



The Isles of Melancholy and Madness

drawings in the manner of musical scores
THE MUSIC OF FREDERICK SOMMER

performed by Walton Mendelson & Stephen Aldrich

THE MUSIC OF FREDERICK SOMMER

Drawings in the manner of musical scores

In 1934, Frederick Sommer visited Los Angeles. Walking through the art museum one day, he noticed a display of musical scores. He saw them not as music, but as graphics, and found in them an elegance and grace that led him to a careful study of scores and notation.

He found that the best music was visually more effective and attractive. He assumed that there was a correlation between music as we hear it and its notation; and he wondered if drawings that used notational motifs and elements could be played. He made his first “drawings in the manner of musical scores” that year. (I asked Fred to review this text; and he asked that I refer to his scores “only” in this way. When I suggested that it was perhaps too long to be repeated throughout the text, he laughed and said, “Well, use it at least one time.”)

Although people knew of his scores, and occasionally brought musicians to his house to play them, no one ever stayed with it for long. In 1967, both Stephen and I attended Prescott College, Prescott, Arizona, where Sommer was on the faculty. We barely knew of his reputation as a photographer, and nothing of the scores. Towards the end of September he invited us to his house for dinner, but we were to come early, and I was to bring my flute. “Can you play that?” he asked, as we looked at one of the scores, framed, and sitting atop his piano. With no guidance from him, we tried. Nervous and unsure of what we were getting into, we stopped midway through. I asked Stephen where he was in the score; he pointed to where I had stopped. We knew then, mysterious though they were, the scores could be played. On May 9, 1968, the first public performance of the music of Frederick Sommer was given at Prescott College.

Sommer had no musical training. He didn't know one note from another on his piano, nor could he read music. His record collection was surprisingly broad for that time, and his familiarity with it was thorough. What surprised me when I first met him were his visual skills: he could identify many specific pieces and almost any major composer by looking at the shapes of the notation on a page of printed music. And being an eighteen-year-old, I did test him.

Of Sommer's known works, his drawings, glue-color on paper, photographs, and writings, it is only these scores that have been a part of his creative life throughout the entirety of his artistic career. He was still drawing elegant scores in 1997. And like his skip reading, they are the closest key to understanding how he thought.

Technology and thirty years of playing the scores have come together to allow us to make a performance on CD. While the scores don't have specific notes, the graphic elements direct the improvised performance. Every performance is different, but the score, through its visual organization, guides us. There are two performances each of scores 5, 60 and 65.

The example on the next page is Score 66. Pitch and duration are shown in a general, suggestive way; whereas in the transcription of the wind instrument performance of the highlighted section pitch and time are specifically defined.

Certainly, our interpretation of the scores is idiosyncratic, and can't be considered definitive. I do not present the scores or our performances as anything other than what they are; I do not offer them as my idea of the avant-garde in music. Realistically, they are, as with the musical compositions of photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn done on piano rolls, an interesting footnote in the history of photography and music. I welcome comments or suggestions; I can be reached at walton@I2onI4.us.



The score numbers are a convenience of mine. Sommer did not have a system for numbering or titling them, nor is there any way to determine when a particular score was drawn. I grouped the performances into suites, repeating the opening piece at the end of each as a kind of coda, and giving them titles.

The instruments used are a Rowland RD-500, electronic keyboard, for recording with a Kurzweil K2500R for mastering, and a Yamaha WX11 and WT-11 electronic wind instrument (controller) and sound module (synth), for recording and mastering. The electronic wind instrument is a clarinet-shaped instrument having five octaves and the capability of simple polyphonic playing, as heard on tracks 5, 13, and 56. Its sound was changed from violin to “swamp-synth” on track 4, and to “whistle” on track 20. The keyboard was changed on tracks 4, and 6 to strings, and track 20 to “clavichord/koto”. We recorded every practice session into a computer using Midiman Winman 2X2 MIDI interface and Cakewalk Pro Audio recording software. The CD was

engineered and mastered at Sweetwater Sound, Inc., in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, by Larry Pester. Over the entirety of the two suites, nine notes were changed or deleted, most of which had been corrupted either by the Yamaha sound module or in converting the files from one format to another. Beyond adjusting the dynamics, creating a feeling for where the music is being performed, and whatever else is part of the arcane tools of the sound engineer, these recordings are live performances: no performance has been otherwise edited or spliced together—each is what we played, as we played it.

