

OLIVER KNUSSEN (1952–2018)

Choral (1970–72)
(10mins)

When the composer Oliver Knussen died in 2018, the contemporary music community in Britain lost its father figure. Speaking to the *New York Times* in the days following Knussen's death, George Benjamin described the generations of composers who had benefitted from his guidance and generosity: "He had a fertilizing and energizing effect on British music for 40 years."

That generosity is often cited as a reason for Knussen's limited output. He wrote little and finished even less. But it was due in part to his extreme perfectionism and the weight of knowledge in his head; "it was as if every bar that he wrote was measured against all the music that he knew," wrote the composer Colin Matthews in an obituary. What Knussen did write was precise, rich and fine – laboured over meticulously but often feeling entirely spontaneous.

Choral, for wind, percussion and double basses, was composed mostly in 1970 and first performed (in its final version) on 30 March 1975 at Carnegie Hall in New York. The piece was conceived after a vision, in which Knussen "saw several funeral processions converging onto a point in the distance".

The title refers to two elements of the structure: first, the separation of the ensemble into what the composer described as "discrete choirs (which shift as the piece progresses)" and the use of a chorale or hymn-like theme, which he described as "the decoration of a single, immensely slow sequence of four chords".



OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908–1992)

Le Merle bleu from *Catalogue d'oiseaux* for solo piano
(1956–58)
(13mins)

When George Benjamin was 16, he went to Paris to study with one of the most important and original composers of the 20th century, Olivier Messiaen. "He was wonderful," recalled Benjamin of Messiaen in 2008; "inspirational, subtle and passionately involved. Everything was a discovery. Everything was done because he loved it."

Messiaen's exuberant, colourful music was informed by two major external elements: his devout but embracing Catholic faith and his fascination with birdsong. From 1956 to 1958 the French composer wrote a second major collection for piano to follow his existing meditations on the child Christ, this one focusing on birdsong: *Catalogue d'oiseaux* (Catalogue of Birds).

As the title suggests, the collection is an ornithological reference book for piano. "I have tried to render exactly the typical birdsong of a region, surrounded by its neighbours from the same habitat, as well as the form of song at different hours of the day and night," the composer told a colleague.

But there is more than tweeting in Messiaen's works, in which harmony and rhythm conjure up what he described as "the perfumes and colours of the landscape in which the bird lives". Tonight's soloist Pierre-Laurent Aimard has referred to the piece as a "grand hymn to nature" from a man who never ceased to marvel at it.

According to Messiaen's own notes, his *Merle bleu* (Blue Rock Thrush) was found in June on the Côte Vermeille on the Mediterranean coast of France, above "overhanging cliffs above a sea of Prussian blue and sapphire blue." From an echoing, rocky crevice, we hear the song of the thrush as it sings "almost exotically," recalling "the music of the Bali". We also hear the Thekla Lark, the cries of the Common Swift and the Herring Gulls crying out over the sea.

SIR GEORGE BENJAMIN (b. 1960)

Duet for piano and orchestra
(2008)
(14mins)

George Benjamin's various composition teachers, Messiaen included, quickly recognised his natural talent. Benjamin returned to Paris to study with Pierre Boulez, and also received instruction from Robin Holloway at the University of Cambridge. As he felt the world at his feet after a remarkable Proms debut in 1980 with *Ringed by the Flat Horizon* (he was still a student at the time), he also felt the weight of his responsibility to find an authentic and original voice. Snow-blinded by the limitless possibilities of late 20th-

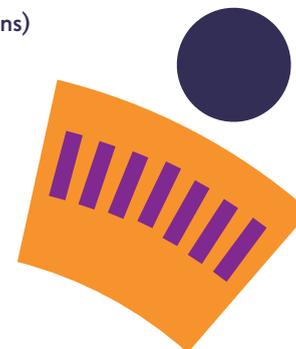
century music, Benjamin recounted to the journalist Alan Rusbridger a few years ago that he ended up "going down a lot of cul-de-sacs".

