

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 29 May 2025
7.30pm

Sean Shibe guitar
Ema Nikolovska mezzo-soprano
Alphonse Cemin conductor
Adam Walker flute
George Barton percussion
Owen Gunnell percussion

Sam Wilson percussion
Emma Wernig viola
Matthew Hunt clarinet
Mira Benjamin violin
Colin Alexander cello

James Dillon (b.1950) 12 Caprices (2025) *world première*
Cassandra Miller (b.1976) Bel Canto (2010)

Interval

Pierre Boulez (1925-2016) Le marteau sans maître (1953-5)
Avant 'L'Artisanat furieux'
Commentaire I de 'Bourreaux de solitude'
'L'Artisanat furieux'
Commentaire II de 'Bourreaux de solitude'
'Bel Édifice et les pressentiments'
'Bourreaux de solitude'
Après 'L'Artisanat furieux'
Commentaire III de 'Bourreaux de solitude'
'Bel Édifice et les pressentiments'



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Nominations for the finest classical albums would be incomplete without at least one of Maria Callas's title-role recordings in Puccini's *Tosca*. The legendary diva's performance of 'Vissi d'arte', recorded live at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden in 1964, conveys an all-too-human frailty and sense of grief. Callas returns to life in **Cassandra Miller's** *Bel Canto*, an intimate portrait of the artist and the manner in which passing time and the personal tragedies that came with it affected her voice and artistry. 'The path of the piece is not only about the ageing of an extraordinary woman,' notes its composer, 'but also about the listener.'

Bel Canto calls on the vocal soloist to evoke Callas's interpretation of 'Vissi d'arte', embracing what Miller describes as 'the full generosity of her vibrato, swoops and portamenti'. Clock time appears to expand and contract as the work unfolds, an impression cultivated by two independent ensembles, the first comprising alto flute, clarinet, guitar and mezzo-soprano, the second forming a string trio. 'Separating the ensemble into two smaller groups, without conductor, enables an intense chamber-listening between the players,' Miller observes. 'This intimacy allows them to carry out with great musicality the non-notatable qualities of the swoops and vibrato, and the unnamable subtleties of vocality.'

The opening notes of 'Vissi d'arte' are extruded in the first section of *Bel Canto*, which gives way to a profound meditation on the three notes to which Puccini set the words 'non feci mai male...' ('I never harmed...'); guitar and voice, joined by solo violin, fashion profoundly moving, mantra-like repetitions of material drawn from the aria's impassioned 'quante miserie' ('all misfortunes') line, before vibrato-rich strings, alto flute and clarinet give voice to an ecstatic final section, again related to 'quante miserie'. The score's layering effects create what Miller calls 'a sonic depth of field – echoing the depth of the Greek landscape in which I felt the warm revelation that originally inspired this piece.'

James Dillon's *12 Caprices* for solo guitar sprang to life fully formed. 'To talk about miniatures, is to talk of glimpses,' the composer observes, 'a framing of the fugitive, written in a few days at the end of March [20]25, an apology for not arriving in Andalusia perhaps; gestures from a cubist Lorca perhaps, prefaced as they are by Lorca's *Capriccio*, after all –

"In the moon's web,
the sky spider,
stars are entangled,
whirling." *Federico García Lorca*

Fleeting images of an idea; of a form; of an uncertainty, an instrument fugitive, perhaps.'

Dillon traces the origins of the word 'caprice' to its early 17th-century roots in 'capriccio', literally 'a shivering' of the kind felt when the hairs of one's head stand on end. Each of his miniatures, which are collectively dedicated to the American poet Dan Albertson, captures an aspect of capricious movement, something triggered by the sudden arrival of a fresh thought, sensation or feeling, effect following cause and vanishing in an instant.

In the summer of 1955, the recently completed concert hall of Südwestfunk, set in tranquil woodland on the

outskirts of Baden-Baden, played host to the annual Festival of the International Society of Contemporary Music. 'In such surroundings one's aesthetic sense tends to expect a fair measure of beauty from the music one has come to hear,' wrote the composer Franz Reizenstein. 'There was, however, more for the eye than for the ear, and with a few notable exceptions, the standard of works presented was of a deplorably low level.' Reizenstein's review bemoaned the 'weirdness' of *Le Marteau sans maître*: 'It was fiendishly difficult to play and the word went round that it had had fifty rehearsals, and the performers looked a little harassed.'

