

WIGMORE HALL 125

Thursday 20 November 2025
7.30pm

The Artist Is Not Present LCMF x Wigmore Hall

Jennifer Walshe voice
George Barton drums
Dominic Murcott player piano
Jack Sheen conductor
Explore Ensemble

Taylor MacLennan flutes
Alex Roberts clarinets
David Zucchi soprano saxophone I
Amy Green soprano saxophone II
Sarah Park piano

Craig Apps percussion
Eloisa-Fleur Thom violin I
Amy Tress violin II
Oliver Cave violin III
Gemma Sharples violin IV

Christine Anderson viola
Deni Teo cello I
Sérgio Serra Lopez cello II
Sebastian Pennar double bass

Conlon Nancarrow (1912-1997)

From Studies for Player Piano (1948-70)
No. 3a • No. 20 • No. 25

Anon

Instructions for the composition of as many waltzes as one desires with two dice, without understanding anything about music or composition (1792) *attributed to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788)

A method for making six bars of double counterpoint at the octave without knowing the rules (1757)

Antonio Calegari (1757-1828)

Game of Pythagorean Music (1801)

Eyleif Mullen-White (1937-1988)

At the Academy of Projectors (1972) *world première*

Hanne Darboven (1941-2009)

New version of Opus 17a (1984) *world première*

Interval

Conlon Nancarrow

From Studies for Player Piano
No. 12 • No. 36

Caoimhín Breathnach (1934-2009)

Breathnóir (2007) *world première*

Jennifer Walshe (b.1974)

Slop Studies 2#a-7 (2025) *world première*
Co-commissioned by London Contemporary Music Festival and Wigmore Hall

Clarence Barlow (1945-2023)

Im Januar am Nil (1981-4)



UNDER 35S

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'One of the latest fashionable pastimes in society in France is the musical dice game,' announced the *Journal of Luxury and Fashion* in February 1787. And not just in France. On the back of a score from the same year, you can see **Mozart** sketching his own *Musikalisches Würfelspiel*, K516f. Several more were attributed to him after his death by canny publishers cashing in on the star's demise. It was perhaps inevitable that Mozart would jump on this Enlightenment craze. The boy wonder was obsessed with games – bowling, billiards, card-games, word-games, you name it. But this aleatoric form persisted into the 19th Century; **Antonio Calegari** composed his *Game of Pythagorean Music* in 1801.

Two students of JS Bach had set out the principles of the game in 1757: Johann Philipp Kirnberger and Bach's son **Carl Philipp Emanuel**. They presented the would-be composer with a table of numbers, each of which would correspond to a bar of music. The new work would be constructed, algorithmically, by rolling the dice and splicing together the bars that each roll pointed to. Kirnberger's system alone offered 400 trillion permutations.

What, beyond curiosity, motivated these composers? To teach, to sell, to set themselves apart. The aim was not to create great music. Quite the opposite. What was desired was flatness and malleability. A shrink-wrapping of style, ready to feed to the fan base. But a door had been opened to something rather radical. Here, for the first time, a work of art was being fashioned through the application of a set of commands. And one in which content was subservient to an idea. Conceptual art, auto-generated composition, musical slop: it all perhaps begins here.

Only centuries later would composers turn to the liberatory potential of mathematical procedures – the possibility of using process to conjure up unheard-of sounds and worlds. One of the many 20th-century artists who understood this paradox of creativity – that constraints bred freedom, mechanisation spontaneity – was American composer **Conlon Nancarrow**. Tonight we hear five of his extraordinary *Studies for Player Piano*, composed in self-imposed exile in Mexico City.

Some of these studies operate as fiendish canons, others simply as feral polyphony. But all involve multiple lines of music fighting it out against each other according to wildly complex proportions. The result is inhuman and exhilarating. The earliest we will witness, 3a, is driven by a monstrous boogie-woogie, on top of which eight separate strands erupt and wriggle about. *Study 20* is a tempo canon that looks and sounds more like morse code, each voice consists of a single pitch that clashes and clangs against every other voice until the code achieves ghostly shape and near sentience. In *Study 25* – the final 12 seconds of which contains 1,028 notes – you hear the birth of 8-bit chiptune music. *Study 36*, meanwhile, another canon, is the simplest and most insane: a single line played simultaneously in four tempos – zoo one minute, outer space the next. *Study 12* is a favourite of the composer and Nancarrow specialist **Dominic Murcott** who will tonight operate the player piano (a replica of Nancarrow's own and prepared with tacks in the hammers): 'using the Phrygian

mode, irregular bar lengths and guitar-strum like glissandi, the spirit of flamenco is conjured up in a work of pure genius.'

It was fiddly stuff punching holes into piano rolls and it could take Nancarrow up to a year to create a single study. Similar demands faced German artist **Hanne Darboven** in her procedural art, which theorist Mel Bochner compared to musical serialism. Much of this would take the form of a series of drawings consisting of vast numerical sequences through which you could feel the flow of time.

'Maths is writing without describing,' Darboven would say. She was drawn to the numerical for this reason, its ability to reach the unreachable abstract – especially the world of time. In *Opus 17a*, Darboven converted calendar dates into whole numbers, then translated these into pitches. The score that results unfolds in a sawtooth line, rolling forward inexorably like a stock market chart. Along it chugs, soothing and existentially terrifying. She said she 'wanted to make time concrete'. And you really feel it, taste it, almost smell it, this cold, hard, concretised time.

To emphasise the indestructibility of Darboven's formal plan we present the work tonight in the baldest musical material there is: drum kit, performed by **George Barton**.

But algorithmic composition could do much else – drama, emotion, euphoria. Look at the work of the criminally overlooked Indian-German computer music pioneer **Clarence Barlow**. Tonight Explore Ensemble, with conductor Jack Sheen, presents his astonishing magnum opus *In Januar am Nil*, in which almost every element – pitch, duration, form – proceeds according to a rigorous internal logic. Listen out, for example, to how the melody repeats but with each repeat slowly expands, as extraneous notes are added, like a thickening soup, until the melodic stew starts changing flavour entirely.

Today algorithms are put to work for far less enriching ends. Welcome to the age of online slop. But trash is fertile material. In **Jennifer Walshe's** new *Slop Studies 2#a-7*, the ceaseless, contextually collapsed AI feed – 'all corners rounded, sun-drenched, prompted for serenity, hyperrealism, ultra-realism, cinematic 8K' – forms a looping ground: 'The voice weaves in and out of the material, whispering, sputtering and singing text from prompts and slop outputs, dusting grit on the homogenised material.'

Alongside this, Walshe and Explore present two mysterious Irish algorithmic obsessives. In **Eyleif Mullen-White's** 1972 algorithmic song, Gulliver visits Swift's 'Academy of Projectors', in which a professor has invented a form of AI 'for improving speculative knowledge' so that 'the most ignorant person, at a reasonable charge... might write books... without the least assistance from genius or study.' **Caoimhín Breathnach**, meanwhile, builds *Breathnóir* ('Observer') from a recording of an organ, whose keys and stops were depressed in accordance to the position of the planets in the sky over Carrick during a total lunar eclipse. Thanks to algorithms celestial objects could become composers, too.

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