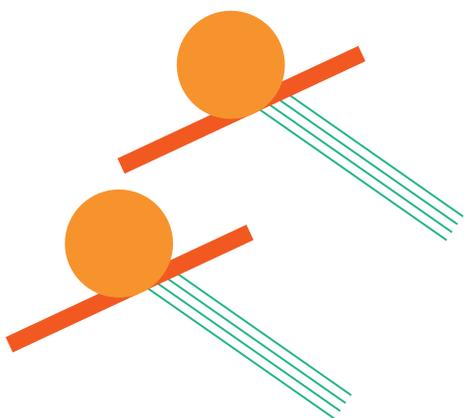
When he did begin to find a through-road in the 1990s, Benjamin developed an economical but highly imaginative style of music founded on an extreme regard for colour, harmonic unification and musical suggestion (some believe you can detect a French accent in his music). Like Knussen, Benjamin has long prioritised quality over quantity. He pretty much locked himself in a room for 26 months to write his second opera, *Written on Skin*, which premiered in 2012 at Covent Garden. Wracked with winding dramatic tension, it is the most successful new British opera of the last decade.

Shortly before starting work on *Written on Skin*, Benjamin wrote *Duet* for Pierre-Laurent Aimard and The Cleveland Orchestra, who premiered the work under Franz Welser-Möst at the Lucerne Festival in 2008. It is a short, delicate score but one that leaves a heavy, lingering residue.

Part of the premise of *Duet* is an examination of concerto form – a look at how the 'individual' (the soloist) can find some common ground with 'the masses' (the orchestra). Each imitates the other's timbres, even as the piano maintains its autonomy, treading its own path. Sometimes, the piano plays a single line – or, as in the very opening, a recollection of a Baroque two-part invention that is worked out with the same consideration for harmony and horizontal line as pervades the whole piece.

Interval (20 mins)





SIR GEORGE BENJAMIN

Dream of the Song (2014–15) (20mins)

The Pen
The Multiple Troubles of Man
Gazing Through the Night
Gacela Del Amor Maravilloso (Ghazal of Wondrous Love)
The Gazelle
My Heart Thinks as the Sun Comes Up

PLEASE NOTE: surtitles will be displayed during the performance. Hebrew poems from *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492*, translated and edited by Peter Cole, Princeton University Press, 2007: © 2007 Princeton University Press.

Surtitles created by Jonathan Burton and operated by Damien Kennedy.

As well as the Philharmonia Orchestra, George Benjamin enjoys a close relationship with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam. It was there that, on 25 September 2015, the composer conducted the first performance of his own cycle of six songs for countertenor, women's chorus and small orchestra, *Dream of the Song*.

The cycle sets texts (in English translation) by two 11th-century Hebrew poets who studied in Granada, Samuel HaNagid and Solomon Ibn Gabirol, and late works by the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, whose

words are sung by the chorus (in Spanish). The texts are filled with imagery relating to stars and moonlight, which led Benjamin to “try to capture a silvery tone for the whole piece”. The Lorca poem takes its title from the *gacela* (ghazal), a traditional form of Arabic poetry on the subject of love.

Dream of the Song was written in the wake of *Written on Skin* and was inspired in part by the voice of Bejun Mehta, who took the role of the Boy in the opera. As in that score, this one is filled with teetering sensuality that often feels close to slipping from eroticism into catastrophe. It is, says Benjamin, “more intimate and poetic” than the drama-fuelled opera. It is not, however, averse to aggression.

Benjamin's solo vocal writing has a coiled lyricism and his orchestra, dominated by strings, is particularly terse and reactive, somehow more tangible in its introspection than in its moments of protest. Benjamin's gift for instrumentation can be heard in the strings at the start of ‘The Gazelle’ and the high horn, celeste, harp and women's voices that induce ‘My Heart Thinks as the Sun Comes Up’. Orchestral colour and gesture constantly react to the voice and the poetry, but there is a fascinating tendency from Benjamin to play at the hinterlands of the orchestra too – to have isolated corners of the ensemble collapse into panic without disrupting the general, glistening flow.



