

Jess Gillam with Zeynep Özsuca and Sam Becker

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 75 mins with no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Meredith Monk *Early Morning Melody* (trans Simon Parkin)

Philip Glass *Melody for Saxophone No 10*

Luke Howard *Dappled Light*

John Harle *RANT!*

Barbara Thompson *The Unseen Way*

Georg Philipp Telemann Sonata in F minor (trans Simon Parkin)

1. Triste

2. Allegro

3. Andante

4. Vivace

Ayanna Witter-Johnson *Lumina*

Kurt Weill *Je ne t'aime pas* (arr Paul Campbell)

Chilly Gonzales *Overnight* (arr Simon Parkin)

Astor Piazzolla 'Bordel 1900', 'Café 1930' and 'Nightclub 1960' from *Histoire du Tango* (arr Simon Parkin)

In tonight's concert Jess Gillam plays with a trio combination that's relatively rare for her, writes Ariane Todes, with soprano saxophone and piano augmented with the sound of the double bass.

This was the starting point for her programming, she says: 'The contrast between a double bass and soprano saxophone is quite stark and there are so many colours you can create with these three instruments. It started from there – thinking about the kind of colours we could draw from that combination.'

From there, she aimed to start the concert with a sense of serenity, out of which she can build a sense of awakening, she explains: 'I have in mind that we're still coming out of the pandemic. We spent so long without concerts, so musicians and audiences need easing into a concert and I like to start recitals somewhat reflectively. I think about the audience as much as possible with programming because it seems even more of a privilege to be able to share performances with live audiences now and I feel even more grateful to the audience for committing to a concert. Choosing to spend their time at a concert is a gift for me as a musician, because it means we can share the moment together.'

The concert opens with three pieces that work as a set which reflects this intention: 'Meredith Monk's *Early Morning Melody* is very simple and effective, conjuring up the awakening of beings and of life with just a simple melody, as does Philip Glass's *Melody for Saxophone No 10* (1995), which is also solo. Luke Howard wrote *Dappled Light* for me a couple of years ago, and again, it is about the moment of daybreak, and life starting up, which feels like a natural progression following the first two pieces.'

After this gentle wake-up call, the energy level goes up a notch with John Harle's *RANT!*, which he wrote for Gillam in 2018, using folk songs and melodies from her native Cumbria. The 'rant' is a dance step that is quite specific to the area and used in 4/4 reel tunes, with dancers hitting the floor vigorously with a foot. Harle has described the work as a portrait of Gillam – 'her energy, her sound and her presence, painted in music from her own part of England'.

Barbara Thompson MBE, who wrote *The Unseen Way*, is one of Gillam's great inspirations. Gillam says: 'Barbara has been a huge influence on me since I was very young. There weren't many female role models as saxophone players and she was a pioneer. She can no longer perform, sadly, as she has Parkinson's Disease, but she's still passionate about composing and sharing music, so it's poignant to

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play a piece of hers. *The Unseen Way* is completely notated, but it sounds spontaneous, and audiences often think it's improvised.'

The saxophone is as at home in Baroque music as it is in classical and jazz, and the next work on the programme is Georg Philip Telemann's Sonata in F minor, published around 1728. She explains: 'When I play transcriptions or arrangements of Baroque music, I try to be conscious of whether the saxophone can bring anything different to a piece while still being authentic and leaving the piece with its integrity. I love exploring Baroque music, especially on the soprano saxophone, an instrument that didn't exist at the time. The fact that Telemann wrote it for either recorder or bassoon made me think he wouldn't mind the saxophone!'

We come back to the present day with *Lumina*, written for Gillam by cellist-composer Ayanna Witter-Johnson. Gillam says, 'Ayanna describes the work as picking notes out of the air and turning your attention to those notes. Again, it begins quite reflectively, and she explores one theme in different rhythmic iterations.'

Kurt Weill wrote '*Je ne t'aime pas*' (I don't love you) in Paris in 1934, a year after escaping Nazi Germany, commissioned by cabaret singer and film star Lys Gauty. Gillam says: 'This is one of my favourite songs by Kurt Weill. I've played it many times with this combination of bass and piano and it works so well because you can play with the contrasts and sculpt the sound. I first heard Ute Lemper sing it when I was very young. I hadn't experienced anybody singing like that until that point, and I've always enjoyed playing it.'

Gillam was drawn to the work of pianist-composer Chilly Gonzales during lockdown as she read his 2020 book, *Enya: A Treatise on Unguilty Pleasures*. She says, 'I started transcribing *Overnight* in lockdown, after reading his book. He talks about the progression of our lives and the music that we enjoy, going from being a baby enjoying lullabies to becoming self aware and trying to like different things in order to be cool.'

Finally, Astor Piazzolla leads us into a sultry night club for his *History of the Tango*, originally written for flute and guitar in 1985. As with many of the other composers on this programme, Piazzolla's music defies the narrow definitions of musical styles, as he brought tango into the concert hall. Gillam explains: 'I love how Piazzolla switches between passion and fire and the most tender, lyrical melodies. With his music you're never quite sure where you're about to go or where you've been. He's often in the grey area between emotions, which I think we've experienced a lot in the last few years.'

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Performers

Jess Gillam saxophone
Zeynep Özsuca piano
Sam Becker double bass

Produced by the Barbican



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