

barbican



Classical Music

Concert programme

SANSARA
with United Strings
of Europe

Sat 14 Dec 7.30pm

Milton Court Concert Hall

Important information



When does the concert start and finish?

The concert begins at 7.30pm and finishes at about 8.45pm, with no interval.



I'm running late!

Latecomers will be admitted if there is a suitable break in the performance.



Please ...

Switch any watch alarms and mobile phones to silent during the performance.



Please don't ...

Take photos or recordings during the performance – save it for the curtain call.



Use a hearing aid?

Please use our induction loop – just switch your hearing aid to T setting on entering the hall.



Need a break?

You can leave at any time and be readmitted if there is a suitable break in the performance.



Looking for refreshments?

Bars are located on Levels -1, G and 1.



Looking for the toilets?

The nearest toilets, including accessible toilets, are located on Levels G, 1 and 2.



Carrying bags and coats?

Drop them off at our free cloak room on Level -1.

SANSARA choir with United Strings of Europe

Sanctuary & Solidarity

Sat 14 Dec 7.30pm, Milton Court Concert Hall

SANSARA choir

Tom Herring artistic director

Ellie Slorach guest conductor

United Strings of Europe

Julian Azkoul artistic director

Basel Saleh oud

Walid Zaido percussion

Basel Saleh oud improvisation

Hildur Guðnadóttir (arr Martin) *Fólk fær andlit*

Caroline Shaw *To the Hands*

1 Prelude

2 in medio/in the midst

3 Her beacon-hand beckons

4 ever ever ever

5 Litany of the Displaced

6 i will hold you

Piers Connor Kennedy/Julian Azkoul *in the midst*

Thomas Tallis *In manus tuas*

Caroline Shaw (arr Kennedy) *and the swallow*

Basel Saleh oud improvisation

Tahmeel Hijaz

Produced by the Barbican

Programme produced by Harriet Smith

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SANSARA and United Strings of Europe join forces to explore the themes of sanctuary and solidarity in a programme built around Caroline Shaw's *To the Hands*.

At a time when millions are displaced from their homes, the search for sanctuary is a universal, yet often unmet, need. Tonight's programme reflects on themes of refuge, solidarity and the resilience of the human spirit. Featuring the collaborative forces of SANSARA and United Strings of Europe, led by artistic directors Tom Herring and Julian Azkoul respectively, and guest musicians Basel Saleh and Walid Zaido, this performance weaves together works spanning centuries and traditions.

Hildur Guðnadóttir's *Fólk fær andlit*, arranged by Peter Stanley Martin for choir and string drone, was written in response to the mistreatment of refugees in Iceland in 2015. The piece juxtaposes the lone voice's plea for 'miskun' (mercy) against the choir's stark, collective repetitions of 'fyrirgefio okkur fyrir' (forgive us for). The interplay of individual and group voices, set against the unyielding backdrop of low strings, reflects isolation and collective guilt.

This tension is carried over into Caroline Shaw's *To the Hands*, a striking contemporary cantata written as a response to *Ad manus*, the third cantata in Dietrich Buxtehude's cycle of seven, *Membra Jesu nostri*.

Shaw writes:

To the Hands begins inside the 17th-century sound of Buxtehude. It expands, colours and breaks this language, as the piece's core considerations ... gradually come into focus.

The prelude turns the tune of *Ad manus* into a wordless plainchant melody, punctured later by the strings' introduction of an unsettling pattern. The second movement

fragments Buxtehude's choral setting of the central question, 'quid sunt plagae istae in medio manuum tuarum', or 'what are these wounds in the midst of your hands'. It settles on an inversion of the question 'what are these wounds in the midst of our hands?'. We notice what may have been done to us, but also question what we have done and what our role has been in these wounds we see before us.

The text of the third movement is a riff on Emma Lazarus's sonnet *The New Colossus*, which is famously cast in bronze at the base of the Statue of Liberty. The poem's lines 'Give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free' and its reference to the statue's 'beacon-hand' present a different image of a hand – one that is open, beckoning and strong. No wounds ... there – only comfort for those caught in a dangerous and complex environment.

