

Soliloquies & Dialogues

Music made in lockdown

**Birmingham
Contemporary
Music Group**



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Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Birmingham Contemporary Music Group is one of the world's foremost new music ensembles. For over three decades, BCMG has developed new music for all audiences. The ensemble has commissioned over 175 pieces of music from the world's finest composers and emerging international talent. Many of the works have been commissioned through the innovative **Sound Investment** crowd-funding scheme, to which over 500 donors have gained a closer insight into making new music. These works have subsequently found their way into worldwide repertoire.

Arnolfini is Bristol's International Centre for Contemporary Arts located on the harbourside in the heart of Bristol. Woven into the fabric of Bristol since 1961, Arnolfini is a pioneer of interdisciplinary contemporary arts, presenting an ambitious, eclectic programme of visual art, performance, dance, film and music, carefully curated to appeal to a broad audience. Housed in a prominent Grade II listed, accessible building on Bristol's harbourside, Arnolfini is an inspiring public space for contemporary arts and learning, greeting over half a million visitors each year and offering an innovative, inclusive and engaging experience for all.

Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and Arnolfini are both registered charities, please consider donating so we can continue to inspire, create and support through the arts.



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Using the unpredictable events of COVID-19 as a stimulus for creativity, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group commissioned a series of new music pieces from composers around the globe during lockdown.

Composers were asked to create pieces for solo artists and were connected with musicians over digital platforms to rehearse, refine, and record their music.

Soliloquies and Dialogues shows the importance of connectivity and creativity during the most devastating of times, and that whilst we were all unified by lockdown, our reactions were still highly individual.

Experience contemporary music for a new creative era, and BCMG's new partnership with contemporary art gallery, Arnolfini. This is a poignant celebration of new things to come, and a reflection of the journey we have all taken together, yet on our own.



Celeste Oram (b. 1990) counting steps* (May 2020, 5')

for solo trumpet with video projection

Tristan Murail (b.1946) Les Ruines circulaires (2006, 7')

for clarinet and violin

Ma Xiao-Qing (b.1996) Back to the Beginning* (April 2020, 7')

for reciting solo violin

José Del Avellanal Carreño (b. 1998) speak, sing...* (October 2020, 8')

for clarinet and electronics

Donghoon Shin (b. 1983) Couplet* (April 2020, 3'30")

for solo violin

Emily Howard (b. 1979) R* (May 2021, 6')

for solo percussion

Steve Reich (b. 1936) New York Counterpoint (1985, 11')

for clarinet and tape

Sir Harrison Birtwistle (b.1934) The Message (2008, 3')

for clarinet, trumpet and military drum

Celeste Oram Counting Steps* (May 2020, 5')

for solo trumpet and a young trumpeter with video projection

Performed by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group Musicians

Oliver Janes Clarinet

Ryan Linham Trumpet

Julian Warburton Percussion

Colette Overdijk Violin

Amelie Thomas Trumpet

**BCMG Soliloquies and Dialogues commissions receiving their live second performances, kindly supported by Sound Investors and donors to the BCMG at Home campaign*

speak, sing... is supported by PRiSM, The RNCM Centre for Practice & Research in Science & Music, funded by the Research England fund Expanding Excellence in England (E3).

Celeste Oram Counting Steps

Gradus ad Parnassum (The Steps to Parnassus) is a method book on composing counterpoint in the style of Palestrina, written by Johann Joseph Fux in 1725. In one sense, it is a very dry book: a scourge of music students who—over centuries and around the world—have been assigned by curriculum to labour through its arcane contents. In another sense, it is (like many musical method books) an underrated piece of philosophical literature, whose theoretical explications testify to the ways in which our descriptions of musical logic & meaning are very much entangled with our understandings of social logic & meaning.

Fux writes the entire book in a Socratic dialogue between the master Aloysius and the student Josephus, and their conversations are not limited to the rules of counterpoint. Of the various aphorisms which decorate *Gradus ad Parnassum*, two in particular caught my attention as I began this piece: We do not live for ourselves alone; our lives belong also to our parents, our country, and our friends. Drops wear down the stone not by strength, but by constant falling.

I write this piece in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic: a situation which makes plain what is at stake in the contingencies and debts of our daily livelihoods. In one sense, it's become clear that our lives do not belong to us, but to capital — as life and suffering are crunched into cost-benefit analyses for economic stimulus and consolidations of geo-political power. In another sense, the instinct to take care has once again illuminated the things which can grow by being given away. A Neapolitan nurse was quoted saying: "I thought I was a weak person. Now I am discovering that I have power and courage above all my expectations."

Commissioned by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, with financial assistance from supporters of BCMG at Home and the following individuals through BCMG's Sound Investment Scheme: Samantha Bird, Paul Bond, Christopher Carrier, Stephen Johnson, Philip Mills, Michael & Sandra Squires, Myriam Thomas, and Christoph & Marion Trestler.

Tristan Murail Les Ruines circulaires

After a short story by Jorge-Luis Borges: a man dreams, dreams of another person who gradually comes to life, becomes real, acquires consciousness. Then the dreamer notices that he is in fact only the product of someone else's dream. The violin dreams - its melody slowly growing out of the clarinet music. The two instruments confront each other, the clarinet triumphs, and in turn begins to dream. This dream elicits a new violin melody... The Circular Ruins: the vestiges from a far distant past are of course also brought to mind: the stone circles standing in Scotland, Stonehenge, Karnack, the monolithic statues in Corsica, the nuraghi in Sardinia, and the unusual group of stones standing somewhere in Senegal, though I have forgotten the name...

