

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 26 May 2025
7.30pm

Colin Currie percussion

Kevin Volans (b.1949)

Asanga (1997)

David Horne (b.1970)

Pulse (1994)

Tansy Davies (b.1973)

Dark Ground (2005)

Dani Howard (b.1993)

Vasa (2025) *world première*

Interval

Andy Akiho (b.1979)

Spiel (2020)

Toshio Hosokawa (b.1955)

Reminiscence (2022)

Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001)

Psappha (1975)



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On three separate occasions in my career I have made a concerted effort to lock horns with that most challenging of percussion formats, that of the entirely solo recital. In each case I have combined classics from the existing repertoire with a major new work in première. As such, in 2001 Dave Maric's *Trilogy* launched in Glasgow, Chicago and Tokyo; 2014 saw Rolf Wallin's *Realismos Magicos* at Wigmore Hall, Bergen Festival and Princeton University; and Dani Howard's *Vasa* this year at Wigmore Hall once again, Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival and the Mingavie Music Club.

A major contributor to the percussion repertoire is **Kevin Volans**. His pattern-based fixations and ambitious proportional perspective, often taxing the player's stamina to its limits, suit the medium ideally. In *Asanga*, a collection of erudite material for unpitched sounds, mostly drums, is heard in episodes that develop deeply in some cases, and only fleetingly in others. The conclusion is equivocal, perhaps as if the game has gone full circle, ready to attempt another set of permutations for an alternative structural solution.

Although premièred all the way back in 1994, at the time of writing (and of this concert) I have in fact only performed **David Horne's** *Pulse* once, but already view it as a central work in my marimba repertoire. The composer correctly identifies a kind of irony in the technical side of marimba writing, in that slow sustained music is often just an illusion of sorts. Behind the scenes of this kind of chorale effect lie carefully judged tremolandi, often quite rapid in terms of the mallets striking the bars. As such, 'slow' music often is secretly rather rapid fire for the performer. And so hence in this work, genuinely quick and up-tempo sections of music in the toccata style get juxtaposed with slower chordal passages until the true identity of these two approaches becomes genuinely blurred. I also note with affection some cross-over in style and era between this work and the highly neglected marimba literature of Sir Richard Rodney Bennett – both composers use tone rows and voice-leading in a similar way and to memorable effect on the instrument.

Tansy Davies writes a stridently disquieting work with her *Dark Ground*, a piece with an occasionally torrid identity crisis. It seems that it could be a pop-style drum-kit that is hand for the music, but conflicting sounds from another kind of place are never far away, to halt any development that could be deemed too, for want of a better expression, vernacular. A crotale fanfare does intervene, offering some actual pitched material by way of arbitration, but the rabble is roused, and the piece plays out with the various strands mostly superimposed in different combinations, without reaching any kind of stylistic truce. A fascinating work that plays skilfully with one's percussive preconceptions.

The world première this evening is by the brilliant British composer **Dani Howard**. This composition responds directly to a modest plan of my own to create a work that uses multiple percussion keyboards to galvanise a deepened sonic palette and potential for sustain, alongside perhaps an element of ritual spiced with dexterity. Dani has embraced this template with fantastic care and precision to create a piece of gentle fragility, beauty, space and tension.

The title refers to the Vasa Museum in Stockholm, and its foreboding tale of historical maritime hubris. This mood channels into the work in various ways, as the marimba creaks into action, gets ahead of itself perhaps, and has to come to terms with a journey that is forced into a great degree of contemplation and humility – elements that are not overabundant in our world today.

Andy Akiho kicks off my second half, and he is indeed the composer whose music I am performing the most this season. This is my first ever performance of *Spiel* so wish me luck as it wheels and spins at breakneck speed, using the most extraordinary extended techniques on a standard glockenspiel that one could ever imagine!

By way of huge contrast, both in terms of tempo and register (more than six octaves), **Toshio Hosokawa's** *Reminiscence* is a constant in my recital repertoire. The opportunity to share its velvet tones in Wigmore Hall could not be resisted and I hope people will be able feel the sound of the marimba as well as hear it. In the work's magical slow and sombre shadows, there is an extraordinary gentle power to behold – this is truly a masterpiece for the marimba.

And a masterpiece is certainly what I conclude with tonight. Premièred in 1976, rather like myself, *Psappha* has had me under its spell since I first heard it live in Leith Town Hall, Edinburgh in circa 1988. The performer was Danish soloist Gert Mortensen and the rather fearsome poster from that event adorned my bedroom wall for many years.

It's an unclassifiable work of genius, and even a basic description of its process and originality is way beyond the purview of this programme note. What is worth holding onto is the shocking and almost entire 'lack' of rhythmic development in the piece – we rely solely on an unfolding constancy, with subtle accelerandos the only permissible parameter of change. The instruments are also organised into sets of three, and so despite rather a large set-up (in my version) the clarity of the lines is always crystal clear.

Lastly, my final word on **Iannis Xenakis** is that one thing that I always keep in mind when performing his music. He was wonderfully Greek – and you can't perform his music without breaking a few proverbial plates.

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