

An abstract painting with a dark, textured upper half in shades of black and dark grey. The lower half features vertical bands of bright white and light blue, with some darker, more complex textures in between. The overall style is expressive and painterly.

# Dark Days

## Scott Wollschleger

## Karl Larson

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## ***Dark Days*** (2017)

Track 1 – 1:40

## ***Tiny Oblivion*** (2016)

Track 2 – 6:29

## ***Music without Metaphor*** (2013)

Track 3 – 7:20

## ***Blue Inscription*** (2010)

Track 4 – 5:45

## ***Lyric Fragment*** (2019)

Track 5 – 4:01

## ***Brontal No. 2 "Holiday"*** (2008)

Track 6 – 7:48

## ***Brontal No. 6*** (2013)

Track 7 – 5:30

## ***Brontal No. 11 "I-80"*** (2020)

Track 8 – 3:42

## ***Secret Machine No. 4*** (2007)

Track 9 – 2:13

## ***Secret Machine No. 6*** (2012)

Track 10 – 4:32

Karl Larson, piano

Music composed by Scott Wollschleger





## Liner notes by Karl Larson

***Dark Days.*** Nearly five years in the making, this album of solo piano music written by Scott Wollschleger and performed by myself represents the latest watermark in what has become a rewarding, prolific collaboration. Composed between 2007 and 2020, these brief, introspective works comprise a collection of recordings that not only document the evolution of a composer's style and approach to a specific instrument, but serve as a deep and meaningful reflection of our long-form artistic partnership. Some of these pieces, such as *Secret Machine No. 6*, *Blue Inscription*, and *Music without Metaphor* predate our collaboration and were my first introductions to Scott's music. Others are ephemeral works, spun out of discarded material from our larger projects. *Tiny Oblivion*, for example, emerged from *Meditation on Dust* (2015), a major work for string orchestra and solo piano, and the first of many pieces Scott wrote for me.

From a technical and stylistic perspective, this album highlights a number of attributes integral to Scott's compositional language. The influence of color on harmony, an approach to rhythm that frequently disguises the aural perception of pulse, the instinctual treatment of compositional form, and a deep, physical bond with the piano itself are all on display. In his music, Scott treats these elements like well-worn tools, each expertly implemented in the service of realizing works more reliant on compositional intuition than conventional structures or processes.

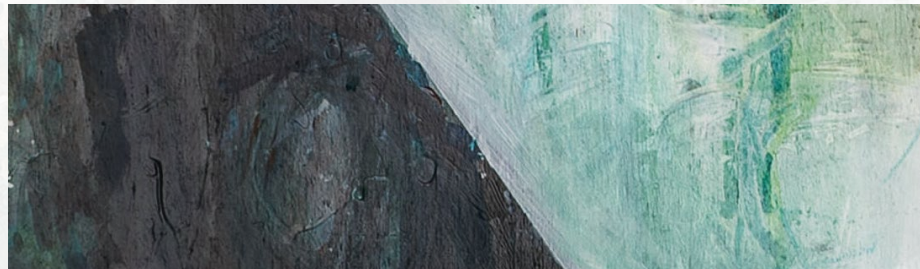
I have always been struck by Scott's unique harmonic language; the contour and rhythm of these works draw the listener in and underline the warm, resonant qualities of the piano. The movement between harmonic areas in Scott's music tends to feel simultaneously spontaneous and inevitable, and while a traditional analysis rarely reveals much, the music is undeniably driven by a distinct, deliberate approach to harmony. From a young age, Scott has experienced synesthesia, a neurological phenomenon causing (in Scott's case) a tangible relationship between harmony and visual color. As he writes, he employs this condition as a compositional tool, often favoring sonorities that provoke a synesthetic response and result in the soft, consonant dissonance that is so characteristic of his music.

The colors Scott experiences through synesthesia are fragile and temporal. In a process he likens to stoking a fire, he often redistributes pitches around the keyboard in order to maintain the vivacity of a particular color, a quality he refers to as "color saturation." This process results in the gesturally dynamic yet harmonically glacial textures that frequently appear in his music. *Dark Days*, the opening track on the album, is a perfect example of this concept. Over the course of the piece's 28 measures, the same pitches (B $\flat$ , E, B, D, C) are repeated in the same order in the same rhythm 27 times. This pattern is only broken once, when an A is inserted between the B and D in m. 23, a deviation representative of Scott's proclivity for intuitive improvisation and preference of expression over rigid structures (see fig. 1). Along with this brief departure from the established pitch content, the only variations in the work are occasional accents, three fermatas, and persistent registral shifts. As these pitches are distributed across the entire range of the keyboard, the sustain pedal is held throughout, resulting in a flickering, fluid, monochromatic aura suspended around the piano.



