Shadowtime composer Brian Ferneyhough and writer Charles Bernstein’s collaborative opera on Walter Benjamin was first performed at the Munich Prinzregententheater on 25 May 2004. The work opens on the last hours of Walter Benjamin’s life spent at the small Fonde de Francia hotel at the border town Portbou between France and Spain. He has just found out that his visa, made out in Marseille, is not valid and must return to France which will inevitably entail his being caught by the Nazis and deported to the concentration camps. Whether Benjamin committed suicide or not is a question that the opera leaves open and unanswered.

Central to the structural development of the work are the “Theses on the Philosophy of History”. In the ninth
thesis Benjamin writes of the angel of history, taking as his premise a Paul Klee painting that he had purchased 20 years earlier.

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise, it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.
ANGEL, STILL UGLY; PAUL KLEE 1940

BELL ANGEL; PAUL KLEE 1939
The sixth scene, titled *7 Tableaux vivants depicting history as the angel of melancholia* concerns that very melancholy angel, a figure not only related to Paul Klee’s painting but also Albrecht Dürer’s famous engraving *Melancholia* depicting an angelic winged person sitting lost in thought, surrounded by objects symbolising measuring and scientific research. In this scene texts by Heinrich Heine and Karl Kraus, amongst others, are recited, in this case by Brian Ferneyhough himself.

In his book on German Baroque tragedy, Benjamin writes about the condition of melancholy and the different levels of importance in Dürer’s picture that make it something of a portrayal of his own sense of loss in the world. The opera can also be interpreted this way. Walter Benjamin is transformed from an historic figure to a floating condition, a timeline within time.

Three of the seven scenes of Shadowtime will be performed for Stockholm New Music. Scene No 2 *Les froissements d’ailes de Gabriel* (The rustling of the Angel Gabriel’s wings) is written as a concert for guitar and 13 instruments.

Among the accompanying instruments are another guitar, tuned a quarter-note lower, which acts as the solo guitar’s dark shadow, and this doppelganger theme returns in various guises throughout the opera. This is also true for scene No 4 *Opus contra naturam* for solo piano, in which Walter Benjamin enters the netherworld and appears as a Las Vegas bar pianist, bearing some resemblance to the glittering Liberace. The pianist sits at the piano after closing-time and plays various fragments, some of them reminiscent of the tonal material in scene No 2. Simultaneously, the gambling city of Las Vegas is there as an image of the hyper-simulated world, one of the contemporary main entrances to Hades.
SCENOGRAPHY

The most obvious interpretation of Brian Ferneyhough and Charles Bernstein’s stagework would of course be to accentuate the sombre and turn the opera into a melancholy shadowplay. This is precisely what director Pia Forsgren has tried to avoid. Nor are there any angel wings or obviously religious symbols among the props. Instead the guiding light has been the borderline quality – the trip back and forth between the living and the dead that progressively lifts the material.

– As far as possible I have reduced scenic expression rather than add a lot of details, says Pia Forsgren. I don’t feel at home in naturalistic or realistic theatre and don’t want to dress the figures in overt symbols. Weight is not the important thing in this performance but lightness.

– That’s why I’ve been working with a light almost blinding space rather than underline the darkness that is already in the music and libretto. It would be such a cliché to conjure up an image of the 1930s as a dark decade. The challenge lies in freeing the language in a non-theatrical way that stirs feelings in the audience. I don’t believe in creating other levels of interpretation but am content in carving away at the pre-existing material. The interesting thing about this performance is that the blinding attack can defy gravity. The answer to the multitude of shades in the opera is a space with no shade at all.
SYNOPSIS

Shadowtime is a “thought opera” based on the work and life of Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). Benjamin is one of the greatest philosophers and cultural critics of the twentieth century. In its seven scenes, Shadowtime explores some of the major themes of Benjamin’s work, including the intertwined natures of history, time, transience, timelessness, language, and melancholy; the possibilities for a transformational leftist politics; and the role of dialectical materiality, aura, interpretation, and translation in art. Beginning on the last evening of Benjamin’s life, Shadowtime projects an alternative course for what happened on that fateful night. Opening onto a world of shades, of ghosts, of the dead, Shadowtime inhabits a period in human history in which the light flickered and then failed.
SUMMARY

SCENE II – *Les Froissements d’Ailes de Gabriel* (The Rustling of the Wings of Gabriel) is instrumental, scored for solo guitar and thirteen players. The guitar suggests the just audible, transitory, flickering, chimerical rustling of the wings of Gabriel, the angel of Messianic time. This is Shadowtime’s first barrier, marking the beginning of the journey of Benjamin’s avatar (shadow or dream figure) from the represented historical times of Scene 1 to the nonhistorical time of the unfolding opera.

SCENE IV – *Opus Contra Naturam* (Descent of Benjamin into the Underworld), a shadow play for speaking pianist, is the pivotal scene of Shadowtime, inaugurating the second half of the opera. *Opus Contra Naturam* is an alchemical term for work against, or beyond, the constraints of nature. The Lecturer from Scene 1 appears in guise of a Joker or Liberace-like singer in a Las Vegas piano bar (that suggests also a Weimar cabaret). He leads Benjamin’s avatar, set adrift after the fateful events of September 1940, on the Orphic descent into a shadow world (“katabasis”) of shock-induced paralysis (“kataplexy”).

