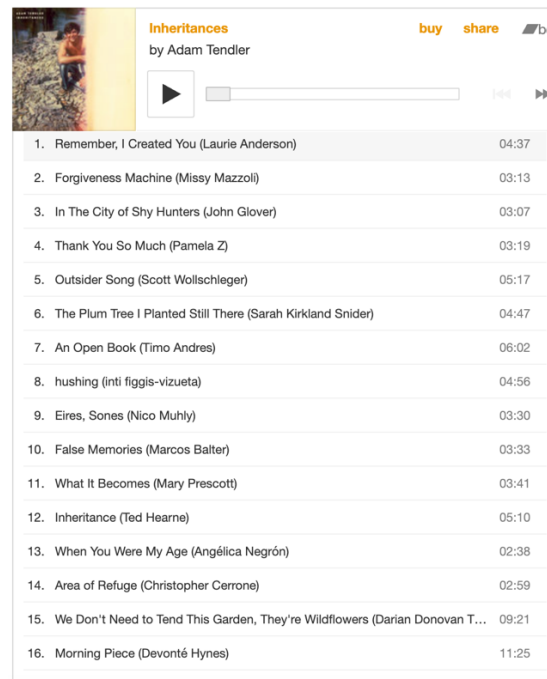


The Rich, Radical Poetics of Grief in Pianist Adam Tendler's *Inheritances*

by Anne Lovering Rounds

Pianist Adam Tendler's studio album *Inheritances*, released on New Amsterdam Records and nominated for a [2026 GRAMMY® Award](#) in the Best Classical Instrumental Solo category, is noteworthy for the star lineup of diverse contemporary composers whose music it curates. (Artists and tracks are shown in the image below; listen at [NewAm Records' webpage for the album](#).)



There is a lit-crit angle of this project and its premise that may be of equal interest to comparatists and interdisciplinarians (in other words, readers, writers, and artists whose thoughts, like mine, always seem to spill over what's allowed in the overhead bin). As has now been covered in a range of high-reach outlets— an [essay](#) by Tendler in *The New York Times*; segments on [The Tamron Hall Show](#) and [CBS Sunday Morning](#) — the 16 works on *Inheritances* were commissioned with a cash sum that Tendler received as an unexpected inheritance after the sudden death of his father. In a pre-concert dialogue at a live performance of *Inheritances* at the contemporary music venue PS21, *Washington Post* critic Michael Andor Brodeur noted that there was a literary quality to the project; he didn't elaborate, but by "literary quality," I think he meant that receiving an envelope with a wad of cash inside, from an estranged family member, who died without warning, could be an inciting plot element for a novel or short story, a kind of Dickensian windfall. The literary-theoretical textures of *Inheritances* are even thicker, richer, and more specifically poetic.

Welcome to PS21

A vibrant center for contemporary performance in the Hudson Valley, PS21 “presents work that challenges and invites” (The New York Times). Our adventurous productions by leading and emerging American and international artists showcase what’s new and thought-provoking in music, contemporary circus, dance, theater—and in entirely new genres.

Friday, August 22, 2025

6:00 pm Pre-performance talk with Adam Tendler and composer John Glover, moderated by *Washington Post* Classical Music Critic Michael Andor Brodeur

7:30 pm Performance of *Inheritances*
Adam Tendler, piano

Duration: 80 minutes, no intermission



FULL PROGRAM

PROGRAM

Remember, I Created You, Laurie Anderson
Forgiveness Machine, Missy Mazzoli
Outsider Song, Scott Wollschleger
You Were My Age, Angélica Negrón
In The City of Shy Hunters, John Glover
What It Becomes, Mary Prescott
An Open Book, Timo Andres
Inheritance, Ted Hearne
hushing, inti figgis-vizueta
the plum tree i planted still there, Sarah Kirkland Snider
Area of Refuge, Christopher Cerrone
False Memories, Marcos Balter
Thank You So Much, Pamela Z
We don't need to tend this garden. They're wildflowers, Darian Donovan Thomas
Eiris, Sones, Nico Muhly
Morning Piece, Devonté Hynes

