

Cassandra's Dream Song: Let's (not) talk about gender

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Abstract: Cassandra's Dream Song (1970), the first flute solo piece by the British 'New Complexity' composer Brian Ferneyhough, has been a controversial and gender related composition for decades. The Western stereotypical stigmatization is still intertwined with the interpretation of this complex masterpiece. In my search for a truthful and contemporary analysis of the piece, I explore Cassandra's psychological path.

Keywords: Hysteria; gender stigmatization; conceptual interpretation

Brian Ferneyhough (1943), the British composer, generally described as the 'father of New Complexity', drastically changed the oeuvre for flute in 1970. His first solo piece for the instrument, *Cassandra's Dream Song*, was so advanced, it took up to 4 years before it was premiered. In 1974, one of the most renowned avant-garde flutists of that time, Pierre-Yves Artaud, brought this stunningly complex work to life.

Besides the extremely complicated musical notation, the structure of the piece was also quite bizarre for the more conventional music scene in the 1970s. The piece consists of two pages, whereby the lines of page one are alternated with a line of the performer's choice from page two. Therefore, the performer has a big influence in the structural course of the piece. In his *performance notes*, Ferneyhough instructs the performer to not determine the order of the lines beforehand, but to instantly decide on stage. That should preserve the unique character and free experience of the piece, every time it is being performed.

The mythical figure of *Cassandra*

In order for a performer to determine this 'free structure' in a profound and logical way, it is advisable to examine the mythological figure of Cassandra. She was one of the eighteen daughters of King Priam of Troy – she also had 67 brothers! – and was chosen by the god Apollo to become a seer. If Cassandra would agree to spend the night with him, Apollo would reward her with the gift of fortune-telling. While the moment of passionate lust was approaching, Cassandra had second thoughts and she did not fulfill her part of the deal. Apollo, not used to being treated this way, was beside himself with anger. Unfortunately for him, a gift of the gods could not be made undone and he already had blessed Cassandra with her supernatural gift. Historical sources about this act differ widely: some say Cassandra was spat in the mouth by Apollo himself. Others claim that Apollo first disguised himself into a wolf, before spitting into her mouth to provide the godly gift. Yet other sources tell the story of Cassandra as a child, falling asleep in a temple of Apollo. A snake approached her and whispered something into her ear. When she woke up, she possessed the extraordinary gift².

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² Homeros. *Illias*. ca. 850 B.C.

Appolodorus. *Bibliotheca*. ca. 1st – 2nd century A.D.

Hyginus. *Fabulae*. ca. 2nd century A.D.

Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. 458 A.D.

<http://revistas.ua.pt/index.php/impar>

A god would not be a god without having a trick up his sleeve: Apollo cursed Cassandra's gift. She would be able to predict the future and always tell the truth, but no one would ever believe her.

Cassandra was very interested in the political and societal life within the palace walls of Troy. Often, she tried to warn her father, King Priam, and his closest advisors of impending distressing disasters. But, as according to Apollo's plan, no one took her predictions seriously.

Cassandra became more and more desperate and frustrated. More than once, she was carried out of her father's royal chambers, screaming and crying.

Female hysteria was born.³

Musical analysis of the piece

Cassandra's Dream Song can be analyzed on three different sub-levels or *layers* (Vanoveren, 2016): the micro layer, the macro layer and the middle ground. The **micro layer** is defined by the execution and analysis of all the little details and techniques within the score. The **macro layer** or the overall structure of the piece, is mostly determined by the structure of the **middle ground**, which is the organic and logic connection between the lines on both pages. This is in order to create a personal and surprising structural interpretation of the piece, each time it is performed.

The next quote from the composer himself – after hearing many performances of his work – regarding this middle ground, caused great controversy, which led to an indelible gender-related connotation of the piece:

The lack of a consciously analytical approach to the piece – the solving of the middle ground – is where many performances, particularly by women, have been less than successful in realizing the work's formal and expressive potential (Waterman, 1994, p.156).

The fact that more and more performers – and for the first time also female performers – performed the piece, caused Ferneyhough to say this very unfortunate quote. In the 70s and 80s, most professional flute players were men and in the small niche of contemporary music, this imbalance was even more prominent. From the end of the 80s and especially from the early 90s onwards, under the guidance of a strong female counter-movement in the musical scene, the contemporary performance landscape became more diverse. It will come as no surprise that this deplorable quote was targeted by many female performers and musicologists of that time (Waterman, 1994).