SCENE VI – In the second and final barrier of Shadowtime, the Lecturer reappears, in a new guise, to perform *Seven Tableaux Vivants Representing the Angel of History as Melancholia*. Both Scene VI and VII imagine Benjamin’s Angel of History as the angel depicted in Albrecht Dürer’s 1514 engraving, *Melencolia*, which shows a dejected, winged figure, surrounded by instruments of scientific inquiry. Tableaux 1 and 4 are reworkings of two poems by the nineteenth-century, German-Jewish, post-Romantic poet Heinrich Heine, a distant relative of Benjamin’s.

Both poems are standards of the lieder repertoire, previously set by many composers – *Der Tod, das ist die Kühle Nacht* and *Die Lorelei* (Heine’s work was censored and banned by the Nazis). Tableau 2, *Tensions*, is a series of sound translations of ten-word propositions, as, for example, “each ear’s sly fiction a toy taboo which founds us.” Tableau 3 is based on permutations of phrases from Benjamin’s essay *Hashish in Marseilles: Seeing only nuances*. Tableau 5, *One and a Half Truths*, takes its title from one of Benjamin’s favorite contemporaries aphorist Karl Kraus; it is a set of imaginary epigrams, concluding “Truth/Is a gun loaded with a parachute.” Tableau 6 presents a full set of syntactic rotations of the sentence, “if you can’t see it it can still hurt you.” The final tableau ends with a play on negative dialectics, asking “whether what is is so because/Is so because it’s not.”
THREE SCENES FROM THE OPERA

THE JEWISH THEATRE 20–22 FEBRUARY 2006
MUSIC: Brian Ferneyhough
TEXT: Charles Bernstein
STAGING: SCENOGRAPHY, LIGHTING, PROJECTION
Pia Forsgren, Tomas Franck och Kenneth Björk
COSTUME: Mikael T Zielinski
CONDUCTOR: Franck Ollu

LES FROISSEMENTS D’AILLES DE GABRIEL
SOLO GUITAR: Magnus Andersson
FLUTE (PICCOLO): Vivian Ellefsen
OBOE (COR ANGLAIS): Ulf Bjurenhed
EB CLARINET (BB CLARINET): Niklas Andersson
CONTRABASS CLARINET (BASS CLARINET): Jan-Erik Alm
FRENCH HORN: Bengt Ny
TRUMPET IN C (SOPRANO TROMBONE): Tora Thorslund
TENOR TROMBONE: Ivo Nilsson
PERCUSSION: Jonny Axelsson
ENSEMBLE GUITAR: Mats Bergström
HARP: Laura Stephenson
PIANO/FORTE: Anders Kilström
VIOLIN: Jeffrey Lee
VIOLONCELLO: Chrishan Larson
OPUS CONTRA NATURAM
SOLO PIANO: Fredrik Ullén

SEVEN TABLEAUX VIVANTS REPRESENTING THE ANGEL OF HISTORY AS MELANCHOLIA
FLUTE (PICCOLO, BASS FLUTE): Vivian Ellefsen
OBOE (COR ANGLAIS): Ulf Bjurenhed
OBOE (COR ANGLAIS): Niklas Andersson
EB CLARINET (BASS CLARINET): Jan-Erik Alm
BB CLARINET, BASS CLARINET: Mats Wallin
SOPRANO SAXOPHONE: Jörgen Pettersson
FRENCH HORN: Bengt Ny

TRUMPET IN C: Tora Thorslund
TROMBONE (BASS TRUMPET): Ivo Nilsson
MALE RECITER: Brian Ferneyhough
VIOLIN 1: Jeffrey Lee
VIOLIN 2: Eva Lindal
VIOLA: Mikael Sjögren
VIOLONCELLO: Chrishan Larson
DOUBLE BASS: Staffan Sjöholm

TEXTS IN PROGRAM FOLDER: Charles Bernstein, Magnus Haglund
TRANSLATION: Nordén & Berggren HB
DRESSMAKING: Chatriin Melander, Elvira Hjortsberg
DESIGN MUSIC STANDS: Peder Freij
SOUND DESIGN: Oscar Johansson
SOUND TECHNICIAN: Stizze Larsson
STAGE TECHNICIANS: Per Lundholm, Heikki Kiviaho
DRESSES: Siena Näsulnd, Siri Isgren
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PROJECTION: Video Unlimited AB
IN-HOUSE CONSTRUCTION, CARPENTRY AND PAINTWORK: Westerlund Bygg
SITE MANAGER: Tanja Ingman
TICKET OFFICE AND BAR: Marie-Louise Larsson, Eva Fatral, Samuel Titelman
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THEATRE MANAGER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, JEWISH THEATRE: Pia Forsgren

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Filmfestival, 2001

5 CONCERT WEEKENDS, 2000

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by Ohad Naharin, 2000

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by Harold Pinter, 1999

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SAVANNAH BAY
by Marguerite Duras, 1995

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