Other critics recognised the rich invention and enduring emotional impact of **Pierre Boulez's** chamber cantata, which he described as 'nine pieces attached to three poems by René Char' for contralto, flute, viola, guitar, vibraphone and three percussion players. 'Moderation,' noted the composer in an essay published in 1962, belonged to the 'petty obsessions' of 'fetishists who proclaim tradition'; however provocative (and debatable) his view, Boulez challenged those who regarded western culture, especially tonal classical music, as superior to all others, and resisted attempts to enrich what he called the 'European sound vocabulary by means of non-European listening habits'.

Le Marteau sans maître grew from an original six-movement structure to include two versions of 'Bel édifice et les pressentiments' and a third *commentaire* on 'Bourreaux de solitude', the 'Executioners of Solitude'. Boulez's terse description of his work, supplied for its première, listed the instrumentation and acknowledged the surrealist poet Char; it closed with an insight into its aesthetic constitution: 'The text is partially sung, partially interpreted through purely instrumental passages'. While much has been written about the serial organisation of *Le Marteau's* pitch, rhythm, form and dynamics (with occasional deviations from strict mathematical patterns), the work's power lies in its deconstruction of language, both verbal and musical, to enhance the aural enchantment cast by Char's verse and thereby restore the fundamental unity of music and poetry.

Boulez begins with an instrumental preface to his setting of 'L'artisan furieux', which follows after Commentary I on 'Bourreaux de solitude'. Words and music coalesce for the first time in 'L'artisan furieux', after which Boulez unveils his Commentary II on 'Bourreaux de solitude'. Voice and instruments dovetail in 'Bel édifice et les pressentiments', the one flowing naturally from the other, leading to 'Bourreaux de solitude' itself, in which the whole ensemble sounds together for the first time. A short, reflective instrumental postlude, 'Après l'artisan furieux', contrasts with the restless energy of Commentary III on 'Bourreaux de solitude'. The recitative-like 'Bel édifice et les pressentiments', nominally a 'double' of its first setting, offers a glorious mix of irrational emotions supported by formal order, the musical material of which gradually breaks down to leave a fragmentary dialogue between untuned percussion and flute.

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12 Caprices (2025)

Cassandra Miller (b.1976)

Bel Canto (2010)

Interval

Pierre Boulez (1925-2016)

Le marteau sans maître (1953-5)
René Char

Avant 'L'Artisanat furieux'

Commentaire I de 'Bourreaux de solitude'

'L'Artisanat furieux'	The Furious Craftsmanship
La roulotte rouge au bord du clou	The red caravan on the edge of the nail
Et cadavre dans le panier	And corpse in the basket
Et chevaux de labours dans le fer à cheval	And plowhorses in the horseshoe
Je rêve la tête sur la pointe de mon couteau le Pérou.	I dream the head on the point of my knife Peru.

Commentaire II de 'Bourreaux de solitude'

'Bel Édifice et les pressentiments'

'Bourreaux de solitude'	Hangmen of solitude
Le pas s'est éloigné le marcheur s'est tu	The step has gone away, the walker has fallen silent
Sur le cadran de l'imitation	On the dial of Imitation
Le Balancier lance sa charge de granit réflexe.	The Pendulum throws its instinctive load of granite.

Après 'L'Artisanat furieux'

Commentaire III de 'Bourreaux de solitude'

'Bel Édifice et les pressentiments'	Stately building and presentiments
J'écoute marcher dans mes jambes.	I hear marching in my legs.
La mer morte vagues par dessus tête.	The dead sea waves overhead.
Enfant la jetée promenade sauvage.	Child, the wild seaside pier.
Homme l'illusion imitée.	Man, the imitated illusion.
Des yeux purs dans les bois.	Pure eyes in the woods.
Cherchent en pleurant la tête habitable.	Are searching in tears for a habitable head.