

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Patricia Kopatchinskaja: Dies Irae

Wednesday 21 February 2024, 7.30pm
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

Repertoire

Entrance music:
Scelsi Okanagon 9'

Biber Battalia à 10 interspersed with movements from Crumb Black Angels:

Biber Presto 1, Die liederliche Gesellschaft von allerley Humor (The profligate society of common humour) & Presto 2 3'15
Crumb Sounds of bones & flutes 0'40
Biber Der Mars (Mars) & Presto 3 2'40
Crumb Dance macabre 1'
Biber Aria 3'50
Crumb Devil-music 1'40
Biber Die Schlacht (The Battle) 0'45

Jimi Hendrix Recording & video 2'

Biber Battalia à 10 interspersed with movements from Crumb Black Angels (con't):

Crumb God-music 2'30
Biber Lamento der verwundten Musquetirer (Lament of the wounded musketeers) 2'30
Crumb Threnody II: Black Angels! 2'30

Pat Kop Die Wut (The Rage) 4'20

Lotti Crucifixus a 10 3'30

Improvisation c.3'

Dowland Lachrimae antiquae novae 4'20

Ustvolskaya Composition No.2 (Dies irae) 20'

Gregorian Chant Dies irae

Performers

Aurora Orchestra

Aurora Voices

Patricia Kopatchinskaja *violin*

Michael Wendeborg *piano, organ, harpsichord*

This performance lasts approximately one hour and 30 minutes with no interval.

Dies Irae serves as a musical response to climate change, featuring the medieval lament of the 'Day of Wrath' (Judgement Day) from the Requiem Mass. As the title suggests, the piece does not convey cheerful sentiments.

In Galina Ustvolskaya's composition *Dies Irae* from the 1970s, eight double basses and a piano, along with a coffin-shaped wooden box, serve as ominous symbols of doom.

The war erupts on the journey to the Day of Judgement.

Heinrich Biber's *Battalia* from 1673: Biber's music disintegrates into painful dissonances and chaotic cries, portraying entropy as a sign of an impending apocalypse. Amidst this battle, the movements of George Crumb's *Black Angels* unfold, a reaction to the Vietnam War, as if resembling music for a horror film. Antonio Lotti's *Crucifixus* then emerges like a voice from another world. This piece of theatre without a plot is designed as an assault on the senses, complete with warning sirens and trombones. The conclusion features the ticking of a time bomb, a poignant reminder of the precarious nature of our existence.

Patricia Kopatchinskaja

PROGRAMME NOTES

Let's start with the music that gives today's performance its title. Or, more strictly speaking, the text: the 'Dies irae' began life as a piece of verse, possibly written by Franciscan friar Thomas of Celano in the 13th century (though it's even been attributed to St Gregory the Great in the seventh century). The distinctive plainchant melody it acquired transformed it into one of the most memorable of all liturgical creations. As did its subject matter, which is nothing less than the Last Judgement, the Divine Creator's dividing of humankind of those to be saved and those to be thrown into the eternal flames of Hell. The 'Dies irae' found its place within the traditional text of the Latin Requiem Mass for the dead, until the Vatican II conference at the end of the 1960s removed it, considering it simply too dark and pessimistic (it still persists in some denominations and churches).

The plainchant melody and its associations have obsessed classical composers down the ages, from Liszt to Ligeti, Saint-Saëns to Shostakovich. Rachmaninov was a particular devotee, quoting the 'Dies irae' in numerous works (including the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*), and Berlioz used it to depict a witches' sabbath in his *Symphonie fantastique*. Indeed, its associations have quietly slid from divine judgement to general devilish mayhem – or, in the case of some of tonight's music, depictions of destruction, instability, doom.

And though it doesn't directly quote the 'Dies irae', a sense of doom haunts the 1968 *Okanagon* by Italian aristocrat and composer Giacinto Scelsi. He's notorious for pondering the very fundamentals of music and sound in works that famously focus on minute fluctuations of a single note. *Okanagon* has a broader perspective than that, however: he instructed that the piece 'is to be understood as a rite, or, if you choose, as the heartbeat of the Earth'. It's a rare classical piece that seems expressly conceived to unsettle or scare, with its harp, amplified double bass and tam-tam restricted to their lowest registers, producing raw and often noisy sounds in what feels like a glacially paced, arcane ceremony.

Doom is indeed the ultimate destination for the remarkably vivid *Battalia*, written in 1673 by German Baroque composer and violinist Heinrich Biber, though the piece includes a fair amount of dark humour too. As its name suggests, it depicts the goings-on before, during and after a battle, from drunken musketeers' cacophonous singing to galloping cavalry, a marching drum leading the unfortunate cannon fodder to their doom (listen out for a 'prepared' double bass, with paper stuck between its strings), and finally a soldier's life ebbing quietly, inexorably away.

Just two years later than Scelsi's *Okanagon*, deeply idiosyncratic US composer George Crumb produced his *Black Angels* for 'electric' (or amplified) string quartet, a bitter denunciation of the Vietnam War that draws on sources as diverse as Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* Quartet and the 'Dies irae' chant to conjure shocking sonic images of destruction, fear and evil. It's a superb example, too, of

Crumb's wildly unconventional ways of employing traditional instruments, with results both noisy and immensely expressive.

If there's anger in Crumb's *Black Angels*, there's even more in *Die Wut* (Rage) by the soloist for and creator of tonight's programme Patricia Kopatchinskaja – one of the Southbank Centre's Resident Artists for Spring/Summer 2024. And though the choral beauties of Venetian Baroque composer Antonio Lotti's *Crucifixus* might seem to offer respite, its haunting depiction of Christ's suffering on the Cross – with ever-mounting, unresolved dissonances – serves to prolong the tension.

Real respite might come instead from the 'Lachrimae antiquae novae' by English Renaissance composer John Dowland, one of seven contemplations of sadness from his 1604 *Lachrimae*. He was almost one of the pop stars of his era, at a time when being proficient as a singing lutenist was considered almost a prerequisite for entering polite society. It was a time, too, when sadness and introspection were all the rage, in the form of melancholy young men lamenting lost loves and wondering whether it was worth going on at all. There was a serious side to the lamenting, however: by unflinchingly facing our grief, we would emerge cleansed and released from the emotional burden, with new wisdom and understanding. 'Aut Furit, aut Lachrimat, quem non Fortuna beavit' ran the inscription on *Lachrimae*'s title page: he whom Fortune has not blessed either rages or weeps.

There's more rage than weeping in the astonishing 1973 Composition No.2 (Dies irae) by Russian composer Galina Ustvolskaya. A student of Shostakovich (who, it's alleged, proposed to her), she forged a determinedly individual path in music of extreme power and extreme emotions. The Soviet authorities seemed not to know what to do with her: unlike many other composers (her teacher Shostakovich among them), she received no official censure, but there were concerns about her apparent unwillingness to conform to the regime's conventionally uplifting style that would entertain and edify ordinary people. Her *Dies irae* is one of three 'Compositions' (alongside *Dona nobis pacem* and *Benedictus*) she created between 1970 and 1975, each on a Christian liturgical theme (though, she insisted, she didn't feel bound by any particular faith or denomination). Written for eight double basses, piano and a coffin-like wooden box that's mercilessly hammered throughout the course of the piece, this is music as witness to horror, and as deliverer of despair: brutal, unforgiving and overwhelmingly powerful.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2024

Find out more:

Aurora Orchestra
Tonight's musicians
Patricia Kopatchinskaja
Michael Wendeborg

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