

Jónsi & Alex Somers: Riceboy Sleeps: with the London Contemporary Orchestra

Start time: 8pm

Running times: 1 hr 50 minutes

All Animals

Interval

Riceboy Sleeps

All times are approximate and subject to change.

Arwa Haider looks into the history behind their expansive ambient record *Riceboy Sleeps* ten years since its creation and ahead of their performance at the Barbican.

In July 2009, Sigur Ros frontman Jónsi Birgisson and his partner, visual artist/composer Alex Somers released their debut album together, *Riceboy Sleeps*. Its music – mesmerizing, multi-layered, deeply chilled yet gorgeously evocative – originally came together at the couple’s Reykjavik home, and during their stay at an off-grid commune in Hawaii. A decade on, *Riceboy Sleeps* still conjures its own symbiotic soundscape over 68 minutes; warmly immersive yet enchanting and otherworldly. Tonight, its lushly intimate tracks such as *Happiness* and *Boy 1904* take on lavish new dimensions, as Jónsi and Alex present the UK live premiere of *Riceboy Sleeps*, performed in its entirety with the London Contemporary Orchestra and a twelve-piece choir.

Alex (who apparently inspired the title *Riceboy Sleeps* through an affectionate nickname) has described the album as ‘the blueprints of our relationship, in a way, musical and personal’. Following ten years of respective audio-visual projects and soundtrack recordings, Jónsi echoes this sentiment as they approach the Barbican show:

‘A lot of good memories are captured in this album,’ he says. ‘It’s a big part of our lives and relationship, so I have really warm feelings when I approach this work. It’s quite romantic, in my mind.’

Jónsi also vividly recalls the DIY process of creating the original work: ‘We were recording string quartets in our living room, and friends who played brass instruments in our kitchen... at one point, our computer crashed and lost all our files, so we were only left with the stereo tracks – I recall it being pretty grimy,’ he laughs.

Around the original release of *Riceboy Sleeps*, Jónsi and Alex played a couple of tracks live at a New York City gig; before now, however, its expressions have largely existed in the recorded realm. For this live performance, *Riceboy Sleeps* has been arranged for orchestra by US musician/composer David Handler; the 25-piece LCO conducted by Robert Ames, with its typically expansive instrumentation spanning strings, woodwind and horns, to percussion sounds including ‘slap sticks’, marbles and bird caller. The concert will open with an orchestral performance of the *All Animals* EP (originally released with a special edition

barbican

of *Riceboy Sleeps*), played without Jónsi and Alex, before the duo join the line-up on vocals, guitars and keys for the main album set.

‘The album definitely feels a bit different in this live version, but David actually tried to recreate the same textures, and even orchestrated the non-tonal stuff from the record,’ explains Jónsi.

The concert also offers a chance for some unusual audience interaction, as audience members will be invited to let popping candy fizz on their tongues for extra ‘percussion’ – taking the music right into their individual headspace.

Part of the beauty of *Riceboy Sleeps* is the way that it creates a poignant blurring of personal details and fictional identities – on the swoon and swell of ‘Daniell In The Sea’ or the piano-led ‘Stokkeseyri’, for instance. It’s also the way that these melodies unfurl into heady, nostalgia-infused narratives, even though they technically contain no lyrics at all. Jónsi and Alex also created their own exquisite artwork for the album release, including delicate illustrations and found photographs, although as Jónsi points out, there will be no additional visuals for the live show:

‘We wanted to have it super-minimal for the concert: just smoke, lights, haze,’ he says. ‘It’s sometimes nice to actually see what the musicians are doing onstage.’

This set-up still leaves plenty of space to dream, as Jónsi adds: ‘I think it’s pretty amazing that we get to play the whole album in running-order with an orchestra and choir. It does feel magical: it brings new meaning, new life, different shades and textures.’

There is a heartfelt revival at play here – and with it, a fresh sense of creative awakening.

Robert Ames (All Animals) conductor, arranger
David Handler (Riceboy Sleeps) arranger

Produced by the Barbican



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