Inheritances features the works of 16 artists, all personal friends of Tendler, and, as he has described them in his *New York Times* essay, “brilliant composers”: Laurie Anderson, Missy Mazzoli, John Glover, Pamela Z, Scott Wollschleger, Sarah Kirkland Snider, Timo Andres, inti figgis-vizueta, Nico Muhly, Marcos Balter, Mary Prescott, Ted Hearne, Angélica Negrón, Christopher Cerrone, Darian Donovan Thomas, and Devonté Hynes. Collecting the work of friends suggests a poetics of coterie (a move associated with the New York School of poets, among other movements), but because of its other parameters, the project resists a common critique of personal or confessional texts, which is that they are exclusive and cliquey, leaving reader-listeners in a position of eavesdropping rather than participating. The project’s plurivocal methodology (16 is a lot of friends; there is a lot of work being done by the *s* in *Inheritances*) places it into a broader critical genre tradition of anthologies, and at the same time, because its works had their impetus from loss, into the mode of pastoral elegy.

I’m thinking of the word *pastoral* in its broadest sense: concurrent with its context of grieving, there is a diction of planting and nature surrounding *Inheritances*, and contained in the language-based elements of its pieces. For example, in his [initial email](#) to composers asking them to write for the project, Tendler spoke of “plant[ing]...cash in the soil of something that may actually grow.” The title of Sarah Kirkland Snider’s piece is “the plum tree I planted still there,” a phrase Tendler chants during Darian Donovan Thomas’ work, “We don’t need to tend this garden. They’re wildflowers,” before sing-speaking of “the blueberry bushes that my dad once planted, once so bountiful that strangers would visit with empty containers to pick them.”

“January 18, 2020

Hello Friends.

As you may know, in October my father died. It came as a surprise and the circumstances aren’t entirely clear. We had a close relationship in my childhood that, for any number of reasons (loss of love not among them) grew more distant, or at least quieter, over time. I last talked to him on Father’s Day.

He left me cash as my inheritance. He kept cash, so I heard, in case of a revolution. My stepmother gave it to me in a parked car on New Year’s Day outside of a Denny’s in West Lebanon, NH. To plant that cash in the soil of something that may actually grow and—if you’ll forgive me—live on, I have decided to commission piano pieces from composers whom I care about and whose work I admire. You are one of them.

At the same time, it might be its elegiac (rather than its pastoral) theme that has propelled *Inheritances* into a bigger conversation. In the November 2025 [CBS Sunday Morning segment](#), reporter Lee Cowan remarked on how the project “actually relates to everyone,” transcending personal circumstance to achieve relatable resonance: “[Tendler’s] father is in the music, but so is mine, maybe yours, your friend’s. Death is a universal end.” But just as its literary elements offer up more complexity than the circumstances of its making, there’s more to be learned from the popular reception of *Inheritances* than the mass relatability of its theme. In an [Instagram post](#), Tendler explicitly expressed gratitude to CBS for its willingness, in treating *Inheritances*, to take on “what is at its core an experimental album by an independent artist, exploring difficult themes through a queer lens...This has always been a family affair; let’s make this circle bigger.”



Inheritances' motivation of coterie towards a generative purpose, its creation of kinship, parallels the work [Lytle Shaw theorizes](#) in his reading of gay New York School poet Frank O'Hara. As well as being legible as a compositional and performance instance of pastoral elegy, what is remarkable, and remarkably literary, about *Inheritances*, is its elegiac, anthologic creation of alternative kinship structures. One might speculate that grief itself, and the genre of elegy through which it is expressed, is a queer lens on human experience, if part of (what Tendler meant by) queerness is being, like mourning, too often silenced, and if experience means being alive. The mainstream media didn't do Tendler a favor by covering a queer project. *Inheritances* did the hard, impressive, and beautiful work of queering the mainstream.

—Anne Lovering Rounds, December 2025

About the Author

Anne Lovering Rounds is a poet, pianist, and professor of English at Hostos Community College, a campus of the City University of New York located in the South Bronx. You can find out more about her published work [here](#) and listen to her playing [here](#).