

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Scottish Ensemble Performs Philip Glass

Sunday 29 September 2024, 7pm

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

Anna Meredith Tull	3'
Sculthorpe Deciso from String Sonata No.3 (Jabiru Dreaming)	5'
Caroline Shaw Moss & Stem from The Evergreen	13'
Jörg Widmann 180 beats per minute	6'
Bryce Dessner Resonance & Des traces from Réponse Lutosławski	11'
Jonny Greenwood Proven Lands from There Will Be Blood	2'
Philip Glass Symphony No.3	26'

Performers

Scottish Ensemble

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

A programme heading for a major work by one of the masters of New York minimalism will get there by way of pieces that point to parallels, and perhaps sources, in other kinds of music.

Instrumentation is a good place to start, when a body of strings is concerned. The ensemble comes layered, from top to bottom, and Anna Meredith's *Tull* (2014), over in two and a half minutes, plays games with that layering. A pattern of five-plus-three beats is maintained while other patterns come and go, until the whole machine shifts. And then...

Near neighbours, in terms of sound, may be geographically and culturally distant. The constant pulse and the repeating melodic formulae discovered by Philip Glass and his colleagues in the early 1960s echo characteristics of music in other continents where deeply ancient ways may have been preserved. Australia would be an example, its human inhabitants cut off from the rest of the world around 12,000 years ago.

In 1989 the Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe visited the Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory, an area the size of Wales but with a resident population – a long-resident population – of only 300. Their music, together with that of Torres Strait Islanders and Indonesians, 'began', he noted, 'to fuse in my mind' and gave rise to several compositions, among them his Eleventh String Quartet (1990). His Third Sonata for Strings is a transcription he made four years later.

We hear the five-minute first movement, which, in his own words, 'contains rhythmic patterns found in the tribal music of the Kakadu area. Some of these patterns also suggest the gait of the jabiru, a species of stork.' The first of those patterns, introduced after a pulse has been established by the cellos, is a quick, syncopated 12-beat phrase from the violas. This music is repeated with new lines added, gathering towards a climax and a change – to machinery played by the violins with the wood of the bow. The first music is then rebuilt, again on the way to a climax, at which super-high violins suggest birds breaking free.

Minimalism finds other plausible models in the natural world, its repetition of the same shape reflected in, and reflecting, say, the form of a flower, or its slow, steady change, in motif or harmony or rhythm, resembling natural growth. Caroline Shaw, in *The Evergreen*, takes this perspective, and again this is music originally for string quartet, made by a composer on a journey into the wild, as she has recalled:

'One day in January 2020, I took a walk in an evergreen forest on Swiikw (Galiano Island), British Columbia, Canada. I found myself slowing down ... Eventually I stopped moving altogether ...

'This piece, *The Evergreen*, is my offering to one particular tree in that forest ... This tree is towering, craggy, warped and knotted, wrapped in soft green ... To be honest, I'm not entirely sure that it's still alive, or that it's not actually an ancient deciduous tree that has tacitly agreed to be covered in moss. But still, it feels like an evergreen friend, and so I wrote some music for it – for the soft moss that covers it, for its strong stem that reaches up, for the gentle chaos of dripping water that surrounds it, and for the roots below, ever seeking and nourishing and building.'

Here the composer sketches the four movements of the quartet she wrote later the same year, from which we hear the first two: 'Moss' with its scintillating harmonics, and 'Stem' with its inbuilt strength.

Jörg Widmann's early piece looks over the fuzzy border to rock, as he mentions in his own note: '180 beats per minute was composed in 1993 shortly after I had left school. My inspiration for this piece was the then highly popular, fast "techno beats". A rhythmic drive and permanent change of pulse whizzes past at maximum speed (180 beats per minute). The structure becomes condensed into a study on one single chord ... Ultimately, the music fuses into a six-voice canon.'

With Bryce Dessner and Jonny Greenwood we reach musicians fully engaged in rock as well as music for classical resources. Dessner wrote *Réponse Lutostawski* (2014) after a prolonged study of the Polish master's *Musique funèbre* for strings. Of the work's five movements, we hear the first, 'Resonance', which responds to the sombre tone of the original piece, and the third, 'Des traces', which moves into the light.

Greenwood, in his teens, brought to Radiohead a fascination with new classical music, especially the early works for string orchestra by Krzysztof Penderecki – Polish strings again. These were among his models when he began, 20 years ago, to write classical scores, one of the first being *Popcorn Superhet Receiver* (2005), for the strings of the BBC Concert Orchestra.

Preparing his film *There Will Be Blood*, Paul Thomas Anderson heard a recording of this piece and approached Greenwood for more. 'Proven Lands' is a two-minute section from *Popcorn* that became a cue in the film. Many of the players use plectra to create an anxious fluttering over which others project a driving low-register line. This splits, gains new lines and loses them, comes to a climax, and remains as a ghost behind the jumpy iteration, blurred by quarter-tones, that races to the finish.

Philip Glass bumped into the unexpected corridor of the symphony in 1992 with a work based on David Bowie's *Low*. Since then have come 13 more, of which he composed No.3 for the strings of the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra and their conductor Dennis Russell Davies, a longtime associate of his.

This work also starts with pulsing, but slower, softer and all on C, the starting point for a minorish melody that arrives in waves

of increasing force, then fades towards what comes next, the movements following each other without a break.

Faster, the second movement also works with a single theme, this time circling and using a scale that might suggest a Middle Eastern dance. The music tangles and untangles, but once started needs a shock to enable it to wind down.

The third movement, playing for around ten minutes, gives the piece its gently beating heart. It opens in classic Glass territory, with oscillations topped by slower motion in chords, initiating a passage that, through a sequence of chord changes, takes nearly a minute to revolve to a close. The passage is followed by variations that gradually open its sombreness to shafts of light. In the second variation, for instance, four vibrant violins shine above the rest of the orchestra. Later we have a solo violin reaching effortlessly up to a high note it repeats. All the time the texture is becoming enriched, until the music is moving in 19 coalescing parts, one for each player.

From here it swerves into the finale, which is again reminiscent of a dance. In characteristic Glass fashion, the music freeze-frames anxiety and joy.

Programme notes © Paul Griffiths, 2024

Tonight's performers

Artistic Director / Violin

Jonathan Morton

Violin I

Freya Goldmark
Elizabeth Cooney
Liza Johnson
Jens Lynen
Kirsty Lovie

Violin II

Samuel Staples
Joanne Green
Laura Ghiro
Ellie Fagg

Viola

Jane Atkins
Asher Zaccardelli
Carol Ella
Dorothea Vogel

Cello

Alison Lawrance
Naomi Pavri
Nathaniel Boyd

Double Bass

Diane Clark
James Manson

Find out more

- ▶ [Scottish Ensemble](#)
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk

You might also like...

Manchester Collective & Zubin Kanga (Double Bill)

Saturday 12 October 2024, 8pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

Experience the full force of the string orchestra as Manchester Collective revive old classics and summon futuristic sounds with cyborg pianist Zubin Kanga.

Lawrence Power's Lock-in

Saturday 9 November 2024, 8pm | Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Live music meets pre-recorded material in a boundary-pushing experience from Resident Artist Lawrence Power, with guests Héloïse Werner and Sergio Bucheli.