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# Caroline Shaw's Musical Portraits

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Composer, singer, and violinist Caroline Shaw is best known for her Pulitzer prize-winning *Partita for 8 Voices*, her performances with the vocal ensemble *Roomful of Teeth*, and her cross-genre collaborations with artists including Kanye West.[1] Beyond *Partita*, however, Shaw's work has received little scholarly attention.[2] As a first step towards exploring this repertoire, I isolate one widespread compositional device in Shaw's music: intertextuality. To narrow things further, I examine one *type* of intertextuality in Shaw's compositions. Though most of Shaw's pieces employ intertextual techniques to some degree, I argue that a subset of her works can be interpreted as musical portraits of other works. Adapting Joshua Walden's (2009, 2018) studies on musical portraits, and Wendy Steiner's (1987) exploration of abstract portraiture in literature and the visual arts, I explore this compositional procedure through analyses of the string quartet, *Blueprint* (2016), and the piano piece *Gustave Le Gray* (2012). In both analyses, my goal is to demonstrate how Shaw's works, like the modernist portraits of the early twentieth-century and the musical portraits of individuals from the eighteenth-century, can function as *representations* of their musical subjects. This presentation, taken from a larger project on Shaw's music, presents some preliminary analytical observations. Ongoing and future work explores these ideas in greater detail.

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[1] For an overview of Shaw's various collaborations, see Stacey Anderson, "Is Caroline Shaw really the future of music?" *The Guardian*, June 9, 2016., https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/jun/09/caroline-shaw-classical-music-kanye-west; accessed June 26, 2019.

[2] Recent work on the *Partita* includes the Ithaca Music Forum at Ithaca College, with paper presentations by Crystal Peebles, Timothy Johnson, and Sara Haefeli. The Forum was held on December 6, 2017. See also Anna Fulton (2019).

Walden has studied the long history of musical portraiture from its 18th-century origins in works by François Couperin and C.P.E. Bach (2008) to contemporary examples in twentieth- and twenty-first-century works by composers including Virgil Thompson, Morton Feldman, and Philip Glass (2018). David Fuller (1997) traces the genre's roots to the short literary portraits of members of the French aristocracy that were fashionable in the 1650s (157–160). Musical portraits are necessarily more abstract than painted or literary portraits, but Walden demonstrates how composers such as C.P.E. Bach believed that music could be as effective as other media in its ability to represent a subject, and that musical portraits should concentrate on the subject's personality and character (2009, 379). For example, in his keyboard portrait, *La Stahl*, Bach represents the "respectable social standing and temperament" of his friend and doctor Georg Ernst Stahl through musical topics, combining "chorale and French overture gestures" in D minor with "the singing style to evoke Stahl's gentle, sensitive nature" (390–391). The audience associates the composition with its subject—in this case, Stahl—largely because of the title, which provides a "lens through which to perceive notes and structures as representations of human characteristics" (380).[3]

The portraitist's focus on inner character rather than physical description—on abstract, subjective impression rather than realism—is not limited to musical depictions. In the 20th century, literary and visual portraitists frequently abandoned literal representation in favor of a "broader and multi-dimensional conception of the indivisible aspects of the sitter's subjectivity" (Walden 2018, 5). Charles Demuth's painting, "I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold" (1928), and Gertrude Stein's poem, "If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso" (1923) are representative examples. Figure 1 reproduces Demuth's painting. The work—a portrait of the

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[3] To hear C.P.E. Bach's piece: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbBxC5Q2Y2M

poet William Carlos Williams—is named after latter's poem "The Great Figure," and consists of, among other images related to that poem, three figure 5s. Eschewing physical portrayal, Demuth represents Williams via allusion to Williams' poetry.[4]

**Figure 1.** Charles Demuth, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (1928). Oil, graphite, ink, and gold leaf on paperboard. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Stein's modernist poem is the literary equivalent of Demuth's painting, as it refers to Picasso only in the title, without referencing biographical details of Picasso's life. Like Bach's *La Stahl*, Stein's title helps the reader interpret the poem with Picasso in mind—a connection that might not be possible otherwise.

