

NAXOS

GAVIN BRYARS

Piano Concerto (The Solway Canal)

After Handel's Vesper • Ramble on Cortona



Ralph van Raat, Piano

Cappella Amsterdam

Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic • Tausk

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'There's another way of making music: by touching the lives and feelings of ordinary people'.

By the word 'another', composer Gavin Bryars (b. 1943) obviously hinted at those aspects of very complex and especially rational avant-garde styles with which modern music is often associated. Bryars instead intends, and indeed succeeds in touching people directly with his music. Looking at both Bryars's compositional career and the music he creates, however, it is a rather remarkable statement. This is that same Gavin Bryars who started his musical career as a jazz bass player, soon getting involved in developing complex-sounding, free improvisation. Subsequently, it was, of all choices, avant-garde composer John Cage with whom he decided to work from 1966. Upon returning to Britain from America, he co-operated with innovative composer Cornelius Cardew. Although these facts might lead one to expect Bryars's musical style to be associated with rationality, sharp dissonances and small audiences in a musical ghetto, the opposite seems nearer the truth. His first two major works, *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1969) and *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (1971) became hugely popular, especially when they were remade in 1993. The earlier work is, in fact, an imaginative recreation of the music played by the ensemble on board the Titanic as it sank on the night of April 14th, 1912; the second work consists of a consistently repeating, looped field recording of a homeless man singing a melancholic tune, accompanied by a through-composed harmonic background of mainly stringed instruments. The first work achieves its accessibility through its evocative sounds and ideas, and the second mainly through its powerful melodic, harmonic and resulting emotional qualities. Taking a closer look behind these *seemingly* sentimental aspects, however, the modernist or even constructivist artist was to be found. In these works, Bryars was relentless in re-using existing musical materials in a conceptual manner; he was

unremitting in his obsessive repeating of a musical event; and he was uncompromising in allowing sounds to build their own climactic structure, breaking down any temporal conventions.

The paradoxical dualistic element which makes these works so remarkable, has become an intrinsic trademark of Gavin Bryars's music ever since. Until around 1980, his works were often based on repetition, conception and internal logic, while never losing their characteristic lyricism. As with any critical and curious artist, however, his style has developed and changed over the years, especially since his opera *Medea* of 1982. Dealing so directly with text and with vocal forces, it stimulated his preference both for lyricism and for textual relationships between literature and music. His interest grew into a more improvisatory way of composing, reminding one of his jazz roots. It led him to re-study the great classical and baroque masterworks of the past, and re-establishing his instrumental focus from keyboards, low strings, percussion and tape to more traditional ensembles such as the symphony orchestra and choirs.

After Handel's Vesper (1995) was originally written for harpsichord, and is a strong illustration of Bryars's post-minimal interests in early music repertoire. Still, it bears those dualisms, typical for Bryars, mentioned in the context of his earlier works: although its original spirit reminds the listener of seventeenth-century music, its underlying building materials could only have been written in the twentieth century. Harmonies are lush, even reminiscent of jazz at times, and harmonic progressions are based on chromatic pivot notes instead of traditional functions. There are certainly traces of his earlier minimalist works in many pulsating passages, but at the same time, baroque-like ornamentations are found in equal measure. Re-interpreting this work for piano, Bryars's lyrical symphonic approach in more recent works comes strikingly to the fore. While the composer is inspired by the baroque fashion of a free

and improvisatory playing style, its harmonic and rhythmic discourse lends itself readily to be interpreted as a rather dramatic narration when translated to the modern piano, with all its colour and dynamic range.

Ramble on Cortona (2010), Bryars's first and so far only composition specifically for piano, is based on themes from his recent vocal *Laude*, which derive in turn from thirteenth-century manuscripts found in Cortona, Italy. The *Laude* alluded to in this work are, in fact, paraphrases on the *Laude Nos. 13, 4 and 28*. Although the work shares its principal inspiration from early music with *After Handel's Vesper*, it makes full use of the resonant qualities of the modern piano timbre, where every note is aimed towards an almost vocal expression instead of traditional virtuosity.

Perhaps the most striking dualisms are to be found in *The Solway Canal* for piano, choir and orchestra. A highly coloured, almost impressionist work, its instrumentation might mislead the listener of expecting a soloist traditionally competing with the forces of the orchestra. However, the opposite is the case: the piano part displays no large outbursts of notes, but it does fundamentally the opposite. It takes on the unexpected rôle of a guide instead, soberly leading the orchestra and the choir into new territories of colour. Landscapes all pass by in a floating way, as if in a dream. Bryars radically re-defines piano virtuosity here as the degree of complete control over the instrument, expressed through touch, sound colour, lyricism and intensity. The choir mystically fills up these colours; the evocative words of the Scottish poet Edwin Morgan (1920-2010) are sometimes to be heard clearly, at other times drifting away in the flowing river of sound. Although, again, the

overall feel is traditionally tonal, the harmonic progressions and melodic lines are, on closer listening, often highly chromatic. At recurring moments, instruments create a seemingly disjointed tapestry of unrelated singing sound, mildly chaotic, reminiscent of the works by Charles Ives, or perhaps even Iannis Xenakis. However, the very soft dynamics at those spots conceals the work's radicalism.

