

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 26 November 2024
7.30pm

Secret Kiss

Geoffrey Paterson conductor
Birmingham Contemporary Music Group

Anthony Robb flute
Helen Benson flute
Melinda Maxwell oboe
Oliver Janes clarinet
John Reid piano
Julian Warburton percussion
Alice Rossi soprano
Meg Kubota reciter

Alexandra Wood violin
Colette Overdijk violin
Chris Yates viola
Arthur Boutillier cello
Julian Atkinson double bass
Celine Saout harp

Rebecca Saunders (b.1967)

Stirrings (2011)

Julian Anderson (b.1967)

Mitternachtslied (2023)

Peter Eötvös (1944-2024)

Secret Kiss (2018) *world première of English language version*

Co-commissioned by Gageego Ensemble Gothenburg, Casa da Música – Porto, Plural Ensemble Madrid, Okamura & Company, Inc., Musikfabrik Cologne, MÜPA Budapest, Wigmore Hall and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group as part of BCMG's Sound Investment Scheme

Interval

Lisa Illean (b.1983)

Cantor (2017)

*I. Prelude • II. Stirring • III. Interlude •
IV. Stealing • V. Interlude • VI. Closing •
VII. L'Envoi*

Harrison Birtwistle (1934-2022)

The Woman and the Hare (1999)
...when falling asleep (2019) *London première*

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BCMG's artistic director Stephan Meier has provided an introduction to this programme:

'Music is the realm of intimacy; what words can't say, music can. Péter Eötvös's melodrama after Alessandro Baricco's novel *Silk* offers a fully detailed narrative of an intimate situation between two people from different continents.

A different pair appear onstage in Harrison Birtwistle's *...when falling asleep* and *The Woman and the Hare*: singer and reciter, both female and rather isolated from each other, without any true dialogue, so as to raise the question whether we are hearing two persons or two inner voices of one. The sombrely enigmatic closing words of *...when falling asleep*, combined with Rilke's lullaby, lend a strong, typically weird 'Harry' character to what turned out to be the composer's final ensemble piece.

The singer is on her own in Julian Anderson's *Lied* of the metaphorically 'deep' midnight hour, offering a precious, life-changing moment of self-knowledge, as well as in Lisa Illean's piece on twilight as the time for reflection and pondering.

To start with though, we hear Rebecca Saunders defying the usual concert set up, instead offering the listener intimate encounters with a specially conceived fragile soundscape, evoking Beckett's 'Light infinitely faint'.

The programme was conceived before the pandemic in close collaboration with Péter Eötvös, who was himself to conduct the first half and to work, as he so passionately desired, with the young professionals of our NEXT academy on other compositions by him in a meticulously drawn up schedule. It was not to be. We dedicate this concert to his memory as a guiding star for contemporary vision and practice for so many of us.'

Rebecca Saunders's *Stirrings* (2011) overlaps two longstanding concerns of hers: with musicians – and therefore sounds – dispersed within the hall, and with the prose writings of Samuel Beckett, here especially his last such effort, *Stirrings Still*. What she calls 'the quiet sound images, fragile, like echoes or resonances' seek a dialogue with each other and with the space they are in, finding and losing themselves through the music's 16 minutes.

Julian Anderson's *Mitternachtslied* reduces both the ensemble, now on stage, and the time frame while throwing out connections in two directions. The Nietzsche poem is one that probably most of us know from its setting in Mahler's Third Symphony, from which this new version could hardly be more different. Meanwhile, the five-piece ensemble is that of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, a model that is again observed, unusually, from a great distance.

That same grouping underlies the **Eötvös** recitation of *Secret Kiss*, but with the pianist replaced by a percussion player on bass drum and tam tam together with vibraphone at the head of other tuned instruments. Eötvös wrote the speaking part for Ryoko Aoko, an actress who has made inroads into the traditionally male world of noh acting. This evening, again, it may seem we hear the

woman of the piece recounting the story, of an intense encounter enjoining intense restraint.

Intensity and restraint are heightened by the choice of sentences from the Baricco novel made by Mari Mezei, Eötvös's wife. The narrative is then heightened again by the music, of course, which combines the punctuating function of music in Japanese theatre with word-painting and evocation of atmosphere. Voices, too, are suggested: the woman's by alto flute and violin, the man's by bass clarinet and cello. At the curious parting, the strings attach mutes and the woodwind players shift up to regular flute and clarinet. Music has the last word.

From here, the ensemble is lightly expanded. **Lisa Illean's** *Cantor* (2017) sets early poems by Willa Cather, introduced by a prelude and separated by interludes. The composer was, she says, 'drawn to the directness and simplicity of Cather's writing, as a conduit for imagining the way a variety of vocal mannerisms might be folded and absorbed in subtle ways into an individual voice.' The woman's voice is gentle but resilient, as she contemplates the land around her, contends with loneliness and finds peace in solitude. Cantor superimposes cycles of lines, waves or impulses, creating a convergence of layers composed of simple elements. Musically, the texture is like a tableau upon which the voice carves its line.

