature, particularly, the darker, more nightmarish tales, for example in his chamber-ensemble piece *Netsuke* (2000-1, rev 2004).

As his output has developed and deepened in scope, so the idea of entropy has been added to the creative mix, symbolising the gradual decline over time; in *Inscription-Transformation* Hesketh realised this further by using the Collatz Conjecture – a numerological construct that allows any sequence to unwind back to 1. These different, yet not unrelated inspirational strands come together to dazzling effect in coruscating recordings—to be issued on CD to mark his half-century—performed by the BBC

National Orchestra of Wales conducted by Christoph-Mathias Mueller of three of his most recent works. The oldest of these is *Knotted Tongues* (2012, rev 2014), written for the Seattle Symphony Orchestra and Ludovic Morlot, its title derived from Benson Bobrick's history of the stammer, as a single-span fantasia on the notion of Descartes' 'beast-machine' rendered stuttering, or unreliable.

Of Time and Disillusionment (2016) is a chamber orchestral suite in five brief movements. The first move-

more recent works – Cecilian Music, the company he established with his composer-wife, Arlene Sierra. Schott's catalogue of over 50 works, covering several full-orchestral works to solo compositions for piano – including *Notte Oscura*, reworked from material from his now withdrawn opera *The Overcoat* (2002-3) – and the trio for oboe, bassoon and piano, *Three Pieces in the shape of a shoe* (2005), a good example of the occasional whimsicality of his titles. One will search in vain in his catalogue for examples of standard forms like the symphony (although he did pen one at the age of 17), sonata or string quartet, as he prefers to give colourful and descriptive titles to his works; *Two Lapels and a Pocket*, the suite extracted in 2004 from *The Overcoat*, is another example. Hesketh's music always fits the nomenclature like a glove, as with *Graven Image*, inspired by:

"the medieval Memento Mori, a painting or sculpture which seeks to remind its owner of the brevity of life (portraying, for example, a living head opposite a cadaver's head or skull). There are many allegorical symbols connected with the Memento Mori; guttering candles, clocks, and bells being some of the most potent and all are markers of time."

Hesketh's brightly coloured music here seems almost carved into the orchestral fabric, possessing a physicality that is one of its most compelling features. Another is its vivid scoring – Hesketh is a master of

the modern orchestra, with a very distinctive sound-world that has been honed by his own experience and that of exemplars from 20th century masters. One such master is Henri Dutilleux, one of two people commemorated in another memento mori-type work, the violin-and-orchestral *Inscription-Transformation* (2015).

