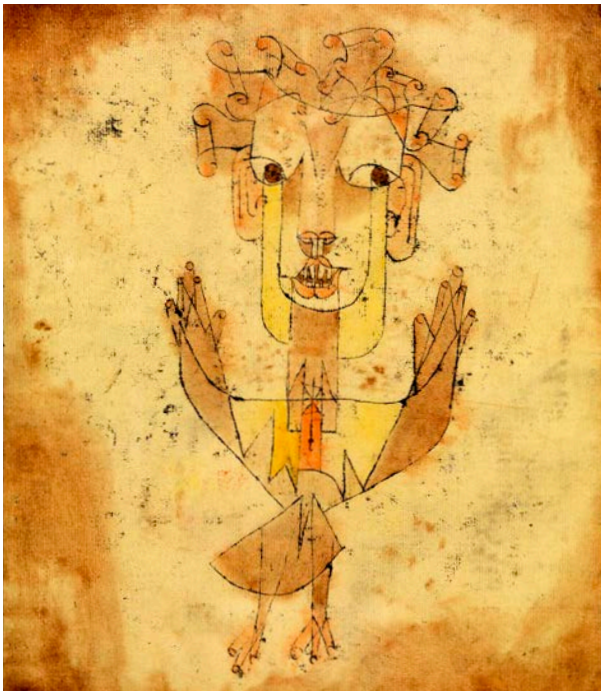


JOHN AYLWARD

ANGELUS



Ecce Ensemble

JOHN AYLWARD

ANGELUS (2014-18)

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|---|--|------|
| 1 | I. What is Possible
<i>Text by Adrienne Rich</i> | 8:55 |
| 2 | II. Angelus Novus
<i>Text by Walter Benjamin</i> | 2:29 |
| 3 | III. Dream Images
<i>Text by Friedrich Nietzsche</i> | 3:54 |
| 4 | IV. The Abstract
<i>Text by Arthur Schopenhauer</i> | 2:20 |
| 5 | V. Supreme Triumph
<i>Text by D.H. Lawrence</i> | 3:43 |
| 6 | VI. Secret Memory
<i>Text by C.G. Jung</i> | 3:02 |
| 7 | VII. Anima
<i>Text by John Aylward & Thomas Mann</i> | 5:31 |

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| 8 | VIII. Truth
<i>Text by Plato and from the Catholic liturgy</i> | 4:31 |
| 9 | IX. The Wing
<i>Text by Plato</i> | 3:34 |
| 10 | X. A Distance From the Sea
<i>Text by Weldon Kees</i> | 5:10 |

Total Time 43:09

Ecce Ensemble

Nina Guo, voice
Emi Ferguson, flutes
Hassan Anderson, oboe
Barret Ham, clarinets
Pala Garcia, violin
John Popham, cello
Sam Budish, percussion
Jean-Philippe Wurtz, conductor