LEOŠ JANÁČEK

(1854–1928)

Sinfonietta (1926) (23mins)

Fanfare: Allegretto – Allegro – Maestoso
The Castle, Brno: Andante – Allegretto
The Queen's Monastery, Brno: Moderato
The Street Leading to the Castle: Allegretto
The Town Hall, Brno: Andante con moto

Also on the bill at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam on 25 September 2015 was Leoš Janáček's *Sinfonietta*, a work written in Brno, now in the Czech Republic, in 1926. The Czech composer has long enjoyed a special place in Benjamin's world. One of his pupils, the composer David Bruce, recalls how Benjamin's all-day composition workshops “might take half an act of Janáček's [opera] *Káta Kabanová* and pick apart the ingenious ways he stretched and pulled a main theme.”

Janáček's totally individual music frequently beguiles anyone who comes across it, particularly other composers. Many of them secretly envy his boldness. While most nationalist composers from the northern and eastern reaches of Europe sought to ennoble the folk music tradition by placing it in classical forms, Janáček turned the process on its head by taking vernacular music as his starting point. He explored a style of writing that matched the rhythms of Czech speech and captured the raw nature of peasant life and art.

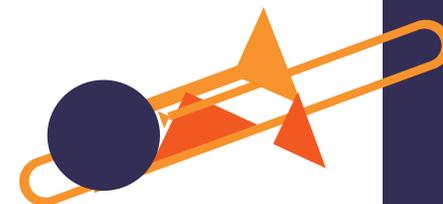
He also injected his real-life experiences – warts and all – into his music. One of those experiences helped form Janáček's *Sinfonietta*. On 27 June 1924, the composer found himself in the Czech town of Písek with two friends, where he heard the band of the Czechoslovak Infantry Regiment No. 11 under the baton of František

Palacký. The band played Palacký's *Equestrian March*, which includes outlandish fanfares played by ceremonially decorated trumpeters standing on raised platforms. His ears open as usual, Janáček scribbled down fragments of what he heard, and returned to Brno.

Two years later, the composer completed a four-movement work provisionally titled ‘Military Sinfonietta’, whose final movement contained an echo of those distinctive fanfares, and asked for no fewer than 11 trumpets (plus two bass trumpets), as well as other brass instruments and drums. Janáček later added a movement at the beginning, in order that the piece could launch with fanfares too. It was first performed by the Czech Philharmonic and conductor Václav Talich on 26 June 1926, when it was titled ‘Rally Sinfonietta’. The title reflected the commission that formalised the work's production, from the Eighth Sokol Rally in Prague.

Janáček, famously, had almost all his success and recognition late in life. Even so, it is remarkable to consider this exuberant, outlandish, cheeky, gregarious and playful score as the work of a 72-year-old. Each movement is a character piece, alternating ebullience and reflection. For a time, the composer associated the movements with landmarks of his adopted hometown of Brno: its castle (second movement), the Queen's Monastery (third movement) and bustling streets (fourth movement). It is just as easily read as a kicking, frolicking celebration of the composer's deep and very personal love for the city.

Programme notes by Andrew Mellor
 © Philharmonia Orchestra/Andrew Mellor



Q&A with Sir George Benjamin

What is it like conducting a programme that includes your own compositions? Do you prefer it to listening to someone else conducting your music?

It's a privilege and pleasure to perform one's own music, particularly with an orchestra as wonderful as the Philharmonia. However, I also very much like to hear my works conducted by others, as long as the scores are projected with understanding, imagination and flair. In recent months I've had the good fortune to attend a few exceptionally good performances of my pieces, where the interpretative approach was sometimes quite different from my own – this could, in turn, have an impact on the way I approach the same scores if I return to perform them myself in the future.

You studied with Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire during the 1970s – what was he like, and what has been his lasting influence on you?

