

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Jean Rondeau: Sisyphus

Friday 6 December 2024, 8pm

Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

However you choose to experience the endlessly inventive world of classical music, we're so glad that you're doing it here with us. Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2024/25.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Programme includes works by Bach, Couperin, Ligeti and improvisation

Performers

Jean Rondeau *harpsichord*

Silouane Colmet Daâge *sound artist*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes. There is no interval.

This is not a programme. It's a musical performance.

Normally, I adhere to the standard exercise of the predefined programme, and the audience has an expectation of what they will hear, the chance even to prepare for it, ready themselves, as for a meal with a seating plan where one is informed in advance who their tablemates will be. The present concept is not intended to negate that established format, but rather to create a musical other, with no desire to be either representational or presentational. A moment of surrender with expectations exchanged for the surprise of an onrushing musical present. In the absence of knowing, the unexpected arises.

When I attend a concert designed in the traditional way, I purposely avoid reading the programme so that my absorption of it as complete as possible, so that its form accosts me, its format surprises me and its foundation remains open to its many possible outcomes. I'd now like to invite the audience to listen in a new perhaps more instinctive way, to put the programme down and let the 'order of the day' be ignored or erased, so that a subtle curve emerges plotting the assembly of a growing set of musical objects over time, a set whose structure places no limits on relationships within it that might be detected between the heart and ears of attentive listeners.

To that end the form is designed to be flexible, changeable. Yet the guiding principles remain precise: we stroll through dances that are improvised, notated, interpreted, at times even a blend of one gesture into another, a sudden left turn in the course of what's unfolding, a dialogue between manifesting and manifest musical material. This is not a programme. But an outpouring that will rely on notated works as a bedrock to be mined. An excursion from the improvised to the written, from the now of

improvisation and interpretation to the yesteryear of notation and the archaeology of the creative revelation.

All the notated works to be played are closely linked to returning, repetition, the ritornello (in the established forms: rondeau, chaconne, passacaille, etc.). These pieces, the ridgelines guiding our course, will be like a wellspring from which to draw according to what transpires. Like pillars. These stylistically far-ranging agents (from Couperin to Bach, Ligeti to new music, notated repertoire to transcriptions), rather than issuing from a linear chronology instead inhabit a cartography where points of linguistic convergence create echoes. The whole thing, in one go, without any real interruption. Providing one continuous eruption.

The aim of this project is also to revive a certain type of harpsichord improvisation. This instrument has always been given over to improvisation, for preludes, postludes and transitions but also for musical works unto themselves – consider the 17th-century French unmeasured preludes, essentially notated improvisations, or the importance of the practice to so many harpsichordist – composers as evidenced in biographical records or even treatises written specifically on the subject (Froberger, Louis and François Couperin, Bach, among many others). Audiences today can easily come across harpsichord improvisation in the form of basso continuo, an accompaniment technique that makes use of the practice. But opportunities to hear it solo are quite rare. From the organ, we may be more familiar with this improvisational tradition, as it is a skill that was never lost from the technique of an instrument whose history and use were less fragmented and experienced a more linear evolution.

This is not a programme. It's a sonic bandwidth where musical fragments are intoned in loops, notes are assigned to music and reiterate our auditory perception of this instrument that is the harpsichord, living by accident and by surprise to sharpen attentive listening and to crystallise that nakedness we feel before the mystery of music.

By Jean Rondeau

Find out more

- ▶ Jean Rondeau
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk