

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 16 September 2023
7.30pm

12 Ensemble

Eloisa-Fleur Thom violin i	May Dolan viola
Zahra Benyounes violin i	Connie Pharoah viola
Venetia Jollands violin i	Max Ruisi cello
Beatrice Philips violin i	Colin Alexander cello
Alessandro Ruisi violin ii	Sergio Serra cello
Oliver Cave violin ii	George Hoult cello
Ellie Consta violin ii	Toby Hughes bass
Maria Gilicel violin ii	Lucía Polo Moreno bass
Luba Tunnicliffe viola	Siret Lust bass
Matthew Maguire viola	

Anna Clyne (b.1980)

Within Her Arms (2008-9)

Claude Vivier (1948-1983)

Zipangu (1980)

Oliver Leith (b.1990)

Non Voglio Mai Vedere Il Sole Tramontare from *Last Days* (2022)
world première of arrangement

Interval

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Verklärte Nacht Op. 4 (1899)

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This programme spans the 20th and 21st centuries, drawing on enduring themes - romanticism and modernism, classical music and popular culture, nostalgia, love and death - and the multi-faceted connections between them, through the expressive and sonic capabilities of the string orchestra. For over 10 years, 12 Ensemble has taken a chamber approach to such music, making it ideally placed to address such themes musically. The ensemble describes itself as 'combining the energy, commitment and spontaneous creativity of a small ensemble with the breathtaking sound and power afforded by a larger string orchestra.' It further extends and explores these possibilities through collaborations with composers.

One such collaboration is with **Oliver Leith**, with whom the ensemble worked on the opera *Last Days* (2022). Leith's opera takes its title and plot from the film by Gus Van Sant that depicts the final days of the life of a rock musician, loosely based on the Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain. The opera was described as 'bleak and beautiful' by Andrew Clements in *The Guardian*, and this assessment is epitomised by the moment in which the song 'Non Voglio Mai Vedere Il Sole Tramontare' ('I never want to see the sun go down') is heard. The opera audience encountered this through a record played on stage by the main character, Blake; the voice on the recording was the American singer-songwriter Caroline Polachek. In this new arrangement, the vocal line of the aria has been transcribed for solo violin.

In Leith's opera this is an extreme moment of emotion, and it is a fitting way to close the first half of this programme, which opens with another work that evokes such extreme emotion. *Within Her Arms* (2008-9) was written by **Anna Clyne** in memory of her late mother. It is an elegy opening with a lamenting, descending motif from which the whole piece is built. Some critics have made a comparison between this music and that of the renaissance; an understandable link given its five-part harmony, and the way that a complex and layered texture is developed from a single gesture. At times, the listener might imagine a consort of viols rather than a string orchestra, especially as the music is punctuated by poignant pauses and moments of stillness. Clyne's note to the piece, aside from the dedication to her mother, comprises a quote from Vietnamese Thiền Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. The quotation describes reconnecting with a loved one through nature, and mirrors the reflective atmosphere to which the music progresses.

Between these works, *Zipangu* (1980) by **Claude Vivier** introduces resonances of modernism reflecting his studies with Stockhausen. However, this music also contains traces of his experiments with musical timbre. The players create varieties of sound-colour, using overpressure as a way to activate additional

harmonics and what the composer describes as 'granular sound'. The music opens with a melody in octaves for the violins, accompanied by a chord that explores such timbral possibilities. Later, the ensemble moves in a unison rhythm but with a similar variety of colour achieved through variation of technique. Of this, the composer wrote: 'a melody becomes a colour (chords), grows lighter and slowly returns as though purified and solitary.' The 'solitary' and drone-like nature of this chord is one of a number of musical elements in Vivier's oeuvre connected with his biography: he was an adopted child who openly described his loneliness. The title is a moniker used for the country of Japan in the time of Marco Polo, an historical figure with whom Vivier became fascinated in the latter part of his life. Vivier had also visited Japan as part of a trip to Asia in the mid-1970s, and Kabuki theatre was one of many influences on his music beyond western classical music: not in its sound, but rather in the ritualised elements of performance. *Zipangu* is dedicated to Vivier's friend, the artist Philippe Poloni.

It may seem surprising that a work from 1899, **Schoenberg's** *Verklärte Nacht*, could draw all of these threads together. However, the descending motif with which the music opens might recall that of Anna Clyne, the ensemble colour and polyphony that of Vivier, and the lyrical violin melodies the vocal line of 'Non Voglio Mai Vedere Il Sole Tramontare'. Originally scored for sextet and later for string orchestra, *Verklärte Nacht* takes the title of a 1896 poem by Richard Dehmel. In the poem, a woman confesses that she has become pregnant through an encounter with a stranger. Her companion, a man, responds that this event is part of the natural beauty of the world, and that they will raise the baby together: 'wie klar das Weltall schimmert!' ('how brightly the universe shimmers!') The music is a tone poem in five sections that reflects the sections of the original poem and, while harmonically adventurous in terms of its extended tonality, retains the late romanticism of its year of composition. This romanticism has further been read into the work's place in Schoenberg's life: in 1901 Schoenberg married Mathilde, the sister of his teacher Zemlinsky; in 1902 the piece was premiered. Many listeners also hear nostalgia in the music: it appeared in the underscore of Simon Langton's 1982 dramatisation of John le Carré's *Smiley's People* to signal a moment of heightened emotion as Alexandra is left behind at the convent in Switzerland. The familiarity of the D minor opening does not tell the whole story, however. The final section concludes resolutely in D major, and Schoenberg further draws on the sonic possibilities of the string ensemble including such characteristics as arpeggio bowing across the strings and pizzicato to create the impression of the shimmering universe.

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