

## **John Casken composer portrait**

*with the Fidelio Trio with guest violinist David Alberman, Nicholas Daniel (oboe), Jillian Bain Christie (soprano) and Ben Marsden (piano)*

### **Kings College Chapel, Aberdeen**

Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> October 2019

#### **Programme**

- John Casken    *Stolen Airs* for cello & piano (2015)  
John Casken    *Amethyst deceiver* for solo oboe (2009)  
John Casken    *Piano Trio* (2002)  
James Aburn\*   *A New Life* (2019, world premiere)

\* winner of the Carlaw/Ogston Music Prize

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#### **Programme notes**

##### **John Casken *Stolen Airs* for cello & piano**

*Stolen Airs* takes as its starting point an episode from *Sylvie and the Songman*, a magical children's novel by Tim Binding. The Songman has developed the technique of stealing the songs and voices of birds and animals, and eventually humans. Slowly stealing Sylvie's voice, the Songman offers to give back her song if she will tell him the secret of the musical instruments invented by her father that have accidentally produced an all-powerful, single sonority of frightening energy. Her father has written down the formula that he believes created this and the Songman wants it for his own purposes. He thinks that his own discovery of how to steal voices, to silence the world, together with the ability to summon the immense power of the single sound, will enable him to rule the world.

He captures, imprisons and slowly silences Sylvie, offering to return her voice if she will tell him where to find the secret formula. Slightly changing the details of the story, I imagined the Songman tempting Sylvie by singing three 'stolen airs' to her. She almost succumbs, drawn in by his evil charms, but then she hears a distant air, a melody sung to her when she was a child by her mother. This breaks the Songman's spell.

This scenario provided the idea for *Stolen Airs* as it moves from a dark place towards the cello playing the three simple airs. Each one has a folk-like character, initially supported by the sustained resonance of the piano, and after each air the singing lines give way to more urgent music. Finally, a different, distant air is heard, bringing the work to an enigmatic end.

*Stolen Airs* was written for the cellist Philip Higham for its first performance in Durham University's Musicon series with the pianist Alasdair Beatson in the Music School, Palace Green, Durham, on 24 November 2015. It was commissioned by Dr Elizabeth Manning to mark the retirement of her husband, Professor Peter Manning, from the University of Durham. The work is dedicated to Peter, my colleague at Durham from 1981-1992.

### **John Casken *Amethyst deceiver* for solo oboe**

*Amethyst deceiver* is a short piece inspired by the idea of a mysterious woodland setting in which strange things come to life. 'Amethyst deceivers' are tiny purple mushrooms, rarely seen, but when found, picked and cooked they apparently have an intense flavour. Having never seen or eaten an amethyst deceiver, but beguiled by the name, I have created my own specimen, to be played 'freely, and with an air of mischief.'

The piece was written for Emily Sleightholme, an undergraduate student at The University of Manchester, for its first performance in her Finals Recital in May 2009.

### **John Casken *Piano Trio* for violin, cello and piano**

I shadows            II striding the line            III dreams  
IV dancing the line            V memories

My Piano Trio is in five movements and develops some of the soprano's material from my second opera *God's Liar*, based on Tolstoy's short story *Father Sergius*.

The first, third and fifth movements are related, each one pushing its predecessor's material even further. The opening movement is both

shadowy and dappled but more vigorous ideas sow the seeds for later movements. The third movement starts as a dreamy variation of the first before moving into a dancing and lilting section in 13/16, briefly jubilant as well as obsessive. A return to the dreamy music precedes a darker and more agitated music that the violin pursues until the end. In the fifth movement a longer version of the 13/16 music leads to brief quotations from the opera's first scene, first on the cello and then answered on the piano. This is the first of six short sections that bring the work to a close. In the penultimate section the chanting strings (also material from the opera) and assertive piano are strongly contrasted, while the final *cantabile* section sees all the members of the trio coming together.

The second and fourth movements are also related to one another. In recasting Tolstoy's story as occupying both the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the original production of the opera saw the stage divided in two with a diagonal line demarcating the two centuries. At one point, the soprano danced down this line in an innocent and almost abandoned way, and both the idea of striding and dancing were images that determined the nature of these two movements in the Trio.

The second begins with three different characters in each of the instruments: the piano dry and detached with important, rising chromatic lines that return in the fourth movement; the pizzicato cello begins by echoing this but soon goes its own way; the violin is curiously muted at the start, in its own dream-world. As the pace increases, they all then get swept along, with the music spinning ever more quickly before this is brought to an abrupt halt. In the fourth movement the idea of dancing the line is heard as an almost deranged and broken waltz which spins in an even more alarming way.

