

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## James McVinnie Ensemble: American Minimalism

Saturday 29 June 2024, 6pm

Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth 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.

Whether this is your first encounter with classical music or one of many, I'm absolutely thrilled that you're joining us for more powerful human experiences. Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2024.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

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### Repertoire

Gabriella Smith <i>Imaginary Pancake</i>	7'
Philip Glass <i>Etoile polaire; Mon père, Mon père &amp; Ange des oranges</i> from <i>North Star</i>	12'
Philip Glass <i>Music in Contrary Motion</i>	12'
inti figgis-vizueta <i>build-it-yourself</i>	2'
John Adams <i>China Gates</i>	5'
John Adams <i>Hallelujah Junction</i>	17'

### Performers

James McVinnie Ensemble  
James McVinnie *keyboards*  
Eliza McCarthy *keyboards*  
Siwan Rhys *keyboards*  
Hugh Rowlands *keyboards*

Gabriella Smith, 'a force to be reckoned with' (Steve Reich), is an environmentalist and composer from the Bay Area in California, whose work invites listeners to find joy in climate action. Her music comes from a love of play, exploring new instrumental sounds, and creating musical arcs that transport audiences into sonic landscapes inspired by the natural world. I asked Gabriella to explain the title *Imaginary Pancake*, tonight's concert opener, and this was her reply:

'When I was asked to write a solo piano piece, I started thinking back to all the most memorable solo piano moments in my life. And the memory I kept coming back to was when I was seven years old, I was at some kind of summer music programme, and I remember there was this kid there who was a couple years older than me and was a super good pianist. I remember he would always play this piece that started at both extreme registers of the piano, which he had to totally flatten out to reach with his short, kid arms, and would just gleefully hammer away. And I just thought this was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. So one day I asked him what piece it was and he said "Beethoven!" (I forget what Beethoven he said...)

'So, 20 years later – when I was asked to write this piece – I thought I should figure out what piece that was and write something inspired by it. So I listened to all the Beethoven piano sonatas, concertos, bagatelles... everything I could possibly think of... and it wasn't one of them. This piece does not exist. I have no idea what it was. My guess is that it really was Beethoven, but that my memory of it just became so exaggerated over 20 years to the point of being unrecognisable from the original. So the piece is not inspired by any actual Beethoven but by what I imagined that piece to be.'

Originally written for pianist Timo Andres, *Imaginary Pancake* is a knockout; not only a blisteringly virtuosic showpiece but a beautiful, grand, sculptural form, displaying all the hallmarks of Smith's unique compositional style. The climax of the piece is reached with 'glorious hammering' at either end of the piano's keyboard which slowly subsides into a plaintive four-note cluster, played by the right hand while the left hand reaches

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*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour without an interval.*

forwards into the piano, dampening the strings of the sounding notes, and producing string harmonics and unusual sonorities.

Through his operas, symphonies, compositions for his own ensemble and wide-ranging collaborations with artists from Twyla Tharp to Allen Ginsberg and Woody Allen to David Bowie, Philip Glass has had an extraordinary and unprecedented impact on the musical and intellectual life of his times. One distinctive album by Glass from the 1970s is *North Star*, featuring incidental music at its best from a documentary film about the work of sculptor Mark di Suvero. The musical scores for the work remain unpublished and this is a rare opportunity to hear these works live.

Much of Glass' early work is based on the extended reiteration of brief, elegant melodic fragments. *Music in Contrary Motion* is one of a series of pieces Glass wrote in the 1960s based on repetitive structures and change, in which we hear a constantly shifting and evolving pattern of two melodic lines that mirror each other (as notes in the upper voice go up, those in the lower voice go down, with each line itself inhabiting the interval of a fifth). Underpinning these constantly shifting voices is a long bass drone which oscillates between the home key note and the dominant. Glass wrote: 'the mechanics of perception and attention tied you to the flow of the music in a way that was compelling ... the listener experiences an emotional buoyancy. Once we ... allow ourselves to enter the flow of the music, the buoyancy that we experience is both addictive and attractive and attains a high emotional level.'

inti figgis-vizueta (b.1993) is a composer and cultural artist who works to reconcile historical aesthetics and experimental practices with trans and indigenous futures. As the title suggests, her miniature for solo piano *build-it-yourself* invites the soloist to find their own sense of structural form in the music – the score is tantalisingly sparse and features nothing more than the basic elements of pitch and relative rhythm. Each performance is unique to the taste and instinct of the player in the moment of its conception.

In a recent podcast about his career, composer John Adams talks about moving to the West Coast of America, now over 50 years ago, in search a new compositional voice, and his desire to break away from European influences that had suffused his studies at Harvard University. Today, Adams' compositional style is instantly recognisable as truly 'American' music and has become, for many, the sound of California itself, capturing the essence of

its vastness, beauty and strangeness. Adams' music forms the backbone of tonight's concert, culminating in the ethereal *China Gates* from 1977 and ecstatic *Hallelujah Junction* for two pianos written in 1996.

*China Gates* is a gentle flow of soft notes in two voices, each occupying the same or similar narrow territory on the piano, in three broad sections, underpinned by low booming bass notes. The work was written as a companion piece to his much longer *Phrygian Gates*. Both are minimalist in style and represent Adams' use of simple repetition enriched by other compositional devices. One such device is his use of 'gates', (a term derived from electronics), described by Adams as 'the moments when the modes abruptly and without warning shift'. Adams' inspiration for the piece was the repetitive, rhythmic 'endless winter rain' that he experienced in San Francisco in 1977.

The title *Hallelujah Junction* comes from the name of a truck stop near the California-Nevada border, close to Adams' composing cabin. The work is in three movements following a traditional fast-slow-fast format. Adams said of the piece:

'Here we have a case of a great title looking for a piece. So now the piece finally exists: the "junction" being the interlocking style of two-piano writing which features short, highly rhythmicised motives bouncing back and forth between the two pianos in tightly phased sequences ... I begin with only the "l-le-lu-ja" of the title (a Hebrew word), a three-syllable exclamation that bounces back and forth between the two instruments until it yields to a more relaxed and regular figuration ... The final moments of *Hallelujah Junction* revel in the full onomatopoeic possibilities of the title. We get the full four-syllables – the "Hallelujah" – as well as the "junction" of the by-now crazed pianists, both of them very likely in extremis of full-tilt boogie.'

**Programme notes © James McVinnie, 2024**

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- ▶ [southbankcentre.co.uk](https://southbankcentre.co.uk)

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