



# London Contemporary Orchestra: Other Worlds

Wednesday 31 October 2018 8pm, Hall

**Giacinto Scelsi** Uaxuctum: The Legend of the Maya City, destroyed by the Maya people themselves for religious reasons *UK premiere*

**interval** 20 minutes

**John Luther Adams** Become Ocean

**London Contemporary Orchestra and Choir**

**Robert Ames** conductor

**Universal Assembly Unit** art direction

**Artrendex** artificial intelligence



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Please remember that to use our induction loop you should switch your hearing aid to T setting on entering the hall. If your hearing aid is not correctly set to T it may cause high-pitched feedback which can spoil the enjoyment of your fellow audience members.

We appreciate that it's not always possible to prevent coughing during a performance. But, for the sake of other audience members and the artists, if you feel the need to cough or sneeze, please stifle it with a handkerchief.

If anything limits your enjoyment please let us know during your visit. Additional feedback can be given online, as well as via feedback forms or the pods located around the foyers.

**barbican**



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# Welcome

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A warm welcome to this evening's concert. Titled 'Other Worlds', it explores a subject that could not be more pertinent: that of global warming and the imminent threat that this poses to our entire planet.

This is explored musically by the London Contemporary Orchestra and Choir under Co-Artistic Director Robert Ames in two works that occupy quite different sound worlds but which have a common theme.

Giacinto Scelsi's *Uaxuctum* looks to the past and the destruction of an ancient Mayan civilisation; it's a work so demanding that this is the first time it has been heard in the UK, even though it was written over 50 years ago.

The American composer John Luther Adams was just 13 when Scelsi wrote *Uaxuctum*. He is a figure as concerned with environmental activism as he is with music and the two aspects come together to potent effect in the sonorously beautiful *Become Ocean*, which won him a Pulitzer Prize in 2014.

To increase the impact of tonight's message, the music will be accompanied by audio-visuals which, in an unprecedented step, are generated by an artificial intelligence algorithm in response to the live music.

It promises to be an extraordinary occasion. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

# Sounds of the apocalypse

The thematic connection between John Luther Adams's *Become Ocean* and Giacinto Scelsi's *Uaxuctum*, subtitled 'The Legend of the Maya City, destroyed by the Maya people themselves for religious reasons', is as obvious as the works themselves are climactic. However, there's much more to these pieces than simply a shared grand subject matter. Two masterpieces, one theme: the destruction of civilisation. But they offer two very different visions of such a dramatic concept.

Both Adams's *Become Ocean* and Scelsi's *Uaxuctum* are in the same vein in the sense that they are universal, but the Scelsi presents its own very particular complexities. So problematic were these intricacies that there was a 21-year gap between it being written in 1966 and its premiere in 1987, just a year before Scelsi's death at the age of 83. It seems extraordinary that the piece has had to wait another 31 years for its UK premiere.

Scelsi was born in 1905 into an aristocratic family living in the countryside outside Naples, and was little recognised in his time. He was something of an eccentric – the playboy count travelled the world, dabbled in eastern philosophy and refused to be photographed, preferring instead to be represented in publications as a circle on top of a horizontal line. He would also re-date manuscripts deliberately to confuse musicologists.

Today he is regarded as a man ahead of his time, and his music is going through something of a renaissance, performed in trendy venues in London, with critics extolling his esoteric style.

With his financial position, Scelsi was free to pursue his own musical path. It's believed he taught himself piano. He became a student of one of Alban Berg's pupils, before moving to Paris in the 1920s, where he lived the life of a dandy.

In the 1930s he became interested in compositional languages and techniques such

as Schoenberg's 12-tone serialism and Scriabin's 'colour of music' theory.

Scelsi spent the Second World War in Switzerland, where he wrote works such as the String Trio (1942) and String Quartet No 1 (1944). These are very different to his later works, and are much more in the Classical vein.

Towards the end of the war, he suffered a mental breakdown. In the time spent convalescing, he became fascinated by the many different sounds that can be produced by one note, spending much of his recovery playing a single key on a piano over and over again.

This one-note, many-pitches concept came to define much of the rest of his work. *Quattro pezzi su una nota sola* ('Four Pieces on a single note', 1959) is a demonstration of just how powerful and dynamic one note can be.

It was at this time that Scelsi also became deeply interested in the eastern philosophies that he'd encountered on his travels – the single note of the 'om' clearly aligned with his musical interests. He writes this meditative chant into 1969's *Konx-Om-Pax*, and it feels present in *Aiôn* (1961).