Harrison Birtwistle's long alliance with David Harsent's poetry resulted in four operas and a song cycle as well as *The Woman and the Hare* (1999). Singer and reciter here are two wanderers on the same shore, song and story two refractions of the same memory. As so often in Birtwistle's songs, the singing line is high, slow and clear. This is a voice suggesting that a flow of tears is imminent; it is also a voice chiming like a human bell, in radiant ecstasy.

Answering a 75th birthday commission from BCMG, Birtwistle in 2019 returned to the genre he had invented with *The Woman and the Hare*. This time, in *...when falling asleep*, the two soloists are on separate tracks, with their own texts: for the singer, a poem by Rilke translated into English by Jochen Voigt; for the speaker, fragments adapted from Swinburne's elegy for Baudelaire, *Ave atque vale*. Almost all that links these poems is that both are addressed to a silent individual, one who is close but separate, and may not be hearing what is said. Out of that comes the drama – and the music – of the piece. The singing voice begins, with strings. The speaker interrupts, with piccolo, in her own tempo. But then it is as if nothing had happened; the singer goes on – except that the change to the scoring begins to infiltrate her music, until three woodwind instruments have become part of the orchestra, joined late in the day by a percussionist. It may seem, too, that the voices, singing and speaking, are becoming aware of each other, aware of belonging together, as their words begin to echo one another.

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Rebecca Saunders (b.1967)

Stirrings (2011)

Julian Anderson (b.1967)

Mitternachtslied (2023) **Song of Midnight**

Friedrich Nietzsche

O Mensch! Gib acht!	O man! Take heed!
Was spricht die Tefe Mitternacht?	What speaks deepest midnight?
Ich schlief, ich schlief - Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht: -	I slept, I slept - I have been woken from a deep dream: -
Die Welt ist tief, Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht.	the world is deep, and deeper than the day could know.
Tief ist ihr Weh - Lust - tiefer noch als Herzeleid:	And pain is deep - joy - deeper still than heartache:
Weh spricht: Vergeh! Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit -, - Will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!	pain speaks: begone! But joys all want eternity - - want deep, boundless eternity!

Peter Eötvös (1944-2024)

Secret Kiss (2018) *world première of English
language version*

*Mari Mezei, after Alessandro Baricco, trans. Eszter
Molnár*

In 1861 Hervé Joncour, a young Frenchman, held
between his fingers a veil woven of Japanese silk
thread.

It was like holding smoke between his fingers...

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reproduce the text of this song

Interval

Lisa Illean (b.1983)

Cantor (2017)

Willa Cather

I. Prelude

II. Stirring

A crimson fire, that vanquishes the stars
An odour from the dusty sage
A sudden stirring of the herds.
A breaking of the distant land...
And the flare of water, silver in the light
A swift, bright lance flung low across the world
A sudden pang for the hills of home

III. Interlude

IV. Stealing

Somewhere, sometime...
When the hills are hid in shadows
When brooks are still and hushed for wonder
Let them gather
Stealing from the trackless dust

V. Interlude

VI. Closing

Since thou came'st not at morn
Come not at ev'n
Let night close peaceful
Where it hath begun
Affrighten not the restful stars of heav'n
With futile after-glimpses of the sun
My heart implores me
But my lands are wasted
And evening closes in
I have no house for Love, to shelter him.

VII. L'Envoi

Then for that the moon was ours of olden
Let it for an April night transform us
From our grosser selves
To happy shadows.

*Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have
ended.*

Harrison Birtwistle (1934-2022)

The Woman and the Hare (1999)

David Harsent

I have come to this place to be shot of myself, I have
come to come
to nothing ...

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text of this song

...when falling asleep (2019) *London première*

Rainer Maria Rilke, trans. Jochen Voigt

Algernon Charles Swinburne

I would like to sing someone
to sleep,

... sudden rain ...

... leaf-buds are
poisonous ...

to sit and be with someone.

... grey like dust ...

... where sun and moon
are mute ...

I'd like to cradle you and sing
to you softly

... pale with heat ...

... quiet eyes unsleeping...

and accompany you sleep-in
and sleep-out.

... this short scroll ...

... a curl of severed hair ...

... a barren kiss ...

I want to be the only one in the house,
Who'd know, the night was cold.

... obscure fingers ...

... smell of a sick flower ...

... with a wintry smell ...

And I would like to listen
within and without

... fiery blossoms ...

Into you, to the world, to the
woods.

... half faded ...

... not all our songs ...

The striking clocks call one
another,

... wild notes about this
dust ...

And one sees to the bottom
of time.

... soft flame and heat of
song ...

And down below a strange man goes by
And disturbs a strange dog.
Beyond is silence.

... o sweet strange
singer...

... sound of unregarded
tears ...

I have laid my eyes

Wide upon you;

... singing these dim
divisions ...

And they hold you gently

And let you go, when something stirs in the dark