The first (male) performers of the piece, Pierre-Yves Artaud⁴ and later on Harrie Starreveld⁵, interpreted the *middle ground* based on a mathematical analysis of both pages – the so-called *pioneer's version* (Waterman, 1994). The feminist equivalent by Dr. Ellen Waterman, focuses on the emotional development of Cassandra in order to give structure to the piece.

³ Homerus, ca. 850 B.C.

⁴ Neuma: New Music Series, Vol.2, Neuma 45072, 1988.

⁵ Interview with Brian Ferneyhough, March 4th 2015.

<http://revistas.ua.pt/index.php/impair>

The pioneer's version

Artaud and Starreveld used the mathematical construction of the first page to determine the (fixed) order of the second page. The amount of sections appearing on page one is structured according to the principle of a palindrome (2-4-5-5-4-2) (fig.1). Inspired by this analysis, the pioneers structured the order of the second page according to a similar mathematical approach. They counted the amount of sections per line and sorted them in an increasing order (4-6-8-9-11) (fig.2). The constantly diminishing sections, where the performer needs to breathe more often in a more restless way, contribute to the metaphor of Cassandra's hysterical episodes.

Here is the structure of the piece according to the *pioneer's version* (Waterman, 1994):

Line 1 (2 sections)	Line C (4 sections)
Line 2 (4 sections)	Line E (6 sections)
Line 3 (5 sections)	Line D (8 sections)
Line 4 (5 sections)	Line A (9 sections)
Line 5 (4 sections)	Line B (11 sections)
Line 6 (2 sections)	

Figure 1 Cassandra's Dream Song for flute solo (1970) by Brian Ferneyhough, edition Peters, page 1 - mathematical analysis

Figure 2 Cassandra's Dream Song for flute solo (1970) by Brian Ferneyhough, edition Peters, page 2 - mathematical analysis

The climax of the piece – the highest note (D7) – occurs at the end of line B, which only emphasizes the analyzed and organic character of this interpretation.

For me, this interpretation contains two problematic implications. First of all: the order of the second page is predetermined and fixed, although Ferneyhough specifically asks for the opposite in his performance notes. Secondly: this interpretation maintains the rather archaic and rudimentary binarity within Western classical music (Sergeant, 2016).

Page one, the *Apollo voice* or the 'male page' is well-balanced, rational and notated in a very rigid and structured way. Page two, the *Cassandra voice* or the 'female page' is rather chaotic, hysterical and all over the place (Waterman, 1994).

The feminist version

During her doctoral education in the early 90's at the University of California, San Diego, contemporary flutist Dr. Ellen Waterman, decided to update the analysis of *Cassandra's Dream Song*. It bothered her that Artaud and Starreveld embedded the piece in such a patriarchal interpretation (Waterman, 1994). She was not only disturbed by the controlled, rational and mathematical approach, she also decided that the stigmatization of the female protagonist, as the prototype of a hysterical woman, could use some restyling. Waterman decided to research the myth of Cassandra and Apollo more profoundly and turned towards the novel *Kassandra* by the German author Christa Wolf.⁶ She tells the myth of Cassandra from the perspective of the female protagonist, not from a male dominated and patriarchal point of view, as usually happened in the tradition of old-Greek storytelling.

Waterman uses Wolf's description of Cassandra's emotional evolution, as a woman in a patriarchal society, as the guideline for her – fixed and predetermined – order of the second page (Waterman, 1994) (fig.3):

- Line A (blind ambition)
- Line E (formation of an individual voice)
- Line C (choice)
- Line B (hysteria)
- Line D (resolution, self-knowledge)

⁶ Wolf, Christa. *Kassandra*. Baker & Taylor, CATS, 2009.
<http://revistas.ua.pt/index.php/impair>