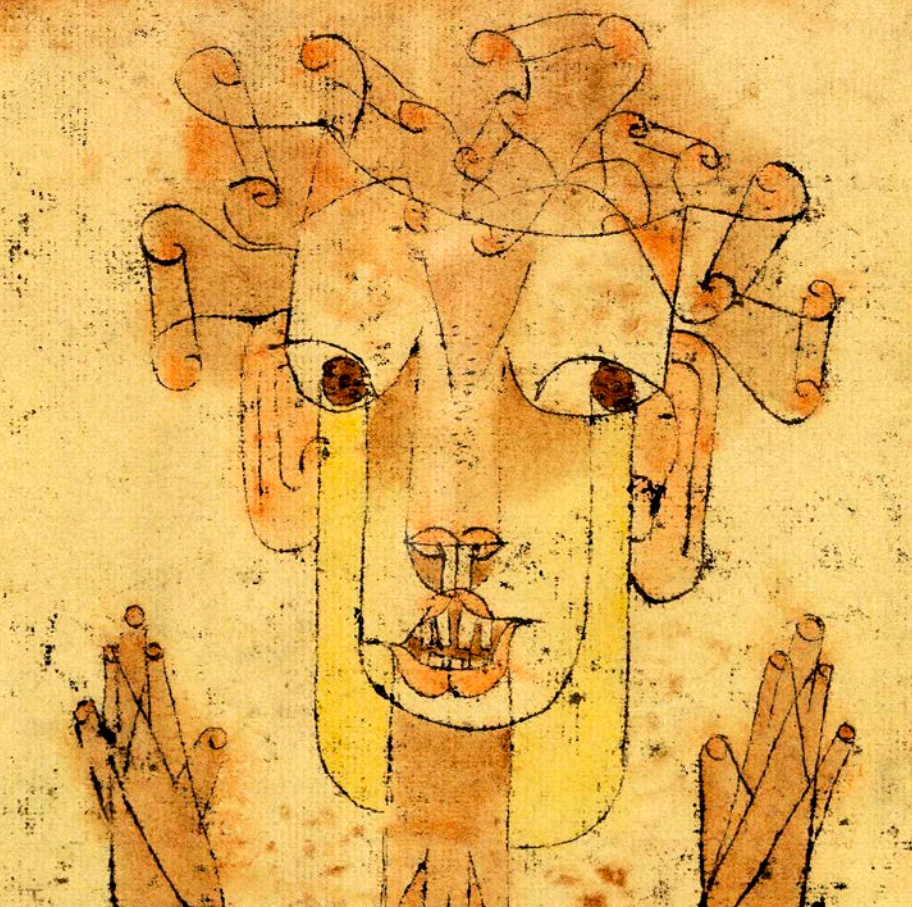
IN THE SUMMER OF 2014, shortly after the death of my father, I took my mother back to Europe for the first time since she fled Germany as a refugee after World War II. To be able to bring my mother back to Europe after 60 years was one of the most profound experiences I have ever had. Together, we viewed Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. We saw the 'Angel of the Future' together, across generations. A few weeks later, I came across a Walter Benjamin text that powerfully describes a vision of Klee's painting. The words struck me and I set them to music. Slowly, over the course of four years, other texts revealed themselves, and *Angelus* began to come into focus.

Angelus is a monodrama in which the voice is speaker, vocalist, witness, agent, and storyteller. The piece is an exploration of life felt through the lenses of various cultural histories, represented in the pastiche of authors that inhabit the work's landscape. By invoking this range of influence and ordering it into physical, psychological and spiritual concerns, *Angelus* became a kind of treatise on the human experience for me. The piece begins with a poem by Adrienne Rich that lays out the broad concerns of the entire work: the possibilities of life, the mind, and connection to others. The nine texts that follow approach these concerns from metaphysical, then psychological, and finally spiritual perspectives. The work concludes with a passage from a poem by Weldon Kees, *A Distance from the Sea*, which likens the psychological sensation of memory to the often confusing physical sensation of viewing the depth of the horizon and landforms between.

Angelus was composed between 2014 and 2018 and the complete work was recorded at the American Academy of Arts and Letters on June 19, 21, and 22, 2019. It was a special pleasure collaborating with soprano Nina Guo on the performance and recording of this piece. Her grace, spirit, and absolute virtuosity shine across the entire work.

This work is dedicated to my mother and to all those who have been displaced by violence and war, to their resilience and search for meaning in darkness.

—John Aylward



THE POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR John Aylward's *Angelus* was a chance encounter with an enigmatic image. As we enter into the piece, we should recall its provenance.

The philosopher, Walter Benjamin, purchased the delicate, astonishing monograph, *Angelus Novus* from the artist, Paul Klee, in 1921. As Benjamin's dear friend, the Kabbalist Gershom Scholem informs us, he repeatedly referred to the picture as his "most important possession." Not long after he acquired *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin was inspired to start an eponymous journal, with a Talmudic legend as its founding premise: "Even the angels," he wrote, "new ones each moment in innumerable bands — are created so that, after they have sung their

hymns before God, they cease and dissolve into the naught.” A decade later, shortly after the Reichstag fire, the exiled philosopher reimagined the angel as talisman of all that he had left behind: “The angel...resembles all from which I have had to part: persons and above all things,” he mused, before posing a characteristically taut, dialectical paradox: “In the things I no longer have, he resides. He makes them transparent, and behind all of them there appears to me the one for whom they are intended.”

