SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Voices from the East: Georgia & Armenia

Sunday 19 May 2024, 4pm | Royal Festival Hall

Classical music is an incredible, centuries-long story. As we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – share that story with the world today, we're creating as many ways for as many different people as possible to experience this wonderful art form.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Kancheli Styx for viola, chorus & orchestra 36'
Terterian Symphony No.3 26'

Performers

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra
Kirill Karabits *conductor*
Valeriy Sokolov *viola*
Harutyun Chkolyan *duduk, zerna*
Karen Sirakanyan *duduk, zerna*
Bournemouth Symphony Chorus
Tom Service *presenter*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes without an interval.

Voices from the East is a project with profound personal resonances for the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra's Chief Conductor Kirill Karabits, and one he feels deeply passionate about. Born in Kyiv, Karabits is the son of eminent Ukrainian composer Ivan Karabits, who himself maintained strong professional and personal relationships with many of the composers whose music is featured in today's concerts. 'I remember growing up in this musical environment,' Kirill Karabits explains, 'and that this music from the former Soviet republics was absolutely fascinating. But for many different geopolitical reasons, audiences probably have absolutely no idea about what's been happening musically in these countries. When I first came to the Orchestra in 2008, I felt strongly that they wanted me to propose a very personal project, and one I could take forward and develop over the coming years.' *Voices from the East* began the following year, and has since then travelled widely through countries and little-known repertoire across live performances and well-received recordings.

Also being performed today:

Voices from the East: Azerbaijan & Turkmenistan
1pm | Royal Festival Hall

Voices from the East: Ukraine
7.30pm | Royal Festival Hall

Giya Kancheli (1935–2019)

Styx

The two composers in today's second *Voices from the East* concert, from neighbouring countries in the Caucasus, were close friends and colleagues, and also direct musical influences on each other – to the extent, in fact, that Avet Terterian's name even finds its way into the sung texts of Giya Kancheli's 1999 *Styx*.

Georgian composer Kancheli is probably the best-known figure for Western listeners among the composers featured in today's three concerts. His music often evokes great beauty and deep contemplation, tapping into profound emotions of sadness, regret and longing to sometimes devastating emotional effect. Born in Tbilisi, he studied at the city's State Conservatory and taught there for many years from 1970, as well as being music director at Tbilisi's Rustaveli National Theatre. Later in life he lived in Western Europe, first in Berlin, then in Antwerp, before his death in 2019.

Styx was commissioned by Utrecht's *Gaudeamus Festival*, and premiered in 1999 by its dedicatee, Russian violist Yuri Bashmet. The piece takes its name from one of the rivers in the ancient Greek mythological underworld: the Styx must be crossed before the dead can reach Hades. Kancheli's viola soloist almost represents the boatman Charon, ferrying the recently deceased into the underworld, from living reality into memory, and in musical terms acting as a focus and mediator between the work's orchestra and chorus. Kancheli said of his choice of solo instrument: 'The voice of the viola is capable of bringing together the world of the living and the world of the dead, divided by the waters of Styx. Only the viola, with the richness of its sound and versatility of expression, can bring the soul to reconciliation, peace and harmony.'

Kancheli wrote *Styx* in memory of his friends and fellow composers Avet Terterian and Alfred Schnittke, both of whom had died during the 1990s. It's effectively a musical requiem, but one without any specific liturgical references: 'The traditional canonical text was unacceptable to me, since this was a preconditioned form, and to me this means "shackles" once again,' the composer observed. With that in mind, rather than the traditional Latin Requiem Mass texts, Kancheli's

chorus sings a text entirely of the composer's own devising, almost a collage-like collection of incantations based around ancient chants, words from Georgian folk songs, the names of Georgian churches and monasteries, and the names of deceased family members and friends (including both Terterian and Schnittke themselves).