In his earliest forays into the one-note concept Scelsi used an ondiola – a forerunner of the analogue synthesiser. Turning the dials he would alter pitch and tone, while fellow composer Vieri Tosatti translated the results into full orchestral and choral scores.

For his 1966 masterpiece *Uaxuctum*, Scelsi turns to the ondes martenot – a cross between an organ and a theremin.

This is probably his best-known work and it consists of 20 minutes of feel-it-in-your-stomach music. The instrumentation calls on bass tuba, double bass tuba and six double basses, a formidable percussion section requiring at least seven players, plus a 200-litre barrel rubbed with a 2m thunder sheet.

The first movement opens with an exhalation, a choral whistling of winds, before the brass thunders great pronouncements of doom, on a single note.

Over five movements, *Uaxuctum* progresses into grand, threatening soundscapes – at times venturing into sci-fi with its brass blasts and clanging vibraphone that bring to mind The Enterprise’s Captain Kirk encountering an overwhelming mysterious force. Only this time there is no lucky escape or happy ending: as the music unfolds, the ancient Maya people destroy the city, and the memory of their voices drifts off into an uncertain future.

Throughout the piece, Scelsi calls on the chorus to employ unusual vocal techniques, including trills, tremolos, microtonal oscillations, nasal sounds and breathing noises. The composer uses the human voice like an ondiola crossed with a sampler – fully employing its flexibility and breadth of sound to produce a dramatic, unsettling experience.

But it’s not just demanding to listen to, it’s also one of the most technically difficult pieces of music to realise, which is one of the reasons it had to wait nearly two decades for its premiere.

‘Scelsi has his own language, because he was working with quarter tones and strange tunings,’ explains Robert Ames, Co-Artistic Director of the London Contemporary Orchestra. ‘There are

also many layers and lots of dense textures, but all the time there needs to be incredibly good intonation for it to resonate properly.

‘The technical challenges, plus the fact that there’s still a slight fear among some orchestral programmers that if you put on this sort of music, people won’t come – which is absolutely not the case in our experience – explain why it has never been performed in the UK before.’

**interval** 20 minutes

John Luther Adams’s *Become Ocean* paints a picture of the world being consumed by the seas. Unlike Giacinto Scelsi’s foreboding and doom-laden *Uaxuctum*, it feels like a darkly beautiful, almost peaceful fate. As *The New Yorker* music critic Alex Ross wrote, *Become Ocean* ‘may be the loveliest apocalypse in musical history’.

Yet it’s much more than that, points out Ames. ‘It is probably one of the most incredible pieces of music written in the last decade. It’s a masterpiece. It has universal appeal, so it’s very approachable on many levels whether you’re an academic or just a lover of music.’

Born in 1953, Adams came to prominence in 2014 when *Become Ocean* won the Pulitzer Prize – a full four decades after he’d graduated in composition from the California Institute of the Arts. As he told NPR, ‘Early on, I didn’t win the right prizes. It seems that every time I had the

opportunity to make the right career choice, I made the wrong career choice, which in the long run turned out to be the right artistic choice.'

It was his focus on his other great passion – environmental activism – that stopped him from fully pursuing a career in music straight out of university. There was a more urgent call. Shortly after graduating in 1973, he swapped the sunny climate of Valencia, California, for the altogether more rugged and frozen shores of Alaska, where he campaigned to protect the state's pristine wilderness.

Living there, where nature – and man's impact on it – was ever-present, he eventually had to make a choice: environmental campaigning or composing. He decided 'someone else could take my place in politics, no-one else could make the music I imagined in me'.

Adams's political views aren't overt in his work. Rather, his skill is to raise awareness of the plight we face by presenting us with the sheer beauty of what we're destroying. The only indication that *Become Ocean* is – as one heavy metal website put it – 'doom as all hell' is Adams's note in the score: 'Life on this earth first emerged from the sea. As the polar ice melts and sea level rises, we humans find ourselves facing the prospect that once again we may quite literally become ocean.' That sentiment, like the title itself, comes from a poem John Cage wrote in honour of American composer – and Adams's friend

and mentor – Lou Harrison, who died in 2003: 'Listening to it we become ocean.'

In *Become Ocean*, arpeggios on harps are the sunlight dancing on the top of the waves. You can't help but hold your breath as the crescendo of the growing wave swells around you, and then crashes and – exhale – recedes into a decrescendo.

However, as Ames says, there's more to this piece than awesome beauty. In its 42-minute duration, there are 630 bars of music, plus a bar of silence; at bar 316 the music starts running in reverse, making it a palindrome.