**FIGURE 1:** *Dark Days*, mm. 20-28

Other works, such as *Blue Inscription* or *Music without Metaphor* feature a similar approach with a more fluid compositional process. Both works feature recurring harmonic motifs that are, in contrast to *Dark Days*, constantly being affected by slight changes in contour and rhythm, in addition to register, further highlighting Scott's penchant for irregularity and intuitive variation in his work.





Although the rhythmic characteristics of Scott's music are often more subtle than the harmonic content, his rhythmic language is essential to the pervasive sense of suspension found throughout this album, and is a critical key to his individual style. For many listeners, the most striking rhythmic component in these works will likely be Scott's approach to the perception of the beat, or lack thereof. Much of his writing serves to mask a consistent sense of pulse, though rhythmic time is, with few exceptions, always felt by the performer. Scott disguises the beat through the use of ametric settings (*Dark Days*, *Lyric Fragment*, and *Brontal No. 11 "I-80"* are the only works on the album that employ meter), complex tuplets designed to warp the perception of time (see fig. 2), non-traditional rhythmic notation dictating duration relative to other notes instead of a metronomic beat (see fig. 3), and proportional notation that asks the pianist to interpret the physical spacing of notes on the page as prompts for rhythmic interpretation. This proportional notation is present in several works on this album, perhaps most prominently in *Music without Metaphor*, a handwritten score featuring flowing penmanship evocative of the work's aural result (see fig. 4). Pulse is not completely absent from *Dark Days* (passages from *Music without Metaphor*, for example, hint at a waltz), but rhythmic focus throughout the album gravitates towards duration, rather than beat.



FIGURE 2: *Brontal No. 11 "I-80"*, mm. 34-39

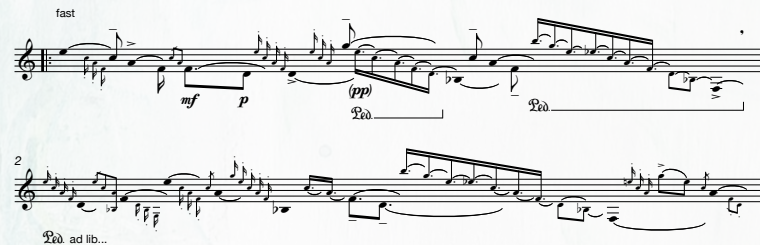


FIGURE 3: *Secret Machine No. 4*, stanzas 1 and 2

As a performer of Scott's music, I approach his rhythmic language as a prompt to sustain and cultivate the delicate, suspended quality of the music and as an invitation to listen to the sonority of the piano as sounds resonate and decay. The concept of decay is pervasive in Scott's music, both from a philosophical and musical perspective, and it is a crucial element to consider while interpreting Scott's work. Larger pieces, such as the previously mentioned *Meditation on Dust* or the piano / bass / percussion trio *American Dream* (2017), focus heavily on themes of physical and societal corrosion and decay, ideas that are present on a smaller scale throughout this album. As a compositional motif, the decay of sonorities can be considered a focal point and a literal reflection of a conceptual theme. The physical decay of sound is integral to Scott's music on a structural level, but it is also poignant; like us, the basic function of the instrument itself is inseparable from decay.



FIGURE 4: *Music without Metaphor*, stanzas 1 and 2

From a formal perspective, the works featured on this album vary from one to another; however, as a whole, the treatment of sections as moveable objects and a willingness to embrace combinations of abstract and traditional forms can be observed throughout. Often the final step in his compositional process, Scott's approach to form is fluid and modular. In earlier stages of composition, his works are composed of numerous, unconnected blocks of musical content. As the piece takes shape, Scott experiments with the order of events, intuitively rearranging sections until settling on his ideal overall arc. This process can be best observed in larger works, such as *American Dream* (2017) or *Brontal Symmetry* (2015), as the often abrupt changes between moments feel more apparent in broader forms and in greater quantities. However, the comparatively brief works featured on this album reflect a similar technique on a smaller scale.

Scott's modular approach, while revealing a tendency to eschew traditional methods, can result in both abstract and conventional forms. Perhaps the most aurally apparent example of abstract form stemming from this approach on this album, *Brontal No. 2 "Holiday"* and *Brontal No. 6 "I-80"* move rapidly between brief, contrasting motifs, resulting in a hyper-contoured texture and highlighting the kinetic quality of both pieces. Other works on the album employ familiar, identifiable traces of traditional form. *Secret Machine No. 4*, though lacking bar lines, is written in a simple binary form, and Scott describes the form of *Music without Metaphor* as "almost classical," stating "There are two main ideas (at the beginning of the work), and then at one point, in the middle of the piece, a totally new thing happens, but just for a moment and never returns."





