

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 4 May 2024

In Focus: The Climate Agenda

11.00am

Chris Godhard guitar
Ravi Nathwani guitar
Marianne Huang Yueyin piano
Jessica Hopkins soprano
James Connolly baritone

Sean Morrison violin
Dylan Edge violin
Rebecca Stubbs viola
Andrea Kim cello
Andy Deng piano

Gabriella Smith (b.1991)

Chris Godhard guitar • Ravi Nathwani guitar
Loop the Fractal Hold of Rain (2017)

John Luther Adams (b.1953)

Marianne Huang Yueyin piano
Nunataks (2007)

Peter Maxwell Davies (1934-2016)

From *The Yellow Cake Revue* Op. 88 (1980)
James Connolly baritone • Andy Deng piano
Tourist Board Song • *Patriotic Song*
Chris Godhard guitar • Ravi Nathwani guitar
Farewell to Stromness

Bryce Dessner (b.1978)

Sean Morrison violin • Dylan Edge violin • Rebecca Stubbs viola •
Andrea Kim cello
Pulsing (2022)

Nico Muhly (b.1981)

Jessica Hopkins soprano • Andy Deng piano
Endless Space (2021)

12.15pm – 1.00pm

In Focus: Discussion

Speakers from the Royal Northern College of Music, led by Manus Carey, consider the impact of music in addressing climate change.



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2.00pm

Elana Kenyon-Gewirtz violin
Orla McGarrity violin
Rachel Stonham violin
Jeanette Szeto viola
Ellen Quinn cello
Ruaraidh Williams cello
Joana Moura double bass
Isabeau Hansen flute
Naomi Robinson flute
Emma Chan oboe

Abigail Martin clarinet
Josh Pyman clarinet
David Tillotson horn
Erline Moreira bassoon
Freddie Ball trumpet, cornet
Siyi Dai piano
Marianne Huang Yueyin piano
Maria Barbosa Aristizábal conductor
Mark Heron conductor

Gabriella Smith (b.1991)

Elana Kenyon-Gewirtz violin • Rachel Stonham violin • Jeanette Szeto
viola • Ruaraidh Williams cello
Carrot Revolution (2015)

Hans Abrahamsen (b.1952)

Naomi Robinson flute • Emma Chan oboe • Josh Pyman clarinet •
David Tillotson horn • Erline Moreira bassoon
Walden (1978)

*I. Moderato fluente - Allegro • II. Alla marcia •
III. Andante - piu mosso ma calmo •
IV. Allegretto grazioso*

Gabriella Smith

Isabeau Hansen flute • Abigail Martin clarinet • Freddie Ball trumpet •
Orla McGarrity violin • Jeanette Szeto viola • Ellen Quinn cello • Maria
Barbosa Aristizabal conductor
Maré (2017)

Asteryth Sloane (b.2000)

Isabeau Hansen flute • Abigail Martin clarinet • Freddie Ball cornet •
Siyi Dai piano • Orla McGarrity violin • Jeanette Szeto viola • Ellen
Quinn cello • Joana Moura double bass • Mark Heron conductor
Earth Canticle (2024) *London première*

Cheryl Frances-Hoad (b.1980)

Marianne Huang Yueyin piano • Orla McGarrity violin • Jeanette Szeto
viola • Ellen Quinn cello • Joana Moura double bass • Mark Heron
conductor
The Whole Earth Dances (2016)

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RNCM
ROYAL NORTHERN
COLLEGE OF MUSIC

Presented by the Royal Northern College of Music

What can musicians meaningfully contribute to a topic as vast and urgent as climate change? It may be tempting to answer 'very little' - music is hardly going to decarbonise the world economy, after all. But at the same time, the profound implications of the climate crisis make it something that many creative artists feel they cannot altogether ignore.

Gabriella Smith is a composer who, more than most, ties her artistic identity to environmentalism – she has written that her music 'invites listeners to find joy in climate action'. Born in California and now based in Seattle, the habitats of America's Pacific coast are a recurring presence in her work, and her music tends towards the playful. Her guitar duet *Loop the Fractal Hold of Rain* demonstrates her love of extended techniques, with alternative tuning, slide glissandi and harmonics on show. There is certainly a 'rainy' feel to the rapid figurations among the twelve strings, which create kaleidoscopic shifts of surface colour and polyrhythmic patterning, underlined by a sense of minimalist propulsion.