There are also palindromes within the palindrome. Each of the three main sections of the orchestra plays segments that reverse midway through. *The New Yorker's* Ross has mapped out its swelling crescendos and decrescendos, and points out that the passages all relate to the number seven and its multiples. As he puts it: 'It doesn't seem a coincidence that the piano sets the music in motion with a rapid-moving seven-note figure, that the work lasts 42 minutes, and even that there are 42 staves in the score.'

If you just appreciate what's on the surface, this is a wonderful piece of music. But, like nature itself, once you explore further, there's an oceanic depth of complexity.

Programme notes © James Drury

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# About the performers

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Lee Kirby

Robert Ames

## **Robert Ames** conductor

Robert Ames is at the forefront of a new generation of musicians questioning the conventions and rituals surrounding classical music. He is Co-Artistic Director and Conductor of the London Contemporary Orchestra and is also well known as an innovative programme curator.

He has led the LCO in sell-out concerts at The Printworks and Oval Space in East London, the Royal Festival Hall, Barbican Centre, Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and BBC Proms at the Tate Modern and Royal Albert Hall.

Recent and forthcoming conducting engagements include the Rotterdam and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic orchestras, Moscow New Music Ensemble, the Aarhus, Belarusian State, Kazakhstan State and Wordless Symphony orchestras, Symphony Orchestra of India, City Of London Sinfonietta, London Electronic Orchestra and the Manchester Camerata.

He has worked closely with many leading figures in new music, including Philip Glass, Meredith Monk, Bryce Dessner, Mica Levi, Nico Muhly, Richard Reed Parry, Terry Riley, Anna Meredith and Steve Reich. He is also passionate about championing music from the leading composers of his own generation, premiering

works by Shiva Feshareki, Claire M Singer, Emilie Levienaise-Farrouch, Catherine Lamb and Edmund Finnis, among others. He has worked with a variety of artists in other fields too, including fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, architect-designer Ron Arad and sculptor Conrad Shawcross. Recent projects have also taken him into the world of pop, where he has collaborated with artists such as Actress, DJ Shadow, Jonny Greenwood, Thom Yorke, Jamie xx and Frank Ocean.

His work has encompassed a number of film projects, as conductor, orchestrator and producer. These include the soundtracks for Naji Abu Nowar's *Theeb* (nominated for an Oscar in 2016), John Maclean's *Slow West* (Sundance Award 2015), Ridley Scott's *Alien: Covenant* (2017) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Phantom Thread* (Oscar nomination 2018). This year he has conducted live performances of the *Phantom Thread* soundtrack at screenings of the film in Los Angeles, New York and Rotterdam, as well as at its European premiere in London. Earlier this year he made a recording with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic that is due for release on Universal Music's Mercury KX label.

## **London Contemporary Orchestra**

London Contemporary Orchestra is a leading global orchestral group focused on playing, commissioning and developing new music and artistic output. Alongside working with well-known artists, LCO is keen to nurture a diverse next generation of players, conductors and composers by creating opportunities for them to work at the highest professional level.

Formed in 2008 by Co-Artistic Directors Robert Ames and Hugh Brunt, the LCO has collaborated with a wide array of musicians, artists, creative figures, platforms and venues, such as Radiohead, Frank Ocean, Jed Kurzel, Jonny Greenwood, Steve Reich, Justice, Terry Riley, Thom Yorke, Mica Levi, Actress, Beck, William

Basinski, Richard Reed Parry, Goldfrapp, James Lavelle, Secret Cinema, Vivienne Westwood, Nike, Bill Morrison, Conrad Shawcross, Ron Arad, Hannah Perry, NTS, Boiler Room, DAZED, the Meltdown Festival, Barbican Centre, Southbank Centre, The Roundhouse, Printworks, Tate Modern and the BBC Proms.

The ensemble has recorded widely for film and television, including soundtracks for *The Master*, *Alien: Covenant*, *Macbeth*, *Phantom Thread*, *Assassin's Creed*, *You Were Never Really Here*, *Suspiria* and *American Animals*, performed live on *Moonlight*, *There Will Be Blood* and *Under the Skin* and featured on Radiohead's 2016 album *A Moon Shaped Pool*.

The LCO has been given the prestigious Best Ensemble Award by the Royal Philharmonic Society.

London Contemporary Orchestra is grateful for the support of Arts Council England and the Cockayne Foundation.



### Universal Assembly Unit

Universal Assembly Unit is a London-based practice working at the intersection of art and technology. Founded in 2013, the studio is directed by Samantha Lee and Patrick Morris who both graduated from the Architectural Association. The studio explores the potential for digital technology to enhance our experience of space by expanding the senses and engaging the public. This is explored through the crafting of light and sound to create transformative, immersive and choreographed environments.