Although Benjamin was able to reclaim *Angelus Novus* in 1935, when an acquaintance carried the drawing from Nazi Berlin to Paris, the reunion was short-lived. As Scholem tells us:

When, in June 1940, he fled from Paris and stored his papers in two suitcases — which George Bataille, connected with Benjamin through the College de Sociologie, founded by Bataille, temporarily kept hidden in the Bibliotheque Nationale—Benjamin cut the picture out of the frame and stuffed it into one of the suitcases. And so after the war it made its way to Adorno in America and later in Frankfurt.

Only months before he relinquished *Angelus Novus* for a second time, Benjamin produced a harrowing verbal precis of the image: the ninth of twenty

enigmatic “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” In this psychedelic text, the focus shifts from the viewpoint of the author (who joyously conjures an infinite progression of ceaselessly dissolving angels, or mourns the loss of “things I no longer have”) to the frozen stare of a “weak Messianic power” (Benjamin’s phrase, from the second “Thesis”), unable to save the cultivated European from the catastrophes of history.

Benjamin’s Midrash on Klee’s image fused with his personal fate. Like the picture itself, the text almost disappeared from history. While crossing France to escape the Gestapo, the philosopher sent a copy of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” with its commentary on the *Angelus Novus*, to another intellectual comrade, Hannah Arendt. Several months later, on the day after he was denied passage from Franco’s Spain into Portugal, Benjamin killed himself. Arendt, who herself barely escaped from internment in southern France to make the perilous journey to Portugal and then America, carried the unique copy of Benjamin’s manuscript with her. Arendt’s biographer, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, reports that she and her fellow refugees read the manuscript of Benjamin’s “Theses” aloud, as if it was a sacred text, while they traveled by sea from Lisbon to New York.

Adorno returned Benjamin’s beloved picture, *Angelus Novus*, to Gershom Scholem, who had immigrated to Palestine in the 1920s. Scholem’s family bequeathed the picture to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Years later it was lent

to the Centre Pompidou, where John Aylward and his mother, Monika, encountered it in 2014.

In re-envisioning *Angelus Novus*, John Aylward honors its accreted meanings and catastrophic history. In his hands, however, Benjamin's mystical vision of impotently flapping wings (brilliantly rendered at the end of the work's second movement) appears at the vanishing point of an all-too-human, psychological drama: a struggle for transcendence rendered in a torrent of virtuosic vocalization. The voice is alternatively lyrical, didactic, ironic, bemused, inquisitive, contemplative, and ecstatic. It fitfully glides and soars in the stratosphere. It speaks plainly and sinks into noise. Its volatile relationship to the iridescent colors of its instrumental environment reveals a precarious and never fully-resolved accord between subject and world.

The fraught psychological drama, however, is contained in a taut frame—or rather, a pair of frames, one inside the other. The outer frame consists of settings of two mid-century American poets, avatars of the time and place Benjamin failed to reach. The piece begins with a musical rendering of a conditional verb in Adrienne Rich's repeated phrase—*If the mind were clear*. Instrumental textures progress from pointillism to arabesque and then coalesce to form coherent harmonies supporting a sustained vocal line. The work's overarching riddle comes into focus here, at the borderline between transcendence and disenchantment:

how to “manage the miracle/for which mind is famous.” At the end of the piece, a second American poet, Weldon Kees, presents an unambiguous but still enigmatic resolution—“Life offers no miracles, unfortunately, and needs assistance”—as voice and instruments achieve a more relaxed but still uncertain rapprochement.

