

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## The Hermes Experiment

Sunday 24 September 2023, 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: Autumn/Winter 2023/24.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

---

### Repertoire

Philip Venables *A Photograph* (libretto by Cordelia Lynn) 8'

*Free improvisation*

Elaine Mitchener *the/e so/ou/nd be/t/ween* 8'  
(World premiere)

*Free improvisation*

Laura Moody *Rilke Songs* 10'

*Free improvisation*

The Hermes Experiment & Jethro Cooke *Metropolis* 10'

*Free improvisation*

Meredith Monk *Double Fiesta* arr. Anne Denholm 6'

### Performers

The Hermes Experiment

Anne Denholm *harp*

Oliver Pashley *clarinet*

Marianne Schofield *double bass*

Héloïse Werner *soprano*

The Hermes Experiment is, as we all know, a most unusual ensemble – by virtue of its instrumental line-up, of course, but also because of that line-up's consequences. Search library catalogues and you're unlikely to come up with many pieces for this combination. The musicians therefore have to build their own repertory, of pieces devised for them and others they arrange. They thus place themselves close to the creative action, which has the further consequence that those writing for them, whether composers or members of the group themselves, will want to draw on their creative energies – the way they handle themselves as musicians and, in particular, their abilities and experience in group improvisation.

There is not too much of this in *A Photograph*, composed in 2020 by Philip Venables to words by Cordelia Lynn – just, as the composer suggests, the kind of rubato normal in an art song. The starting point was an old family photograph of the composer's, described by the soprano in speech as the piece begins. Occasionally words spark off responses from the instrumentalists, whose lines come to shadow the narrative, until the soprano suddenly joins them, singing. It is as if one figure in the photograph has come alive. A small but acute drama starts to unfold, from within the space of a telephone box.

Much more fully improvised is the new work by Elaine Mitchener, *the/e so/ou/nd be/t/ween*, for which the only written material is a single-page graphic score that carries indications of timing, with ever shorter segments for a total duration of eight minutes. A few years ago Mitchener conducted a two-day workshop on improvisation with the ensemble; more recently, with this performance coming up, she had Zoom sessions with individual members, encouraging them, by way of graphic notation, to uncover new possibilities in their instruments (including, of course, the voice). From recordings of these sessions she made a kind of audio guide for the group, which was also useful to her in developing the eventual score. Rooted in their experience with Mitchener, what the musicians come up with this evening will also depend on spur-of-the-moment events and decisions – but that is true of any musical performance.

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour with no interval.*

*The Hermes Experiment is hugely grateful to the Marchus Trust for its generous support throughout 2023–26.*

Mitchener's title offers a further stimulus to the players. 'The work requires', she says, 'an openness to search for the sound(s) between.'

It might be a matter of becoming, as Rilke has it in Stephen Mitchell's translation, 'the other side of the air'. The phrase is from 'An die Musik', which is the first of three poems Laura Moody set in her *Rilke Songs* of 2021. We are returning here to more or less conventional notation, with some rhythmic freedom and semi-improvisatory use of given notes at the start of the first song. Moody provides her own note:

'The first song, 'An die Musik', takes Rilke's ode to the ephemeral wonders of music to a place of wildness and abandonment, referencing modal music to be sung outdoors amid the hum of nature. The second, 'Sonnet to Orpheus 1,3', reimagines Rilke's meditation on human limitation in the face of the god-like workings of art as a Mahlerian *lied* interpreted by wonky mechanical devices. It is inspired by my enthusiasm for antique automatons, orchestrions (the elaborate, automated "orchestral" machines of the 19th century and early 20th) and the sci-fi mainstay the GlitchBot, a humanoid robot whose imperfections and glitches serve to highlight particular aspects of humanness. The third song is a setting of Rilke's shortest poem and the enigmatic epitaph the poet chose for his own final resting place. A kind of lullaby, the setting is inspired by wildlife photographer Neil Bromhall's time-lapse films of roses opening and fading, the contemplative ostinato compositions of Meredith Monk, and the spirit of Bill Evans' *Peace Piece* and Mark Hollis' *The Colour of Spring*.'

Continuing a switchback succession, the next item on the programme depends again a lot more on improvisation, the prompt this time coming from field recordings of London sounds put together by Jethro Cooke: hence the title, *Metropolis*. This is the nearest thing to a Hermes Experiment classic, performed by them first in 2015 and several times since. Héloïse Werner has drawn attention to one particular moment: 'There are these amazing sounds when Tower Bridge lifts and falls and you hear all the mechanics of the thing – this huge sound.'

The programme ends back in the world of more or less prescribed composition and with a composer already mentioned by Laura Moody: Meredith Monk. Monk's is music, though, that lends itself to reinterpretation through arrangement. She composed *Double Fiesta* in 1986 for her own voice with two pianos as part of a theatre compilation, *Acts from Under and Above*. 'In the piece,' she has noted, 'I explored a variety of vocal qualities and quick shifts of persona or character within the underlying relaxed but buoyant atmosphere created by the two pianos.'

Relaxed and buoyant the music remains in the Hermes Experiment transformation, which their harp player, Anne Denholm, put together during deep lockdown in 2020 for them to join one another electronically from their respective homes. That version remains accessible on YouTube.

**Programme notes © Paul Griffiths, 2023**

#### **Find out more**

- ▶ [The Hermes Experiment](#)
- ▶ [Anne Denholm](#)
- ▶ [Oliver Pashley](#)
- ▶ [Marianne Schofield](#)
- ▶ [Héloïse Werner](#)
- ▶ [southbankcentre.co.uk](https://southbankcentre.co.uk)

## **You might also like...**

### **Manchester Collective: LAD**

Friday 27 October 2023, 6pm & 9pm | Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Ambient drone meets baroque masterpiece in an experimental programme featuring Julia Wolfe's *Lad*, reinvented here for solo violin.

### **Peter Gregson: Patina 360**

Saturday 4 November 2023, 10pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall Foyer

The composer's boundary-pushing 2021 album is all around you at this late-night world premiere, with an immersive sound environment designed by Brett Cox.