They have been commissioned to create interactive and multimedia installations for live

performance, exhibition and festival venues across the UK and Europe. These include Nuit Blanche, Croydon Council, the Roundhouse, Barbican Centre, Royal Festival Hall, Sonár+D, Abandon Normal Devices, London Design Festival and Fotodok Utrecht.

Leading the art direction for this concert, for several months UAU has been working with Artrendex to train the AI algorithm on videos that embody the natural theme, teaching it the aesthetics of nature so it is able to reconstruct organic imagery evoked by the music being played live.

### Artrendex

Artrendex is a startup that builds innovative artificial intelligence technology for the art market and the creative domain. The key feature of its innovation is the ability to quantify aesthetic concepts that for a long time were believed to be subjective. Based mainly on visual analytics, its models were shown to be able to predict style changes and trends in historical data. Founded in 2016 by Dr Ahmed Elgammal, Artrendex has been collaborating with a variety of cultural institutions in building innovative solutions using AI.

Artrendex technologies and products have been used by high-profile institutions such as the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia and HBO. Artrendex technology has received widespread international media attention, including reports in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, CBS, NBC News, *Science News* and *New Scientist*, among many others.

Artrendex is providing novel AI music visualisation technology that will be premiered for the first time in this concert.

Artrendex

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# London Contemporary Orchestra and Choir

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## **Violin 1A**

Galya Bisengalieva  
Charlotte Reid  
Marianne Haynes  
Anna Ovsyanikova  
Anna de Bruin

## **Violin 1B**

Zara Benyounes  
Hannah Dawson  
Charis Jensen  
Venetia Jollands

## **Violin 2A**

Eloisa-Fleur Thom  
Emily Holland  
Guy Button  
Nicole Crespo  
Violeta Barrena

## **Violin 2B**

Rakhvinder Singh  
Laura Virtanen  
Nicole Stokes  
Kirsty Mangan

## **Viola 1**

Zoë Matthews  
Clifton Harrison  
Matthew Kettle  
Ann Beilby

## **Viola 2**

Ian Anderson  
Elitsa Bogdanova  
Amy Swain  
Matthew Maguire

## **Cello 1**

David Lale  
Zoë Martlew  
Sarah McMahon  
Gregor Riddell

## **Cello 2**

Reinoud Ford  
Nathaniel Boyd  
Sergio Serra  
Daisy Vatalaro

## **Double Bass 1**

Dave Brown  
Roger Linley  
Elena Hull

## **Double Bass 2**

Andy Marshall  
Frances Emery  
Laurence Ungless

## **Flute**

Pasha Mansurov  
Zinajda Kodrič  
Hollie Lukas

## **Oboe**

James Turnbull  
Emma Gibbons  
Chris O'Neal

## **Clarinet**

Anna Hashimoto

## **Piccolo Clarinet**

Stuart King

## **Bass Clarinet**

Scott Lygate

## **Bassoon**

Andrew Watson

## **Contrabassoon**

Ashley Myall

## **Horn**

Phillippa Slack  
Kate Hainsworth  
Paul Cott

## **Trumpet**

David Geoghegan  
Katie Hodges  
William Cooper

## **Trombone**

Iain Maxwell  
Andy Connington  
Andy White

## **Tuba**

Sasha Kousk-Jalili

## **Contrabass Tuba**

Tom Kelly

## **Timpani**

Dan Gresson

## **Percussion**

Sam Wilson  
Ric Elsworth  
George Barton  
Elsa Bradley  
Vittorio Angelone  
Craig Apps  
George English  
Nathan Gregory

## **Piano**

Katherine Tinker

## **Celesta**

Matthew Drinkwater

## **Harp**

Vicky Lester  
Valeria Kurbatova

## **Ondes Martenot**

Nathalie Forget

## **Soprano**

Josephine  
Stephenson\*  
Héloïse Werner\*  
Fiona Fraser  
Laurel Neighbour  
Lucy Cronin  
Rebecca Lea  
Patricia Aucherlonie

## **Alto**

Rose Martin  
Bethany Horak-Hallett  
Sarah Anne  
Champion  
Clare Kanter

## **Tenor**

Matt Howard\*  
Oliver Martin-Smith  
Jack Granby  
James Robinson  
James Rhoads

## **Bass**

Cheyney Kent\*  
Joey Edwards  
Greg Link  
Richard Latham  
William Marsey  
Jack Lawrence-Jones

*The list of musicians  
was correct at the time  
of going to press*