Each facet of Scott's compositional language discussed above (harmony, rhythm, and form) can be considered a tangible musical property. These are the basic building blocks of most forms of music, and they are all apparent to the listener in some shape or form, regardless of their training or background. However, another quality of Scott's piano music — and a major reason I continue to be so drawn to it — is likely less apparent to most listeners; it simply feels nice to play. I often remark to my students that it's important to notice and acknowledge when music sounds beautiful, but also when it feels beautiful, and Scott's piano music is a wonderful amalgamation of both sensations. Of course, tactile gratification is not a prerequisite for a good piece (there are many phenomenal works, new and old, that decidedly lack this quality), and the parameters of idiomatic writing are subjective, to be sure; however, most pianists will agree that the rarely occurring synergy of intellectual and physical stimuli is invaluable.

The idiomatic nature of Scott's piano music is directly related to the amount of time he spends at the instrument during his compositional practice. A gifted pianist in his own right, Scott seriously studied the piano throughout his undergraduate degree, and it has remained an integral tool and muse throughout his career as a composer. While he never performs in public, and recordings of him playing his own works are rare, Scott works with the piano routinely. If not actively working on new compositions (the piano is the starting point for most of his pieces, regardless of instrumentation), Scott can often be found sight reading through an eclectic collection of scores or improvising at the piano, exploring the sensations and sounds of the instrument in a process he likens to “mining for material.”

The corporeal satisfaction inherent in playing Scott's piano music provides immediate access to a rich, complex aesthetic world. His close relationship with the instrument is immediately apparent, and it invites the pianist to linger in the music, ponder its nuances, and play intuitively, exploring the interpretive limits of the sound world. This is not to say the music is easy; on the contrary, many of Scott's pieces are technically quite challenging, and the execution of soft, subtle music such as this requires a whole different brand of virtuosity. Scott's connection with the piano and the resulting music is welcoming, offering a comfortable space to occupy while chipping away at those difficult passages. Many pianists will recognize this quality in other pieces or composers from their repertoire (Ravel and Schumann immediately spring to mind, for me), but it is a special occasion to discover contemporary works that approach the instrument in such a skillful manner, and it is certainly present in Scott's music.

The ten works featured on this album, while indicative of Scott Wollschleger's style and compositional approach, are not a complete representation of his entire solo piano repertoire. We specifically chose this collection of pieces because they all share a subdued sense of intimacy. These works are personal gestures, originally intended for private settings, rather than concert halls, unlike larger, multi-movement works, such as *In Search of Lost Color* (2010). Scott has often remarked that he "follows lightly in the footsteps of the New York School," a reference to his former teacher and Morton Feldman student, Nils Vigeland, as well as a nod to his aesthetic and philosophic kinship with the broader artistic movement. As someone who shares an affinity for this group of artists (along with some ancillary educational lineage), I have always agreed with Scott's self-assessment. However, while the influence of composers like Feldman, Cage, or Vigeland certainly arise throughout *Dark Days*, the music on this album reminds me most of the subtle warmth embodied in the poetry of Frank O'Hara. They are not heroic or romantic, intended to be shouted from the mountain tops; they are the intimacy of a hand written note, a journal entry, or a love letter.

Lastly, a word about content and our current era: as we prepare to release this album, the world is entrenched in catastrophe and turmoil at a degree few of us have experienced in our lifetimes. Domestically, the United States has witnessed months of acute social and political unrest, laying bare the systemic racism and socio-economic inequities that have long plagued our society. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has been raging for over a year, claiming the lives of millions, forcing a radical disruption of day-to-day life for billions, and disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable among us. While the bulk of the composing and recording process took place well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the album's title feels suitable for

our era, and some of the music does indeed deal with themes of existential dread and destruction. The title track, *Dark Days*, was composed during Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017 and reflects the sense of extreme anxiety and sadness so many of us associated with the event. *Tiny Oblivion* (often paired with *Dark Days* in live performance) also interacts with darker themes. In his program note for the piece, Scott describes the work title as "something of a black humor acceptance and reference to the fact that our ultimate fate is to die and then eventually turn into particles that will forever break down into smaller particles, spreading out over unfathomable vast distances in an ever expanding and cooling universe. So for all the commotion associated with one's life, we all in the end get to have our own little tiny oblivion."

While the thematic content of *Dark Days* and *Tiny Oblivion* fit snugly into the catastrophic reality of this current time and place, the entirety of the album reflects something softer and warmer. For me, the collective whole of *Dark Days* expresses sensitivity, intimacy, and peace. The image *Dark Days* conjures in my mind's eye is not one of hopelessness, but that specific, contradictory warmth we feel during the darkest days of the year, glowing embers in the fireplace, the muted silence of falling snow.