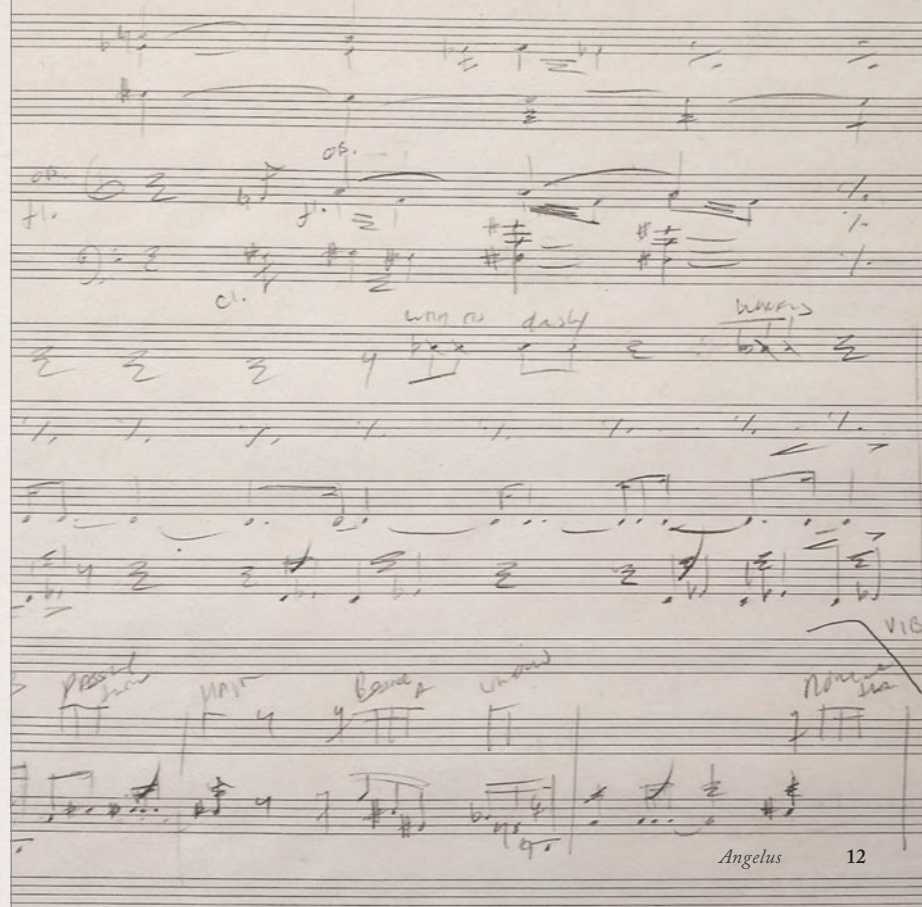
Within this structure, two evocations of an angel's beating wings comprise an internal framework. The first, a wheezing arpeggiation that trails into noise in the second song, evokes Benjamin's vision (“the angel can no longer close its wings”). At the end of the ninth song, the climax of the work as a whole, a hair-raising, *tutti* ascent culminates in a high register halo, the sound of acoustically-beating antique cymbals. The angel has achieved liftoff, but only, it seems, in the ecstatic hallucination of the composition's protagonist.

Within these paired frames, two sets of songs explore the themes of failed and fleeting transcendence, even as they grasp for essences. In the work's early settings of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, D.H. Lawrence, Carl Jung and Thomas Mann, voice and instruments seem to be playing a game of metaphysical hide and seek. In the Nietzsche setting, for example, their convergence on the same pitch (on the word “willing”), seems to hint at an imminent revelation. But later, when this pitch class (sounding an octave lower) is linked to the word “truth,” there is no union of word and pitch: the word is spoken, not sung, and the evanescent hope for an epiphany evaporates. In the run-up to the piece's climax, settings

of excerpts from Plato's *Phaedrus*, music and text turn more frankly spiritual, but, in a further twist, with an explicit link between spirituality and insanity. The music's final apotheosis refuses to settle the question.