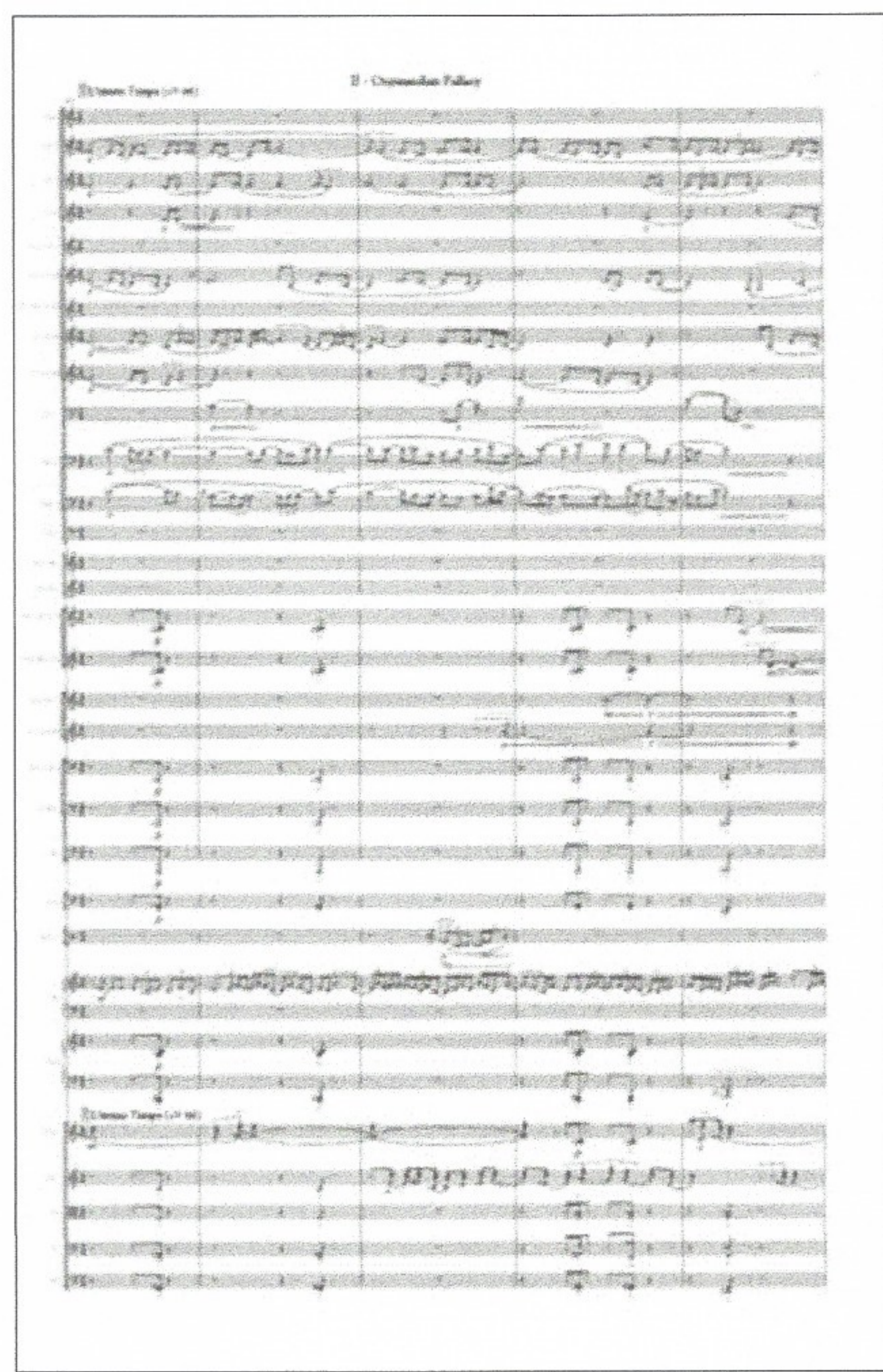
The ability to think in instrumental colour is evident just as much in works for the black-and-white of the keyboard, most grippingly in the tremendously vivid piano cycle *Horae (pro Clara)*, an enchanting sequence of twelve pieces with highly suggestive subtitles that seem as much directions to the audience as the performer: "as fleet as the tiniest hummingbird" (II); "like the splash and suspension of water droplets" (V), or – my personal favourite – "like an evening full of the linnet's wings" (X). The music was composed in 2011-2 specifically for its dedicatee Clare Hammond, who has recorded it with ear-beguiling virtuosity and musicality (BIS 2193).

If some of *Horae's* subtitles suggest a kinship with composers from the Francosphere, the music is not really Messiaen or Debussy-like at all, though there is an undercurrent of Francophilia

Hesketh's brightly coloured music here seems almost carved into the orchestral fabric, possessing a physicality that is one of its most compelling features.



The 'Maniaco, agressivo' start to the fourth movement of *Of Time and Disillusionment*



The first page of *In Ictu Oculi*, the title track of the new *Paladino* CD

ment, *Fragmented escapements*, opens like a supercharged Henzerian toccata-allegro, with especially effective writing for winds, but the scoring throughout is restrained and luminous, not least in the succeeding *Ritornelli*. There is a clear Stravinskian rhythmic verve as well, more noticeable than in many Hesketh pieces. He has written that the work's "allusions to various aspects of clockwork (escapements and petite sonnerie) as well as the use of rhythmic gestures and cycles are regularly found in my other works. However, the fragility with which they are often presented here is more grotesquely contrasted with a gradual bellicosity that evolves as the work progresses." The third span, *Notturmi per I defunti* ('Nocturnes for the dead'), has a central episode entitled 'Petite sonnerie', refining the textures even further to chamber music, appropriate for the expressive and emotional heart of the suite. Despite the reduced instru-