While the third movement operates in broad strokes from a distance, the fourth one zooms in so we see the intimate scene of an old woman in her home. Who is she, where has she been, whose lives has she left? This simple image melts into a meditation on the words 'in caverna' (in the hollow), found in Buxtehude's fourth cantata, *Ad latus*.

In the fifth movement, the harmony is passed from one instrument to another, overlapping only briefly, while numerical figures are spoken. These are global figures of internally displaced persons, by country, sourced from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) in May 2015. Sometimes data is the cruellest and most honest poetry.

The final movement unfolds the words 'in caverna' into the tumbling and comforting promise of 'ever ever will I hold you, ever ever will I enfold you'. They could be the words of Christ, or of a parent or friend or lover, or even of a nation.

Drawing inspiration from Shaw and Buxtehude, *in the midst* is a collaboration between composer Piers Connor Kennedy and me (on violin), in which we weave haunting

choral fragments together with Middle Eastern-inspired violin improvisations.

We pick up from Shaw's final pizzicato figure, and my improvisational approach is inspired by my Lebanese heritage, incorporating idioms typical of taqsim – improvisations exploring Arabic musical modes above a drone. Despite moments of discord and friction, the improvisation and interplay of cultures and musical traditions unfolds as a testament to the human capacity to endure, adapt and create, and to find strength through compassion – forging new possibilities and making indifference impossible.

In contrast, Thomas Tallis's *In manus tuas* offers a timeless voice from the 16th century. Set to a prayer from Compline (the final service of the day), its serene polyphony reaches across centuries, and speaks to the unchanging need to be held and kept safe.

Caroline Shaw's *and the swallow* (Psalm 84), originally an *a cappella* piece, here arranged by Kennedy for choir and strings, reflects on the universal yearning for a place to call home. This new version reinforces the message of compassion in a subtly crafted combination.

Our programme is framed by Syrian musician Basel Saleh's oud improvisations, grounding the evening in the rich cultural heritage of a region deeply affected by conflict and displacement.

SANSARA and the United Strings of Europe invite you to reflect on our collective role in fostering sanctuary. In a world fraught with division, tonight's works serve as a poignant call to embrace our shared humanity, inviting us to find strength and solace in connection and creativity.

© Julian Azkoul and Kirsten Fehring'

Hildur Guðnadóttir (arr Martin)

Fólk fær andlit

Miskun

Fyrirgefið okkur fyrir

Mercy

Forgive us for

Caroline Shaw

To the Hands

1 Prelude

2 in medio / in the midst

quid sunt plagae istae

quid sunt plagae istae in

medio manuum tuarum

in medio

quid sunt plagae istae

quid sunt plagae istae in medio

manuum nostrarum

what are those wounds

what are those wounds in the

midst of your hands

in the midst

what are those wounds

what are those wounds in

the midst of our hands

Text from Buxtehude's Ad manus: Zechariah 13 v6, adapted by Caroline Shaw, with the addition of 'in medio manuum nostrarum'

3 Her beacon-hand beckons

Her beacon-hand beckons:

give

give to me

those yearning to breathe free

tempest-tossed they cannot see

what lies beyond the olive tree

whose branch was lost amid the pleas

for mercy, mercy

give

give to me

your tired fighters fleeing flying

from the

from the

from

let them

i will be your refuge

i will be your refuge

i will be

i will be

we will be

we will

Text by Caroline Shaw, responding to the 1883 sonnet *The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus, which was mounted on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903

4 ever ever ever

ever ever ever

in the window sills or

the beveled edges
of the aging wooden frames that hold
old photographs
hands folded
folded
gently in her lap

ever ever
in the crevices
the never-ending efforts of
the grandmother's tendons tending
to her bread and empty chairs

left for Elijahs
where are they now
in caverna
in caverna

Text by Caroline Shaw: the final line, 'in caverna', is from Buxtehude's *Ad latus*: the line from the Song of Songs, 'in foraminibus petrae, in caverna maceriae', or 'in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow of the cliff'

5 Litany of the Displaced

The choir speaks global figures of internal displacement, sourced from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (<http://www.internal-displacement.org/global-figures> — accessed 1/3/2015). The numbers spoken are the numbers of internally displaced persons by country, in ascending order. These are people, some of whom may have legal refugee status, who have been displaced within their own country due to armed conflict, situations of generalised violence or violations of human rights.