Near the beginning of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt spoke to the horrors of the recent past by restating the message of Benjamin's Angel. "[T]here remains also the truth," she wrote, "that every end in history also contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only 'message' which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom." John Aylward's *Angelus* pays tribute to Benjamin by making a new beginning, retelling the story of *Angelus Novus* through the eyes of another refugee, his mother Monika, and her brief, chance encounter with Benjamin's picture in Paris. In transposing the story to another time and place, Aylward's *Angelus* joins Arendt in affirming the first and most hopeful of Benjamin's readings of his beloved picture — an interpretation in which it is emblematic of music-making itself: *Angels — new ones each moment in innumerable bands — are created so that, after they have sung their hymns before God, they cease and dissolve into the naught.*

— Martin Brody





JOHN AYLWARD HAS BEEN DESCRIBED BY the *Boston Globe* as "a composer of wide intellectual curiosity" who summons "textures of efficient richness, delicate and deep all at once." His music is influenced by a range of modern and ancient literature and deeply affected by time spent in the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico. These streams of influence have led to a music that considers ancestral concepts of time, appropriations of indigenous cultures into surrealism, impressionism and post-modernism, and the connections between creative mythologies across civilizations.

Aylward's work has been performed internationally by a range of ensembles and soloists, and his own ensemble, Ecce, has served as a laboratory for his larger projects to take shape. Both as a pianist and as a director of the Etchings Festival, Aylward has supported new music of all kinds through commissions and performances.

Awards and fellowships include those from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (the Walter Hinrichsen Award and a Goddard Lieberman Fellowship), the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University, the Koussevitzky Commission from the Library of Congress, the Fromm Music Foundation, the Fulbright Foundation, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, the MacDowell Colony, the Atlantic Center for the Arts, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, First Prize from the International Society for Contemporary Music, and many others.

Aylward holds composition degrees (MFA, PhD) from Brandeis University and a degree in piano performance (BM) from the University of Arizona. John lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, with his wife Kate, and teaches music composition at Clark University.



ECCE ENSEMBLE is an ensemble of performing and creative artists who take on intensive collaborations and pedagogical projects that touch on important cultural and social aspects of our time. Their core aim is to work in a collaborative, creative, socially engaged and interdisciplinary way. Directors of the group routinely reach out to artists from around the world to assist in the group's collaborative projects, and the ensemble itself is diverse in its talents and creative visions.

Recent collaborations have been with prominent international figures such as Kaija Saariaho, Toshio Hosokawa, Philippe Hurel, Mark Andre, Garth Knox, Keiko Murakami, and a range of other performers, theater artists and movement artists. In the past ten years, over a hundred emerging composers and sound artists from around the globe have been mentored at Etchings, Ecce's annual summer festival in Auvillar, France.



I. What is Possible

From the poem *What is Possible* by Adrienne Rich

A clear night if the mind were clear
If the mind were simple, if the mind were bare
of all but the most classic necessities:
wooden spoon knife mirror
cup lamp chisel
a comb passing through hair beside a window
a sheet
 thrown back by the sleeper

A clear night in which two planets
seem to clasp each other in which the earthly grasses
shift like silk in starlight

 If the mind were clear
and if the mind were simple you could take this mind
this particular state and say
This is how I would live if I could choose:
this is what is possible

A clear night. But the mind
of the woman imagining this the mind
that allows this to be possible
is not clear as the night
is never simple cannot clasp
its truth as the transiting planets clasp each other
does not so easily

 work free from remorse
does not so easily
 manage the miracle
for which mind is famous
 or used to be famous
does not at will become abstract and pure

this woman's mind

does not even will that miracle
having a different mission
 in the universe

If the mind were simple if the mind were bare
it might resemble a room a swept interior
but how could this now be possible

given the voices of the ghost-towns
Their tiny and vast configurations
needing to be deciphered

the oracular night
with its densely working sounds

If it could ever come down to anything like
a comb passing through hair beside a window

no more than that

a sheet
thrown back by the sleeper

but the mind
of the woman thinking this is wrapped in battle
is on another mission

a stalk of grass dried feathery weed rooted in snow
in frozen air stirring a fierce wind graphing

her finger also tracing
pages of a book
knowing better than the poem she reads

knowing through the poem.

through ice-feathered panes

the winter
flexing its talons
the hawk-wind

poised to kill

1980

II. Angelus Novus

Text from *Theses on the Philosophy of History* by Walter Benjamin

Its eyes are staring, its mouth is open, its wings are spread. Its face turned toward the past... He sees one single catastrophe piling wreckage upon wreckage...

