

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Two Pianos, Eight Hands: Fitkin, Hammond, Stott, Wall

Friday 23 September 2022, 6pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2022/23. This new edition, the first under my curatorship since arriving as Head of Classical Music, celebrates classical music in all its forms with artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

Having spent the majority of my life immersed in classical music, it is a tremendous honour to be leading the programme at the Southbank Centre, and flying the flag for this incredible art form.

We look forward to welcoming you to our spaces.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Graham Fitkin (b 1963)

Sciosophy for 2 pianos (8 hands) 5'

Flak for 2 pianos (8 hands) 7'

Steve Reich (b 1936)

Clapping Music for 2 musicians 5'

Unsuik Chin (b 1961)

Study No.4 (Scalen) 3'

Study No.6 (Grains) 3'

Study No.5 (Toccata) for piano 3'

John Adams (b 1947)

China Gates for piano 5'

Anna Meredith (b 1978)

Camberwell Green for piano 4'

Graham Fitkin

Totti for 2 pianos (8 hands) (World premiere of new arrangement) 7'

Bla Bla Bla for 2 pianos (8 hands), recordings &

spoken voices (London premiere) 20'

Performers

Graham Fitkin *piano*

Clare Hammond *piano*

Kathryn Stott *piano*

Ruth Wall *piano*

Eight hands playing together at two pianos are going to have to concentrate, and be closely coordinated. Graham Fitkin keeps them smartly moving to a strong pulse, creating a music of bright cogwheels turning in some massive machine. *Sciosophy*, a five-minute Fitkin classic from 1986, is a bit like a train ride. Your eye is caught by something out the window – a tree on a hill – and you follow it through changing perspectives until it disappears from view. So here with musical objects, which shift as they bump against each other. And all the time you're going somewhere. *Flak*, from 1989, takes this further, and for a tad longer, but now with just the white notes in action. The sun is shining. You might think of bells – of being somewhere where you can hear bell ringers in two or three towers at the same time, ringing the changes. Halfway through, they all span out.

Zip back to the early days of repetitive music. Steve Reich wrote *Clapping Music* in 1972 for minimal resources: two people, needing only the hardware they carry with them at the ends of their arms, plus amplification as necessary. The two start with a rhythmic pattern of 12 pulses and then, while one of them maintains this to the end, the other keeps skipping forward by one pulse until, after 12 skips, the two are back together. Simple – but not so easy to do, or to hear. More striking are the patterns that result from the overlap, and the moments of change.

Repetition can also wobble. The fourth of Unsuik Chin's Etudes for solo piano (1995–2003) has scales rushing about, their harmonic colours shimmering. They seem to be looking for something, which they find. But the search goes on, until it flags. In the Sixth Etude a note in the middle of the keyboard just will not keep quiet, jamming all attempts to go somewhere – or else enabling a different kind of going somewhere. In the

Fifth a little fanfare grows into a rampage of self-similarity, ticked off by irregular accents.

Back on track, rotating wheels gently turn through *China Gates*, a five-minute piano piece John Adams composed in 1977, as he discovered how minimalist repetition could go along with harmonic journeying. The right hand moves through arpeggios throughout while the left finds mobile patterns just below and plumbs in a bass note now and then. A new such note, like a gently tolling bell, will mark a change of mode, along the path of softly scintillating harmonies.

If repetition in this John Adams piece turns grit into pearl, in Anna Meredith's *Camberwell Green* of 2010, similar in duration, the grit stays gritty. It's a matter of upping the dissonance, and the rhythmic unevenness, as layers are added and wreak havoc on what was already there. A layer may slow down while another speeds up, simplify while another gets more complicated. The processes collapse back to a single repeating note at the halfway point, and get going again. As for the title, Mendelssohn wrote a piano piece sometimes known as 'Camberwell Green', much more often as 'Spring Song', when he was staying in that district in 1842.

Repetitive music is always about movement, because in music nothing really stays the same. Football too. Fitkin wrote *Totti* in 2004 and named it in honour of Francesco Totti, the star of AS Roma. The piece brings us back to the sound of eight hands at two pianos, but now, as groove builds on groove through seven minutes, in a state of constant speed and gathering wildness. Originally this was teamwork for four pianos; Fitkin has tightened it to fit on two.

Programme note © Paul Griffiths

The term 'Shifting Baseline Syndrome' is often associated with ecology, creeping unperceived environmental change and our own generational amnesia. But I feel it can be applied to other things such as cultural and political change too. How did we create such complexity? How did we get to where we are? Why did we not notice our increasing need for instant emotional gratification, or our acceptance of oligarchic power, of pseudo-events, of our own disenfranchisement? I wanted to use the piano, the 19th-century domestic instrument of choice, to explore this a little. The piece involves two acoustic pianos and two sampling keyboards which use altered and arpeggiated piano sounds.

One of the samplers also triggers vocal samples. Initially these are from Dr. Daniel Pauly from University of British Columbia, who I interviewed about Shifting Baseline Syndrome in his own scientific aquatic work. As the piece progresses, the 'pretend' pianos grow in stature, taking over from the scientific text. Dr. Pauly's text becomes usurped by growing references to pianos and their use in narrative. So there are real pianos, pretend pianos and audio samples from film in which pianos are key to their narrative.

From the outset, the live speaker takes a pseudo-role as compere, referring constantly to 'it'. 'It' is clearly important and there is an assumption that the audience understand what it is. In line with Dr. Pauly's text the Speaker impresses on the audience that 'it' is changing, it has always been changing but we only notice those changes that we directly experience. We get used to it. But despite the clarity of this text, the constant obfuscation of what 'it' actually is becomes more important. Is it ecological, political, cultural, or is it about pianos?

Programme note (Bla Bla Bla) © Graham Fitkin

Find out more

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