

# February 2025

by Rebecca Winzenried

## Lara Morciano (b. 1968) *Embedding Tangles* (2013)

Lara Morciano's music is ever searching – for new methods of connecting traditional performance with technological innovation. *Embedding Tangles*, for solo flute and live electronics, is emblematic of her explorations with acoustical instruments and how their sounds can be reshaped through spatial processes and gestural captures, by working with performers' movements in real time. *Embedding Tangles* sets the solo flute player on an exhilarating journey of virtuosic techniques, unique timbres and articulations—melodic at moments, but wrapped in an atmospheric sound world that seems to emerge from an entire ensemble of instruments and effects. Flutist Sébastien Jacot, who performed the premiere at the Geneva Museum of Art and History in 2014, repeats the challenge in these performances.

The Italian-born Morciano began her musical studies as a pianist, graduating from the Tito Schipa Conservatory in Lecca at 16, and going on to study composition at the Santa Cecilia Conservatory and the Santa Cecilia National Academy. A pivotal moment came in 2001, when she participated in a computer music workshop at IRCAM, the French center for music and sound research. Soon after, her first work for solo flute and electronics, *Tangled* (2002) resulted from her time as artist-in-residence at the Montbéliard National School of Music, in collaboration with the Tempo Reale Centre for Research, Production, and Education in Florence.

Morciano has since become a sought-after name in electronic music, with presentations of her work and research at IRCAM (which has commissioned several of her pieces), MIT, New England Conservatory, and Monash University in Melbourne, among others. In 2013 she was selected for the SACRe (Sciences, Arts, Creation, and Research) program of the University of Paris Sciences et Lettres. *Embedding Tangles* was developed as part of her doctoral work there.

Of *Embedding Tangles*, she wrote that “instrumental sonorities are the starting point of an exploration that seeks analogies and correspondences between the performer's action, instrumental writing, and electronic treatments. Certain sonic and idiomatic characteristics of the instrument are highlighted and amplified: the percussive, blown, noisy, inharmonic, and polyphonic components become the occasion for a work aimed at the proliferation of similar materials (using different types of granular processes and timbral descriptors) while creating an imaginary and symbolic sound universe that reveals the dual dialogue, ethereal and incisive at the same time, of the musical discourse of the work.”

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## George Gershwin (1899-1937) Prelude No. 2 in C-Sharp Minor (1927)

On the afternoon of December 4, 1926, George Gershwin sat down at the piano in the ballroom of the new Roosevelt Hotel in New York City for the debut of a work *The New York Times* identified as Five Piano Preludes. A brief item noted that the composer was applauded afterward until he responded with an encore of the third movement from his Concerto in F, composed by the previous year. That the “futurist” program also included a “jazz” set of Gershwin songs sung by contralto Marguerite d’Alvarez, accompanied by the composer, demonstrates the space he occupied in the music world, caught between his Tin Pan Alley roots and burgeoning classical aspirations. The debut of the Preludes fell between the overwhelming success of *Rhapsody in Blue* in 1924, and the premiere of *An American in Paris* in 1928. It also came in the same year as the Broadway hit *Oh, Kay!*, following up on the success of *Lady, Be Good*, the first collaboration with brother Ira as lyricist.

Gershwin forever had a foot in two worlds, lauded in some quarters for his blending of jazz, blues, and classical forms while derided in others for not being a serious artist. His early career had taken off with success as a song-plugger, playing and improvising tunes on the piano to encourage sheet music sales.

But he had also undertaken serious piano study and composition, and continued to improve his skills in that vein, famously seeking compositional advice from such luminaries of the classical world as Nadia Boulanger, Maurice Ravel, and Arnold Schoenberg. He was rebuffed by all, each saying that they had nothing to offer a man with such natural affinity for inventive composition, injecting jazz and blues elements into classical forms to capture the modern, energetic American spirit.

For someone who was always noodling around on the piano, Gershwin’s Preludes represent the only solo concert works for the instrument published during his tragically short lifetime. His original intention was to write 24 preludes under the title *The Melting Pot*. About seven were composed by the time of the Roosevelt Hotel concert, from which he selected five to perform (the exact selections were not identified in the program or published reports). Only a trio ended up being published as *Preludes for Piano* (Three Preludes) in 1927. Gershwin described Prelude No. 2 as “a sort of blues lullaby,” with a jazz-inflected melody over a languid bass line evoking nocturnal moments.

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**Kurt Weill (1900-1950)**  
**"Lied des Lotteriagenten," from *Der Silbersee* (1933)**  
**"Die stille Stadt" (1920)**  
**"Der Abschiedsbrief" (1933)**  
**"It Never Was You" (1938)**

The songs in this cabaret set cover some particularly momentous times in the life of Kurt Weill, best known as the voice of German cabaret and for his collaborations such as *The Threepenny Opera* with Bertoldt Brecht. *Der Silbersee* (*The Silver Lake*), a three-act "play with music" with text by Georg Kaiser (1874-1975), deals with social inequity and the psychological trauma of poverty through the lives of two men, Severin and Olim. "**Lied des Lotteriagenten**" ("**The Lottery Agent's Tango**") appears in Act I, when Olim's fortunes turn: he has won the lottery. The agent delivers the happy news with cautionary admonitions about the changes wrought by sudden wealth. *Der Silbersee* premiered simultaneously in Leipzig and Magdeburg, Germany, in March of 1933, only to be shut down within days by the newly installed Nazi regime. It proved to be the last Weill work performed in Germany until after World War II. Tipped off of his imminent arrest, the Jewish composer fled to Paris, then on to the United States, where he would become a citizen and spend the rest of his life.