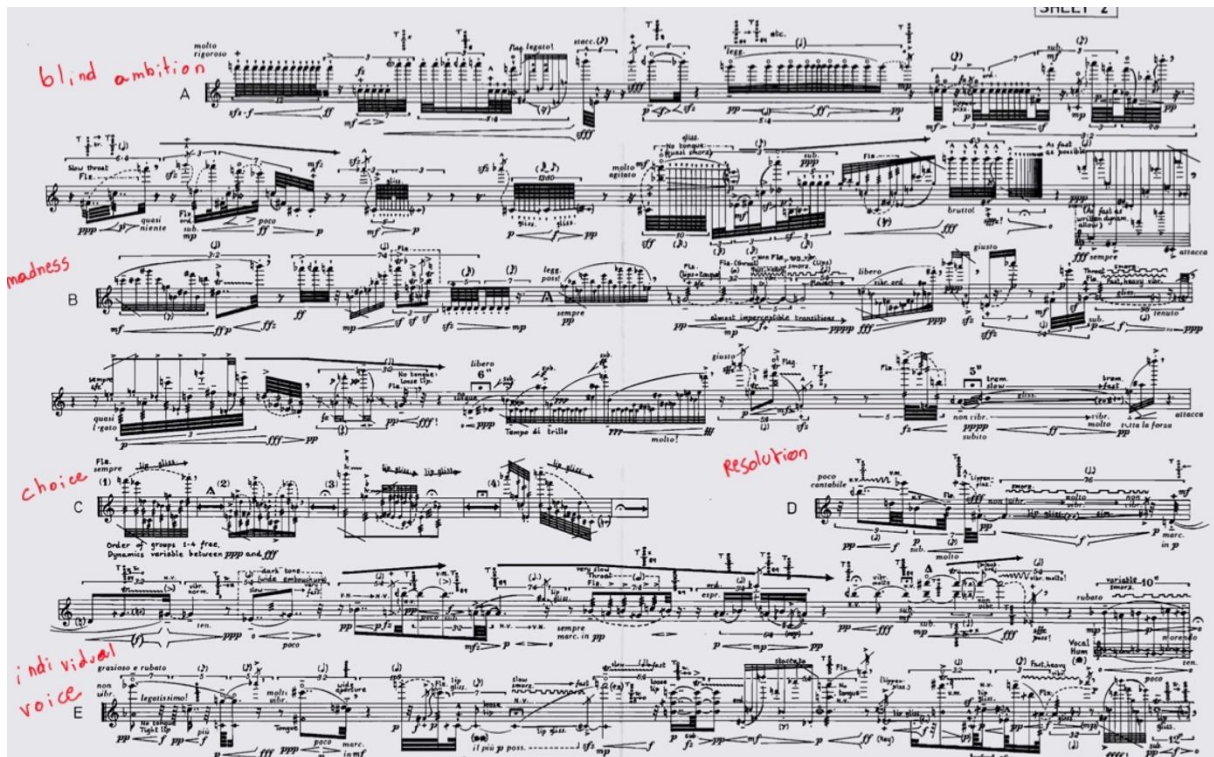


Figure 3 Cassandra's Dream Song for flute solo (1970) by Brian Ferneyhough, edition Peters, page 2 - feminist analysis

This version also avoids Ferneyhough's instruction to not predetermine the order of the second page. And exactly as the pioneer's version in the 70's and 80's, this interpretation is also imbued with a stereotypical and archaic atmosphere. Men approach the structure of the piece in a mathematical and rational way, 'solid and sound', as it should be! Women, on the other hand, dig into the emotional narrative of the leading character, as though fulfilling an empathic stereotype, you know, as they should be!

These approaches, however, undermine one of Ferneyhough's most important instructions for the piece: total freedom of structure.

Cassandra in the 20th century

It is that 'total freedom of structure' that is of great interest to me. When a composer so explicitly writes down that the structure and order of the piece cannot be determined and rigidly fixed beforehand, it has indisputable consequences for the interpretation.

Strongly holding on to a gender-related – and thus rigid and binary – interpretation destroys every chance on flexibility in the structural course.

That is why I decided to consider the figure of Cassandra as an allegory, rather than a gender-determined figure. This led me to a psychological approach. The *Cassandra Complex* is a psychological phenomenon that has been used in specialized literature since 1949, ever since the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard referred to the term as 'events that can be known beforehand'.

In 1963, psychologist Melanie Klein, explained the Cassandra metaphor by describing people suffering from severe physical or psychological pain, seen from a tormenting and personal point of view. When these people try to explain their suffering – and the cause of it – to people they trust, they are not believed (Klein, 2002).

