

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 26 May 2023
10.00pm

Elaine Mitchener mezzo-contralto
Apartment House

Gordon MacKay violin
Anton Lukoszevieze leader, cello
Emma Williams flute
Heather Roche clarinet
Kerry Yong piano, harpsichord
Simon Limbrick percussion

Albert M Fine (1932-1987)

White On White for chamber ensemble (1965)
arranged by Anton Lukoszevieze

Peter Maxwell Davies (1934-2016)

Eight Songs for a Mad King Op. 39 (1969)
The Sentry (King Prussia's Minuet)
The Country Walk (La Promenade)
The Lady-In-Waiting (Miss Musgrave's Fancy)
To Be Sung On the Water (The Waterman)
The Phantom Queen (He's Ay A-Kissing Me)
The Counterfeit (Le Conterfaite)
Country Dance (Scotch Bonnett)
The Review (A Spanish March)

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Elaine Mitchener is grateful to House of Flora @houseoffloraofficial and Bridget Carey

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Albert M Fine White On White for chamber ensemble

Albert M Fine (1932-87) was a composer, conductor, poet and artist working in the early 1960s who was also involved with the art movement Fluxus. In Philip Glass's memoir *Words without Music* he described Fine as 'the most influential musician that I met at the Julliard.' Fine often collaborated with the Lithuanian Fluxus co-founder George Maciunas, with one notable work being his *Piece for Fluxorchestra* (1967), which involved musicians located all over a concert hall, including in the audience. He created works in different media, such as mail art, and also left a number of musical compositions and music for the theatre. Fine is forgotten today and is a small, but not insignificant, contributor to the history of experimental music.

In 1965 he composed a set of piano pieces called *3 Movements for Piano*. The first movement is called *White on White*. The music consists of continuous, undulating ostinati with different configurations of a limited pitch gamut for the right and left hands. Each bar of the music has different notes subtly accentuated. In the preface to the work he states that different strings of the piano may be prepared, at the performer's discretion. The version of the work in this concert has been 'lightly' arranged by myself for ensemble, whereby different pitches of the gamut are sustained by wind and string instruments *sotto voce*, so that they become embedded in the texture of the different ostinati. The piano plays the music as written and the percussionist has a set of five untuned objects with which they perform one line of the piano part.

The extended and repetitive nature of the music prefigures the systematic nature of the work of Philip Glass, but comes at a time in America of the emerging music of Terry Riley and also after the Theatre of Eternal Music, involving La Monte Young and Tony Conrad. In some ways *White on White* is closer to the 'Balinese' music of Colin McPhee and his *Balinese Ceremonial Music* (1934). Fine's composition however has an element of absurdism, as over the course of some 20 minutes, nothing changes, yet everything changes, rather like the minute variables found in the grid paintings made in the 1960s by Agnes Martin. *White on White* is tonight dedicated to another artist, Robert Janz, who died in 2021. Janz's work often focused on spontaneous interventions of NYC billboard posters and graffiti, altering with paint or ripping paper to create new compositions. In his final years he could be seen wandering his neighbourhood with a bucket of water and a brush, daubing the water onto the surfaces, buildings and pavements of Manhattan, creating spontaneous paintings that slowly disappeared as the water evaporated.

Peter Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* is an intense, histrionic and visceral work. Albert M Fine's music acts as a psychological precursor, a heavy and dark velvet curtain of expectation and suspense.

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Peter Maxwell Davies Eight Songs for a Mad King Op. 39

When it premiered on 22 April 1969 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, *Eight Songs for a Mad King* quickly emerged as a classic of avant garde music theatre - a starkly modernist monodrama that, in its iconoclasm, brilliantly captured some of the revolutionary spirit of the age.

Today, its portrayal of King George III's mental illness feels as profoundly unnerving as it did when first performed by the Pierrot Players, the ensemble founded in 1967 by Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle. Its visceral evocation of the King's traumatised state, woven around transcripts of his own words, works through a heightened expressionist repertoire of screams, cries, distorted and fragmented vocalisations, startling pitch changes, and the speech/singing style of *sprechstimme*, giving unsparing insights into the mind of a man tormented by multiple losses of sovereignty, and by the brutal regime of his physicians.

In many ways, the ideological currents of the 1960s - among them the struggles for civil, women's and gay rights, the anti-colonial and the anti-psychiatry movements - allow the piece to resonate with each age. Today, as Britain grapples with its legacy of imperialism and enslavement, the King's fragmented identity appears symbolic of an internalised conflict between the colonising and colonised aspects of his mind and empire.