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[4] This and additional basic information is summarized in The Metropolitan Museum of Art's entry: https://www.metmuseum.org/en/art/collection/search/488315. For a detailed analysis, see Aiken (1987).

The works discussed so far portray individuals. Many (but not all) of Shaw's musical portraits, on the other hand, take other musical works as their subjects. Shaw's portraits depict their subjects through a variety of means: sometimes directly, through quotation, and other times indirectly or abstractly, by developing characteristic motivic, textural, harmonic, or formal details extrapolated from the subject work—a process I argue is analogous to a modernist portrait such as Demuth's "I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold."

Shaw composed the string quartet *Blueprint* in 2016 for the Aizuri Quartet on a commission by the Wolf Trap foundation for the Performing Arts.[5] Figure 2 reproduces Shaw's accompanying program note.

**Figure 2. Caroline Shaw's program note for *Blueprint* (2016).**

The Aizuri Quartet's name comes from "aizuri-e," a style of Japanese woodblock printing that primarily uses a blue ink. In the 1820s, artists in Japan began to import a particular blue pigment known as "Prussian blue," which was first synthesized by German paint producers in the early 18th century and later modified by others as an alternative to indigo. The story of *aizuri-e* is one of innovation, migration, transformation, craft, and beauty. *Blueprint,* composed for the incredible Aizuri Quartet, takes its title from this beautiful blue woodblock printing tradition as well as from that familiar standard architectural representation of a proposed structure: the blueprint. This piece began its life as a harmonic reduction — a kind of floor plan — of Beethoven's string quartet Op. 18, No. 6. As a violinist and violist, I have played this piece many times, in performance and in joyous late-night reading sessions with musician friends. (One such memorable session included Aizuri's marvelous cellist, Karen Ouzounian.) Chamber music is ultimately about conversation without words. We talk to each other with our dynamics and articulations, and we try to give voice to the composers whose music has inspired us to gather in the same room and play music. *Blueprint* is also a conversation — with Beethoven, with Haydn (his teacher and the "father" of the string quartet), and with the joys and *malinconia* of his Op. 18, No. 6.

As described in the program note, the title, *Blueprint*, has two meanings. Firstly, the color blue references the name of the Aziuri Quartet, whose name derives from Japanese woodblock

printing characterized by the use of blue ink. Secondly, the title refers to the architectural

schematic. In reference to this second meaning, Shaw writes that the "piece began its life as a

harmonic reduction—a kind of floor plan—of Beethoven's string quartet Op. 18, No. 6," later

mentioning the work's "joys and *malinconia*" [emphasis original] (Shaw 2016). Both meanings

suggest representation: one meaning refers to a literal blue woodblock print; the other to a bird's

eye view of a structure. Both meanings suggest interpreting *Blueprint* as a portrait of

Beethoven's work could yield meaningful analytical insights.

**Figure 3.** A form diagram of *Blueprint*.

| Section 1 (intro.) | Section 2 | Transition | Section 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| mm. 1 – 60 | mm. 61 – 156 | mm. 157 – 215 | mm. 216 – 265 |
| B min. → V/Bß maj. | Bß maj. | unstable | Bß maj. |
| Newly composed material; stylistic allusions | Decontextualized juxtaposition of Beethoven's 1st movement | Fragments of direct quotations of Beethoven's *malinconia* emerge | Sustained quotations form the presto finale juxtaposed with new material |

Figure 3 diagrams the large-scale form of *Blueprint*. My analysis segments the movement

into three large sections and a transition. Section 1 is a sixty-measure introduction consisting of

newly-composed material along with fleeting allusions to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

harmonic idioms. Section 2 decontextualizes features of Beethoven's first movement, extracting

and juxtaposing its characteristic musical gestures. A transitional passage leads to Section 3,

where a series of increasingly obvious quotations of Beethoven's finale conclude the quartet. The

overall form of *Blueprint* reflects what Peter Burkholder (1985) calls a "cumulative setting,"

whereby the composer "develops motives from the [source] tune or presents important

countermelodies before the theme itself is whole at the end" (3). Section 1 presents occasional

stylistic allusions to common practice tonal language, Section 2 employs jumbled fragments of

Beethoven's first movement, while unadorned, direct quotations emerge in the transition and

Section 3.