The angel would awaken the dead — make whole what has been smashed. A storm is blowing over Paradise. Such violence, the angel can no longer close its wings.

III. Dream Images

Text from *The Will to Power* by Friedrich Nietzsche

The destruction of an illusion does not produce truth, but only one more piece of ignorance, an extension of our 'empty space', our desert... We must value more the force that forms, shapes, simplifies, invents. The ascertaining of truth is fundamentally different from forming, shaping, willing. Thus it is with sounds, but also with the fate of people. We discover in ourselves needs for untruth.

Deception, flattering, lying and cheating, talking behind the back, posing, living in borrowed splendor, being masked, the disguise of convention, acting a role before others and before oneself—in short, the constant fluttering around the single flame of vanity is so much the rule of law that almost nothing is more incomprehensible than how an honest and pure urge for truth could have arisen among us. Deeply immersed in illusions and dream images; our eyes glide only over the surface of things... and our feeling nowhere leads to truth.

IV. The Abstract

Text from *The World as Will and Representation* by Arthur Schopenhauer

Besides our life in the concrete, we live a second life in the abstract. In the former, we are abandoned to all the storms of reality or must struggle, suffer and die. But your life in the abstract, as it stands before your rational consciousness, is a calm reflection of your life and of the world in which we live. Here in the sphere of calm deliberation, what previously possessed you completely and moved you intensely appears to you colorless, and for the moment, foreign and strange.

You are like an actor who has played your part and takes your place in the audience where you quietly look on at whatever may happen, even if it be the preparation of your own death.

V. Supreme Triumph

Text from *Apocalypse* by D.H. Lawrence

What you really want is pure passion. In your *living* wholeness and your *living* unison, not the isolated salvation of your soul. No! You want physical fulfillment first and foremost, since now, once and only once, you are flesh and potent. For the vast marvel is to be alive. As for flower and beast and bird, the supreme triumph is to be most vividly, most perfectly, alive. Whatever the unborn and the dead may know, they cannot know the beauty, the marvel of being alive. The magnificent here and now. Yours, and yours alone, and yours only for a short time... There is nothing of yours that is alone and absolute except your mind. And you will find that the mind has no existence by itself, it is only the glitter of the sun on the surface of the waters.

VI. Secret Memory

Text from *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* by Carl Jung

Further, you find unsatisfied longing... A desire to touch reality, to embrace the earth and fructify the fields of the world. But you make no more than a handful of fitful starts, crippled by a secret memory. A fragment of the world which you encounter again and again, never quite right since it remains resistant, submits only to force. It makes demands on courage and resolution when it comes to throwing your whole being into the scales. For this, you need one capable of relinquishing your first love. A faithless Eros.

VII. Anima

Text by John Aylward & from *Freud and the Future* by Thomas Mann

Your inspiration? Reason for living? An awakening to life? But just the same, an illusionist, a mirage. A paradox: hope and ruin, faith and despair. A reflection of your destiny. Your lover. The conscious face of your anima. Sating your inmost needs? What about your need for temptation? And experience? Ethos. People have hidden desires that society won't condone.

Some say these are sublimated down, into the unconscious. Others ask what if those impulses are there always.

Der geheimnisvolle Gedanke, ist der daß, genau wie im Traume unser eigener Wille, ohne es zu ahnen, als unerbittlich objektives Schicksal auftritt, alles darin aus uns selber kommt und jeder der heimliche Theaterdirektor seiner Träume ist, — auch in der Wirklichkeit, diesem großen Traum, den ein einziges Wesen, der Wille selbst, mit uns allen träumt, unsere Schicksale das Produkt unseres Innersten, unseres Willens sein möchten und wir also das, was uns zu geschehen scheint.

Translation:

Precisely as in a dream it is our own will that unconsciously appears as inexorable objective destiny, everything in it proceeding out of ourselves and each of us being the secret theater director of our own dreams, so also in reality the great dream that a single essence, the will itself, dreams with us all, our fate, may be the product of our inmost selves, of our wills, and we are actually ourselves bringing about what seems to be happening to us.

