

Couperin & Concrète
Adam Swayne – piano

This programme of music for piano and electronics owes as much to older styles as it does the *musique concrète* of 20th-century France. The colourful musical palettes of French giants Couperin and Messiaen appear alongside hypnotic cityscapes and church bells. Legendary recordings by Caruso, Judy Garland, and some of the greatest albums of all time, are used as ‘found material’ in heady juxtapositions with virtuosic live piano music.

Pianist Adam Swayne presents a mesmeric hour that will challenge your perceptions. What is present, and what is past? What is music, and what is sound? What is familiar, and what is unfamiliar?

François COUPERIN *Passacaille* in B minor (*Pièces de clavecin* II: *Ordre 8ème*)
Jonathan HARVEY: *Tombeau de Messiaen*
Joanna BAILIE: *Artificial Environment No.8*
Matthew SERGEANT: *A Self Portrait (Couperin)* (Second Performance)
Charles DODGE: *Any Resemblance is Purely Coincidental*

Couperin’s monumental 1717 *Passacaille* opens the concert. It is a rondeau with eight couplets of varying length and mood. Listen out for a reprise of this piece, in a very different guise, during Matthew Sergeant’s work later in the programme.

Also in the vein of musical tributes, *Tombeau de Messiaen* (1994) is Jonathan Harvey’s nod to another French composer. He says “Messiaen was fascinated by the colours of the harmonic series and its distortions, and found therein a prismatic play of light. The tape part of my work is composed of piano sounds entirely tuned to harmonic series – twelve of them, one for each class of pitch. The ‘tempered’ live piano joins and distorts these series, never entirely belonging, never entirely separate.”

In her series of *Artificial Environments*, which stretches to nine pieces, Berlin-based composer Joanna Bailie mixes field recordings, found material and partial transcriptions to otherworldly and immersive effect. This eighth work was written for Mark Knoop and premiered at Kings Place in 2012. Here are her notes for the three movements:

ia) ...and the dreams that you dare to dream... A recording of a famous song is passed through a filter resembling a Venetian blind. At the beginning, the gaps through which sound can enter are very narrow, gradually opening up until the very end of the work when the identity of the source becomes apparent. The piano reinforces certain components of the filtered sound, occasionally hinting at the song that lies beneath and at other times forming its own song out of the available filtered material.

i) *Babel* In *Babel*, the piano is paired with excerpts from a long recording that was made while walking up and down the queue of tourists waiting to enter Notre Dame de Paris. The title refers to the density of languages encountered at this particular tourist spot and it is speech itself which is the focal point of the composition. Even if the speech cannot be understood, its sonic components, highlighted by the rhythmic “freezing” of the recording, are analysable and form a somewhat random harmonic progression from which the piano material is drawn. Central to the piece is the idea that a musical proposition exists within the accidental narrative of the field recording, to be outlined by the piano part and accessed by a listener willing to play his or her part in this framing of the sound of real life.

ii) Street *Street* is a piano adaptation of the middle movement of *Symphony-Street-Souvenir*, a piece for large chamber ensemble originally written for and commissioned by the Ives Ensemble. It was intended for a concert dedicated to the music of Aldo Clementi and the fact that the recording features a carillon in addition to the gradual slowing down/lowering of pitch is of course a nod to the music of the Italian composer. The piano part is a kind of equally-tempered filtering of the bell analysis (which as one might imagine contains many micro-tones) and in its fragmentation provides a strange half-fitting counter-melody to the tape. The carillon recording was made at Vor Frelsers Kirke in Copenhagen.

Bristol-based composer Matthew Sergeant writes of his new piece, “it’s not a self-portrait of me, but it might have something of that ilk for a number of other parties. Derived from François Couperin’s Passacaille in B minor, the electronic component of *A Self-Portrait* is made from digital attempts to reconstruct the sound of the Couperin original in performance (a performance given by Adam Swayne, for whom this piece was written) using audio grains from selections of Rolling Stone magazine’s ‘100 Most Influential Albums of All Time’. The live pianist finds ways to engage with the resulting mangle. An image of Couperin’s original drowning in the superabundance of music in our digital musical emerged. Reaching and seething through some kind of vicious membrane. So maybe it’s a self-portrait of Couperin, or maybe one of Spotify”.

The tape part of Charles Dodge’s *Any Resemblance is Purely Coincidental* is also based on pre-existing music, in this case a computer restoration and re-synthesis of the 1907 recording of the legendary Enrico Caruso singing ‘Vesti la giubba’ from Ruggero Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* (1892). Dodge writes: “In the course of the work the voice searches for an accompaniment and is heard at different times with the original band, with electronic sounds, with copies of itself, with the live piano, and with combinations of them all. There is a surrealistic, dreamlike aspect to these apparent dislocations. The initial efforts are humorous; as the work progresses other emotions come into play. The title of the work recalls the standard disclaimer from FBI television dramas of the 1950s. I chose it when assured by RCA Records that I could use the computer renderings of the legendary voice if I made no attempt to exploit Caruso’s name or visual likeness. *Any Resemblance Is Purely Coincidental* was commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1980. The computer renditions of the Caruso voice were made by digital signal processing pioneer Thomas Stockham and his student Neil J. Miller at the University of Utah in the early 1970s. The work is dedicated to the memory of Margaret Fairbank Jory, who was the executive director of the American Music Center at the time that I was its president”.

Pianist Adam Swayne studied at the University of Manchester and the Royal Northern College of Music before completing his doctorate as a Fulbright Scholar at Northwestern University in the USA. His principal teachers were John Gough, John Casken and contemporary specialist Ursula Oppens.

He now combines performing, and occasional composing and conducting, with his roles as Deputy Head of Keyboard Studies at the RNCM and Programme Director for the Riot Ensemble. With Riot he has performed in contemporary music festivals throughout Europe and released a number of recordings. His “blistering” first solo CD was selected as an Instrumental Monthly Choice by BBC Music Magazine, and it also received two nominations at the 2019 Opus Klassik awards in Germany. His “powerful” second CD, a commemoration of 20 years since 9/11, was launched at the Wigmore Hall and played on BBC Radio 3. The Times described him as “a pianist of formidable technique and high intelligence” and the Evening Standard as “an ideal blend of panache and subtlety”.

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