Figures 4–9 review the process in detail. Figure 4 shows the beginning of *Blueprint*. The

repetitive initial idea is a characteristic opening strategy for Shaw, as evidenced by Figures 5a

and 5b which excerpt the openings of the string quartet *Entr'acte* (2011) and *Gustave Le Gray*

(2012) respectively.

**Figure 4.** *Blueprint*, beginning. The initial idea is boxed.

**Figure 5a:** *Entr'acte*, beginning. The initial idea is labeled.



**Figure 5b.** *Gustave Le Gray*, beginning. The initial idea is labeled.

Note the similarities between the three openings: in all three pieces a compact fragment recurs incessantly, generating a larger opening section. *Blueprint's* opening E minor sonority turns out to be the subdominant of B minor by measure 10. While typical of Shaw, the slow introduction coupled with the off-tonic beginning might be interpreted as a veiled reference to the many famous off-tonic beginnings heard in Beethoven's music.[6] For the most part, however, Section 1 avoids obvious quotation or allusion. Instead it showcases musical devices familiar to Shaw's musical language including frequent ostinati and the use of microtonal pitch-bending. Section 1 functions as a musical frame, akin to a canvas onto which Shaw will develop her portrait of Beethoven's quartet.

**Figure 6.** *Blueprint*, the juncture between Sections 1 and 2, mm. 55 – 61.



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Figure 6 shows the seam between Sections 1 and 2. In contrast to the contemporary musical language of most of Section 1, the concluding half-cadence in measures 58–60 suggests a different world. Section 2, beginning at rehearsal C, introduces decontextualized fragments of Beethoven's quartet. Shaw alludes to these fragments in her score marking, "*yay opus 18 partay*" [italics original].

**Figure 7.** Musical relations are highlighted.

**(a)** The beginning of Beethoven's op. 18, no. 6.
**(b)** mm. 71ff of Shaw's *Blueprint*.

**Figure 8.** Quotations of Beethoven's op. 18, no. 6, iv in *Blueprint* (2016) along with their original versions.

**(a)** Beethoven, op. 18, no. 6, iv, measures 19ff. The arrow marks the beginning of the quotation.



**(b)** Shaw's quotation in *Blueprint*, measures 190ff. The arrow corresponds to the arrow in (a).

**(c)** Beethoven, op. 18, no. 6, iv, before the *Allegretto quasi Allegro*.



**(d)** Shaw, *Blueprint*, measures 206ff.

**Figure 9.** Similar passages at the conclusion of Beethoven's op. 18, no. 6 and Shaw's *Blueprint*.

**(a)** Beethoven, op. 18, no. 6, iv, *Prestissimo* to the end.



**(b)** Shaw, *Blueprint*, measure 229–end.

Figure 7 compares Beethoven's original (top) to Shaw's portrait (bottom). Annotations on the figure illustrate how the ostinato, sixteenth-note figure, and Bb major arpeggiations in Beethoven's movement are reconfigured in Shaw's portrait. Section 2 comprises the bulk of the quartet. Figure 8 shows how quotations from Beethoven's quartet begin to permeate Shaw's work in the transition to Section 3. Here, literal quotations gradually emerge from Shaw's portrait. Figure 9 excerpts a passage from Section 3 near the end of *Blueprint*, where Shaw quotes the main theme of Beethoven's quartet at length. *Blueprint*'s final cadence, a pizzicato version of Beethoven's original, provides a belated answer to the half-cadence that concluded Section 1.

