

# Max Richter:

## Voices

**Start time:** 8pm

Doors: 7.30pm

Infra: 8pm

Interval: 8.40pm

Voices: 9.00pm

**Approximate running time:** 2 hours, including interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

### **Martin Aston discusses the creation of *Voices* with Max Richter – a new work commissioned by the Barbican.**

As Bob Dylan famously put it, 'you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.'

By the latter stages of the noughties, Max Richter had the increasing feeling that, 'the world was turning up-side down... that the liberal institutions established in the second half of the 20th century were being questioned.'

This feeling was largely a product of 9/11, the Iraq War, Guantanamo Bay's black sites, rising international tension, and the emergence of a new political order. The German-born, British-raised composer began to respond in the best way he knew, through music – the exquisitely sombre, ruminative fusion of classical tradition, minimalism, electronica and spoken word that has pushed him to the forefront of contemporary classical, and has led to a string of soundtrack commissions for film, opera and ballet. His work has explored topics such as Kosovo (*Memoryhouse*), the Iraq War and the long-term effects of violence (*The Blue Notebooks*), the London bombings of 7/7 (*Infra*) and the need for community and respite in our digital age (*Sleep*). Though Richter's work often starts with political questions, his music seeks answers not in the public sphere, but in deeply personal qualities of creativity and community.

In recent years Richter has begun to mine this territory deeper. By 2015 he had begun to experiment with a specific concept that reflected his sense of things being out of balance, that of the 'negative orchestra' as he calls it. 'One that is turned upside down. It is not dominated by the high frequencies made by upper strings and woodwind, as in a conventional orchestra but overwhelmingly features low frequencies, made by cellos and double basses amongst other instruments.' Richter's 'negative' score idea feels more prescient with each passing year. 'I could see how our global society was changing dramatically,' he recalls. 'and I sensed something more was coming. And it has.'

The piece that he created for this ensemble, *Voices*, is now ready and receives its world premiere at the Barbican. The 'negative orchestra' comprises eight violins (plus a solo violin part played by Mari Samuelsen), six violas, twenty-four cellos, twelve double basses and a harp, joined by Richter on keyboards. There are voices in *Voices* too, a solo soprano (Grace Davidson), a narrator, and a twelve-piece choir, Tenebrae.

The narrator will be reading from the UN Declaration of Human Rights. As Richter explains, 'It's easy these days to feel hopeless or angry, as people on all sides do, and though the Declaration isn't a perfect document, it holds out the possibility of a better world. A wish fulfilment of what can be, and of what we, in some imperfect way, have had.' The instruction he has given to his narrator is to read the piece as though she were an alien, landing on our planet for the first time, and breathing the world into existence.

Richter has also crowd-sourced multiple readings of the Declaration in dozens of different languages, reflecting his internationalist outlook. 'I asked for people to send in declarations in their own language. I've been stunned by the response – dozens of languages came in, in just a few days and readings are still coming in. It's important to me that these *Voices* are not actors but real people. The readings are incredibly moving.'

But if the text articulates hope, the choir 'sings wordlessly. It's the idea of being speechless. Reading the news, and you hardly know what to say.' Still, the six soprano and six alto singers are more 'high frequency', counterbalancing the 'negative' lows. 'I don't want to be too literal with the idea,' says Richter, 'but there is an interplay between dark and light.' Commenting on the connection between the musical and narrative aspects of the work, Richter says 'I like the idea of a piece of music as a place to think, and it is clear we all have some thinking to do at the moment'.

Ever since 2002, when his solo album debut *Memoryhouse* was inspired by the Balkan wars of the 1990s, Richter has been drawn to these narratives with explicit social and political themes, adding a dimension of emotional engagement to the physicality of his sound. As a teenager, he was drawn to poetry as the best way of telling stories, eventually surrendering the idea in favour of his love for 'electronic music and experimental music of all sorts.'

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As he recalls, after graduating in composition from the Royal Academy of Music, Richter was, 'all set to write hyper-complicated music. That was the orthodoxy at the time.' But unorthodoxy won the day. A lesson from Berio, who encouraged Richter to concentrate on only what mattered to him, led him to reject his musical inheritance in favour of a more direct and minimalist musical language. Richter first co-founded the ensemble Piano Circus, commissioning and playing minimalists such as Arvo Pärt, Brian Eno and Julia Wolfe, before creating his own minimalist landmarks. 'I felt that, actually, music is about communication,' he said in 2019, 'so, what I did is I simplified my language. And a lot of my energy is still spent trying to make works which feel simple. That's not to say they are simple. To make something feel simple and feel inevitable is actually very hard. But it's the way I want to talk.'

That said, Richter admits the hardest part of composing is, 'stopping composing!' With only a few days left before rehearsals for *Voices* begin, he continues to refine the score. 'Things have their own timescale built in,' he says. 'Some pieces are finished quickly, others take time. Also, if I'd said in 2008, "I want a seventy-piece orchestra with lots of basses," the answer would have been no! It's not easy getting resources together for a large-scale project, and it's wonderful that the Barbican have committed to that.'

*Voices* is Richter's first commission from the Barbican, but the relationship stretches back to the 2012 premiere of *Recomposed: Vivaldi – The Four Seasons*, Richter's radical reinvention of the Italian composer's violin concertos. In 2014, the Barbican presented *Memoryhouse's* live debut before staging his eight-hour opus *Sleep* (2015) at nearby Billingsgate Market where beds were provided for the unique performance that Richter described as, 'a manifesto for a slower pace of existence.'

*Voices* was originally planned for the Barbican's *Sounds and Visions* festival in 2018 that Richter co-curated with the artist Yulia Mahr, instead Richter performed the soundtracks for two ballets choreographed by Wayne McGregor for the Royal Ballet: *Infra* (2010), created as a response to London's 2005 terrorist bombings and taking inspiration from T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*; and *Three Worlds: Music from Woolf Works*, inspired by proto-feminist author Virginia Woolf. Preceding tonight's premiere of *Voices* will be another performance of *Infra*, written for piano, electronics and string quintet, a more intimate Richter masterpiece. 'It's a good contrast,' he says, 'it makes sense to pair them.'

Profiling past achievements and forging into the new, Richter continues to push boundaries and narratives alike, never settling for the status quo whilst the world forces him to respond otherwise.

## Performer

**Max Richter** piano, computers, synthesizers

**Naarrator** Sheila Atim

**Tenebrae** choir

**Grace Davidson** solo soprano

**Mari Samuelson** solo violin

**Robert Ziegler** conductor

Produced by the Barbican



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