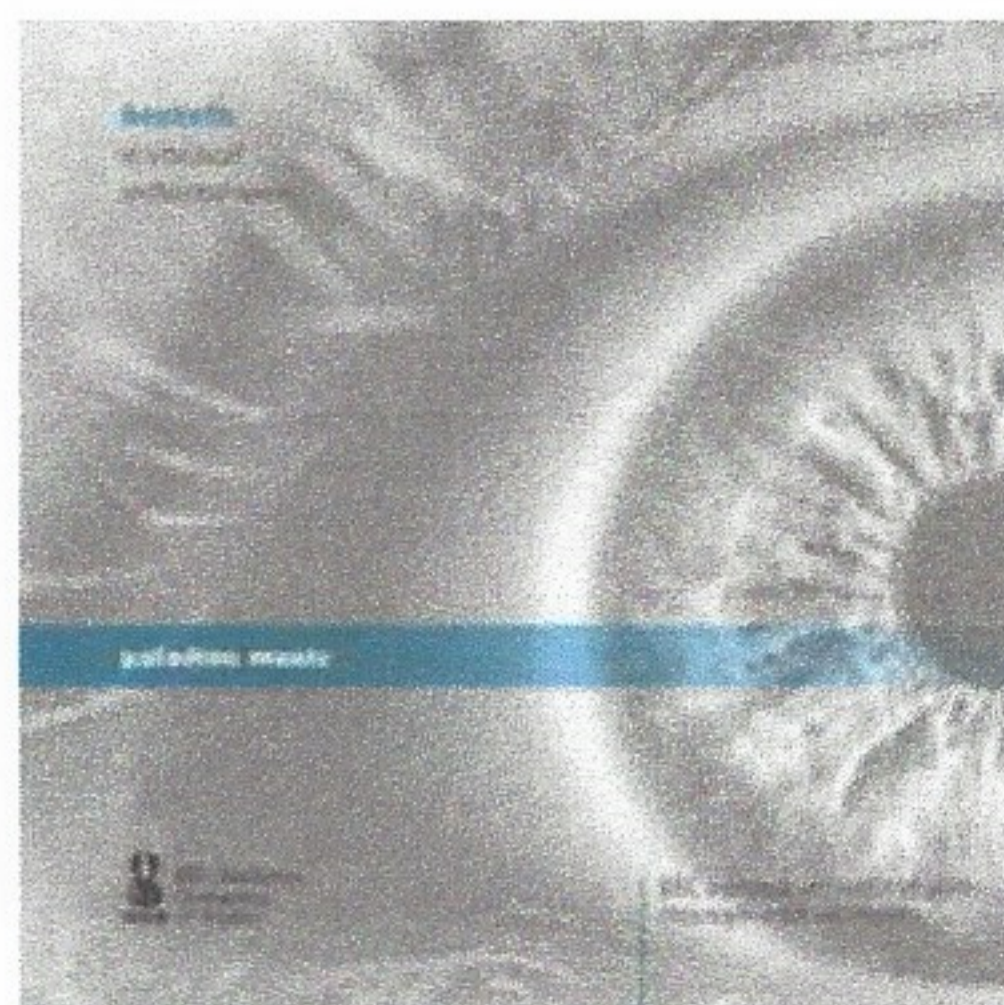
mentation, Hesketh's ensemble generates considerable weight of sound – not to be confused with volume – when needed, as in the *Notturmi's* close, or the pell-mell torrent of the ensuing *Corrupted Dances*, which recalls something of the momentum of the opening but ramps the intensity up considerably. The spectral final movement, *Regulated escapements*, brings the suite to a surprisingly yet logically quiet close.