In her program note, Shaw writes that "*Gustave Le Gray* is a multi-layered portrait of Chopin's [Mazurka] op. 17, #4" (2012d). Shaw's use of "portrait" is likely colloquial yet suggestive, as Gustave Le Gray (1820–1884) is by many accounts the most important French

photographer of the 19ᵗʰ century, credited with inventing an improved technique for developing

photographic negatives by waxing the paper (Daniel 2004). Shaw's initial performance direction

references this innovation: "like a photograph slowly developing on wax paper" (2012d). While

Shaw's performance direction resonates locally with the musical character of the opening, this

analysis will concentrate on a wider interpretive perspective. Crucially, unlike the portraits

discussed by Walden, I will not interpret *Gustave* as a portrait of Le Gray despite the piece's

title. Rather, I interpret the work as a portrait of Chopin's Mazurka. Under my reading, the

performance instruction and title, by referring to a well-known French photographer from

Chopin's era, will provide further support for drawing connections between Shaw's composition

and the portrait medium.

Figure 10 is a formal overview of the piece. The structure is modular: short, contrasting

episodes strung together create a discontinuous whole. Only the opening material and a passing

reference to the music of Module E return. In the middle of Module C, Shaw gives the pianist the

option to quote Chopin's A minor Mazurka, op. 17, no.4. In the premiere, pianist Amy Yang

played the entire Chopin Mazurka at this point.[7] Other pianists quote only the short passage

included in the score.[8] Figure 11 is a score excerpt of *Gustave* showing the place where the

pianist may insert the Mazurka. The text in the figure is printed in the score. After the optional

quotation, Shaw's notation gradually emerges from the fuzzy print of the Mazurka's incipit,

contrasting Chopin's original from Shaw's musical portrait.

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[7] A recording of this performance is available for purchase along with the score at https://caroline-shaw-editions.myshopify.com/collections/frontpage/products/gustave-le-gray.

[8] See for example, Gregory Oh's performance on September 19, 2015 at The Harbourfront Theatre Centre in Toronto, Canada. Oh chooses not to quote Chopin at all. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGixCen911c (accessed April 20, 2019).

**Figure 10.** A formal overview of *Gustave Le Gray* (2012).

|  | Portraits<br>(108 measures) |  | Photograph<br>(Optional quotation + 24 measures) |  | Portraits<br>(106 measures) |  |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A<br>*1 – 40* | B<br>*41 – 108* | C<br>*109 – 133* | D<br>*134 – 164* | E<br>*165 – 195* | F<br>*196 – 203* | E'<br>*204 – 208* | A'<br>*209 – 240* |
| opening cell | sequences | Chopin Mazurka | middle voice expansion | chromatic thirds | "Linen Hymn" | recall of thirds | opening cell |

**Figure 11.** A score excerpt of *Gustave*. The pianist may insert Chopin's Mazurka before performing measure 109. The text is in the score.

*. . .Chopin's a-minor mazurka | Op. 17 #4 . . .*
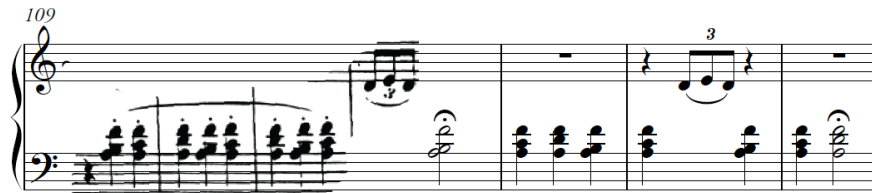


