

(Heart-)Felt Hammers: The Piano Music of Michael Hicks

BY DAVID DEBOOR CANFIELD

A composer, performer, scholar, teacher, and poet, Michael Hicks would seem to be the quintessential Renaissance man. Author of six books, most published by the University of Illinois, he is a recognized authority on Mormon music and in other areas of musical research. These labors have on three occasions been recognized with ASCAP Deems Taylor Awards. His music has been heard at festivals of the American Society of University Composers, the Cincinnati Composer Guild, and the Subtropics Music Festival, performed by ensembles including the Black Swamp Saxophone Quartet, the Menlo Brass Quintet, and the Memphis Symphony Brass Quintet. A number of his works have been recorded on the Tantara Records label in addition to those on the CD herein reviewed. I had an opportunity to query Hicks on his manifold activities via email in July of 2015.

I am curious right off the bat as to how you juggle all these activities in some coherent fashion! Is your schedule a rigorous one, where you allot a certain amount of time to each of your pursuits?

I used to ride waves of impulse, one obsession to the next, with no planning or scheduling. Sleep suffered along the way. Now, however, I tend to write more by request for this or that (usually for scholarship) and I plan better—and refuse more, too, preferring to play with grandkids or post on Facebook. Fortunately, one of the jobs of a professor is, as Frost said, to “provide, provide.” So I get pseudo-timecard credit for all this providing of personal expression, in whatever forms it takes.

Are some of your activities born more from a sense of duty or obligation, or do you truly love being involved in all of these different areas? Note that I would define “love” in this question as things that you would do even if you weren’t paid for them.

Obligation, yes, but mostly an obligation to construct and maintain my own identity amid the communities among which I’ve landed or chosen to live. And it’s love, too. We sing a hymn whose chorus ends “Doing good is a pleasure / A joy beyond measure / A blessing of duty and love.” So the joy and blessing of all this—and I’m lucky to have found it—is the amalgamation of duty and love.

How did you get started in music? Who or what were your formative influences?

My parents were not musical, though my mom played hymns and a few popular standards on the piano from time to time. Like many of my generation, I found solace in the radio and especially records, and that sound world was my putative baptism into music proper (or improper). My father got me a guitar when I was 12, which led me to folk and rock and, as it turned out, Elizabethan music and Bach. As for Modernism, it was psychedelia in the Beatles and others that pulled me in that direction. My friends and I in California craved weird stuff and I only discovered later that that was a serious, “artistic” way of thinking and behaving.

How old, then, were you when you realized that music would provide your livelihood?

I don’t know. Part of it was by default: I wasn’t good at or attracted to many other things. And my working in plating shops and factories and custodial jobs made me study hard to do something that felt less deadening than those—although music always ran through my head, even when I was vacuuming or dipping racks of metal into hydrochloric acid. So I always knew music would be how I’d make a life, no matter how I made a living. I still find, after many years of doing it, that getting paid for musicianship is amazing grace, indeed.

In consideration of this CD of your integral works for piano, I’d be curious as to how the piano “fits in” to your compositional corpus. These works all fit comfortably on one CD. Have you written more music in other genres?

I like plucking sounds and coloristic sonic palettes and long-held notes and, well, that “weird stuff” I mentioned before. Piano has never served me well in those regards (except for the plucking), so I lean toward chamber music without piano. I’d say that I only write a piece or two a year. I often say that a composer is also an imposer: He or she is saying to a performer, in effect, “temporarily give up playing the fine music that already exists and play mine instead.” So if I write something, I

need to feel it's worth the imposition on a player.

That's an interesting take, and one I've not thought of. Your use of a Baroque-era temperament for your The Idea of Domes fascinates me. How did you discover or get interested in this tuning system to the point of utilizing it in a modern piano, and how would you characterize the difference between that system and the modern equal temperament system of tuning? (See how cleverly I get you to write part of my review for me!)

I've had an on-and-off affair with microtonality, nurtured by my love of pop, my high school listening to music by Penderecki and Partch, and my later formal studies with Ben Johnston. This piece, though, arose from my having my office piano tuned in Werckmeister III for years in order to teach my counterpoint and score analysis students about well-temperament. I love the variety of "key colors" it provides, mostly via the different sizes of major thirds, but it was probably Ben who made me realize one could use a non-equal-tempered piano in a non-tonal way for the special hues it gives.

Right off the bat, my ears picked up the "guitar" chord that opens this work. Back in my graduate studies, I took a course on Alberto Ginastera, and wrote a paper on the various uses he made of this chord derived from the open strings of the guitar. What is the significance of this chord in your The Idea of Domes, and what is the source of its title?