The CD is dedicated to Fred for his friendship, enthusiasm, and curiosity; and to Frances, his remarkable wife, who made his work possible.

Walton Mendelson
January, 1998

A note on the 2003 edition, Isles of Melancholy and Madness:

This is the identical CD to the one produced in 1998-2000, but the packaging has been changed to something more in keeping with CDs in jewel cases. The feedback I have received has been remarkable and gratifying. If I could speak for Fred without that being presumptuous, I'm sure he would be pleased at the response, too.

Fred's musical tastes ran from early Christian chant well into the avant garde of the first half of the twentieth century. When I first met him, his favorite piece of music, and one which he insisted required a drink—most often his version of the Brazilian *batidas*: 1 part honey, 1 part lemon juice, and 3 parts tequila—was Wilhelm Friedemann Bach's *Sinfonia d-moll*. (He said that one time he gave Max Ernst two batidas, and played the Friedemann for him. Asking

him what he thought of the music, Ernst said, “I need the drinks, but how do I hold them.”) He loved Satie, and would show us how one should dance to Satie, if one wanted to—this demonstration usually occurred after the liquid preparation mentioned above was too eagerly embraced. During his last few years, his musical tastes move back to Palastrina, Josquin, and Tallis, to name a few.

Despite his knowledge and taste, and, in the beginning, my asking, he never gave me advice or made suggestions regarding the direction the performances took or of what he might have had in mind when he drew the scores. He would lay on his day bed, a few feet from the piano, and listen to us. It was enough that we were playing his scores. He often said, however, that “you must do no less well than you can.” And that is itself remarkable advice.

Isles of Melancholy and Madness is rededicated to Fred and Frances. And I would like to acknowledge and thank Chris Pichler, whose faith and support made it possible to see the project through. An elegant, limited edition portfolio of this CD and the scores is available from Nazraeli Press, ISBN 3-923922-81-7, item #81-7, www.nazraeli.com, phone: 520.798.1530.

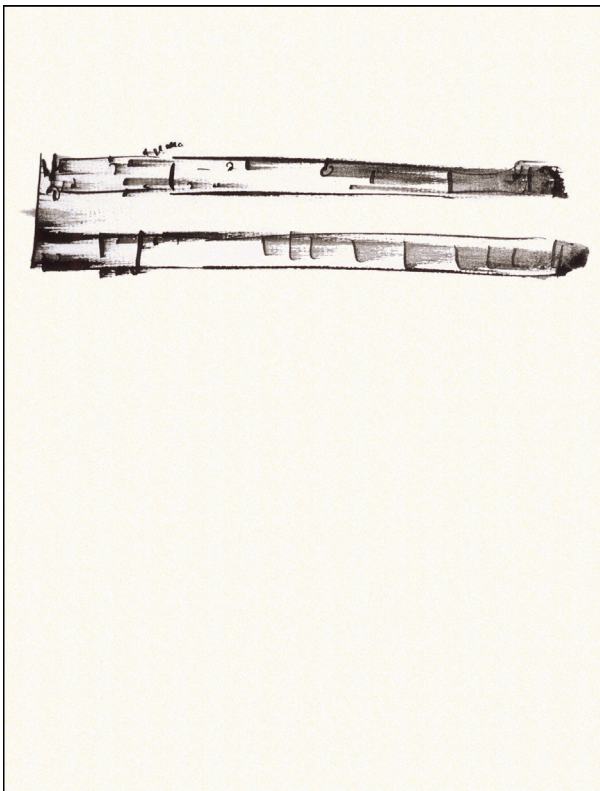
Walton Mendelson
December, 2002

*Morality and manners serve
the behavior of our needs,
where Art remains the confessor
for artists who have something to say.*