6 i will hold you

i would hold you
i would hold you
ever ever will i hold you
ever ever will i enfold you

in medio
in medio
in medio
in medio
in medio manuum tuarum

Text by Caroline Shaw: the final line is a reprise from the Zechariah text

**Piers Connor Kennedy/Julian Azkoul
in the midst**

Quid sunt plagae istae in medio
manuum nostrarum?

What are those wounds in
the midst of our hands?

**Thomas Tallis
In manus tuas**

In manus tuas, Domine,
commendo spiritum meum.
Redemisti me Domine, Deus veritatis.

Into your hands, O Lord, I
commend my spirit.
You have redeemed me, O Lord,
O God of truth.

Compline Respond. Psalm 30:6

**Caroline Shaw (arr Kennedy)
and the swallow**

How beloved is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts
my soul yearns, faints,
my heart and my flesh cry

The sparrow found a house
and the swallow, her nest,
where she may raise her young

They pass through the valley of bakka
they make it a place of springs
the autumn rains also cover it with pools

Psalm 84

Basel Saleh oud

Basel Saleh is a Syrian conductor, composer, singer and oud player and a member of The Ivors Academy of Music Creators. He was previously a professor of oriental singing at the Higher Institute of Music in Damascus (where he studied qanoun and classical singing) and conductor of the Orchestra and Choir Artists Association in Syria, and is currently based in the UK, where he is conductor of London Arab Orchestra and Academy of Art and Arab Heritage Choir.

He has performed at a number of acclaimed festivals, including Glastonbury and the Roskilde Festival in Denmark, and conducted concerts featuring cross-

cultural collaborations with renowned orchestras including the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra alongside artists such as Damon Albarn of Gorillaz.

As a composer, Basel Saleh's works include *Salabtany*, which was performed by the BBC Singers, and *From the Barada to the Thames*, performed by Truro Sinfonia.

Julian Azkoul violin

Anglo-Lebanese violinist Julian Azkoul is in demand as an ensemble leader, soloist and collaborator, appearing as guest director of Britten Sinfonia, Camerata Nordica and Archets du Léman, and guest leader of the Ulster Orchestra, Façade Ensemble,

Chineke!, Riot Ensemble, Camerata Venia and Nexus Orchestra. He has led the Jubilee and Piatti quartets and co-led UK orchestras, including the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Hallé, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Manchester Collective.

He is the artistic director of the multinational string ensemble United Strings of Europe, curating programmes and arranging music for it. Since 2020, the group has released four critically acclaimed albums on BIS Records with several more in the pipeline. Almost all of the ensemble's albums feature Julian Azkoul's arrangements and transcriptions, many of which have also been performed by other groups, including the Scottish Ensemble, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, Kaleidoscope Chamber Orchestra, Ebony Ensemble, Lapland Chamber Orchestra and Nederlands Dans Theater.

Julian Azkoul has a keen interest in Middle Eastern music; he plays on violins by Joseph Rocca and Wiltrud Fauler, using bows by Nicolas Maline and Christopher Graves.

Walid Zaido percussion

Walid Zaido is a skilled percussionist; he trained at the Higher Institute of Music in Damascus, specialising in classical and oriental music. He has performed with renowned ensembles, including the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra, Syrian National Orchestra for Arabic Music, Arab Youth Philharmonic Orchestra and the International Youth Symphony Orchestra. He has performed at prestigious opera houses and theatres worldwide, with appearances in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Algeria, Morocco and Lebanon.

Ellie Slorach conductor

Ellie Slorach is a dynamic force on the choral and orchestral music scene, especially known for her educational and innovative projects. This season began with performances and recordings with the BBC Philharmonic and Opera North, before continuing with both orchestral

and semi-staged performances with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Royal Northern Sinfonia, Manchester Camerata, the Dunedin Consort, BBC Concert Orchestra and BBC National Orchestra of Wales. She also makes debuts this season with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Sinfonia Smith Square and the Estonian National Male Choir. In February she conducts the Liège Philharmonic in collaborations with hip-hop and break dancers from No Way Back.

Ellie Slorach is founder and artistic director of the Kantos Chamber Choir, which is recognised for cutting-edge performances in venues ranging from concert halls to nightclubs. This season, they will be recording the album *In Your Dreams* – a collection of pieces related to sleep. She currently holds the position of Engagement Conductor with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra.