— Karl Larson, January 2021





**Karl Larson** is a Brooklyn-based pianist and specialist in the music of our time. A devoted supporter of contemporary composers and their craft, Larson has built a career grounded in commissioning and long-term collaborations. He frequently performs in a variety of chamber music settings, most notably with his trio, Bearthoven, a piano / bass / percussion ensemble focussed on cultivating a diverse new repertoire for their instrumentation. As a soloist, Larson is known for championing the works of his peers and the recent canon alike, often gravitating towards long-form, reflective works of the 20th and 21st centuries. Through his

work with Bearthoven, collaborations with a wide variety of chamber musicians, and his solo projects, Larson has helped to generate a large body of new work, resulting in world premiere performances of pieces by notable composers including David Lang, Sarah Hennies, Christopher Cerrone, and Michael Gordon.

A sought after collaborator, Larson has performed with many leaders in the field, including the Bang on a Can All-Stars, the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE),

**Scott Wollschleger**'s music has been highly praised for its arresting timbres and conceptual originality. Wollschleger (b. 1980) "has become a formidable, individual presence" (*The Rest Is Noise*, Alex Ross) in the contemporary musical landscape. His distinct musical language explores themes of art in dystopia, the conceptualization of silence, synesthesia, and creative repetition in form and has been described as "apocalyptic," "distinctive and magnetic," possessing a "hushed, cryptic beauty," (*The New Yorker*, Alex Ross) and as "evocative" and "kaleidoscopic" (*The New York Times*).

His concert works have been performed across the US and the world, including the Turner Contemporary in Margate, England, the NOW! Festival in Graz Austria, MATA Festival Interval Series, Bowerbird in Philadelphia, and the Bang on a Can Festival at MASS MoCa. Mr. Wollschleger has received support from a variety of organizations including, The New York Foundation for the Arts, New Music USA, BMI

and the Yvar Mikhashoff Trust for New Music. Mr. Wollschleger was a Co-Founder and Co-Artistic Director of *Red Light New Music*, a 501c(3) non-profit organization dedicated to presenting and crafting contemporary music.

His debut album, *Soft Aberration*, was released on New Focus Recordings in 2017 and was named a "Notable Recording of 2017" in *The New Yorker*. His second album, *American Dream*, written for the trio, Bearthoven, was released on Cantaloupe Music in 2019. This album, *Dark Days*, was released by New Focus Recordings in 2021.

Wollschleger's work is published by Project Schott New York.

[www.scottwollschleger.com](http://www.scottwollschleger.com)

Ensemble Signal, the American Composers Orchestra, Maya Bennardo (violin), Ashley Bathgate (cello), and Ken Thomson (clarinets/saxophones). Larson's recent performances include notable appearances at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall, EMPAC, the Guggenheim Museum, MoMA, MASS MoCA, and the Teatro General San Martín in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Karl received a Doctor of Musical Arts in Contemporary Music and a Master of Music in Piano Performance from Bowling Green State University, where he studied with Dr. Laura Melton. Larson

completed his undergraduate degree at Luther College in Decorah Iowa as a pupil of Dr. John Strauss. His recordings can be heard on Cantaloupe Music, New Amsterdam Records, New World Records, New Focus Recordings, and GALTIA Media.

[www.karllarsonpiano.com](http://www.karllarsonpiano.com)

All music composed by Scott Wollschleger.

*Dark Days*, *Tiny Oblivion*, *Brontal No. 6*, *Lyric Fragment*, *Blue Inscription*, *Music without Metaphor* published by Project Schott New York (BMI).

*Brontal No. 2 "Holiday"*, *Brontal No. 11 "I-80"*, *Secret Machine No. 4*, *Secret Machine No. 6* published by Scott Wollschleger Music, New York (BMI).

All tracks recorded at Oktaven Audio, Yonkers and Mount Vernon, New York.

Tracks 5,7,8 were recorded December 22, 2020.

Tracks 3,4,6 were recorded November 21, 2019.

Tracks 1,2,9 were recorded June 17, 2017.

Track 10 was recorded May 15, 2015.

Recording engineer: Ryan Streber.

Editing, mixing, and mastering: Ryan Streber and Scott Wollschleger.

Editing assistant: Charles Mueller.

Piano technician: Dan Jessie (Hamburg Steinway D).

Produced by Scott Wollschleger and Karl Larson.

Executive Producer: Scott Wollschleger.

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*River of Silence* (2020) by Theresa Musatto





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