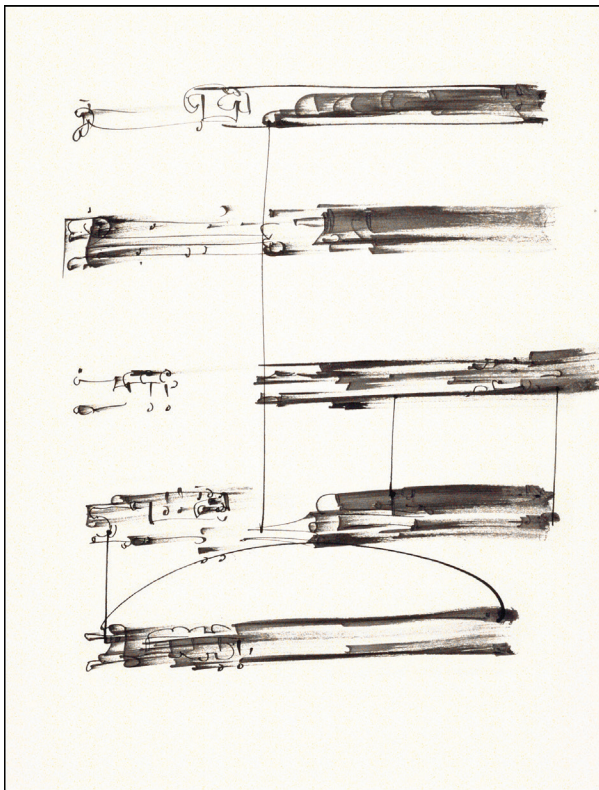
—Frederick Sommer, 1995

Drawings in the manner of musical scores

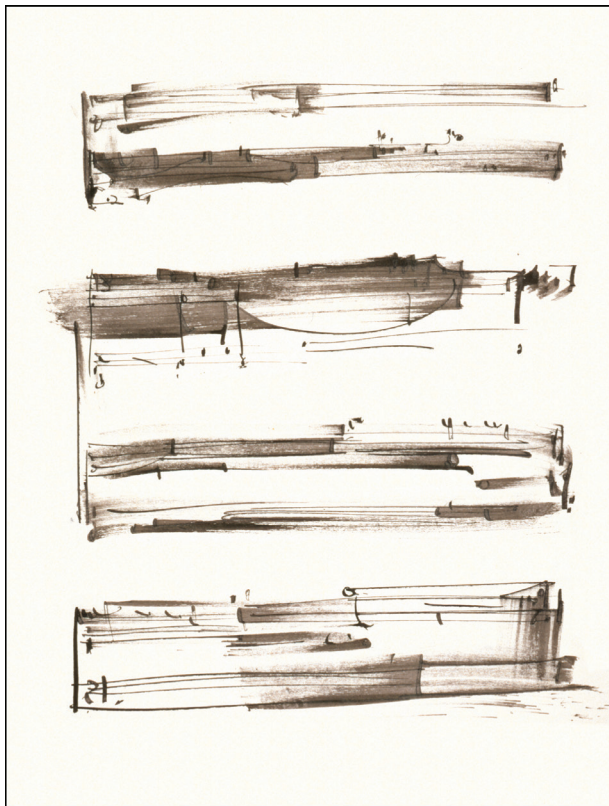
THE MUSIC OF FREDERICK SOMMER



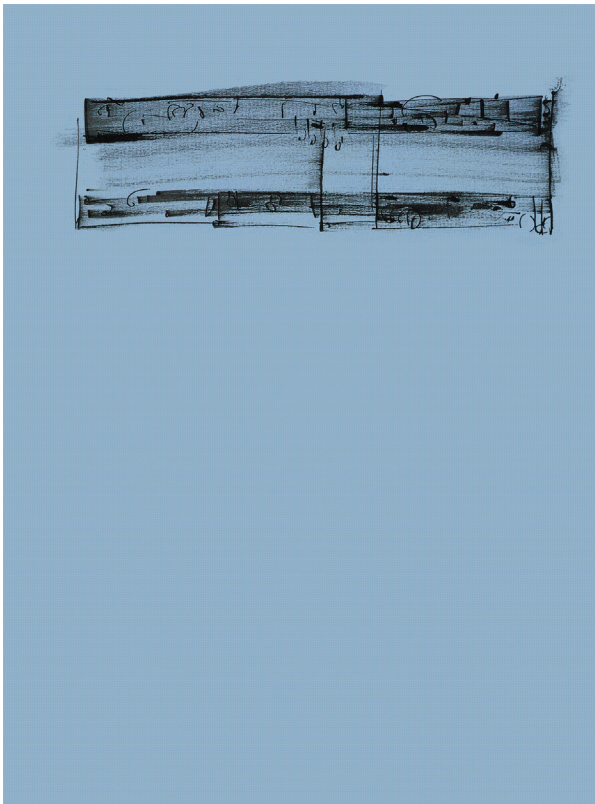
Score 65, tracks 1, 6, 8



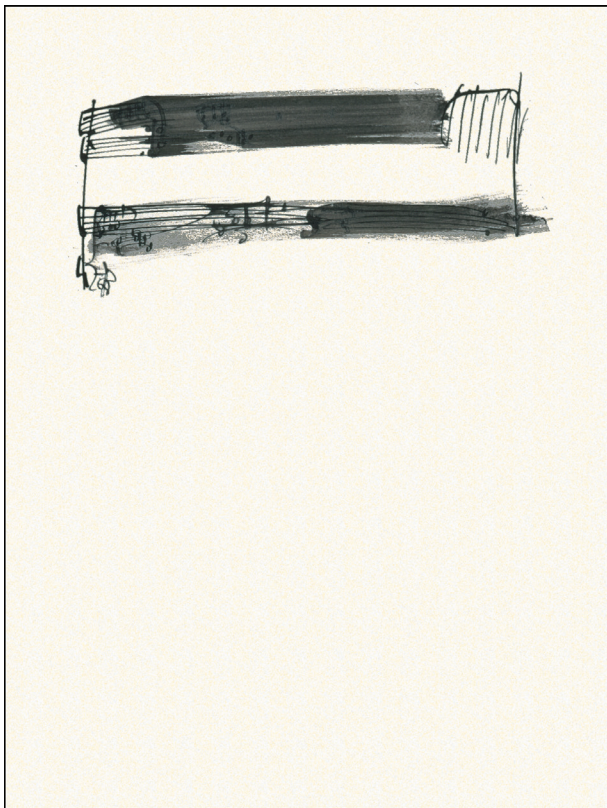
Score 60, tracks 2, 7



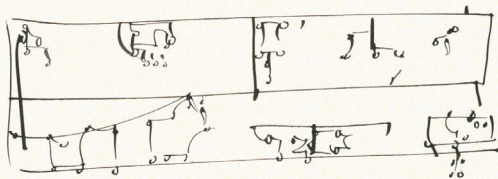
Score 63, track 3



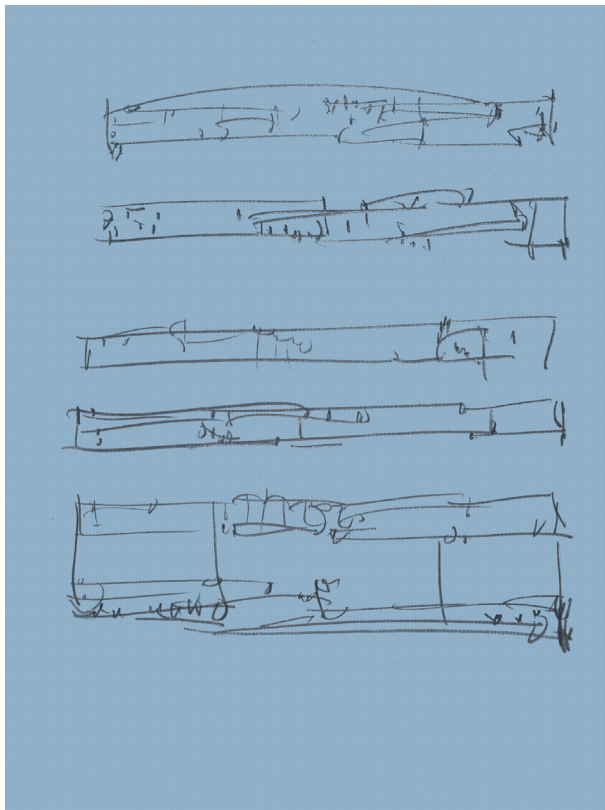
Score 14, track 4



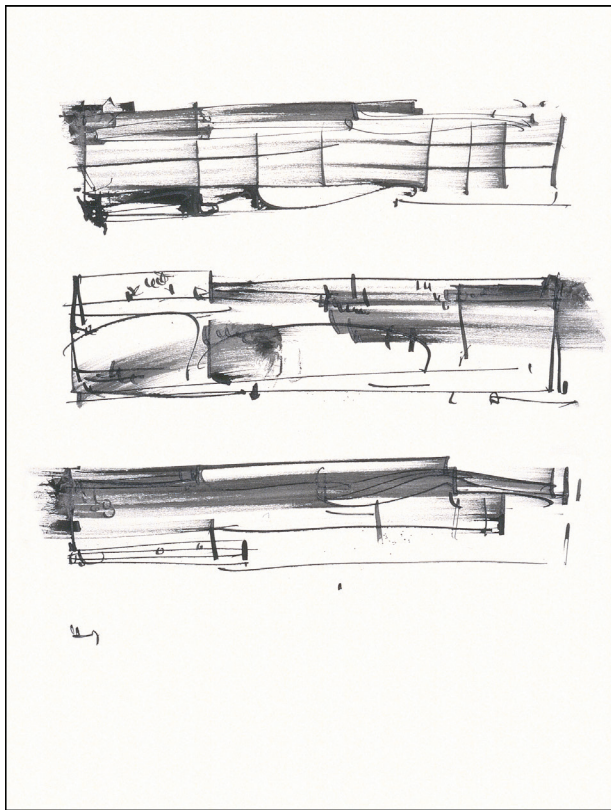
Score 05, track 5, 9, 20



