

STELE

IN MEMORIAM EARLE BROWN

for any sound source

CHRISTOPHER LEE
(2011)



STELE:

TRANSLATION I

for piano

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♩=c.52

fff *ff* *pp* *f*

mf *fff* *f*

p mf *mp*

Ped.

The works of Earle Brown (1926-1993) represent a fascinating intersection of music, visual art, and philosophy. Brown was a member of the "New York School" of avant-garde composers who came to prominence in the 1950s and counted among its ranks John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff. Cage had begun his career in the 1930s as a disciple of Arnold Schoenberg, whose twelve-tone music sought to give equal functional status to all twelve pitches of the chromatic scale. Cage carried this democratic philosophy to the next logical step and posited the equality of *all* sounds (as well as the absence of sound). By the early 1950s, Cage was writing "indeterminate" music, which sought the complete liberation of sound by eliminating human intervention in the compositional process. He achieved this by allowing his process to be determined by coin tosses, rolling of dice, and other acts of randomization.

Around the same time, Cage and his younger colleagues came under the influence of the abstract expressionist painters who were flourishing in New York. They sought a mode of musical expression that was analogous to the spontaneous and physical approach of artists like Jackson Pollack, in whose works the physical act of painting was made visible and indeed determined the finished piece. They began to use increasingly abstract graphic notation that had little to do with conventional music and relied on performers to freely interpret the works. Brown's *December, 1952* is probably the earliest purely graphic score, containing no conventional musical notation at all, and consisting entirely of several floating gray blocks and lines.

Stele is an homage to Earle Brown. Despite its conceptual roots in the mid-twentieth century, it utilizes a distinctly twenty-first century mashup of aesthetic principles in its execution. It is purely graphic, but its form has been determined along precisely mathematical lines: each block in the score represents a letter of Brown's name, and the size of each block proportionally corresponds to its letter's average frequency of use in the English language. For example, since the letter E is the most frequently used letter, its block is assigned the largest area of 26 possible letters, which I have chosen to interpret as .26 square inches; A is the third most frequently used letter and receives .24 square inches, and so on. I wanted the visual-textural variety that different types of blocks would offer, and decided that letters with even-numbered frequency rankings would be represented with open boxes. Therefore, the letters O, N, and B, with rankings of 4, 6, and 20 respectively, received open boxes. The ten letter blocks were then arranged on the page in a rough outline of the initials "EB," with the letters of each remaining within their respective initial. I imagined this as being analogous to the way an astronomical chart outlines constellations. This also provides a link to Brown's mentor John Cage, who, in his work *Atlas Eclipticalis*, determined pitch and rhythm by tracing star charts onto manuscript paper. *Stele* may be interpreted freely by anyone using any instrument or other sound source.

Stele: Translation I represents one possible interpretation of the previous piece, notated using strictly conventional means for solo piano. The five pitches of the opening gesture trace the letters of Brown's first name: E (flat), A, Re (D), La (A), E flat. The harmonic material of the entire piece comes from this chord, namely the intervals of a minor second, perfect fourth, and tritone. Each of *Stele's* letter blocks receives one chord in the *Translation*, and the length of time between chords generally corresponds to the amount of visual space between blocks. (I chose to "read" *Stele* in four rows, left to right, as one would read text.) The size of each letter block determines the number of pitches in each chord, its register (high or low), and its dynamic: generally, the larger blocks get more pitches, a louder dynamic, and appear in a lower register. The black blocks also correspond to denser, close-spaced chords, while the open boxes correspond to open-spaced chords. Finally, the end of each "text row" in *Stele* is set off from the beginning of the next row by three sixteenth notes of rest in the *Translation*; this is visible in measures 2, 4, 7 and 9.

A *stela* is a stone or wooden slab, usually erected for memorial or commemorative purposes and inscribed with the names of the deceased.

-Christopher Lee