A colleague of mine once observed that, even though I never write for guitar, I'm always writing guitar music. That's my musical root system. So here I decided to make that explicit, using the open-string arpeggiation as a starting point for progressive deformations, but also as a stable point to which one could always return. Retunings and returnings, one might say. That's the role of the chord in this piece. As for the title, it came to me, unbidden or unthought-out. I think it has to do with the mystery of abstraction that helps to sacralize many of the world's domes, but what that has to do with this piece, I can't say. I often affix titles that run parallel in feeling to what I hear in the music, but that don't necessarily express a derivation from one to the other.

I was also intrigued by your setting of the Stations of the Cross. Most Christians, myself included, would not associate what is generally considered to be a Catholic and Western Christian concept and practice with Mormonism. Are the Stations of the Cross a significant factor in Mormon theology and practice?

My love for the Stations of the Cross derives not from Mormonism, in which the Stations have no place, but from my hanging out in the Catholic church across the street from our high school in Mountain View (California). I found the Stations both moving as a narrative and fascinating as a structure. I've seen many representations of them in the years since, the most powerful of which for me—and the one that incited me to do a very severe musical take on them—was Barnett Newman's series of panels by that name. It's one of the great works of the last century, to my mind.

How are the arts in general incorporated into the Mormon worldview?

That's a vast topic, one about which I've written a lot over the years, so I'm at a loss to short-change it. The best way I would summarize it is to say that Mormons (like Masons) find sacred symbolism in the *compass*, which suggests that, as we say, "all truth may be circumscribed in one great whole." Mormon scripture also says that "truth is knowledge of things as they are, and as they were, and as they are to come." It's that last clause, I think, that most encourages the exploratory, searching nature of art for us. "What will come" always depends on a consideration of "what may come."

Is there such a thing as "Truth" in music?

I'm sure there is, though maybe not with a capital "T." We live in a universe that teaches us that truth is a matter of perception that varies with one's angle of vision (cf. the blind men and the elephant). Maybe it's fairer to say that there are truths in music, probably an infinite number, the ongoing discovery of which keeps the composer (and interpreter and listener) hungry for more. I suppose I'm implying that the hinge of the compass—the kind that one draws circles with—eventually breaks. In the end—if there were one—truth probably can't truly be circumscribed, our symbol notwithstanding.

In Mantikos and Sophikos, you muse on differing modes of Greek thought and expression, specifically the sophic (rationalized) and mantic (prophetic). How do these ideas from ancient Greek culture inform and influence your music?

These particular pieces came from the use of the terms in an article or two by the great Mormon scholar Hugh Nibley. I don't know that the ideas influence so much as undergird all my intellectual and spiritual pursuits. At the risk of sounding preachy, I note that Mormon scripture also teaches that we are to "seek learning, even by study and also by faith." I stay conscious of that in all my work, whether creative or scholarly: reason takes one so far, but faith is the leap one always has to take in response. I think composers generally understand that, since the act of composing is one of making countless small decisions very quickly.

Since you are also a poet, have you taken the opportunity to set your poetry to music?

I've always avoided that. I even resist setting others' poems. Poetry is a complete art form and I don't like to tamper with it. On the other hand, I have written *lyrics* for many songs. And those lyrics feel incomplete to me if treated as poetry. For example, one song, "Moon," begins: "I've been saving shadows in my face / A gift from the trees." That might be poetic, but not part of a poem as such. I write lighter lyrics, too. One song begins: "It took eons of natural selection / Just to learn how to deal with rejection." Again, these are words conceived only as part of a song. So that's my serpentine way of answering "no" to your inviting question.

What avenues in music composition, if any, would you like to explore that you have not yet to this point?

The avenues open up when someone asks me for a piece. A friend and colleague, for example, recently asked me to write him an organ piece. I would never have thought to, or wanted to, but the invitation freed my mind to consider what I'd write for that medium. As it turned out, it was an avenue that I really wanted to go down, once I was on it. That's how it works for me these days.

Well, I appreciate your insights and information, and I will be looking forward to hearing more of your music in the future!

HICKS *The Idea of Domes. The Stations of the Cross. Mantikos. The Annunciation. Sophikos. L'Épitaphe de Monk* • Keith Kirchoff (pn) • TANTARA 0314 (49:00)

The music of Michael Hicks evokes its own world, and really doesn't sound like that of anyone else. It's as far removed from most of the tradition of Western music as the New Horizon spacecraft is from earth, as it makes its closest pass to the demoted erstwhile planet Pluto the very day I'm writing these words. *The Idea of Domes*, for instance, is a mostly quiet work, that intersperses effects such as humming and plucking or damping of the strings inside the piano with ascending non-tonal arpeggios that begin with notes drawn from the open strings of the guitar but quickly transform into less tonal groupings of notes. The tuning of the piano for this work is explained in the above interview, and the sound is not far from that of modern equal temperament, but is in line with what Bach would have utilized in his *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Accordingly, this system of tuning imparts a new color to the sound of the piano that is partly responsible for the other-worldly effect of the work. I'm not sure, though, how pianist Keith Kirchoff managed to pluck just one note in the middle of a fairly quickly executed sequence, but my hat is off to him for doing it skillfully and convincingly, such that a unique texture is imparted to the run.