The work was commissioned by the Brighton Festival for The Florestan Trio who gave the first performance on 6 May 2002. They repeated it at the Cheltenham Festival later that year, and then at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam (two performances) in 2003 from where it was broadcast on Netherlands Radio. The Gould Piano Trio, as well as recording the work, featured it in the 2019 Corbridge Chamber Music Festival.

programme notes © by John Casken

### **James Aburn *A New Life* (2019, world premiere)**

This piece is a study of the poem *Vita Nuova* by Oscar Wilde. It begins with the soprano completely unaccompanied, lamenting about the pain and suffering that is expressed in the poem. With angular lines and an almost atonal feeling the anguish, pain and loneliness is highlighted by the sparse texture. This is broken up by the entrance of the piano. The

high tremolo figure and subsequent melody grounds us in a key centre which represents ideas of hope and healing. This builds to a climactic and triumphant crescendo on the words, 'when lo! a sudden glory!'. As well as a study of Oscar Wilde's poem, this piece can also be used as a study of the mind and soul and how that relates to our experience and relationship with nature.

James Aburn, 2019

## Biographies

**John Casken** (b. 15 July 1949) lives in Northumberland, not far from the English-Scottish Borders, within sight of the Cheviot Hills and within reach of the historic Northumbrian coast. The landscape, its changing colours, huge skies, and the poetry of this part of England have influenced his works and helped to create a strong sense of place, forming a thread throughout his music. When asked by the Cheltenham Festival in 2017 to describe his music in five words, he ventured: *windswept, dreamy, turbulent, melancholic, and painterly*.

*Orion over Farne* for orchestra (1984), the large-scale choral piece *To fields we do not know* (1985), described as a Northumbrian elegy, the orchestral song-cycle *Still Mine* (1992), the ensemble piece *Winter Reels* (2010), and the choral piece *Uncertain Sea* (2014) all draw inspiration from Northumberland and the northern hills. So too do the Cello Concerto (1990) and *The Dream of the Rood* (2008). In 1990 Casken's first opera *Golem* won the First Britten Award for Composition, in 1993 the Prince Pierre de Monaco Prize was awarded for *Still Mine*, and in 2009 *The Dream of the Rood* won the British Composer Award (Vocal Category). In 2015 Casken's oboe concerto *Apollinaire's Bird* was shortlisted for both an RPS Award and a British Composer Award.

John Casken studied at the University of Birmingham and at the Academy of Music in Warsaw in 1971-2, and from this time he formed a close association and friendship with Witold Lutosławski. John Casken was Composer-in-Association with Northern Sinfonia from 1990-2000 and has worked with many of the UK's major orchestras, including the CBSO, Philharmonia, BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Philharmonic and the Hallé who premiered *Madonna of Silence* (2019) for trombone and orchestra. This featured Katy Jones, the orchestra's Principal Trombone, just as *Apollinaire's Bird* was written for Stéphane Rancourt, the Hallé's Principal Oboe. John Casken has written for major artists including Heinz Holliger, Heinrich Schiff, The Lindsays, Dmitry Sitkovetsky, Thomas Zehetmair, Jane Manning, Sir Thomas Allen, and Sir John Tomlinson. He has worked closely with ensembles including the Nash Ensemble and

Psappa and his works have been performed at many major international festivals. He was a Lecturer at Birmingham and Durham universities and Professor of Music at The University of Manchester from 1992-2008. In 2018 he became Visiting Fellow in Composition at the University of Aberdeen.

[www.johncasken.com](http://www.johncasken.com)

**James Aburn** graduated from the University of Aberdeen in June 2018 with a first-class degree in music. He continued his studies at the University of Aberdeen to study for a master's, specialising in composition under the supervision of Professor Paul Mealor where he was awarded a distinction.

As a composer, James has received many performances all over the world of his music. He received a world premiere of his piece, *Disruptions around F*, for solo piano in March 2017 performed by William Gray. In April 2018, James conducted his setting of *Ave Maria*, in its international premiere at Warsaw's Arch Cathedral. *Ave Maria* has since been performed numerous times including a performance in Canterbury Cathedral. His setting of *Cantate Domino* was performed at the British Consulate in New York City in November 2018, and his setting of *Locus Iste* was premiered last year at a service to mark the founding of the University of Aberdeen. In July 2018, James wrote a piece, *Summer Moonlight*, for the soprano singer Jillian Bain-Christie, which was premiered at the JAM on the Marsh festival in Kent and later in St. Andrew's Cathedral, Aberdeen. James was also commissioned by JAM on the Marsh for the 2019 festival to write a piece for the London Mozart Players called *Silent Shadows* that was premiered in July and conducted by Michael Bawtree. In March 2019 James won the Carlaw-Ogston Composition Competition with his piece *Three Pieces for Clarinet and Piano*. In May 2020 a new choral work for the choir Voce, a professional choir based in Connecticut USA conducted by Mark Singleton, will be written by James as part of their 2019-2020 concert season.

### **Fidelio Trio**

Adi Tal, cello - Mary Dullea, piano - with guest violinist David Alberman in place of Darragh Morgan who is indisposed.