Maxwell Davies composed the piece after meeting actor and baritone Roy Hart, whose extended vocal technique encompassed a five octave range and the ability to produce chords with his voice. The scenario resulted from librettist Randolph Stow's encounter with a miniature mechanical organ once owned by the King - his confused attempts to teach his pet bullfinches to sing its tunes providing the framing device for the eight monologues recounting his conversations with the birds and with several imagined interlocutors.

While the vocalist may or may not represent the King himself, the musicians who play the birds - the percussionist being the King's keeper - are projections of his psyche: at times, commenting on or improvising around his parts; at times, mocking him with mechanical bird calls. Throughout the piece, Maxwell Davies juxtaposes incongruous rhythms, as he quotes and distorts the styles of other composers, most notably in the pastiche, in the 7th movement, of Handel's *Messiah*. While the King performs 'Comfort ye, my people', the music slides into a foxtrot before culminating in the destruction of a violin, an act of aggression - alluding perhaps to Jimi Hendrix - signifying the final disintegration of his sanity.

It is this musical and political radicalism that inspired Elaine Mitchener to approach Maxwell Davies for permission to perform the work. Now, after adapting her mezzo-contralto voice to meet the challenges of the piece, she and cellist Anton Lukoszevieve of Apartment House unveil their interpretation, making Mitchener, in the process, the first British, and first Black woman to take on the role. In so doing, the pair aim to reignite the still revolutionary potential of an extraordinary work.

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Peter Maxwell Davies (1934-2016)

Eight Songs for a Mad King Op. 39 (1969)

Randolph Stow and King George III

The Sentry (King Prussia's Minuet)

Good day to Your Honesty: God guard who guards the gate.
Here is the key of the Kingdom.
You are a pretty fellow: next month I shall give you a cabbage.
Undo the door!
Who has stolen my key? Ach! my Kingdom is snakes and dancing, my Kingdom locks and slithering. Make room!
Pity me, pity me, pity me. Child, child, whose son are you?

The Country Walk (La Promenade)

Dear land of sheep and cabbages. Dear land.
Dear elms, oaks, beeches, strangling ivy, green snakes of ivy, pythons. God guard trees.
Blue-yellow-green is the world like a chained man's bruise.
I think of God. God also is a King.

The Lady-In-Waiting (Miss Musgrave's Fancy)

Madam, let us talk, let us talk.
Madam, I mean no harm.
Only to remember, remember
What it was that through silk,
Lace, linen and brocade
Swooped on my needle. To remember. Madam,
Let us talk, I mean no harm.

To Be Sung On the Water (The Waterman)

Sweet Thames, sweet Thames, far, far have I followed thee.
God guard my people.
Sweet Thames, flow soft. Flow, burdened by my people
(Deliver me of my people; they are within)
To Eden garden, unto Eden garden
in Hanover, Bermuda or New South Wales.
Sweet Thames, flow soft. Evacuate my people.
I am weary of this feint. I am alone.

The Phantom Queen (He's Ay A-Kissing Me)

Where is the Queen, why does she not visit me?
Esther! O my heart's ease.
Have they chained you too, my darling, in a stable?
Do they starve you, strike you, scorn you, ape your howls?
They say some other woman is my wife, but the Queen's name is Esther
Esther
Esther
Fall on my eyes, O bride, like a starless night.

The Counterfeit (Le Conterfaite)

I am nervous. I am not ill
But I am nervous.
If you would know what is the matter with me
I am nervous.
But I love you both very well;
If you would tell me the truth.
I love Doctor Heberden best; for he has not told me a lie
Sir George has told me a lie: a white lie, he says
But I hate a white lie!
If you tell me a lie,
Let it be a black lie!

Country Dance (Scotch Bonnett)

Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people
With singing and with dancing,
With milk and with apples.
The landlord at the Three Tuns
Makes the best purl in Windsor.
Sin! Sin! Sin!
Black vice, intolerable vileness
In lanes, by ricks, at Courts. It is night on the world.
Even I, your King, have contemplated evil.
I shall rule with a rod of iron.
Comfort ye.

The Review (A Spanish March)

My people: I come before you in mourning,
On my breast a star:
The King is dead.
A good-hearted gentleman, a humble servant of God,
A loving husband, an affectionate sire.
Poor fellow, he went mad.
He talked with trees, attacked his eldest son,
Disowned his wife, to make a ghost his Queen -
A ghost his Queen.
So they seized him (yes!) and they whipped him
(Ach! yes!) starved him; jeered in his face,
While he talked he talked he talked he talked he talked:
They could not shave him, his mouth was never still.
Sometimes he howled like a dog.
And he veiled the mirrors not to see himself pass by
For his eyes had turned to blackcurrant jelly.
Poor fellow, I weep for him.
He will die howling.
Howling.