Weill's early career "**Die stille Stadt**" ("**The Silent Town**") was written in 1920 to a text by Richard Dehmel, a leading German Symbolist poet who had died that year. Dehmel was a favorite of composers, with his poems enjoying settings by Richard Strauss, Arnold Schoenberg, Alma Mahler, and Anton Webern, among others. In "Die stille Stadt," a wary traveler gazes down upon a quiet mountain village as night falls.

Still finding his way in the U.S. in 1933, Weill was approached by German native and Hollywood star Marlene Dietrich about the possibility of writing songs for her musical revue. "**Der Abschiedsbrief**" ("**The Farewell Letter**"), with lyrics by Erich Kästner (1899-1974), unleashes the bitter reactions of a jilted lover. Its caustic tone seems tailor-made for Dietrich (who apparently never performed it). Or it may have reflected Weill's own feelings at the time; he and Lotte Lenye had just divorced (although they would reconcile and remarry two years later).

Lenye did record "**It Was Never You,**" but the song of romantic longing originated with the 1938 Broadway musical *The Knickerbocker Holiday*. Based loosely on the book *A History of New York* by Washington Irving, the show, with lyrics by Maxwell Anderson (1888-1959), also produced the popular Weill standard "September Song."

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## Claude Debussy (1862-1918) *Clair de lune* (1905)

Claude Debussy's *Clair de lune*, the universally recognized segment from his *Suite bergamasque*, was inspired by a poem of the same name by Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine. Published in 1869, the poem has a sense of pathos, opening with "Your soul is a chosen landscape/ On which masks and Bergamasques cast enchantment as they go,/ Playing the lute, and dancing, and all but/ Sad beneath their fantasy-disguises."

Debussy was taken with Verlaine's imagery and set 18 of his poems as songs; two settings of *Clair de lune* for voice and piano had been composed by the time *Suite bergamasque* was published. That suite's title references the residents of Bergamo, Italy, the city from which the commedia dell'arte characters of Harlequin and Pierrot originated.

At the same time, a popular French folk tune, also called *Clair de lune*, would have been another familiar reference to the composer (and indeed the tune remains recognizable to many today). Its lyrics include direct reference to the character of Pierrot, who would become a symbol of the misunderstood artist by the end of the 19th century.

In this program, Debussy's *Clair de lune* serves as a companion and lead-in to Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, with their shared imagery of the lovesick clown Pierrot gazing at the moon. In Debussy's hands, the solo piano *Clair de lune* emerges as a lush, impressionistic work, conjuring pools of moonlight, dream states, and carrying the listener along on tidal waves of emotion.

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**Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)**  
**Six Little Piano Pieces, Op. 19, No. 6 (1911)**  
**Pierrot lunaire, Op. 21 (1912)**

In the midst of orchestrating *Gurre-Lieder*, his large-scale oratorio with five vocalists, three choruses, and narrator, Arnold Schoenberg gave himself a day off, so to speak. He composed five of the **Six Little Piano Pieces** on February 19, 1911, taking the opportunity to stretch his mind with brief bits of music that stepped him even farther away from the late-Romanticism of his early works and into atonal territory. The entire set lasts a brief five minutes (No. 1 is only 17 bars long) and each piece stands on its own. A sixth was added on June 17 of that year, a month after the death of Gustav Mahler, the composer who had been a great influence. Schoenberg attended the funeral and returned home to begin working on a painting, *The Burial of Mahler*, and this final piano piece. While not meant as a direct reference to Mahler's death, No. 6, identified, as the others, by its tempo marking, *Sehr langsam* (*Very slow*), is heard as a tolling of bells. In a mere two minutes it sets a somber tone, and acts as a definitive closing of one musical chapter and the opening of another.

In early 1912, Schoenberg wrote in his diary, "I believe I am approaching a new way of expression." He had begun composition of **Pierrot lunaire**, on commission from Viennese actress Albertine Zehme. She had used texts of the *Pierrot lunaire* poems by Albert Giraud (1860-1929) in her stage performances but was looking to incorporate a stronger musical element. Inspired by his interest in numerology, Schoenberg selected 21 poems from Giraud's original set of 50 for his Opus 21, crafting them in three groups of seven.

The three melodramas, as he called them, follow the commedia dell'arte character Pierrot from moonlit longing for his beloved Columbine through obsession, delirium, and violence, to memories of home in Bergamo, Italy. Text is declaimed in *Sprechstimme* (*speech song*) that was derived partly from Zehme's performance style, prefiguring performance art pieces to come. Structurally, *Pierrot lunaire* finds Schoenberg playing with traditional forms—canon, fugue, rondo, passacaglia—within atonal writing. Instrumentally, he deployed a quintet of flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano in different combinations and doublings throughout; the formation has come to be known as the Pierrot ensemble.

*Pierrot lunaire* is one of Schoenberg's most performed works, although Camerata Pacifica Artistic Director Adrian Spence believes that, "the static concert production, with standard lighting, does not emphasize the dramatic nature of the wild, blasphemous, violent and bloody, sexually allusive poetry." In these performances, continuing Schoenberg 150th anniversary celebrations, the moon plays a central role—waning, waxing, or entirely absent. The soprano soloist moves through different settings for each of the 21 poems, and musicians shift position. "In comparison to a theater production these shifts are minor, but in a chamber music presentation it should be very striking," says Spence.