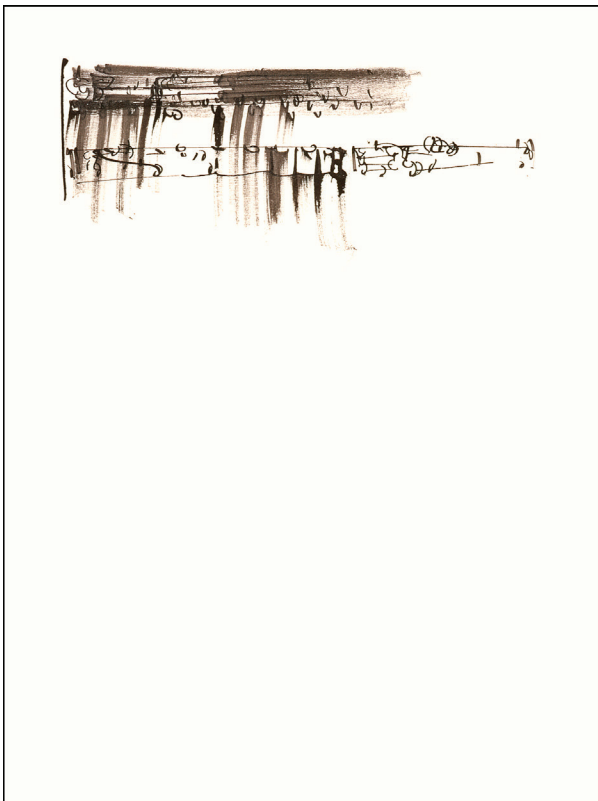
Score 66, track 10



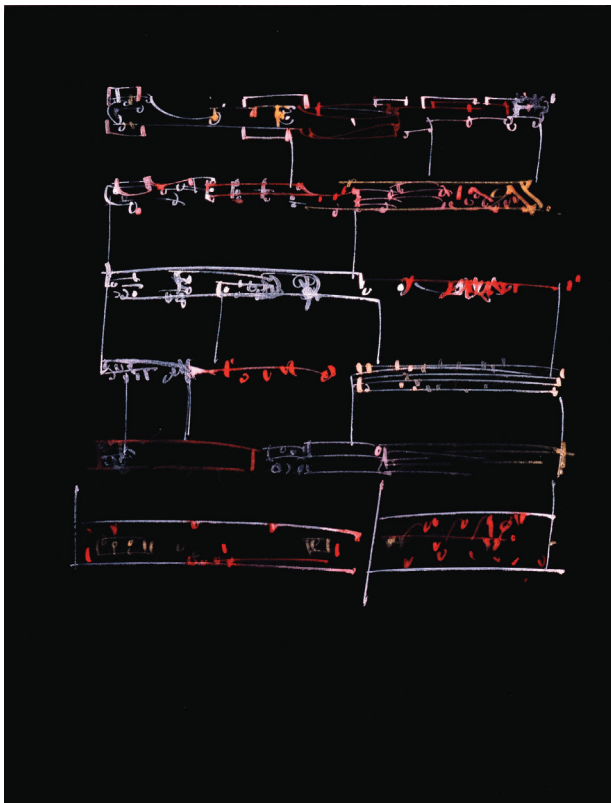
Score 24, track II



Score 69, track 12



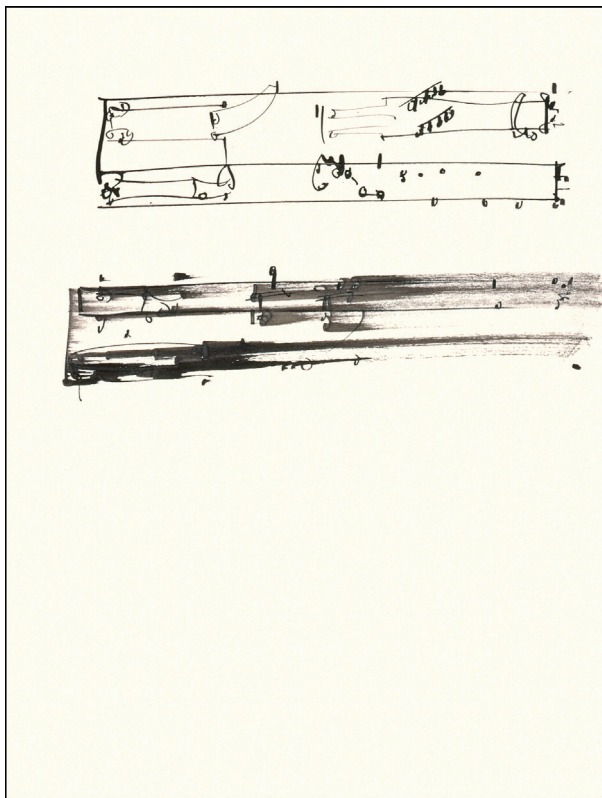
Score 01, track 13



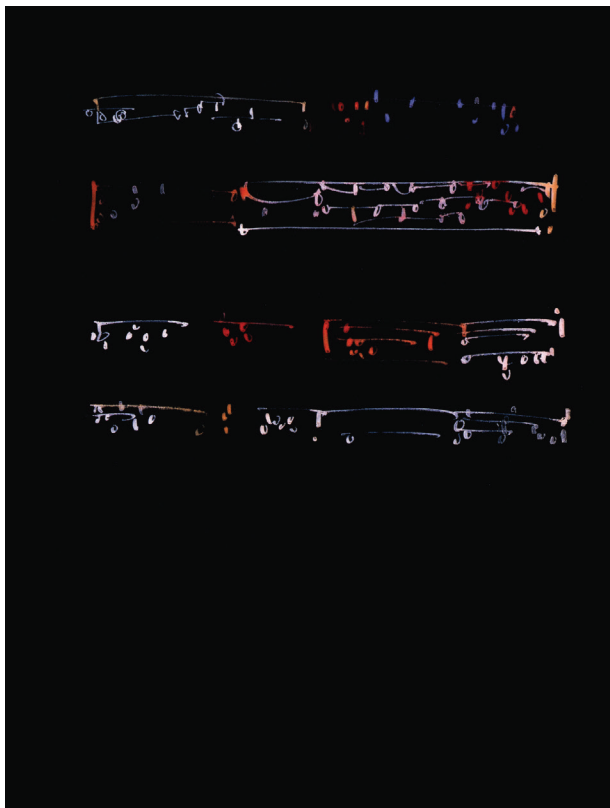
Score 19, track 14



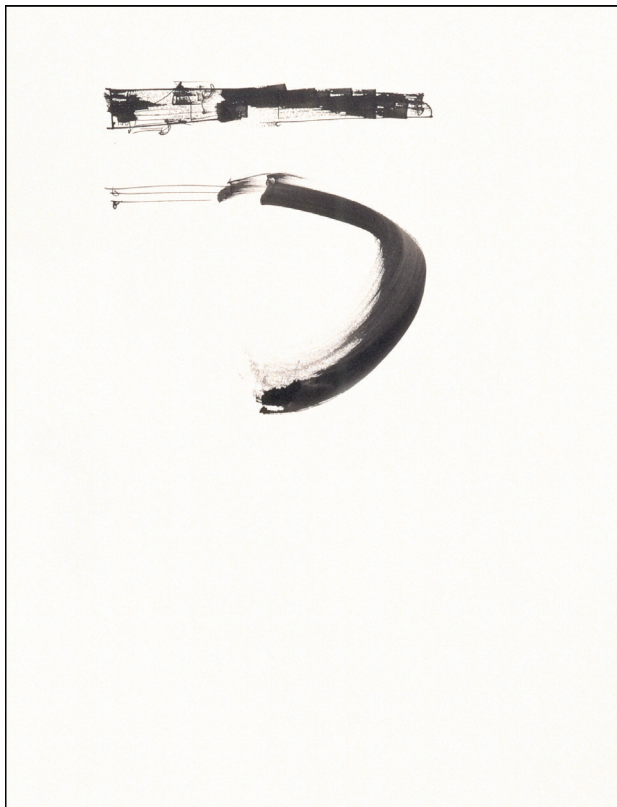
Score 6I, track 15



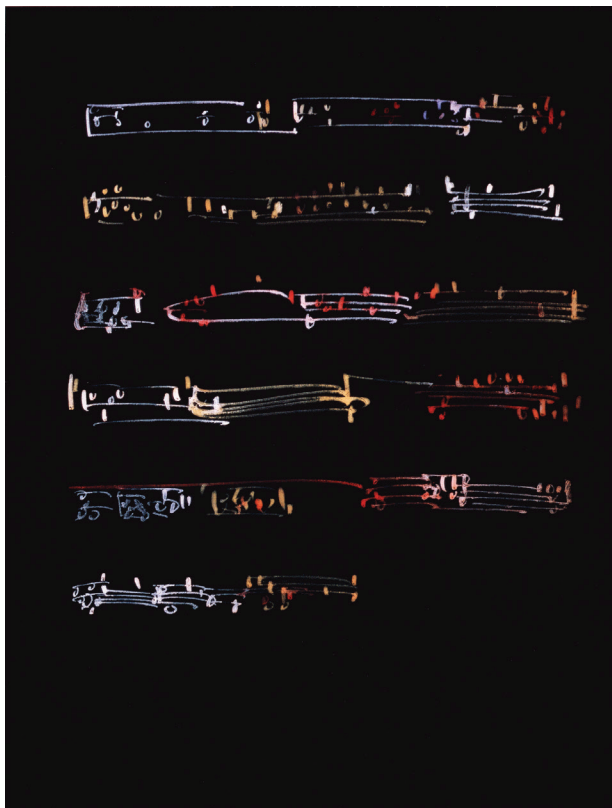
Score 15, track 16



Score II, track 17 track II



Score 59, track 18



Score 32, track 19