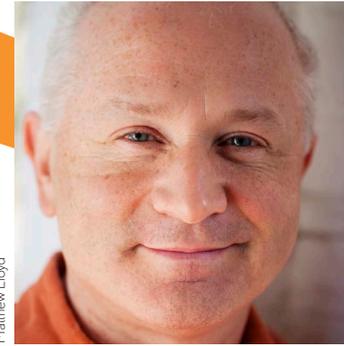
Messiaen welcomed me into his class when I was only 16 – and I was his youngest-ever student. There's no question he was the most inspiring and generous teacher imaginable – and an immensely sweet man as well – and I recall my time with him with deep gratitude and emotion. We stayed closely in contact after his departure from the Paris Conservatoire in 1978 until his death in 1992, but the moment we first met in April 1976 probably counts as the decisive day in my life as a musician. Though these days I believe little of his perceptible influence remains in my work, he had a huge impact on my development.

Do you think it is easier or harder to make it as a composer now, compared to when you were starting out in your career?

There are definitely more opportunities for young composers than when I started my musical life. The Philharmonia, LSO and LPO – as well as the London Sinfonietta and Birmingham Contemporary Music Group, amongst other groups and ensembles around the country – all promote marvellous schemes destined for new creators of talent. Such things barely existed in the 1970s and 1980s! I'm not so sure, however, that it's easier for composers today to find a meaningful and individual path; on the contrary, with the plethora of idioms at large in the wider world and seemingly no fixed centre, it may be even more difficult. One thing perhaps is marginally less positive than before, however: I have the impression that, though there are currently more composers than ever, the number being signed up by major music publishers has decreased.

Which of the concerts coming up in our 2019/20 London season would you recommend?

I am currently hard at work on a new score so, beyond the few concerts I have to conduct myself this season, I'm afraid I rarely step away from my desk. Nevertheless, if I had more available time in my schedule I would definitely go to hear the 15 March reconstruction of an unimaginably rich 1808 programme of Beethoven premieres – it looks vastly compelling. I must add that the mixture of Xenakis and Aribert Reimann in the *Music of Today* event immediately prior to my own concert looks most enticing, as indeed do other programmes in the same series later in the season.



Matthew Lloyd

SIR GEORGE BENJAMIN
Conductor & Composer

Born in 1960, George Benjamin began composing at the age of seven. In 1976 he entered the Paris Conservatoire to study with Olivier Messiaen, after which he worked with Alexander Goehr at King's College, Cambridge.

When Benjamin was only 20 years old, *Ringed by the Flat Horizon* was played at the BBC Proms and, two years later, *At First Light* was premiered by the London Sinfonietta and Sir Simon Rattle. The London Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Boulez premiered *Palimpsests* in 2002 to mark the opening of 'By George', a season-long portrait. This season, the Composer Festival at Konzerthaus Stockholm and Radio France's Festival Présences were dedicated to Benjamin's work. He conducted at both events before returning to London for tonight's concert with the Philharmonia Orchestra to celebrate his 60th birthday.

Benjamin's first operatic work *Into the Little Hill*, written with playwright Martin Crimp, was commissioned in 2006 by the Festival d'Automne in Paris. Their second opera, *Written on Skin*, premiered at the Aix-en-Provence festival in July 2012, and their third collaboration, *Lessons in Love and Violence*, was premiered at the Royal Opera House in May 2018. Both of these large-scale works have received numerous

performances and productions around the world and were filmed for release on DVD and broadcast by BBC Television.

As a conductor, Benjamin has a broad repertoire and has been responsible for numerous world premieres, including important works by Wolfgang Rihm, Unsuk Chin, Gérard Grisey and György Ligeti. In summer 2019 he conducted two performances at the Lucerne Festival Academy, and the previous year appeared at the BBC Proms with both the London Sinfonietta and the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain. During the 2018/19 season he returned to the Berliner Philharmoniker (where he was the season's composer in residence) and his close collaboration with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra continued with performances of *Into the Little Hill* and *Written on Skin* on tour in Germany. He also led the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, with whom he has had an association for many years, made his debut with the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra – as part of a season-long portrait in Hamburg's new hall – and conducted a major European tour with the Ensemble Modern Orchestra.

Benjamin has frequently appeared at the Tanglewood Festival and is the Henry Purcell Professor of Composition at King's College London. His works are published by Faber Music and are recorded on Nimbus Records. He has received numerous honorary fellowships and international awards, was made a Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2015 and was knighted in The Queen's Birthday Honours, 2017.