John Luther Adams is another American composer whose music is inseparable from environmental advocacy. As he put it in a 2023 interview, 'for me, everything is an adoration of the Earth', and he has recently composed works to be performed in outdoor spaces, blending his own sounds with those of nature. If his musical language is starker than Smith's, so too are the places he's lived – from the wintry isolation of Alaska to several arid southern deserts. His piano piece *Nunataks* takes its title from a word for mountain peaks that rise out of ice fields, symbols of lonely vulnerability in an otherworldly landscape. Much like his prize-winning orchestral work *Become Ocean*, this music seems to speak directly in terms of indifferent natural processes. Chords of overlaid perfect fifths rise and hang in the air, cool and elemental, separated by crystalline silences. The planet is beautiful and strange, it seems to say, but none of it exists for our benefit.

'All politics is local', as the adage goes, and that is certainly the case for **Peter Maxwell Davies's** *The Yellow Cake Revue*, which was composed in opposition to uranium mining for a nuclear power plant in his adopted home of Orkney ('Yellowcake' is a uranium concentrate powder). This satirical show from 1980 features a mixture of songs, instrumentals and spoken word. We'll hear its opening three numbers: the 'Tourist Board Song', 'Patriotic Song' – both in pastiche cabaret style – and then the wistful piano interlude *Farewell to Stromness*, arranged in this case for two guitars. The two vocal numbers caustically illustrate the strength of local feeling against the mining. As 'Patriotic Song' puts it: 'Your farms and fishing are all gone/ Your town is killed by our greed/ But wave a cheerful little Union Jack/ For the greater national need.' But while these songs are very much of their time and place, *Farewell to*

Stromness has gone on to become probably Davies's most popular work, its nuclear origins all but forgotten. As he put it in 2014, it has 'almost become a folk tune...it gets played at an awful lot of funerals these days'.

In climate terms, too, *The Yellow Cake Revue* is now a period piece. Astonishingly, over half of humanity's cumulative carbon emissions following the industrial revolution have occurred since 1990. Whether nuclear power should play a role in decarbonisation is a question we still face, only it's now clearer that the 'greater need' is no longer national, but global.

Bryce Dessner's *Pulsing* is a movement from *Impermanence*, a string suite composed for the Sydney Dance Company and Australian String Quartet. It was first conceived in the aftermath of the fire at Notre-Dame in Paris in 2019. While he was composing it later that year, wildfires devastated the Australian bush, making the pertinence of climate change to its theme of fragility all the more apparent. With its varied rhythmic groupings over repeating chord sequences, *Pulsing* seems to put a modern twist on Baroque string music, and its choppy opening gestures are reminiscent of Vivaldi. But the time signature of 5/4 negates any four-square evenness, leaving us with a sense of old certainties warped. There is no leading melody to guide us, no firm cadence to reassure – instead the music's relentless tread has its own fiery foreboding, suggesting an unstoppable process that might continue perpetually.

The melding of old and new takes a literary turn in **Nico Muhly's** song 'Endless Space', which was commissioned by Renée Fleming and Yannick Nézet-Séguin for their 2021 album *Voice of Nature: The Anthropocene*. Muhly sets lines by climate journalist Robinson Meyer alongside poetry by the 17th Century mystic Thomas Traherne. These two voices occupy very different periods and worldviews, but they share one thing in common: a sense of wonder at the planet and its place in the universe.

We begin with Meyer's comments about satellite imagery of the Earth, and how words cannot do justice to this magnificent sight. The soprano line is loose, responsive to the text, the piano nimbly supportive. After an increase in tension we reach the section where Traherne contemplates the heavens, and the vocal line soars rapturously: 'What is there which a Man may see/Beyond the Spheres? Felicity.' From here, Meyer's sobering premonitions of worsening natural disasters briefly draw out some agitation, but we soon return to Traherne's serene vision. The overall mood of 'Endless Space' remains contemplative, as Muhly allows the two textual voices to sit in gentle tension, without suggesting any firm conclusions. It is, perhaps, an honest note to end on – one which speaks to the disquieting ambiguity of our current moment, poised between hope and despair.

