

Max Richter: Ambient Orchestra

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 110 mins, plus 20 min interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Martin Aston sits down with composer Max Richter to discuss his anticipated return to the Barbican with his new repertoire that explores the interplay between classical, ambient, and electronic music.

When Max Richter premiered his ninth album *Voices* at the Barbican in February 2020, he talked of a belief that, 'creativity is activism,' illustrated by the score's incorporation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

But what the composer does not believe in is delivering a lecture. He would rather respond with music, he says 'as a space to reflect on ideas and feelings. I'm interested in the intersection with the listeners' biographies: the way a musical performance becomes conversational.'

Richter's welcome return to the Barbican stage is similarly attuned, encompassing six pieces from his considerable and acclaimed repertoire - three of which receive their UK premiere - that share, 'a thematic connection,' he says. 'Away from conflict and toward tranquillity.'

The title 'Max Richter: Ambient Orchestra' explores the concept of the orchestra as a medium for ambient music, long associated with meditative powers. 'The idea reflects my interest in both classical and electronic,' Richter explains. 'We're used to electronic ambient music, which developed in the 1970s, but this arguably has roots in the "furniture music" of Eric Satie, written nearly a century earlier, so I'm making that connection in this concert.'

The evening opens with *Testament*, performed only once before (on Polish television in March 2021) as part of the Adam Mickiewicz Institute's commemoration of the radical Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki. As Richter recalls, 'Penderecki had such radical way of thinking of music. But what's interesting is that he never stood still. Penderecki returned to something more connected to music history, almost a romantic music. To keep searching is a cool attitude.'

Another anniversary commission - and UK premiere - opens this evening's second half; *Opus 2020*, commissioned by Beethoven Orchestra Bonn for the composer's 250th birthday, but in Richter's hands, things took a decidedly left turn. 'I immediately thought of the music commissioned to mark Beethoven's 200th anniversary,' he says, 'when Stockhausen wrote *Opus 1970*, adapting his own *Kurzwellen* piece for multiple radios: what if the radios were all playing Beethoven? I wanted to take the idea further, with a constellation of Beethoven fragments, like tape loops, but played instrumentally rather than by machines.'

Between *Testament* and *Opus 2020* are two pieces, 'The Waves: Tuesday' and 'Dream 19 (Pulse)'. 'The Waves' is the closing section of Richter's eighth album *Three Worlds: Music From Woolf Works*, scored for the ballet choreographed by Wayne McGregor, inspired by work by the legendary author Virginia Woolf. 'It's a kind of mini-requiem for Virginia,' says Richter. 'The problems she faced are very much with us now: a search for a meaningful existence and purpose, things which she had lost at different points in her life.'

'Dream 19 (Pulse)' comes from Richter's seventh album *Sleep*, the landmark eight-hour opus that the Barbican staged in 2017 at the nearby Old Billingsgate Market where beds were provided for a unique performance. 'Sleep is a kind of protest music,' he says, 'about getting off the hamster wheel of production and consumption...a manifesto for a slower pace of existence.'

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The evening's penultimate work is taken from Richter's debut album *Memoryhouse*, released in 2002 and first staged at the Barbican in 2014. The album was inspired by his interest in real and imagined histories of the 20th century; several pieces were inspired by the mid-90s conflict in Kosovo, including 'Arbenita (11 Years)', 'a wordless response to a poem that an 11-year-old contributed to the book *Voices From Kosovo*,' says Richter. 'The political and social dimension is especially relevant now, given the situation in Ukraine.'

Max Richter: Ambient Orchestra closes with the UK premiere of the title track of his tenth album *Exiles*, released in 2021 but recorded pre-Covid with the Baltic Sea Philharmonic for Sol León & Paul Lightfoot's ballet *Singulière Odysée*, and first performed in 2016. 'The migrant crisis of 2015 was the urgent problem of the day,' Richter recalls. 'It's based on the idea of a journey, with a repeated musical structure that travels through different regions of orchestral colours.'

On the journey through Max Richter: Ambient Orchestra, Richter will be joined by an expanded line-up of 12 Ensemble and, on 'The Waves' and 'Arbenita (11 Years)', the soprano Grace Davidson. 'The ensemble and Grace are old friends who I have often collaborated with,' says Richter. '12 Ensemble are an omnivorous and adventurous group of players; Grace - who also recorded *Sleep* with me - is an exceptional singer. The first time I heard her, I thought, so that's what a perfect voice sounds like!'

Richter was protected from the worst impact of the pandemic. 'My live shows were cancelled for a couple of years,' he says, 'but I was mostly writing at home, which I felt very privileged to be able to do,' But he was thrilled to return to the stage, in August 2021. 'Music is a communal act, between performers and the audience. To play again, outdoors at Crystal Palace, to eight thousand people, was amazing. Everyone was so happy to be there.'

Whilst the world keeps throwing up problems, so Richter can react with his creative form of activism. Perhaps music that helps us think and reflect should be piped all around the world! 'We live in dark times, with so many different challenges,' he concludes. 'But since our problems are made by us, it suggests that we can also make the solutions. There is a young, activist spirit out there, and that means that there is always potential to change for the better.'

Produced by the Barbican

Performers

Max Richter piano

12 ensemble an extended version made up of: 8.8.8.8.4, strings, Wind, brass, percussion, harp & piano

Matthew Lynch conductor

Grace Davidson soprano



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