

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 3 May 2025
3.00pm

Wigmore Hall Voices of Today: Katherine Balch

Ensemble intercontemporain

Ustina Dubitsky conductor

Jeanne-Marie Conquer violin Jeanne Maugrenier horn
Natan Gorog viola Lucas Lipari-Mayer trumpet
Éric-Maria Couturier cello Lucas Ounissi trombone
Nicolas Crosse double bass Samuel Favre percussion
Emmanuelle Ophèle flute Hidéki Nagano piano
Alain Billard clarinet

Hanzhi Wang accordion

Marceau Lefèvre bassoon

Régis Campo (b.1968)

Les Villes-lumières for brass trio (1994)

Dai Fujikura (b.1977)

Calling for bassoon (2011-12)

Sofia Avramidou (b.1988)

A Hug to Die for ensemble (2022)

Yan Maresz (b.1966)

Entrelacs for six instruments (1998)

Pierre Boulez (1925-2016)

Dérive 1 for six instruments (1984)

Katherine Balch (b.1991)

husk for solo accordion and ensemble (2025) *world première*

Commissioned by Wigmore Hall (with the generous support of the Marchus Trust and the Wigmore Hall Endowment Fund)



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The Ensemble intercontemporain – now, like most new-music groups, half a century old – introduce themselves this evening with a work by a composer of the post-Boulez generation from the South of France. **Régis Campo** composed his brass trio *Les Villes-lumières* ('The Cities of Light') in 1994 for his hometown of Marseille. Playing for six minutes, the piece is an extended fanfare that keeps more or less recommencing.

Dai Fujikura is a familiar figure here, having arrived from Japan at 15 and refused to go home. He wrote *Calling*, one of his many solo instrumental pieces, in 2011-12, on the way to his Bassoon Concerto. Much of the ten-minute composition is made of multiphonics (using particular fingerings to bring forward four or five notes at the same time), which may be sustained or throbbing, as at the start. The main alternative is quick melody, launched at first by a whole-tone rise in quarter-tone tuning. Where this begins, Fujikura asks his performer to 'imagine [they are] playing some kind of horn in ancient times, part way up a mountain, sending a signal to a village, or perhaps troops down in the valley...'. The two kinds of music alternate with one another and to some extent exchange features, until melody pushes forward, its goal ultimately revealed as a multiphonic that is a fragile E major chord.

Born in Thessaloniki, **Sofia Avramidou** completed her training in France, notably with Yan Maresz for electroacoustic composition. She composed *A Hug to Die* in 2022 for the Festival Ensemble(s) in the Paris suburb of Bagnolet, writing for a formation not so far from that of the piece we just heard (and at a similar length), though her concentration on marginal sounds obscures any similarity. Her own note usefully indicates her sources and intentions:

'*A Hug to Die* is inspired by *The Pillowman* by the contemporary playwright Martin McDonagh. The piece focuses on the exploration and development of timbre, framed by a dramaturgy of intense contrasts and continuous transitions which create a flow between balance and imbalance. Through the nuanced use of timbre, several textures are constructed, which initially create a compact and organic sound environment. As the piece develops, this uniformity is juxtaposed with untamed and irregular sound structures consisting of intense and repetitive rhythms, which create a sense of agony and turmoil. On a poetic level, the piece exposes the profound alienation of human relationships and the detrimenting of childhood innocence, dealing with the logic as well as the absurd, the real and the surreal, the pure and the cynical, by constantly oscillating between dream and nightmare.'

Yan Maresz's *Entrelacs* ('Traceries') is a classic from the ensemble's repertoire, of which it gave the first performance in January 1999. Scored for a six-piece

group not so far from that of *Pierrot lunaire*, but with double bass and vibraphone, the work begins at speed as a line undulating within a narrow middle register. Though playing in unison, the instruments are rhythmically differentiated, some holding the note, some rapidly reiterating it. Agility and risk are built in; the colouring becomes opalescent. Also, the line not only moves within itself but is constantly on the move, towards notes that are temporary staging posts. Quite soon it must run out of steam, and the music opens into a space where its components, stationary now or itching with life, can stand out. Then the line is on the go again. And so on, until, after 12 minutes, time is up.

It is back, then, to **Pierre Boulez**, who wrote *Dérive 1* in 1984 and dedicated it to William Glock, who had been his host and collaborator in the running of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Only six or seven minutes long, and again scored for something like a *Pierrot lunaire* ensemble, the piece moves from decorated and trilled chords towards a more polyphonic treatment in which solos emerge from the waves and fall back again. Finally the chords filter back, now not to initiate events but to freeze. A *dérive* in French is a drift, but we are perhaps also to think of derivatives – derivatives, that is, deriving from another senior figure in Boulez's life, Paul Sacher. Interpreting the man's surname as spelling out musical notes, Boulez had obtained for his Sacher tribute *Messagesquise* (1976) a set that served him in several later works, including this one: E flat ('Es' in German), A, C, B ('H' in German), E, D ('ré' in French).

We end with a brand-new piece by another composer in her 30s, our 'Voice of Today' **Katherine Balch**, who was born in San Diego and studied at Yale and Columbia. Her programme note demands to be quoted in full, not least for how it ends:

'*husk* is a micro-concerto for accordion and 12-person chamber ensemble, written for and dedicated to Hanzhi Wang. At about 15 minutes in duration, in two asymmetrical, contrasting movements, it feels to me in some way an excerpt from a larger work that does not yet exist, though I hope it will be felt by listeners as a self-contained experience. In the first movement, the accordion acts as the heart (the grain) of an ensemble body (shell), a grain that germinates yet is always contained with and nurtured by the skin of its ensemble support. In the second movement, this skin begins to break apart, or be scraped apart. The accordion lashes out of its skin. The grain without its hull may become an object of growth, an object of decay, or an object of nourishment. I haven't written that part yet.'

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