Gabrielle Smith's single-movement string quartet *Carrot Revolution* was commissioned to respond to the work of philanthropist art collector Albert C Barnes, who developed a practice of hanging pictures in his own curated 'ensembles'. Its title refers to a quotation sometimes mis-attributed to Cezanne: 'the day will come when a single, freshly observed carrot will start a revolution.' Building on these ideas of seeking fresh angles, Smith created 'a patchwork of wildly contrasting influences [...] full of weird, unexpected juxtapositions and intersecting planes of sound'. The scratches, drumming and glissandi of the opening bars resemble the layered collages of hip-hop, and from there on the energy does not let up, as Smith invites us to reimagine what the string quartet can be.

A more diverse instrumental group takes the stage for Smith's *Maré*, with trumpet, flute and clarinet alongside strings. Named after the Portuguese word for 'tide', this work was inspired by her stay at the Instituto Sacatar, a beachside artist colony on a Brazilian island, where the ebb and flow of the sea determined the day's activities. The music is constructed as something like a large wave, beginning with an atmospheric haze of unpitched sounds which gradually coheres into a pulsing flow, building in force to a frantic *moto perpetuo*. The varied timbres create pointillist colour effects, much like the glinting water surface under a tropical sun, and eventually this great crest subsides to a breathy coda, recalling how the piece began.

Between these works, we'll hear the 1978 wind quintet *Walden* by Danish composer **Hans Abrahamsen**. It's named after the 1854 book by American philosopher Henry David Thoreau, in which he documented his experiences of living in a woodland cabin for two years.

Compared to Smith's effusive music, *Walden* is somewhat pinched and spare. Abrahamsen strips back his musical processes to discover a 'new simplicity', and begins tentatively, with thin textures leavened with pauses, as if trying to figure out what he wants to say. But like Smith, there is playfulness too. Later on we hear mechanical patterns working against each other, and the quintet becomes somewhat akin to a soundscape of disparate birdsong, with various elements overlapping at their own registers and rhythms. The final section is a lively bitonal dance that soon evaporates into thin air. Understated to the very end, in this music we can detect an analogue to Thoreau's experiment in simple living, but also a young composer's deliberate rejection of the more ostentatious complexities of the 70s avant-garde.

Abrahamsen writes that Thoreau was 'way ahead of his own time in his perception of the economy and cyclic character of Nature [...] his ideas are particularly relevant now that pollution caused by society has reached alarming proportions.' The way that *Walden* 'makes do' with minimal material is therefore a musical expression of a core environmentalist imperative.

A new commission, *Earth Canticle* is an octet by composer and RNCM graduate **Asteryth Sloane**, in which piano and strings are joined by the mellow sounds of alto flute and cornet. And so from the undergrowth we now ascend to the trees, with the work's dedication to a particular monkey puzzle tree that used to grow near Sloane's family home. However, as the composer makes clear, this is 'an elegy and a love song' for all trees – an elegy for those felled by industry and the planet's increasingly powerful storms, and a love song for the indispensable place that trees hold in living ecosystems, and for human cultures around the world.

Of the music, Sloane writes: 'the piece opens with a cornet melody which returns at different points, the last time only in part, as if the music had begun to melt away. A "rocking" refrain hovers between more tense and fleeting musical moments. Its final iteration leaves the piece suspended before finally melting into the air.'

Attentiveness to nature also informs *The Whole Earth Dances*, a piano quintet by **Cheryl Frances-Hoad** which was commissioned for the same forces as Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet. Through walks in her local park, Frances-Hoad likes to pay attention to the subtleties of the changing seasons, and this piece is partly inspired by two poems by Ted Hughes about thistles and ferns.

In particular, two descriptions of the plants inform the musical material. We begin with thistles – 'Every one a revengeful burst of resurrection' – heard in the arrestingly abrasive opening, with piano chords in dense thickets. 'Here is the fern's frond, unfurling a gesture' resonates with later passages of probing lyricism. The protean vitality of this music – and its sheer sonic heft – draws a connection between humble, often-overlooked verge plants and the fecundity of nature as a whole. As Frances-Hoad writes: 'when much of the Earth is being polluted, fracked and deforested, it seems particularly important to really notice and respect the land'.