In his book *Camera Lucida*, Barthes distinguishes between a painted portrait and a photograph. A painted portrait is an interpretation of its subject, while a photograph is in some ways inseparable from what it depicts. Referencing René Magritte's famous painting, *La Trahison des images* (*The treachery of images*), Barthes quips that, in a photograph, "a pipe is always and intractably a pipe" (1980, 5). The distinction between a photograph and painted portrait is suggestive for our analysis and is analogous to the distinction between a musical quotation and a musical *representation* of a work. The quotation of Chopin's Mazurka functions as a musical photograph—as literal a depiction as possible of the musical subject itself. The surrounding modules are a series of portrait miniatures—interpretations of the subject. Shaw

makes the distinction obvious to the performer by photocopying the "Mazurka notation" into the printed score of *Gustave*. The distinction is less obvious to the listener, but given Shaw's program notes, a listener familiar with Chopin's Mazurka will recognize the quotation as actually Chopin's Mazurka, while the surrounding musical modulations are interpretations of the Mazurka.

The top of Figure 10 applies the distinction between portrait and photograph to *Gustave*, and reflects a tripartite interpretation organized around the central quotation—the subject revealed in Module C. The portraits surrounding the subject quotation comprise an approximately equal number of measures: 108 measures in Modules A and B, and 106 measures from Module D to the end of the piece. These portraits represent musical features of both the quotation in Module C and the other portraits.

In Modules A and B, Shaw extracts musical details from the opening phrase of the Mazurka, expanding 12 measures of Chopin's piece into two distinct modules totaling 108 measures. Module A portrays the introduction and presentation phase of the Mazurka's opening sentence, while Module B elaborates on the sentence's continuation.[9] Figure 12(a) and (b) show the openings of Chopin's Mazurka op. 17, no. 4 and *Gustave Le Gray* respectively.

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[9] The sentence forms the antecedent phrase of a larger parallel interrupted period.

**Figure 12.**

    **(a)** The opening of Chopin's Mazurka in A minor, op. 17, no. 4.
    **(b)** The opening of Shaw's *Gustave Le Gray*.

The openings of both pieces share an emphasis on A, active middle voice(s), and controlling sixth span. In the Mazurka, the rising B–C–D line contained within the A–F sixth becomes the melodic incipit in measure 5. A similar procedure occurs in *Gustave*. After four iterations of the gesture shown in Figure 12(b), Shaw shapes an accompaniment by extracting the notes of the G minor triad from the opening cell (Figure 13). The relationship between the accompaniment and opening gesture is even clearer when the music returns at the end of the piece in measure 209. As shown in Figure 14, Shaw replicates Chopin's procedure by fashioning a longer melodic line from the ascending notes—A–Bb–D—of the opening cell.

**Figure 13.** Left hand accompaniment extracted from the opening right-hand gesture (mm. 16ff).
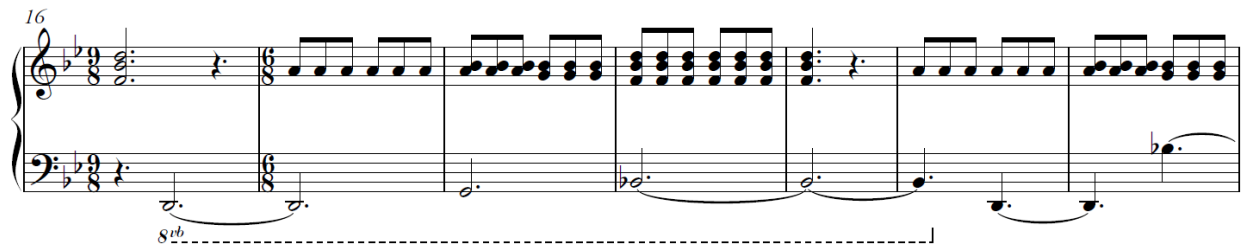


**Figure 14.** The opening motive extracted to form the right-hand melody (mm. 221ff).



The portrait of the Mazurka in Module A connects with the photograph in Module C by two large, quasi-sequential descents, which comprise Module B. Figure 15 reproduces the

second quasi-sequence, which depicts the continuation phrase of the opening music of the