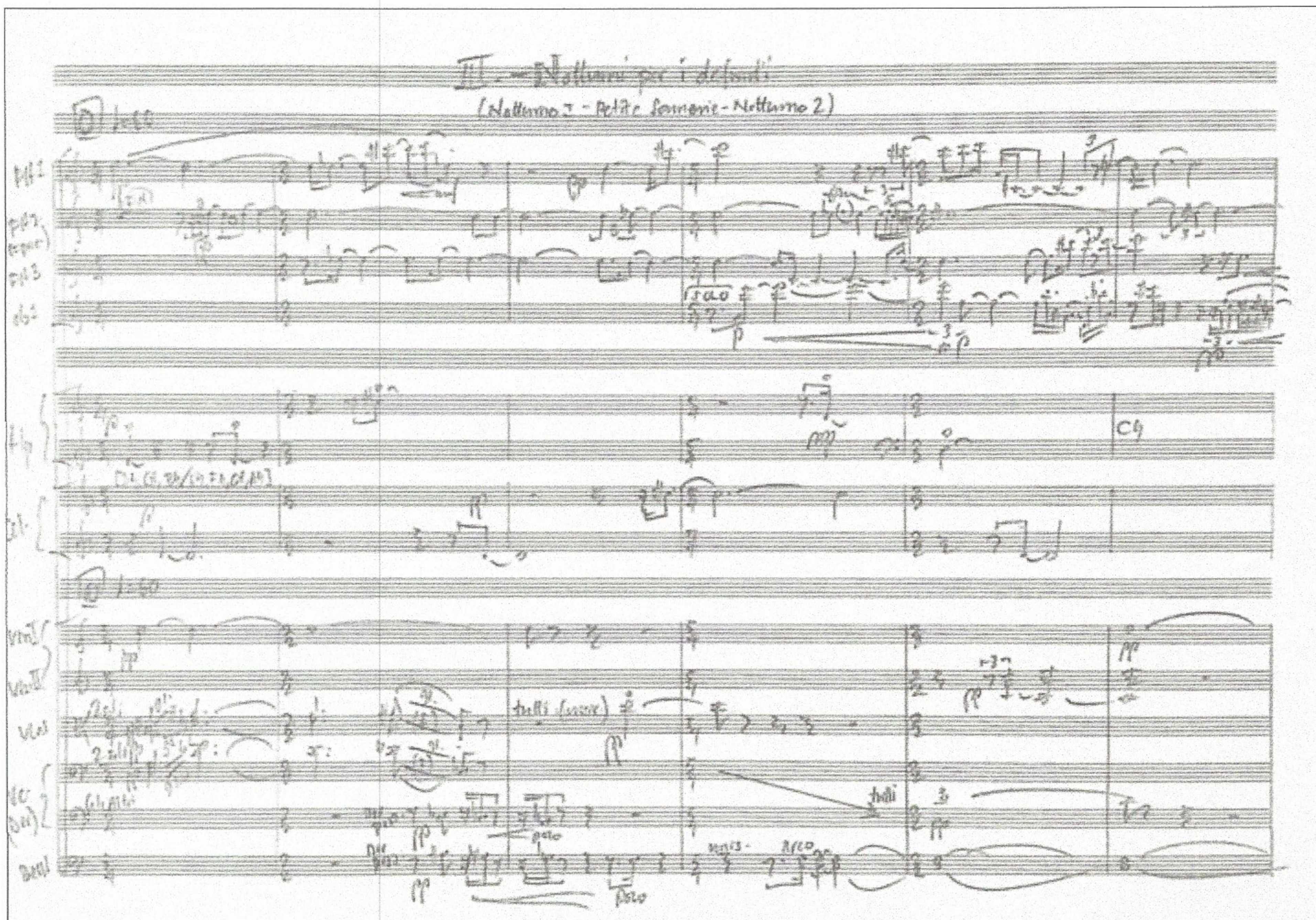
Of Time and Disillusionment – the title may have resonances of George Crumb's orchestral suite but is actually a misquotation of a Handelian title 'the triumph of time and disillusionment' – bears a superscription from Marcus Aurelius (a sentiment echoed in Borges, a favourite writer of Hesketh):

There is a kind of river of things passing into being, and Time is a violent torrent. For no sooner is each seen, then it has been carried away, and another is being carried by, and that, too, will be carried away.

In Ictu Oculi ('In the blink of an eye', 2017) has two (rather briefer), by Villon and William Dunbar, and is the most recent of his works to be issued on disc—

and what a work it is, too. Inscribed 'in memoriam Muriel McMahon' (the composer's grandmother, the other commemoratee of *Inscription-Transformation*), is another work of the 'memento mori' type. Cast in three meditations with two linking 'Stele'





Notturmi per i defunti (Of Time and Disillusionment) v1

sections (all attacca), *In Ictu Oculi* stands in relation to Hesketh's output in much the same way as the orchestral *Images* or *La mer* do to Debussy's. The music is hardly less gripping, either; the scoring more hard-edged at times, for sure, the harmonic language more complex and 'modern', full of beguiling textures, affecting solos (especially for the winds) and a good deal of shade to offset the light. This may point to a kinship at least with the large and vivid canvas by the seventeenth century Spanish painter Juan de Valdés Leal (1622-90) of the same name, dominated by the skeletal figure of Death. As with the painting, however, there is no sense of threat in the music, rather the realisation of the fleetingness of the passage of time. The three meditations bear revealing titles: *ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt*

(‘Where are those who came before us’), *Ozymandian Fallacy* and *Timor mortis conturbat me* (‘The fear of death disturbs me’ – part of the quote from Dunbar’s *Lament for the Makaris*). The performances are as riveting as the music and no less than this composer deserves.

Conductor Pascal Rophé has described Hesketh as having “a strong capacity to build a shape and a dramaturgy in a piece. Also, in terms of intensity of the orchestration and of driving the climax into a piece he has a poetry in the way he treats the orchestra; the mixtures, and the colours”. Intense colours, dramatic structures, poetic orchestration: the next Hesketh half-century looks really exciting. ■

Caption???

