



Karen Power: polar soundings

Katherine Wren, viola

Friday 24 and Saturday 25 October 2025

kooperator.space, The Academy (Schoolhill entrance), Aberdeen

*Commissioned by sound. With support from the Hope Scott Trust
and the National Lottery through Creative Scotland*



(Duration of live performance is cc 40').

polar soundings is a multifaceted concept that is disseminated as both a standalone multichannel (8.2) sound installation and as a solo viola + polar environments composition composed for Katherine Wren. Like much of Karen's recent work integrating field recordings into an artistic context, this multilayered and open structure emulates the aliveness of its subject matter; the Antarctic and Arctic Poles.

Between 2013 - 2022 Karen completed a personal sonic pole-to-pole journey, where she listened and recorded all found life above, inside and deep below the ice. The soundscape for this work is built entirely of these audible and inaudible field recordings, which at times are enhanced, edited, elongated and remixed, but never beyond a point of recognition.

polar soundings is a climate artwork, which builds upon Pauline Oliveros's concept of listening as activism, which aims to increase empathy and connection with the climate emergency by creating space for these two deserts to sound in their own language and be appreciated in all of their uniqueness, beauty, fragility and wildness.

The viola and Katherine Wren's own experience of Greenland and her uniquely diverse musical background are centrally placed within this composition and offer an endless rainbow of characters, embouchures, techniques and styles, as she sounds materials in conversation with the polar soundscapes. Katherine negotiates her past, present and future position in and with the ice and through her careful listening finds connections, which in turn help change the way she and our audiences listen to these giant and remote locations. Based on Karen's ongoing development of using aural scores and parts as alternative methods of communicating real-world sounds within musical contexts, **polar soundings** is composed with collaborative and flexible elements. These processes aim to allow Katherine to respond to the uniqueness of each performance space and to create a more conversational framework, that is built on active listening between performer, environment and audience. With support from Creative Scotland. Karen and Katherine spent valuable time in residence, where they devised both flexible and fixed materials in response to the ice.

*'As a listener, I am deeply inspired by our planet. I find extreme joy in listening to birds communicating, bees pollinating and the winds being transformed into sea waves, to mention just a few luscious sounds. In **polar soundings**, I share this personal way of listening in two of our worlds most wild and remote places, where I hear sonic connections between completely unrelated events and timescales. I try to listen beyond any one sound and focus on the fragility of natural sonic bleed and layering that occurs around us all of the time. **polar soundings** is a work that touches on human nature, our innate sense of place, our dislocation from place, our separation from our primal selves and our lack of appreciation for the other-than-human in our world. It invites us to explore the possibilities of hearing the natural structures and harmonies held like bookends by the poles, as something that can unit and guide us. Our poles are melting and fast, this work begins and ends in the water that is to come.'*

Karen Power

Biographies

Karen Power is an Irish composer/sound artist, based in Cork, Ireland. Her creative output is diverse - from orchestral to installation and radio works - and for the last decade has been focused on field recording as a means of bringing every day environments into artistic settings. Environments and how we hear every day sounds lies at the core of her practice, with a continued interest in blurring the distinction between what we consider 'music' and all other sound.

For over a decade, Karen has listened and recorded in some of the worlds most isolated locations, such as The Arctic, Amazon, Namib + Sahara Deserts, Outback Australia, New Zealand, Antarctica + Tanzania. Resulting field recordings are most

often paired with musicians and involve new types of ‘aural scores + parts’, co-creative techniques and live collaborative exchanges, which are unique to each pairing + constructed to encourage a shared active listening environment. Karen values development time and has been in receipt of global residencies such as; The Arctic Circle Residency, The Banff Centre, Mac Dowell Residency, Array Music, UC Davis and in 2015 she received a DAAD Award enabling residence in Berlin for 1 year.

She has been commissioned by RTÉ Lyric fm, Bozzini Quartet, National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, RTÉ Concert Orchestra, Klangforum Wien, Irish National Opera, SCAW, Carin Levine, Sonar Quartet, Ensemble Mosaik, ConTempo, Quiet Music Ensemble, Ultraschall Festival, Musik Protokoll, MikroMusik, Music Current + NMD Festival. Karen's work has been awarded international awards and honorary mentions and she has represented Ireland internationally on a number of occasions, most recently @ ISCM and @ The International Rostrum for Composers.

Her installation work and interest in field recordings has taken her music across many genres and art mediums including: video, dance, film, painting, sculpture, acoustic ecology and glass. This collaborative and multidisciplinary approach has enabled some of my more open-time music to be presented in spaces like galleries, parks, churches, warehouses and even a gaol, which offer audiences choice in how and when we listen.

To listen + read more go to: www.karenpower.ie

Katherine Wren studied music at the University of Manchester and the Royal Northern College of Music. She is currently a member of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra where, alongside orchestral playing, she has a passion for contemporary music and audience engagement.

In September 2016 she formed Nordic Viola, a flexible ensemble performing and promoting music from the countries encircling the North Atlantic. Since then, Nordic Viola have performed in festivals in the Faroe Islands (Summartónar Festival 2018) Iceland (Bláakirkjan Summer Concert Series 2022) and Scotland (Sound Festival, St. Magnus International Festival and Orkney International Science Festival, Made In Scotland Showcase at Edinburgh Festival Fringe). Nordic Viola has also toured Orkney and Faroe with their Faroese counterparts, Aldubáran playing their acclaimed “Sagas and Seascapes” production.

Katherine is increasingly in demand as a composer/improviser and has performed alongside composer Charles Ross in Reykjavik and Egilsstaðir and in the co-production “Arctic Edgelands” with Renzo Spiteri, Arnannnguaq Gerstrøm and Richard Craig in Nordic Music Days Glasgow 2024.

Nordic Viola have released two albums: Elsewhere, Elsewhen in 2023 for chamber ensemble and On A Wing and a Prayer – Reflections on Deeside’s Changing Habitat, for viola and electronics in association with composers Pete and Joe Stollery.

Katherine received a Special Commendation in the 2020 RPS/ABO Salomon Prize for her contribution to all aspects of orchestral life and her work with Nordic Viola, cited as “a fulfilling new experience for players that has forged lasting links with these communities.” The panel said, “the positive energy and passionate curiosity Katherine brings to the orchestra is inspirational and engaging to all who know and work with her.”

Nordic Viola was shortlisted for a Scotland New Music Award in 2019 and 2020 as a result of their work promoting and commissioning new music from northern composers.

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