Shortlisted for the 2016 Royal Philharmonic Society Music Awards, the Fidelio Trio are enthusiastic champions of the piano trio genre, performing the widest possible range of repertoire. They are broadcast regularly on BBC Radio 3, RTÉ Lyric FM, and featured on documentaries; they have an impressive list of commissions and premieres from the leading and newest composers; they work closely with composition and

performance students at institutions across the world and have a large discography of highly acclaimed recordings.

Since their debut at London's Southbank Centre, they have appeared at the Wigmore Hall and Kings Place, at festivals from Brighton to St. Magnus; from Gregynog to Huddersfield; and overseas from the Dublin to Shanghai; and from Johannesburg to Boston.

Their extensive discography includes Gramophone Magazine Critic's Choice for French Trios for Resonus Classics; a world premiere recording of works by Philip Glass for his label Orange Mountain; Korngold and Schoenberg for Naxos; the complete Michael Nyman Piano Trios for MN Records; multiple releases on NMC, Delphian Records including portrait CDs for composers such as Luke Bedford and Michael Zev Gordon.

The Fidelio Trio are constantly commissioning new works, giving first performances and, importantly, further performances to establish a growing repertory. Composers that the Trio have worked with closely include Simon Bainbridge, Gerald Barry, Joe Cutler, Donnacha Dennehy, Alexander Goehr, Toshio Hosokawa, Michael Nyman, Johannes Maria Staud, Kevin Volans, Judith Weir, Charles Wuorinen and Evan Ziporyn.

The Trio has recently been on tour to the USA, South Africa, Zimbabwe and China; given a Schubert cycle at Kilkenny Arts Festival; a residency at the National Concert Hall in Dublin, and performed Beethoven's Triple Concerto across the UK and across Ireland with the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra.

They are Artistic Directors of their annual Winter Chamber Music Festival at Belvedere House, Dublin City University and continue to be passionate in their advocacy for the piano trio across the world.

[www.fideliotrio.com](http://www.fideliotrio.com)

[www.loganartsmanagement.com](http://www.loganartsmanagement.com)

**Nicholas Daniel** has long been acknowledged as one of the world's great oboists, and is one of Britain's best known musicians. He has significantly enlarged the repertoire for his instrument with the commissioning of hundreds of new works.

Nicholas has been Music Director of the Leicester International Music Festival for many years. He is Professor at the Trossingen Musikhochschule in Germany and at the Guildhall School of Music in London, and he records and broadcasts widely.

He was honoured in 2012 by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II with the prestigious Queen's Medal for Music, for having made "an outstanding contribution to the musical life of the nation".

Nicholas was put into the spotlight at the age of 18 when he won the BBC Young Musician competition, after which he quickly established his

career with debuts at the BBC Proms and on disc. He made his conducting debut at the BBC Proms in 2004.

He has been a soloist with many of the world's leading orchestras, performing a huge range of repertoire and premiering works written for him by composers including Harrison Birtwistle, Henri Dutilleux, James MacMillan, Thea Musgrave, John Tavener and Michael Tippett. His recording of concertos by Vaughan Williams and MacMillan was awarded the BBC Music Magazine Premiere Award in 2016.

Nicholas is a founder member of the Britten Sinfonia, the Haffner Wind Ensemble and the Britten Oboe Quartet, whose debut disc was released to great acclaim on the Harmonia Mundi label in 2017. He also works regularly with the pianists Charles Owen and Julius Drake, and with many leading string quartets. He is principal oboist of Camerata Pacifica, California's leading chamber music ensemble.

[www.nicholasdaniel.co.uk](http://www.nicholasdaniel.co.uk)

**Jillian Bain Christie** is a Scottish artist and soprano. A graduate of Glasgow School of Art, she has recently started exhibiting work again after a hiatus while studying music at the University of Aberdeen. In 2014, she completed a MFA in Creative Performance Practice at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London. There, her specialist areas of interest concentrated on both contemporary and Nordic song, and research into the correlation between visual art and music. Jillian continues to study privately with Joan Rodgers CBE.

Recent projects include performances in Zürich and Helsingborg; premiering the soprano solo in Paul Mealer's Symphony No.1 'Passiontide', with James Jordan, the University of Aberdeen Chamber Choir and the Orchestra of Scottish Opera; the creation of the title roles in two operas by Joe Stollery, in association with Tête à Tête and **sound**; Stockhausen's *Stimmung* at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre, with Gregory Rose; an artist's residency as part of Haddo Arts Festival 2018, Aberdeenshire; and a solo exhibition at the Barbican Library, London.

**Ben Marsden** studied mathematics at Cambridge, piano with Bridget Wild (assistant to Claudio Arrau) at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and history of science at Kent. He lectures at the University of Aberdeen, where he is currently Head of the History Department, and publishes on the cultural history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century science and technology. As an accompanist, orchestral pianist and occasional soloist he continues to perform with a wide variety of groups and individual musicians in and around Aberdeen.

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