United Strings of Europe

Julian Azkoul violin and director

Ariel Lang violin

Kay Stephen viola

Raphael Lang cello

Marianne Schofield double bass

The United Strings of Europe creates musical experiences that celebrate diversity and bridge cultural divides. Praised for its original programming and mix of virtuosity and expression, the London-based ensemble commissions and arranges music and performs regularly in Europe and the Middle East. It also enjoys a close partnership with BIS Records, releasing an album each year, which have been widely critically acclaimed.

USE's collaborators include renowned soloists, composers, actors, dancers and theatrical directors. The ensemble's lockdown film *send back the echo*, commissioned from composer/director Jasmin Kent Rodgman, explored themes of disability and social alienation with deaf actor Vilma Jackson. It was released on BBC Arts in late 2020 and was selected for the London Short Film Festival in 2021. The

following year USE partnered with four juggler-acrobats, director Bill Barclay and choreographer Sean Gandini to create the show *Apollo Resurrected*, featuring a bespoke arrangement of Stravinsky's ballet *Apollon musagète* and a new commission from Joanna Marsh. The ensemble recently featured at The Night With Festival in Glasgow, Festival on the Close and the Byline and Southrepps festivals, as well as being artists-in-residence at Hatfield House, and making debuts at Kings Place, St Martin-in-the-Fields, Northern Ballet, the Victoria Hall in Geneva, Wigmore Hall, the Barbican with the BBC Singers, Reading Town Hall and Antwerp's De Singel.

Armed with the conviction that music and ensemble playing can enrich people's lives and promote cross-cultural understanding, the ensemble is committed to reaching new audiences through educational work and initiatives that engage young people, refugees and marginalised groups.

SANSARA

Lucy Cox, Sarah Keating, Fiona Fraser, Clover Willis soprano

Anna Semple, Amy Blythe alto

Paul Bentley-Angell, Jack Granby tenor

Ben Tomlin, Piers Connor Kennedy bass

Ellie Slorach guest conductor

Tom Herring artistic director

SANSARA is a collective of professional singers, composers and creatives from across the UK. Together, it's committed to reimagining the choral experience.

Its name echoes the ancient Sanskrit word 'samsara' – the transformational experience of moving through life's cycles. A choir is a living, breathing instrument fuelled by the primal force of the human voice and its power to move, challenge, console – to transform hearts and minds. Inspired by this belief, it shares choral music old and new to create spaces for reflection and renewal, whatever that might mean for each individual listener.

From intimate *a cappella* performances to immersive vocal soundscapes, in a beautiful venue or through your headphones, the audience is invited in.

SANSARA engages with the complex, messy issues of our time. The cycles of modern life can be overwhelming. Despite our digital connections, feelings of loneliness and social isolation are on the rise. The group's work is rooted in the transformational potential of choral music to enhance people's mental and physical well-being.

Whether commissioning new music that brings refugee communities together, making a podcast about love and resistance, or using ensemble singing to support the journey through loss, the group believes that choral music can speak directly to those seeking creative responses to the challenges of today.

Its work is collaborative, experimental and forward-looking. Recent projects include collaborations with Manchester Collective, Fretwork, United Strings of Europe, composers Natalia Tsupryk, Piers Connor Kennedy, Rebecca Dale, Jasmin Kent Rodgman, Nico Muhly, Marco Galvani and instrumentalists Basel Saleh, Julian Azkoul, Liam Byrne and Ruth Gibson.

SANSARA won the London International *a cappella* Choir Competition, and performance highlights include concerts at the Southbank Centre, Barbican, Kings Place, St John's Smith Square, Bridgewater Hall, V&A, St Martin-in-the-Fields, Erholungshaus and De Singel.

Releases include *My North*, a commission by Rebecca Dale which was premiered at a commemorative event at the National Covid Memorial Wall, and *A Quiet Night - Tyhoyi Nochi* by Ukrainian composer Natalia Tsupryk, commissioned for Ukrainian Independence Day in 2022. SANSARA's recordings have been broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and 4, Scala Radio, ABC and NPO Klassiek, and the group's previous album *Traces* (2023) was an Editor's Choice in *Gramophone* magazine.

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