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Peter Maxwell Davies

Tourist Board Song

Oh come to sunny Warbeth
And sport upon the shore
The loveliest beach in Orkney
Could Heaven offer more?
Just a mile or so from Stromness
And the wild Atlantic's roar.
Here of a summer weekend
Stromnessians flock in droves.
But help! What can have happened
To Warbeth's sandy coves?
How Heaven can to Hell transform
So fast God only knows.

Oh, the beach that we played on
Is fanned by the breath of radon
And the sand dunes where the lovers hide
Are point two five percent uranium oxide.
And the little stream for our ablutions
Burns your skin with acidic solutions.
While the rocks that we swam from
Are pulverised by the megaton.
We can't fly our kites still
They'd tangle in the rod and ball mill
Where the chimneys and the fume stacks
Belch sulphuric acid on the train tracks
Which has scorched the grass and leaves for miles
around
And killed off all the crabs and fish in Hoy Sound.
Now you can't hear yourself speak or think
In the squalor waste and dust and smoke and noise
and stink.

Oh come to sorry Warbeth
And look upon the shore
The saddest beach in Orkney
Could ever Hell blight more?
Just a mile or so from Stromness
And the uranium crater's core.
Just a mile or so from Stromness
And the uranium crater's core.

Patriotic Song

You've heard of the man with the pacemaker
Containing a quarter of a gram
Of plutonium, which the terrorists
Cut out to make a bomb.
Well, here's another act
Of sabotage on a patient
Perpetrated by the mining corporation,
On behalf of your elected government.

Two church steeples skewer his eyes
Pinning his head in Stromness
The right wrist trapped by the Brig of Waith
The left by the Bishop at Breckness.
One leg stuck under Yesnaby Stack
The other at the Ring of Brodgar;
The patient's prepared for surgery
To be performed on his uranium corridor.

No anaesthetics are in use here
We doctors don't stand to gain.
The patient must feel each probe and cut
And his blood the lochans stain.
His lungs we will eviscerate
To transmute into nuclear fuels.
Admire how we cut the living ribcage out
With our life destroying tools.

The flesh and bones are crushed to dust
Listen to the mighty churn
Of mile high machinery all night long;
A new style Orkney quern.
The resultant mush will be dissolved
In H₂SO₄
To ensure that all Stromnessians
Breathe poison for evermore.

What we don't want, we'll leave for you
A legacy of guts and pluck
Contaminating the land and sea
With radioactive muck.
Sadly here's another case
Where the patient's beyond our care
Screaming his final threnody
While to safety we repair.

Your farms and fishing are all gone
Your town is killed by our greed.
But wave a cheerful little Union Jack
For the greater national need.

Farewell to Stromness

Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.

Bryce Dessner (b.1978)

Pulsing (2022)

Nico Muhly (b.1981)

Endless Space (2021)

Robinson Meyer, Thomas Traherne

One of the great things about Earth as an image is that...it's too much. It helps me to think about how we share the planet, and the fact that it's always half day and it's always half night. Your midnight is someone else's noon. It doesn't work in language: I try to talk about it, and it comes out as clichés. But this is seeing it.

Prompted to see my Bliss above the Skies,
How often did I lift mine Eyes
Beyond the Spheres!

Dame Nature told me there was endless Space
Within my Soul; I spy'd its very face:
Sure it not for nought appears.
What is there which a Man may see
Beyond the Spheres?
Felicity.

Whether the emergencies of the coming century arrive in the form of fires, or floods, or plagues that rise invisibly from the group, they're likely to become more and more extreme and less and less familiar. Even in its quietest places, the world will become newly hostile.

No empty Space: it is all full of Sight,
All Soul and Life, an Eye most bright,
All Light and Love,
Which doth at once all things possess and give,
Heaven and Earth, and All that therein live;
It rests at quiet, and doth move;
Eternal is, yet Time includes;
A Scene above
All Interludes.

'Endless Space' texts by Robinson Meyer. This article was originally published on the website TheAtlantic.com and is republished here with The Atlantic's permission. Maxwell Davies texts by Peter Maxwell Davies, printed by kind permission.