

# Today's program

SETH KNOPP, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

# Yellow Barn

## Season Finale

August 8, 2020 | 7:30 | The Big Barn, Putney, VT

**John Cage (1912-1992)** Solo for Voice 43 from Song Books (1970)

Lucy Shelton

**Philippe Hersant (b.1948)** In The Dark (2006)

Yasmina Spiegelberg, clarinet

**Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)** Seven Romances on Poems of Alexander Blok, Op.127 (1967)

Ophelia's Song  
Hamayun, the Prophetic Bird  
We Were Together  
The City Sleeps  
Storm  
Secret Signs  
Music

Tony Arnold, soprano; Mark Steinberg, violin; Coleman Itzkoff, cello;  
Seth Knopp, piano

**Osvaldo Golijov (b.1960)** Tenebrae (2002)

Lucy Fitz Gibbon, soprano; Yasmina Spiegelberg, clarinet; Adelya Nartadjieva, Alice Ivy-Pemberton, violins; Mark Steinberg, viola; Coleman Itzkoff, cello

**James MacMillan (b.1959)** Angel (1993)

Seth Knopp, piano

Tonight's wall program was created by Michele Burgess.

SOLO FOR VOICE 43

THEATRE WITH ELECTRONICS

(RELEVANT)

DIRECTIONS

Improvise a melody using the following text by Erik Satie (four times) recording it meanwhile. Let the first time be approximately 17 seconds, the second 49 seconds, the third 52 seconds, and the last 53 seconds (total duration: approximately two minutes and fifty-one seconds). Play back the recording and then sing it recording it a second time. Then play both recordings simultaneously.

**et** *TOUS* CELA M'est adveNU  
PA<sub>R</sub> LA Faut **E** **DE** la musIQUE .



et tout cela M'Est adue<sub>NU</sub> PAR  
LA FAUTE DE la musi<sub>que</sub>.

et tout **cel**a m'e<sup>ST</sup> **adven**U Par la

**FA***UX* DE **LA** **M***USI*que .

et tout cela m'est  
advenu par la faute  
de la musique .

"And all this that has happened to me is the fault of music"

## Program Notes

### **John Cage (1912-1992)** Solo for Voice 43 from Song Books (1970)

Many of the fundamental ideas of John Cage's later compositional practices emerged in his earlier years. He entered Pomona College as a theology major in 1928, and describes in his autobiographical statement why he left soon after:

"I was shocked at college to see one hundred of my classmates in the library all reading copies of the same book. Instead of doing as they did, I went into the stacks and read the first book written by an author whose name began with Z. I received the highest grade in the class. That convinced me that the institution was not being run correctly. I left."

Decades later, Cage would become a pioneer of indeterminacy in composition and in performance, where elements of the music are left up to chance or to the whim of the players. In 1951, Cage acquired the first English translation of the *I Ching* [Book of Changes], the Chinese symbol system designed for divination. Much of his subsequent work used operations based on pages from the *I Ching* to which Cage would randomly flip, including *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951) for 12 radio receivers, *Music of Changes* (1951) for piano, and, later, *Cheap Imitation*. He also composed using star charts in his *Etudes Australes* (1975) for piano and *Atlas Eclipticalis* (1962) for orchestra. Cage's most ambitious work involving chance procedures was *Européras I & 2* (1987), which uses the *I Ching* to generate every aspect of the production—libretto, score, costumes, sets, lighting, "plot"—based on a database of over 100 classic European operas. According to Cage, his use of the technique allowed a piece to be performed in chaotically different ways, and also fulfilled his intention to "let things be themselves."

In 1970 Cage took a commission to write two sets of songs for Cathy Berberian and Simone Rist. He consulted the *I Ching* to determine how many songs would go into each book: 56 and 34 were the responses. Now he had the ambitious goal of writing ninety new pieces for a solo singer, and he had only three months to do it. Running to 317 pages of manuscript score, the songs are incredibly diverse, a cornucopia of musical invention.

The heterogeneity of the *Song Books* was the result of the method that Cage set up to guide the construction of the ninety solos. This was a method that would help him to find his way through the challenge of writing ninety solos in ninety days, and that would simultaneously take him on a host of unknown compositional adventures: not an architect's blueprint, but the hero's instructions in a fairy tale, full of riddles and secrets. For each song Cage had to ask three questions and receive the answers by tossing coins and consulting the *I Ching*. The answers would provide him instructions on how to discover this solo.