The emotional content, the lyricism and the direct appeal of Gavin Bryars's music are quite unique. In his explicit and bold stylistic choices, Bryars evokes reactions of opposite sorts amongst his listeners and his critics. In each case, it should be a significant fact that such diverse world-class musicians and ensembles such as The Hilliard Ensemble, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, or even Tom Waits widely perform his music. His dualism is, at times, prone to misunderstanding; his frequent use of tonal material makes for the oft-heard though facile comparison with the old masters of composition. However, for Gavin Bryars, again the opposite is true: a contemporary artist who aims to make art that reflects his own epoch cannot deny several centuries of musical craftsmanship. He instead absorbs and integrates all the great possibilities in sound and style which mankind has acquired during the course of music history – both from its traditions and from the avant-garde. Gavin Bryars's unswerving steadfastness in working according to this very contemporary concept within the world of modern music, unveils the same radical man who set off to work with John Cage almost half a century ago.

Ralph van Raat

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Photo: Marco Borggve

Pianist and musicologist Ralph van Raat studied the piano with Ton Hartsuiker and Willem Brons at the Conservatory of Amsterdam and Musicology at the University of Amsterdam. He concluded both studies with distinction in 2002 and 2003. Van Raat also studied with Claude Helffer (Paris), Liisa Pohjola (Helsinki), Ursula Oppens at Chicago's Northwestern University and Pierre-Laurent Aimard at the Musikhochschule in Cologne. Van Raat has won, among other awards, Second Prize and Donemus-Prize (for Contemporary Music) of the Princess Christina Competition (1995); Stipend-Prize Darmstadt during the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt (1998); First Prize of the International Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition (1999); Philip Morris Arts Award (2003); Elisabeth Everts Prize (2005); a Borletti-Buitoni Fellowship (2005); VSCD Classical Music Prize (2005) and the Fortis MeesPierson Award of the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam (2006). He appears as a recitalist and as a soloist with orchestras in Europe, the Middle-East, Asia and in the United States. Ralph van Raat has been a Steinway Artist since 2003.

Cappella Amsterdam



Cappella Amsterdam was established by Jan Boeke in 1970 and has, since 1990, been under the artistic leadership of Daniel Reuss. In recent years the choir has occupied a prominent position in the field of Dutch Choral music and has enjoyed great success in Europe and beyond. Cappella Amsterdam has also played a key rôle in success of the European Tenso Network of choirs. The choir excels in both modern repertoires as well as music by the old masters and always gives attention to the works of Dutch composers. The choir's several CDs have all been received with praise. *Lux Aeterna*, which included works by Görgy Ligeti and Robert Heppener, was awarded the *Diapason d'Or de l'année 2009* and releases of works by Sweelinck and Frank Martin's *Golgotha* have also received enthusiastic reviews.

Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic

Chief Conductor: Michael Schönwandt



The Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic is a flexible orchestra, the size of which can be varied to perform Baroque, contemporary music and traditional chamber orchestral repertoire, as well as scores calling for larger forces. The orchestra enjoys a rich and varied repertoire and continues its traditions of modern music performance and Dutch as well as world premières. The Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic occupies a prominent place in the *Saturday Matinee* and other famous concerts series in Amsterdam and Utrecht. These concerts are broadcast live on the Dutch national station, Radio 4, and disseminated through the international European Broadcasting Union. The Chief Conductor of the Netherlands Radio Chamber Philharmonic is the Danish conductor Michael Schönwandt. Principal guest conductors are Philippe Herreweghe, Frans Brüggen (Conductor Emeritus) and James MacMillan. The versatility of the orchestra is demonstrated in its wide range of recordings, from Beethoven and Haydn to Tristan Keuris, Otto Ketting, Richard Rijnvos and James MacMillan.

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Otto Tausk



Firmly established in his native Holland, where he is Principal Conductor of Amsterdam's Holland Symfonia, Otto Tausk regularly conducts many of its principal orchestras including the Netherlands Radio, Netherlands Philharmonic, Residentie Orchestra, and Radio Kamer Filharmonie. He also maintains a busy performance schedule worldwide. With various leading contemporary ensembles collaborations with many of today's living composers form an important part of Tausk's work. He has conducted many world premières, such as Michel van der Aa's opera *After Life* with the Asko-Schoenberg Ensemble. Tausk has been Principal Conductor of the Maarten Altena Ensemble and, as assistant conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic, he worked closely with Valery Gergiev (2004-2006). Otto Tausk was born in Utrecht and studied the violin with Viktor Liberman and István Párkányi, and orchestral conducting with Jurjen Hempel, Kenneth Montgomery and Jonas Aleksa. He is Professor of Conducting at the Utrecht Conservatory.