The essentially meditative quality of the first work is heightened in the second, which is a series of short movements devoted to the 14 traditional Stations of the Cross in Roman Catholic devotional practice. A formal analysis of the chords in these pieces might show little, if any, relationship to each other, yet their movement carries the listener along inexorably, just as the Cross of Christ carried the Savior along to fulfill his mission at Calvary. Certain sections, such as those depicting the falls of Jesus, form quite violent outbursts, while the movement portraying the carrying of the cross by Simon the Cyrene is loud and energetic. I note much use of the interval of the minor third in this work, although it is invariably used in a non-tonal fashion. It also sounds as if the tuning of the piano in this work is similar, if not the same, as that used in the opening piece, but it turns out that equal temperament is employed in this piece.

Mantikos represents a quantum leap in the direction of complexity and violent gestures from anything found in the two preceding works. The program notes give little information about the structure of the piece, so all I can really do is to describe its effect upon the ear. The opening (and

continuing) dramatic and dissonant flashes seem to be cast more or less as ripples caused by a rock thrown into a calm lake. The virtuosity required herein is impressively handled by Kirchoff, who captures the extremely wide range of emotions and moods depicted by the composer. The opening sonorities of *The Annunciation* are meant to (and do) portray the light that attends the angel Gabriel as he announces to the Virgin Mary her bearing in her womb the Savior of the world. The piece has all the luminosity and sharp edges of a stained glass mosaic, but quiet moments also suggest Mary's acquiescence to the stunning news that she has received. The composer describes this as the "most severely methodical" work that he has written. His description of the following *Sophikos* as something like a "mosaic viewed through a prism" also seems apt. The flights of virtuosity required in this work are enough to leave the listener breathless.

The disc closes with *L'Épitaphe de Monk*, a four-minute de- and re-construction of the gestures and sonorities in Thelonius Monk's *Crespuscule with Nellie*. That particular work was chosen by the composer in tribute to his grandmother, also named Nellie. Throughout, fragments of Monk's work (one that I do not know) are scattered throughout the piece like bits of glass sparkling in a sand pile, leaving a result that is probably 90 percent Hicks and only 10 percent Monk, at most.

While I cannot honestly describe the works on this CD as "music for the masses," there is profundity in this music that defies description, and the music of Hicks will amply reward those possessed of adventurous ears and open minds. To this enlightened group—would that it were larger—the present CD is heartily recommended. **David DeBoor Canfield**

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Listening to the complete piano music of American composer Michael Hicks opened my eyes to a personal idiom based on purity and gesture. The purity comes from Hicks's disciplined method of composing, where he exacts expression from sparseness. The gestures are selected from a vocabulary that every music lover will recognize: tone, interval, chord, and so on. Hicks fuses these elements to achieve what might be called "conceptual Minimalism"—each piece, written over a long span from 1982 to 2010, is founded on an idea that is allowed to expand, ultimately reaching the boundary between sound and silence where the listener is exposed to sacred space.

The religious intent of Hicks's devices is announced in titles such as *The Stations of the Cross*, which is also his most recent solo piano work, and *The Annunciation*. Each expands upon a striking conception. In *The Annunciation* the angel Gabriel is represented at the outset by the "light" of sudden complex chords, after which there are intervals of silence with increasingly spare chords in between. The effect moves from Mary's awe to the quietness of mind that allows her to accept and absorb the angel's message. In *Stations of the Cross*, the gestures can be as spare as a single note, a simple two-note chord, or a flush of rapid notes. These are arranged into a spiritual drama proceeding from Christ's condemnation to the laying of his body in the tomb. Instead of pictorializing the Passion, the music gives meditative glimpses as a response to each part of the story. There are dramatic outbursts for the three times that Jesus stumbles on the road to Calvary, but when we arrive at the most anguished episodes, nailing him to the cross and his death, Hicks uses almost pure silence interrupted by delicate gestures to indicate that for Christ, the experience is transcendence, an exaltation of the soul even as the body suffers.