The first question: "Is this solo relevant or irrelevant to the overall theme of the *Song Books*?" For his theme, Cage took a line from his diaries: "We connect Satie with Thoreau." Relevant solos include references to either Satie or Thoreau or both; irrelevant songs do not. The second question: "What kind of solo is this?" There were four categories: song (that is, a primarily sung piece), song using electronics, theatre (that is, *not* involving singing, but instead consisting of actions), and theatre using electronics. The third question, the open-ended one, the key that opened the treasure chest of invention: "How will I compose this solo?" There were three possible answers: compose it using a method that Cage had used before, compose it by making a variation to a method already used, or invent an entirely new method of composition. If the answer was to use or vary an existing method, chance also determined exactly which method. Thus armed with a theme, a format, and this general direction, Cage set forth to figure out exactly how to make the solo. He did this for each of the ninety solos, one after the other, until the work was completed, the journey ended.

*Song Books* is a piece that is impossible to characterize in any brief description—a piece which juxtaposes the old and the new, determinacy and indeterminacy. Cage's description is as good as any: "To consider the *Song Books* as a work of art is nearly impossible. Who would dare? It resembles a brothel, doesn't it?"

—James Pritchett

### **Philippe Hersant (b.1948) In The Dark (2006)**

Born in 1948 in Rome, Philippe Hersant studied music at the Paris Conservatory in the composition class of André Jolivet, before completing artist residencies at the Casa Velasquez in Spain from 1970 to 1972, and then at the Villa Medici in Rome from 1978 to 1980. After finishing his music studies in 1970, Hersant set aside for himself a decade in which to find his own language. His patient maturation had more to do with books and words than the exclusive study of his art—with the exception of many kinds of extra-European types of music. An avid reader and lover of cinema, Hersant has drawn on the most varied literary sources (James Joyce, the German Romantics, and many poets from the Orient and the Far-East) and also cinematographic sources (he declares a particular predilection for Fellini and for the eminent position he assigns to memory).

### **Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) Seven Romances on Poems of Alexander Blok, Op.127 (1967)**

"I was a musician, never a politician. I lived according to the dictates of my conscience and my heart," wrote Mstislav Rostropovich in response to a nationalist journalist's attack on his and other artists' decisions to leave the USSR. In 1974 Rostropovich and his wife, the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya, gave up their home in Moscow and their status among the



artistic elite in the Soviet Union to move abroad. Rostropovich was stripped of his citizenship in 1978 and did not return to his home until after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He wrote, "My wife and I have not left our people, but the officials who have been given the opportunity to make a mockery of those who have devoted their life to art."

Rostropovich's friend, Dmitri Shostakovich, never left those officials who made his life miserable. He remained in the Soviet Union until his death in 1975, the same year that Rostropovich penned this open letter.

There are many conflicting stories about the political life of Shostakovich. Some say he was Dmitri Shostakovich: Secret Revolutionary, and some say Dmitri Shostakovich: Puppet of the Party. His political motivations were difficult to pin down, probably because even when forced by the Party to write with an agenda, he was not composing for them, but to be true to his own conscience and heart. His early music generally met success, but there was debate as to whether it upheld true Soviet values. The opera *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was a hot discussion subject when it premiered in 1934 for this very reason. Reviews after the Moscow and Leningrad premieres seemed positive. Party members declared it as a "path for the founding of a new, genuine Soviet realist opera." These very same party members rushed to recant their statements a few weeks later when Stalin himself published an article in the official party magazine titled, "Chaos Instead of Music," denouncing Shostakovich's opera for its overt sexuality, "leftist deformity", and a lack of melody. The government had nonsensically condemned Shostakovich, the most brilliant young composer of his day, on a work which seemed to be a legitimate Party piece. This was a power move; the Party used Shostakovich as a warning to other artists who might try and push back against the government. Shostakovich was his government's plaything.

This constant game of cat and mouse between artist and government wore on Shostakovich over time. In 1967, when Shostakovich composed the *Seven Romances on Alexander Blok Poems*, he was recovering from illness and questioning whether he had anything left to write. Rostropovich had requested a song cycle from his friend for himself and his wife to perform. Shostakovich composed the first Romance for cello and soprano set to the Russian Symbolist poet Alexander Blok's "Ophelia's Song," and then in an outpouring of three days wrote six more which added violin and piano, to be performed by David Oistrakh and Moisey Vainberg.

*Seven Romances on Alexander Blok Poems* was premiered during the fiftieth anniversary year of the October Revolution, performed by a group of close friends at odds with their government. Alexander Blok's most famous poem was titled "The Twelve," and was one of the first written responses to the October Revolution of 1917. It tells the story of a stormy wintry night in Petrograd during the Revolution. During the night, Bolshevik revolutionaries kill a prostitute and wreak havoc among the common people that they are purportedly trying to help and protect in their quest to overthrow the government. Even with its pro-Party plot, the poem offers a multifaceted view of the chaos inflicted upon the

citizens the Soviet Union because of the Bolshevik rise to power. With that mindset, the compilation of poems that Shostakovich selected for this piece might also offer an honest, but understated, narrative of his feelings toward his homeland. Ophelia sings of her lost love, Gamelon the Bird of Prophecy sings a horrible tale of fate, a violin plays softly an old love song, a sleeping city glimmers anxiously at dawn, a storm rages, a man hides from the horrors of violence, and lastly, the thought that Shostakovich ends with is:

*Accept, then, Queen of the world,  
Through blood, suffering, and the grave—  
This last brimming bowl of passion from an unworthy slave!*

A certain devastation in Shostakovich's music is immediately apparent to the listener. In rehearsals, musicians will say, "this section needs to sound bleaker, more desolate." An element of fate, something mechanical, immovable, and unchangeable pervades his music. This piece is different: an offering, an intimate plea first performed among some of Shostakovich's closest friends.