Sommer's musical scores, were drawn on a variety of materials: art papers (white, off-white, tan, rose, blue, etc.), black paper, photographic paper, aluminum foil, in pencil, pen and ink, glue-color, ball point pen, etc. In this booklet, the pencil line border has been added to help set off the scores made on off-white papers.

Engineered by Larry Pester, Sweetwater Sound Inc., Ft. Wayne, Indiana

The Isles of Melancholy and Madness © 2003 Walton Mendelson

Cover Image, *The Isles of Melancholy*, © 2002 Walton Mendelson

Moroccan Leather & Isles of Melancholy and Madness ® 1998 Walton Mendelson & Stephen Aldrich

Drawings/Musical scores © 1934–1998 Frederick Sommer

Also available, from Nazraeli Press, *The Music of Frederick Sommer*, a portfolio of the scores with the CD,

#81-7, www.nazraeli.com, (520)798-1530

THE ISLES OF MELANCHOLY AND MADNESS

THE MUSIC OF FREDERICK SOMMER

Walton Mendelson, electronic wind instrument

Stephen Aldrich, electronic keyboard

Moroccan Leather (29:58)

[1]	65	06.17.96	(2:13)	[5]	05	05.05.96	(2:30)
[2]	60	05.09.96	(6:24)	[6]	65	04.29.96	(3:00)
[3]	63	05.09.96	(5:24)	[7]	60	05.02.96	(5:14)
[4]	14	05.05.96	(2:32)	[8]	65	06.17.96	(2:11)

Isles of Melancholy and Madness (28:57)

[9]	05	01.09.97	(2:03)	[15]	61	02.10.97	(2:28)
[10]	66	11.19.96	(1:00)	[16]	15	02.10.97	(2:53)
[11]	24	01.09.97	(3:10)	[17]	11	02.10.97	(1:53)
[12]	69	09.02.96	(2:45)	[18]	59	02.10.97	(1:35)
[13]	01	08.26.97	(1:02)	[19]	32	04/01.07	(3:24)
[14]	19	04.21.97	(3:52)	[20]	05	01.09.97	(2:03)

Showing track number, score number, date recorded, running time.