These descriptions tell us that Hicks's conceptual Minimalism isn't dry or unfeeling. He wears another cap as an award-winning poet, and the poetic essence of his music is crucial, even when he shatters an image into shards or views it through a prism, to use two analogies the composer offers. Sometimes he works from a purely musical imagination, as in *The Idea of Domes*, where the piano is retuned in "Werckmeister III, a Bach-era well temperament that reflects the harmonies in subtler ways," to quote the liner notes. Beginning with the open notes on a guitar, the piece is actually *about* the tuning in a sense. Individual notes, overtones, and intervals rest upon the listener's ear. As a guide the pianist sings along, producing notes with names from *solfeggio* (do, re, mi, etc.), although not necessarily attached to the usual notes. The result has a gentle, pleasing expansive quality that conveys the freshness of familiar elements heard with a slight skew.

As the writer of a book titled *Sixties Rock: Garage, Psychedelic, and Other Satisfactions*, Hicks

points to another side of his musical personality, which finds an outlet in *L'Épitaphe de Monk*. It was written in tribute to Thelonious Monk for the 90th anniversary of his birth in 2007. Monk was an intellectual jazz lover's idol, of course, whose improvisational style respected no conventional boundaries. Hicks's musical "epitaph" freely uses gestures from Monk along with spontaneous inspirations that they arouse. The overall effect is denser than many of the other works here, but it's not a pastiche of jazz and Postmodernism. Instead, it's like doing a Monk on Monk, paying homage by walking in his imaginary footsteps.

Hicks, who graduated *summa cum laude* from Brigham Young University, earned his doctorate in music at the University of Illinois, and returned as a faculty member and now full professor at BYU, has mastered a rigorous methodology. What makes his piano works appealing is that the methodology doesn't stand in the way of communicating with the listener. The creation of a sacred space feels palpable, even though we don't enter through the easier door of Arvo Pärt or Kaija Saariaho. The pianist Keith Kirchoff plays with total involvement and in addition offers his own readable, elucidating notes on the music. The album title, *Felt Hammers*, is a pun on the piano's mechanism and on what is felt when the hammers strike a note. A highly original blending of means and ends is what this intriguing CD is all about. **Huntley Dent**

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This is a simply fascinating disc. The low playing time of 49 minutes seems strangely apposite: Michael Hicks's music is predominantly aphoristic and, like Webern, makes an integral and profound use of silence. The pieces are not heard in chronological order, yet upon careful listening one can discern a progression towards at his rarified purity of utterance. Less becomes most definitely more.

The 1982 piece *Mantikos* is a companion to *Sophikos* (1984); they are separated by the 2006 piece *Annunciation*. The sprightly, active, almost manic opening gesture of *Mantikos* sets the scene; *Sophikos* is the more controlled, compositionally, of the two pieces. The composer describes *Sophikos* as "like a mosaic viewed through a prism," a beautiful image that seems to match the music perfectly. Gestures are more like cells of energy that come and go, invigorating and yet at the same time intriguing. Keith Kirchoff's pianism is perfectly suited to Hicks's music, quixotic and chameleon-like. His piano tone is most appealing, also, moving from the softest dynamic to diamond-like attacks. Imagery is clearly important to the composer: the inspiration for *Annunciation* is obviously that of the angel Gabriel and Mary. He describes it as the "most severely methodical" piece he has ever written. It moves from light (the arrival of the angel) through to a more contemplative section as the significance of the message delivered filters through to its recipient. Kirchoff's chordal work in this piece is a marvel.

The composition *The Idea of Domes* (2003), which opens the disc, seems to come from another world. Arpeggio-like utterances heard in Werckmeister III (a Bach-era temperament) exude a purity that seems enhanced by the various additions and effects, be they plucked or muted strings or the wordless vocalisations of the pianist. It is *The Stations of the Cross* (2010) that provides the meat of the program, though. Here, Hicks attempts to provide the very essence of his language in a series of 14 "snapshots" (his term) of Christ's passion. There is an element of disbelieving stasis to the initial "Jesus is condemned to death." The low dynamic level, continued in the second Station, "Jesus receives the cross," only underlines the intensity and import of the unfolding events. The higher dynamic of "Jesus falls the first time" imparts a sense of drama which only serves to highlight the tenderness of the angular lines and dissonant yet restrained chords of "Jesus meets His mother." Indeed Jesus' falls constitute the most overt drama of the piece; the Crucifixion itself consists of painful, almost inaudible gestures. The movement lasts just over a minute, yet contains the most telling music of the disc and makes an indelible impression.

The final piece is a tribute to Thelonius Monk and was written for a salon concert for that composer/pianist's 90th birthday. It is essentially a deconstruction of Monk's *Crepuscule with Nellie*. Monk's persona appears sporadically, moving quickly out of focus each time. Funeral chimes feature also: The mix is a telling appreciation of a great artist and, with its enigmatic core, it seems the perfect way to end this memorable disc. **Colin Clarke**