—Annie Jacobs Perkins

### **Osvaldo Golijov (b.1960) *Tenebrae* (2002)**

Osvaldo Golijov wrote *Tenebrae* in September 2000, inspired both by the violence that surrounded him in Israel and by the perspective of Earth as a "beautiful blue dot in space" that he witnessed with his son at the planetarium in New York City. He further writes that this is a piece that can be perceived very differently from different perspectives: from afar, it is smooth, beautiful, gently undulating; from a closer perspective, the harmonies reveal a haunting, pulsating pain. It takes as its musical inspiration motifs from Couperin's *Troisième Leçon de Ténèbres*, a work written for what quite literally is the Christian church's darkest day: a service during Holy Week during which the candles illuminating the sanctuary are extinguished one by one until the congregation is left in darkness.

Two decades later, despite the summer sun, we find ourselves in a different dark moment, one in which we must isolate from each other, must refrain from human touch, must mask ourselves to protect those around us. For many of us, the future has never seemed so uncertain. The communion that we all experience in giving and attending concerts has made Covid performances akin to that blue dot in space: a moment of recognition of what was, constrained within the four corners of a computer screen. And yet this change of perspective—difficult as it is—also offers an opportunity to reconsider, to give thanks. The first note I sang outside of my living room quarantine was a revelation. I had never appreciated so deeply the acoustic of a space until that moment. The opportunity to make music with others is a gift, one made possible by weeks of quarantined discipline, of promises kept and regulations followed. Finishing this summer at Yellow Barn with

Golijov's *Tenebrae* feels deeply meaningful, a reminder that the darkness we find ourselves in now will not only inevitably be followed by light, but also now allows us to see the stars.

—Lucy Fitz Gibbon

The text of Osvaldo Golijov's *Tenebrae* is simple; the letters "Yod", "Kaph", "Mem", and "Nun" from the Hebrew alphabet, with which Couperin begins the "chapters" of his *Troisième Leçon de Ténèbres*, and then finally, "Yrushalem" (Jerusalem).

**James MacMillan (b.1959)** Angel (1993)

Interviews with James MacMillan invariably contain a pointed question about his Catholicism, even though he has been saying since 1997, "I really dislike talking about my religion in public—it goes against all my instincts. I'm astonished and alarmed that, more and more, I find myself in a position of having to do just that." Born in Kilwinning, Scotland in 1959, MacMillan is a composer whose music and person is slapped with labels: religious, post-modernist, minimalist, Catholic, Scottish, Socialist, accessible, eclectic, etc. As he puts it, "...blah blah blah!", and, in a different interview, "there are simply not enough pigeon-holes to cope with the complexity of the new music scene." He was born to a teacher and carpenter, and like so many musical children, had already begun learning to play the piano and trumpet by the time he was nine.

MacMillan is asked so frequently about his faith because it appears in his work as extra-musical inspiration, both overtly in libretto and lyrics and more subtly in instrumental works. Even as a young child, MacMillan was drawn to works that had meaning outside of the music itself, such as Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* and *Tristan und Isolde*—and of course, as a pupil at the St. John's Roman Catholic Primary School in the sixties, there was always "a new hymn, chant or antiphon to prepare for some mass or the other, liturgies coming hard and fast." To this day, MacMillan lists Palestrina and Bach as two canonical influences on his music.

After attending music school at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Durham, MacMillan's career took off when his piece *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* premiered at the BBC Proms. The piece met unexpected acclaim, critics calling it "appallingly successful." As audience and critics noticed then, MacMillan has a unique way of bridging music of different times; he honors the past while living in the present. At the same time one can hear Palestrina and Bach in MacMillan's music, the influence of Berg, Gubaidulina, Schnittke, Stravinsky, and Cage is equally apparent. He says, "tradition will always make its impact in one way or another, and the great error of modernism has been that conceit that they tried to avoid tradition." ... "In writing open-heartedly in music, I write in the hopeful expectation that it will be embraced open-heartedly by others who are not from my way of thinking at all."

MacMillan offers the following note for *Angel*:

A Sikh friend of mine once told me that, according to his religion, angels were present in any household where there were young children. In 1993, as a gift to my daughter Catherine, I wrote this static and serene miniature in an attempt to evoke this parallel world of heavenly beings – so far, but yet so close.