In 1988, psychologist Laurie Layton Shapira researched the different possible causes of the *Cassandra Complex*. These were her conclusions:

1. A dysfunctional relation of the 'victim' with a 'Apollo archetype'
2. An emotional or physical suffering
3. Not being believed when one tries to explain the cause of their suffering

But actually, Shapira still confirmed the stereotyped image of a hysterical woman, by constantly describing the Cassandra archetype as the 'Cassandra woman':

What the Cassandra woman sees is something dark and painful that may not be apparent on the surface of things or that objective facts do not corroborate. She may envision a negative or unexpected outcome; or something, which would be difficult to deal with; or a truth, which others, especially authority figures, would not accept. In her frightened, ego-less state, the Cassandra woman may blurt out what she sees, perhaps with the unconscious hope that others might be able to make some sense of it. But to them her words sound meaningless, disconnected and blown out of all proportion (Shapira, 2006, p.65).

Where the previous psychologists still researched the *Cassandra Complex* within the well-known stereotyped gender specifications, Jean Shinoda Bolen – around the same time – introduced a non-gender specific explanation of the metaphor:

Women often find that a particular [male] god exists in them as well, just as I found that when I spoke about goddesses, men could identify a part of themselves with a specific goddess. Gods and goddesses represent different qualities in the human psyche. The pantheon of Greek deities together, male and female, exist as archetypes in us all... There are gods and goddesses in every person (Bolen, 2014, p.x - xi).

Bolen describes the Apollo archetype as someone who is dominant, rational and strictly analytical, regardless of his or her gender. When the Cassandra archetype – mostly unsuccessfully – tries to open someone's eyes, this person often reacts from an emotion of injustice and will therefore be seen as a hysterical person by the other party. Bolen also suggests that the Cassandra archetype is not hysterical by nature, but that the hysteria is triggered by a dysfunctional relationship with a negative adjusted Apollo archetype (Bolen, 2014).

Embedding in a present-day society

To include this psychological and metaphoric definition of Cassandra in my artistic and interpretational analysis, I searched for examples of this complex in our modern-day life, such as, for example, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS). Patients with CFS are often extremely tired and suffer from chronic muscle pain (Hellinckx & Hellinckx, 2010), but it can

take years before these patients are believed by their physician and before they receive an official diagnosis. Their physical suffering is emphasized by an emotional battle, whereby most patients will hear that the cause of their suffering is strictly psychological. This constant battle may cause frustration, depressive feelings and isolation, which only emphasizes the original symptoms and can cause an impression of hysteria.

Even though the *Cassandra Complex* freed itself from a gender-related context, this approach is still too binary orientated in order to develop a completely free structure of *Cassandra's Dream Song*. This still enhances a polarizing approach – the 'you against me'-story. Page one against page two. The Apollonian blind wall against the hysterical frustration of a Cassandra archetype.

A further derivative of the *Cassandra Complex* is the *Cassandra Dilemma* or the *Cassandra metaphor*, where the Cassandra figure is used as a conceptual symbol for all those who paint a realistic picture but are not being believed.

A known example of the *Cassandra metaphor* is Warren Buffet. Years before the disastrous Wall Street crash, Buffet warned investors and shareholders of the giant 'stock market bubble', that was about to burst. His warnings were of course ignored, since the *big guys* of Wall Street could not imagine a future without their beloved *big bucks*. Nevertheless, the bubble burst and the consequences were devastating. This gave Buffet the nickname of the '*Wall Street Cassandra*' (LaRocque, 2007, p.60).

Also, climatology is a crucial issue within the subject matter of the *Cassandra metaphor*. For decades, climatologists warn us of global warming and the related natural disasters. All these warnings have been ignored by world leaders and governments, for as long as they are being expressed. Why? Because the efforts will cost too much money? Because world powers can shift? Because this future perspective is too pessimistic? In 1999, climatologist Alan AtKisson described this extreme complexity of the *Cassandra Dilemma* within the problematic field of climate change:

The people who gave the warnings about the bad conditions of our environment and the possible occurring disasters are being blamed that their predictions set the disaster in motion (AtKisson, 2000, p.22).

That is the world upside down: experts who are capable of interpreting all these alarming signals are being held responsible for the disastrous consequences that will follow. This happens because the actual consequences are often more severe than originally predicted. The time span between a prediction and the occurring natural disaster is rather large. It is large enough for mankind to continue living the way they are used to, without giving up their modern-day comforts. The input (e.g. the energy waste) is increasing daily, therefore the expected output (the natural disaster) is also exponentially growing.

The conceptual version

The latter concept is an important factor in my personal, conceptual analysis and interpretation of *Cassandra's Dream Song*. The given input will determine the output. The

way an event is communicated (an action) and interpreted (a reaction), establishes the factual output at that particular moment (result/chaos).

