

Minimalist Dream House

Start time: 7.30pm

First hall: 50 minutes

Second half: 35 minutes

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Martin Aston explores the Labèques' relationship to minimalism and their position as advocates for new composition.

Music is often discussed as a series of standalone genres, but in truth, there are no tangible boundaries. Composers and songwriters only build walls if it suits their purpose.

The sound and vision of sisters Katia and Marielle Labèque – 'The best piano duo in front of an audience today' according to the *New York Times* – honour this sense of liberation, drawing on early music, classical, avant-garde, minimalism, rock, jazz, ragtime, flamenco, jazz-funk and beyond. For example, over the weekend before tonight's performance, performing at Philharmonie de Paris, the Labèques brought together pieces by Stravinsky, Debussy, traditional Basque music and a follow-up version of their *Minimalist Dream House* project.

The original double album, released in 2013, gathered interpretations of compositions by pioneers of minimalism and their successors, including William Duckworth, Philip Glass, Arvo Pärt, Michael Nyman, Thom Yorke, Aphex Twin and Brian Eno – artists who bend musical time and space as much as the Labèques, while enjoying the paradoxical freedom of minimalism's limitations. Tonight's British premiere of *Minimalist Dream House* eschews those recordings for a new exploration of minimalist music: a collection of living composers who have written specifically for the Labèques: Caroline Shaw, David Lang, Max Richter, Timo Andres, long-time Labèque collaborator David Chalmin, Bryce Dessner (of The National) and Thom Yorke (of Radiohead).

Joining the Labèques on stage tonight are three of those composers – Chalmin, Dessner and, for the second half of the performance, Yorke, for the world premiere of his first composition created for classical concert halls, *Don't Fear The Light*. Yorke's work for two pianos, electronics and modular synthesiser spans three different movements: the first inspired by the electronic pioneer and composer Laurie Spiegel, a slower middle section that will particularly appeal to Radiohead connoisseurs and a third built on staggered arpeggios. Says Katia, 'It's sophisticated music: harmonically and rhythmically complex.'

Tonight's concert will close with York's second new piece, *Gawpers*, sung by its composer and accompanied by the Labèques. Talking to the journalist and critic Kyle MacMillan in 2018, Katia said, 'If you are going to play the *Lutoslawski Variations on a Theme* by Paganini, or the Brahms-Haydn *Variations*, which are fabulous, beautiful and fantastic - all the piano duets play this same repertoire. You need to invent new repertoire. You need to work with modern composers, living composers. You need to explore.'

Born in Bayonne on France's southwest coast near the Spanish border, into a musical family (their French father sang in the Bordeaux Opera choir; their Italian mother was a former student of legendary pianist Marguerite Long), the Labèques studied piano from a very young age. 'We started as soloists,' Katia recalls. 'We were never supposed to be a piano duet.' But after the pair graduated from the Conservatoire de Paris, they realised, 'We are going to separate and each of us is going to go on our own path in finding concerts, and that would be very sad. It's a lonely life on the road by yourself. At this moment, we said, "Why don't we give it a try?"'

As close siblings, the sisters had a shared intuition that helped them forge a creative partnership, with a little help from Oliver Messiaen, who personally oversaw their version of his *Visions de l'Amen*. They subsequently took on similar avant-garde composers – Berio, Boulez, Ligeti – but 1980's twin-piano adaptation of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* was an equal triumph. The Labèques' inquisitive, adventurous approach led to the first instrumental version of *West Side Story*, Ravel's *Boléro* and compositions written especially for the sisters by Berio, Nyman and Glass. Throughout, they combined the wilder approach of older sister Katia with Marielle's relative calmness. Says Katia, 'If you are going to play the same, it's not interesting... I think we are complementary to each other and that has really helped us very much.'

Unfettered creative spirits need nurturing, so it was no surprise that the sisters – by now living in Italy after sojourns in London and Florence – formed their own classical music label KML Recordings in 2007, and turned to producing a variety of musicians, from B For Bang and Red Velvet (both groups showcased Chalmin's avant-rock explorations) to flamenco singer/composer Mayte Martín and the northern Basque trio Kalakan.

In 2012, the Labèques opened Studio KML, in Rome. Their debut recording here was *Minimalist Dream House*, which had grown out of their involvement in London's 50 Years Of Minimalism festival in 2011. The latest KML release, released only last week, is Dessner's album *El Chan*, in collaboration with the Labèques; album highlight

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'Haven', written for two pianos and two guitars, is part of tonight's performance.

The ongoing life of *Minimalist Dream House*, mutating through time, in line with minimalism's restlessly inventive roots, shows how the Labèques are similarly obeying the muse, while ignoring boundaries. Says Katia, 'We still have so much to learn, to work (on), to practice. We never stop. We still have tons of projects, of new music to learn. We never feel like we have arrived.'

Performers

Katia Labèque piano

Marielle Labèque piano

Bryce Dessner guitar

David Chalmin guitar, electronics

Thom Yorke vocals, monosynth

Programme

Caroline Shaw	<i>Valencia</i>
Max Richter	<i>The Twins (Prague)</i>
Timo Andres	<i>Out of Shape</i>
David Lang	<i>Ever-present</i>
David Chalmin	<i>Particule n° 5 – Particule n° 6</i> <i>de Sept Particules</i> <i>Distant Places</i>
Bryce Dessner	<i>Haven</i>
Thom Yorke	<i>Don't Fear The Light</i> <i>Gawpers</i>

Produced by the Barbican

Don't Fear the Light co-commissioned by Philharmonie de Paris, Auditorium-Orchestre National de Lyon, Barbican Centre, ElbPhilharmonie.



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