Ma Xiao-Qing Back to the Beginning

Ma Xiao-Qing's Back to the Beginning was commissioned by BCMG as part of our Soliloquies and Dialogues series. Soliloquies and Dialogues is a series of commissions we began in March 2020 after the world seemed to come to an abrupt halt, and it focuses on composers responding to lockdown from their own perspectives across the world, writing for musicians locked down here in the UK. After we met Xia-Qing on our tour to Beijing and Shanghai in 2019, we commissioned her to write this piece for BCMG violinist Colette Overdijk.

Commissioned by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, with financial assistance from Penny Collier as Sole Commissioner.

José Del Avellanal Carreño speak, sing...

This piece was developed in response to my ongoing fascination with the idea of 'human music', and what we understand as 'human' – as opposed to 'non-human' or 'artificial' – in the field of music. I am particularly interested in the exploration of the inherently problematic boundaries of the concept, diving into the blurry divide between 'human' and 'non-human' while continuously questioning the nature and legitimacy of those terms. Making use of prism-samplernn, one of the most recent developments in Machine Learning technology, this work presents a dialogue between human and artificial – the live clarinet and electronics, respectively – shaping a narrative focused on the interactions and exchanges between both domains and the internal transformations which take place as a result of this encounter.

Prism-samplernn, developed by the RNCM Centre for the Practice and Research in Science and Music (PRiSM) is a neural network which can be trained into pre-existing audio samples and, once this training is complete, is able generate original audio content based on what it has learned. Taking this into account, the piece was shaped around two recorded improvisations by BCMG clarinettist Oliver Janes, which became the inspiration for a set of 'human' musical responses written by myself and the input for a series of 'artificial' responses generated by prism-samplernn. This collection of responses constituted the main body of musical ideas and material upon which the piece was developed.

Special thanks to Oliver Janes, PRiSM Research Software Engineer Dr Christopher Melen, PRiSM Director Professor Emily Howard and BCMG Artistic Director Stephan Meier for their invaluable help in making this piece possible. *Commissioned by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group in partnership with RNCM PRiSM. speak, sing... is supported by PRiSM, The RNCM Centre for Practice & Research in Science & Music, funded by the Research England fund Expanding Excellence in England (E3).*

Donghoon Shin Couplet

Couplet for solo violin consists of very different two movements. The first one is relatively calm and lyrical and composed with particular intervals. By contrast, the second movement is rather modal but aggressive and wild in terms of the musical character within a fast tempo.

The piece was born out of the fruitful collaboration with the violinist Alexandra Wood. It was also conceived as a seed of my recent large scale piece Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. As musical siblings, those pieces share pitch materials and musical characters.

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Emily Howard R

R (2021 -) is a short work for solo percussion being developed in collaboration with BCMG percussionist Julian Warbuton. The work pursues my long-held interest in exploring geometrical concepts, exponential growth and decay, through sound. I am grateful to Julian for the many zoom discussions we have had over the past months, and particularly regarding the choice of potential percussion instruments for R.

I have developed a framework for the exploration of a number of different metallic sounds chosen by Julian and tonight you are hearing an important stage in our development process - the first opportunity for live exploration. Because of lockdown, I have not been able to meet up in person with Julian and we have discovered that it is impossible for me to gain a true sense of the intricate sound of the instruments working together via zoom. *Commissioned by Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, with financial assistance from supporters of BCMG at Home and Penny Collier as Commissioner.*

Steve Reich New York Counterpoint

New York Counterpoint was commissioned by The Fromm Music Foundation for clarinettist Richard Stolzman. It was composed during the summer of 1985. The duration is about 11 minutes. The piece is a continuation of the ideas found in Vermont Counterpoint (1982), where as soloist plays against a pre-recorded tape of him or her self. In New York Counterpoint the soloist pre-records ten clarinet and bass clarinet parts and then plays a final 11th part live against the tape. The compositional procedures include several that occur in my earlier music.

The opening pulses ultimately come from the opening of Music for 18 Musicians (1976). The use of interlocking repeated melodic patterns played by multiples of the same instrument can be found in my earliest works, Piano Phase (for 2 pianos or 2 marimbas) and Violin Phase (for 4 violins) both from 1967. In the nature of the patterns, their combination harmonically, and in the faster rate of change, the piece reflects my recent works, particularly Sextet (1985).

New York Counterpoint is in three movements: fast, slow, fast, played one after the other without pause. The change of tempo is abrupt and in the simple relation of 1:2. The piece is in the meter $3/2 = 6/4 (=12/8)$. As is often the case when I write in this meter, there is an ambiguity between whether one hears measures of 3 groups of 4 eight notes, or 4 groups of 3 eight notes. In the last movement of New York Counterpoint the bass clarinets function to accent first one and then the other of these possibilities while the upper clarinets essentially do not change. The effect, by change of accent, is to vary the perception of that which in fact is not changing.

Sir Harrison Birtwistle The Message

Sir Harrison Birtwistle wrote *The Message* (Duet 1) in 2008 as a 'birthday card' for the London Sinfonietta's 40th anniversary concert. A pithy, staccato trumpet solo gives way to a more legato clarinet line, the two instruments engaging in a brief exchange before joining in more soulful harmony. A single flourish on a military drum rounds off this short yet delightful little piece. This is the first of a series of duets by the composer. There are now five in the sequence, a number which may grow in future should the composer decide to add to it.



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