I do not condemn one voice to one specific page, but both *action* (the sound world around 'A', marked in green) and *reaction* (the sound world around 'Bb', marked in purple) are represented on both pages and are constantly in conversation with each other. The way I execute the material on page one (the intensity, the technical (im)perfections, the failure or non-failure, ...) will determine the material on page two (result/chaos, marked in orange). This is the key to total structural freedom (Vanoeveren, 2016). (fig. 4)

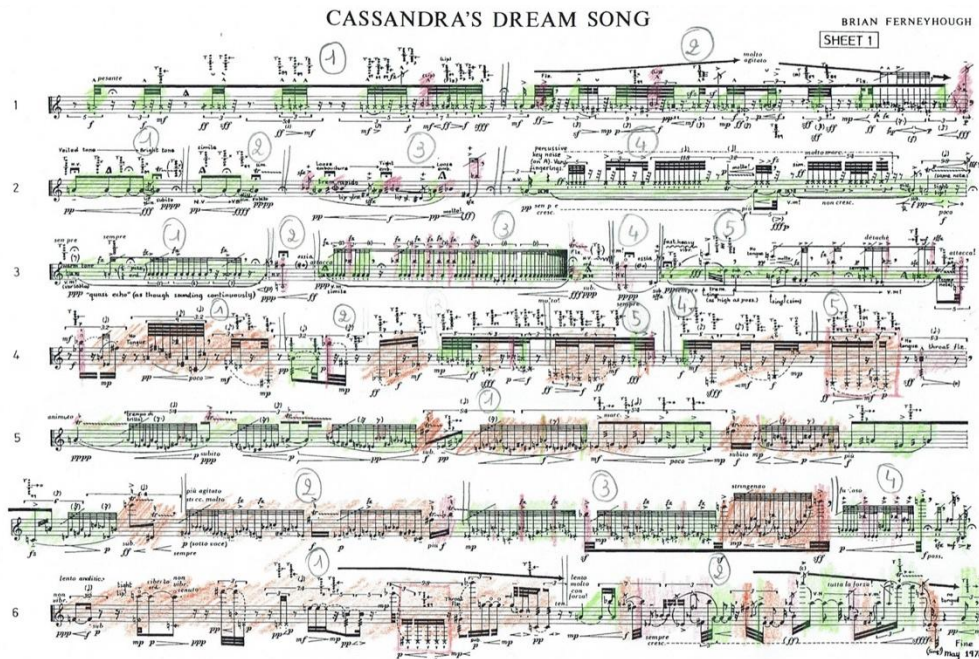


Figure 4 Cassandra's Dream Song for flute solo (1970) by Brian Ferneyhough, edition Peters, page 1 - conceptual analysis

The word *chaos* has been specifically chosen for this case. Since I embed the *Cassandra metaphor* in 21st century society, and we are not being spared from predicted or unforeseen disasters (nuclear threats, ISIS, global warming, polarization, etc...), I believe the word 'chaos' is pretty accurate. But in Greek mythology, *Chaos* is also the *Nothing* from which the gods were born. Moreover, *Chaos* was gender neutral and cold, *nothing* as well as *everything* (Boyett, 2016).

The embedding within Greek mythology is strongly apparent in my interpretational analysis. I choose to process elements from the original myth, or Greek storytelling in general, within the micro layer of the piece: details and small motives are given meaning by linking them to mythological anecdotes.

As an example, I like to refer to the *pizzicati* in the first phrase of the piece: by specifically choosing the technique, where the tongue is catapulted forwards from the middle of the pallet, I imitate Apollo spitting into Cassandra's mouth on the moment where she received her gift.

At the end of line D, the performer has to sing in unison with the flute line. Instead of determined and confident singing, Ferneyhough writes *glissandi* in the voice line and

smorzando in the flute line, resulting in a trembling, undefined melody. This line, that starts with the development of the second voice (Bb sound world), focuses on the insecurity and fear of a young Cassandra, terrified by her visions and robbed from her self-confidence by a politically patriarchal society.