Styx's music unfolds as a series of waves, often returning again and again to the same restricted palette of musical ideas, but finding fresh ways of expressing them. Like that of many of Kancheli's works, its music is sometimes so naive and openly expressive as to border on the sentimental – were it not for the heartfelt, almost painfully vulnerable sense of sincerity and belief that the composer conveys. *Styx* is not without its moments of brightness, even passing passages of joy, but likewise its contemplative atmosphere is occasionally detonated, too, by loud, angry dissonances, often from the orchestra's brass section. Its perhaps surprising final gesture, however, may well have been Kancheli's response to a direct request from Bashmet.

Avet Terterian (1929–94)

Symphony No.3

1 ♩ = 138-152

2 ♩ = 88 (ad libitum)

3 ♩ = 138

It's a mark of the two men's great friendship and mutual respect that Giya Kancheli included Avet Terterian's name among the choral incantations in his *Styx*. And though their musical languages are wildly contrasting, there are similarities, too, between the two composers' slowly unfolding ideas, their sense of almost ritualistic contemplation, their undeniable spiritual preoccupations.

Terterian was born in Baku, Azerbaijan, to Armenian parents, studied in both Baku and the Armenian capital, Yerevan, and held several official posts – as Executive Secretary of the Armenian Composers' Union, Chairman of the Music Department at the Armenian Cultural Ministry, and professor at the Yerevan Conservatory for many years. It is perhaps surprising that he didn't endure greater official censure: in his idiosyncratic musical style, avant-garde Western ideas of atonality, randomness, electronic manipulations and more are put to deeply expressive but also often deeply challenging effect.

His Third Symphony is a case in point: it seems not only to question what might constitute a symphony, but also pose the more fundamental question of what we can legitimately call music. Terterian completed eight symphonies during his lifetime (he left a ninth incomplete at his death in 1994), saying of them: 'We are all living on the threshold of a terrible apocalyptic judgement. It has always seemed to me that my symphonies are a cry of the soul for salvation and for the forgiveness of sins.'

The impetus for composing his Symphony No.3 in 1975 came from the sudden death of Terterian's younger brother, Herman, a successful conductor. Accordingly, its music – often raw, unrestrained and monumental – seems to peer deeply into questions of human existence and connection, and to lament the fragility of human life. Like several other composers in today's three concerts, Terterian also draws directly on the music of his homeland in the piece – in this case, through the inclusion of pairs of traditional Armenian duduks and zurnas, both oboe-like instruments, among his orchestral musicians. Terterian employs them prominently throughout the Symphony's three movements, though the music they play – often slow and wailing – is far removed from their florid improvisations in traditional Armenian music.

The first movement opens with an onslaught of percussion, led by a particularly virtuosic timpani – inspired, Terterian said, by Buddhist meditation rituals he had witnessed in Mongolia. After a few enigmatic harmonies, the movement continues with a duet from two trombones, sliding between notes so slowly you may barely notice. Then comes a duet for two zurnas, joined by braying horns and driving drums as musical layers pile upon each other – leading to an unexpectedly consonant conclusion.

The duduks form the focus of Terterian's slow movement: one player uses circular breathing to hold an unwavering drone tone virtually throughout. The second duduk contributes a few brief melodic ideas, before percussion intrudes (with sounds the composer likened to throwing stones on a coffin), and the duduks ultimately lead the movement to silence.

Terterian compared the explosive energy and raucous dissonance of his final movement with 'the hysterical quality of contemporary times'. Musical layers again accumulate – the zurnas providing a particularly noisy contribution – though after a sudden silence, music from the Symphony's earlier movements returns. After the piece's furious climax, only a single zurna is left standing to bear lonely witness to the cataclysm.

'I hope we can widen listeners' vision of the music and the cultures we experience in concert halls. As a conductor, you constantly face the dilemma of directing standard concert repertoire, or exploring something interesting and fresh that has seldom been heard before. By performing this music, I hope we can remind people that we should all be curious about the things we do.'

Kirill Karabits

Find out more

- Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra
- Kirill Karabits
- Valeriy Sokolov
- southbankcentre.co.uk