Mazurka (see Figure 13a).[10]

**Figure 15.** The second quasi-sequence in Module B (measure 71ff).



The descending semitonal voice-leading is common to both passages. The descent points toward

the optional quotation—the portrait's subject—in Module C. Even if the pianist, upon arriving at

Module C, chooses not to perform an extended quotation in the manner of Yang, Shaw ensures

the listener familiar with Chopin's Mazurka will recognize it by notating four repetitions of

measures 1–4 of the Mazurka in the score. So, while the performer may choose the subject's

aspect ratio, they may *not* avoid displaying it entirely.

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[10] The harmonic rhythm, texture, and descending semitonal voice-leading is also very similar to the accompaniment of Chopin's E minor Prelude, op. 28, no. 4. In this reading, the prelude's initial ascending octave is represented by the ascending sevenths in the right hand of *Gustave*.

The portraits in Modules A and B share a rough chronology with their subjects. After the quotation in Module C, Shaw continues the chronological depiction of the Mazurka in Module D. Module D takes as its subject the ascending melodic gesture prominent in the Mazurka's opening and contrasting middle section, as well as the texture of the middle section. Figure 16 excerpts this passage. Figure 17 reproduces the beginning and the ending of Module D, which expands Chopin's active middle voice by over three octaves, from A3 to C#7. The clusters underneath the upper voice are de-naturalized depictions of the clashing dissonances in Chopin's accompaniment, boxed on Figure 16.

**Figure 16.** The contrasting middle section of Chopin's A minor Mazurka, op. 17, no. 4 (measures 61–68 are shown).

**Figure 17.** The beginning (m. 135) and ending (mm. 160) of Module D.

So far, Shaw's portraits of Chopin's Mazurka relatively realistic. That is, each portrait contains some clear motivic, harmonic, and textural interpretation of a feature of Chopin's Mazurka, analogous to a representation of a subject in a portrait. The portraits have also followed the chronology of the Mazurka. The abstract portraits of Modules E and F abandon this chronology, and more than any other music in *Gustave*, distinguish Shaw's "multi-layered portrait" of Chopin from a variation set. Figure 18 reproduces and condenses Module E.

**Figure 18.** Module E, condensed. The pianist typically plays measure I. Occasionally, they perform measure II (F major instead of F# minor). Measure III is the last measure of module, and leads to Module F.
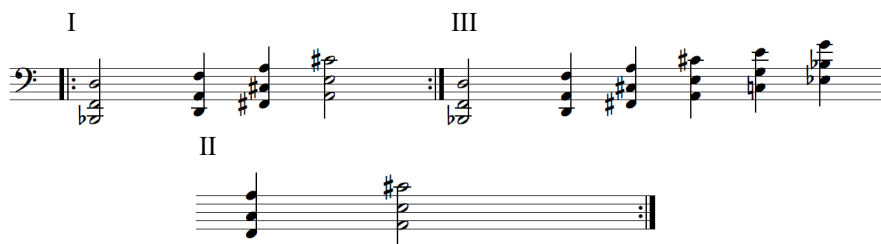


In this module, a series of chords related by chromatic thirds repeats eleven times, with only slight variation. Usually the pianist performs measure I. Occasionally, the pianist substitutes measure II for the second half of measure I (aligned on the figure). The module concludes with measure III. Shaw mysteriously labels Module F, excerpted in Figure 19, "a linen hymn." The music never recurs, and has no obvious harmonic or textural relation to any music in either the Chopin Mazurka or in *Gustave*.

**Figure 19.** The beginning of Module F, the "linen hymn."

The music of Modules E and F are extreme examples of two essential characteristics of *Gustave*: repetition and formal discontinuity. Obsessive internal repetition within each module coupled with the strong contrast between modules results in a discontinuous, modular composition, where the listener progresses through a series of self-contained blocks that defy easy synthesis—a scrapbook of portraits linked only by their shared subject.