Line 4 is not idiosyncratically written, which is pretty rare in Ferneyhough’s music for solo flute. The key-clicks can never be produced in the written dynamics – a fact the composer is absolutely aware of. This can be symbolically interpreted as Cassandra trying to be heard but being muffled by the hostile circumstances at the Trojan court.⁷

In order to determine the structural interpretation of the *middle ground*, I prefer to leave the rigid course of the myth behind and turn to the allegoric approach of Cassandra. The story of the myth is thousands of years old. Whether we look at it from an original patriarchal point of view, or from an emancipated point of view with the focus on the female protagonist, the result of the story will never change. For me, it seems impossible for a non-binary and non-gender related interpretation to be determined by a millennia-old *myth* – or as the word also implies: a fable.

To get rid of this pre-determined outcome – and with it a pre-determined structure of the piece – I apply a more fluid structure.

The *middle ground* of my conceptual interpretation is as follows:

Table1 Middle ground of the conceptual interpretation

Line 1	Line D
Line 2	Line A, C or E – with free order of the sections of line C
Line 3	Line A, C or E – with free order of the sections of line C
Line 4	Line A, C or E – with free order of the sections of line C
Line 5	Line B
Line 6	

The remarkable elements in this structure are the predetermined lines D and B and the free order of line C. This last line consists of 4 separate sections, where the performer not only has the freedom to decide the order of the sections, but also the dynamics and the tempo indications, which were not described by the composer.

I choose intentionally to play line D after finishing line 1. *Action* (the sound world around A) is very dominant in line 1. There is only a glimpse of a sounding Bb (*Reaction*) at the end of the line. In order to develop the dialogue between action and reaction, I choose to continue with

⁷ For the complete analysis, please see: “Vanoeveren, Ine. *Confined walls of unity: the reciprocal relation between notation and interpretation in Brian Ferneyhough’s oeuvre for flute solo*. UC San Diego Electronic Theses and Dissertations. 2016, pp. 13-25. <http://revistas.ua.pt/index.php/impair>

line D, since that same sounding Bb is being developed beautifully at the beginning of that line. This will shape a strong foundation for the rest of the piece.

I follow the logic of the pioneers and Dr. Waterman to choose line B as the last line of the second page. As I described before, the line ends with the highest note of the piece (D7) and this indisputably establishes a climax-feeling. Within the concept of the *Cassandra Dilemma* it can also be interpreted as the final hammer blow before the melancholic and reflective character of line 6 sinks in.

Indeed, I also plead guilty to predetermining a small part of the structure. The big difference is that I, many years and countless performances of *Cassandra's Dream Song* later, can leave this logic behind and choose a more impulsive path, because I am not stuck to a rigid structural analysis. Since the input is constantly changing (together with me as a person and as a performer), the output will always be determined by new turns and twists, evolutions and changes. I truly hope that, in 30 years, I will have a completely new interpretation of the piece, because that would only confirm the conceptual course of the *Cassandra Dilemma* and emphasize the timeless character of Ferneyhough's composition.

Darmstadt 2016

On numerous occasions in 2015 and 2016, I talked with Ferneyhough about this piece and his music in general. In the summer of 2016, during the *Internationalen Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* in Darmstadt, we gave a joint presentation about *Cassandra's Dream Song* and all his other solo works for flute. That would be the first time he would hear and read my final interpretational analysis and I was more than a little nervous to hear his comments. I knew he never fully agreed with the feminist version of Dr. Waterman – although he voluntarily contributed to her research – since he never had the conscious intention to write a gender related composition. The performances and analyses afterwards gave *Cassandra's Dream Song* a negative gender stereotyped connotation.

Fortunately, he agreed with this interpretation and analysis. Although the *Cassandra Complex* and the *Cassandra Dilemma* were not yet developed when he wrote the piece in 1970, he immediately felt a strong connection with the metaphor. He was visibly relieved that I didn't repeat the general misconception of him being a solely cerebral composer, since he would consider himself as a very impulsive artist – however unbelievable that may seem looking at his specific notational style. On the one hand he is a very analytical and thoughtful person, on the other hand he is also very emotional, intense and impulsive.

For him, *Cassandra's Dream Song* is a piece in continuous motion. He described his compositional process as 'an internal conflict between structure and artistry', which inevitably resulted in a binarity in his composition, without having the intention to stigmatize a certain, or any, gender.

To emphasize his creativity and impulsiveness he brought two art works to the lecture (fig. 5): *his* interpretation of *my* analysis of *Cassandra's Dream Song*.

And with a wink he added that 'these [art works] will probably look completely different tomorrow than they look today.'



Figure 5 Painting by Brian Ferneyhough (2016)

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