VIII. Truth

Text from *Phaedrus* by Plato & the Latin Angelus devotion from the Catholic liturgy

The ancient inventors of names! If they had thought madness a disgrace, why would they have called it prophesy? Just as prophesy is more perfect than divination, madness is superior to the sane mind, for the one is human but the other divine. Where plagues and woes have bred, madness lifts her voice and flows to prayers and rites.

Angelus Domini nuntiavit Mariae;
Et concepit de Spiritu Sancto.

There is also a third kind of madness, which is a possession of the Muses.

Gratiam tuam, quaesumus Domine, mentibus nostris infunde: ut qui, Angelo nuntiante, Christi Filii tui incarnationem cognovimus, per passionem eius et crucem ad resurrectionis gloriam perducamur. Per eundem Christum Dominum nostrum.

IX. The Wing

Text from *Phaedrus* by Plato

The wing is the corporeal element which is most akin to the divine. By nature it tends to soar aloft into the habitation of the gods. The divine is beauty, goodness, wisdom; and by these the wing of the soul is nourished and grows.

Souls are eager to behold truth, suited to the highest part of the soul and the wing on which the soul soars. The soul which attains a vision of truth is preserved from harm. When she is unable to follow, and fails to behold truth and sinks beneath her wings, she drops to the ground. The soul which has never seen the truth will not pass into human form. He who employs these memories is being initiated into perfect mysteries and becomes truly perfect.

X. A Distance from the Sea

From the poem *A Distance from the Sea* by Weldon Kees

— The traveller on the plain makes out the mountains
At a distance; then he loses sight. His way
Winds through the valleys; then, at a sudden turning point of a path,
The peaks stand nakedly before him: they are something else
Than what he saw below. (...)

The days get longer. It was a long time ago.
And I have come to that point in the turning of the path
Where the peaks are infinite — horn-shaped and scaly, choked with
thorns. (...)

Life offers up no miracles, unfortunately, and needs assistance.
Nothing will be the same as once it was,
I tell myself. — It's dark here on the peak, and keeps on getting
darker.

It seems I am experiencing a kind of ecstasy.
Was it sunlight on the waves that day? The night comes down.
And now the water seems remote, unreal, and perhaps it is.

Handwritten musical score for "The Little Wren" by Angelus. The score is written on five staves. The first staff is the vocal melody, the second is the piano accompaniment, the third is the vocal melody with lyrics, the fourth is the piano accompaniment, and the fifth is the bass line. The lyrics are: "The little wren is a songster, / He builds his nest in the thicket, / He sings his song in the morning, / And his song is so sweet and true." The score is written in G major and 4/4 time. The title "The Little Wren" is written in the top right corner. The composer's name "Angelus" is written in the bottom right corner. The page number "32" is written in the bottom right corner.

Recorded at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, NY
June 19, 21 & 22, 2019

Joel Gordon, Recording Engineer
Sarah Borgatti, Recording Manager

Mixed and Mastered by Joel Gordon and John Aylward

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Reed.

Cover Image: Klee, Paul. *Angelus Novus*. 1920. Oil transfer and watercolor on
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John Aylward Headshot: Kate Soper

Ecce Ensemble photos: Tina Tallon

Pictured on pages 17-18: (from left to right): Ecce Ensemble: Sam Budish,
Tina Tallon, Jean-Philippe Wurtz, John Aylward, John Popham, Joel Gordon,
Hassan Anderson, Pala Garcia, Nina Guo, Emi Ferguson, Barret Ham

Design: Marc Wolf, marcjwolf.com

Text translations and adaptations by John Aylward

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inventive interpretation. Also, for their love and support, I would like to thank
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& Thomas (dearly departed), and my siblings Clare, Roberta, Eric and Frank. I
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in my work and Cynthia and John Reed for their support, friendship, and shared
love of all that's new in culture. All of these people have given meaning to this
piece and to my work in general. *Angelus* is dedicated to my mother's journey as
a refugee in post-war Germany and to all those displaced by war and violence.



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