In her study of modernist portraits, Steiner quotes the following passage from Gertrude Stein's portrait of Pablo Picasso:

> One whom some were certainly following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were certainly following was one who was charming. One whom some were following was one who was completely charming. One whom some were following was one who was certainly completely charming (Stein 1909, quoted in Steiner 1987, 173).

About this passage, and Stein's early portraiture in general, Steiner draws attention to the writing's "apparent redundancy," and the "severely restricted … number of words, parts of speech, and grammatical structures …" (173). Similar characteristics permeate the modules of *Gustave*: gestures repeat with minimal variation, and these gestures are relatively static in their textures and rhythms. The music of Modules E and F share another characteristic with the Stein excerpt: neither portrait seems directly related to its subject. Instead, one can interpret Modules E and F to reflect Shaw's abstract, general impressions of the Mazurka and Chopin's musical persona. Specifically, the repeated, hypnotic chord progressions of Module E sound like "unwound," deconstructed versions of the Mazurka's repetitive left-hand chordal texture, while Module F, with its strong degree of contrast, reflects the modal and melodic contrast of the

Mazurka's middle.[11] In *Gustave*, Modules E and F represent the most abstract of the portraits. With A', the close motivic and textural associations with the Mazurka return.

But what about the work's title? My analysis focuses on how *Gustave* is a portrait of Chopin's Mazurka in particular, with references to Chopin's compositional style and persona more generally. Yet, Shaw titles her work *Gustave Le Gray*, after the French photographer. As Daniel (2004) notes in his online biographical essay, Le Gray began his career by studying painting before moving on to daguerreotypes and ultimately to paper photography. Shaw's initial performance instruction, "like a photograph slowly developing on wax paper," alludes to Le Gray's invention of the wax paper photographic negative. Beyond this allusion, I argue that the progression of Le Gray's career resonates with my interpretation of Shaw's work as portrait of Chopin's Mazurka. The diverse media by which Le Gray created his portraits is reflected in Shaw's modular composition, where different modules depict aspects of the subject. Also like Le Gray, Shaw's work contains both representative portraits and the musical equivalent to a photograph: a direct quotation.

In this context one may recall the Barthes quote cited at beginning of this analysis. Of course, like any visual medium, a photograph my deceive or obscure; it cannot be assumed to be an accurate representation of reality. However, as suggested by Barthes' remark regarding Magritte's pipe, there is a sense in which a photograph has the *potential* to portray as accurately as possible a moment in time.[12] Analogously, a musical quotation can be subtly altered, reharmonized, reorchestrated. Yet, if transcribed faithfully, a musical quotation has the potential

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[11] In fact, in many of Shaw's compositions, she composes a single hymn or chorale-like passage that is marked by such contrast with the surrounding material that they seem part of an entirely different composition. See, for example, the trio section of *Entr'acte* or the ending of *Its Motion Keeps*. In the *Punctum* analysis later on, we will see how Shaw anticipates one such chorale passage throughout an entire work.

[12] See Susan Sontag (1973) for a fuller treatment of this contradiction.

to depict its subject exactly, that is in a way, to *be* the subject. In *Gustave*, the central quotation

functions as a photographic image of the subject, and is flanked by interpretive portraits of

greater or lesser realism—a musical triptych, or in Shaw's words, a "multi-layered portrait," of

Chopin's Mazurka.

By interpreting *Gustave Le Gray* and *Blueprint* as musical portraits, I model an analytical

perspective by which to engage in close readings of Shaw's instrumental works, relate her

compositional practice with approaches to abstract portraiture in other disciplines, and offer new

insights into the lesser-known music of a leading contemporary composer. Work in progress

explores these pieces in greater detail, and contextualizes Shaw's practice with the aesthetics of

postmodernism and theories of female authorship.

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