

NEW MUSIC DUBLIN

MUSIC FOR 5 SILENT POEMS

30th April 2022, 3:30pm | Kevin Barry Recital Room, National Concert Hall, Dublin

George Higgs *Music for 5 Silent Poems* - 5 multisensory compositions for body language, piano, trombone and double bass (World Premiere)

Jessica Kennedy performing silent sign language poems

George Higgs playing taped body sounds via sampler and other percussion

Billy O'Brien piano

Rossa O'Neil trombone

Brian Kelly double bass

Lisa Harvey Irish Sign Language interpreter

Guillaume Auvray sound engineer

PROGRAMME NOTES

This work was originally commissioned by New Music Dublin as a social media experiment for contemporary classical music. After several animated and enjoyable conversations with John Harris, I promised to compose five one-minute pieces of music for two audiences - one viewing a video stream of the performance outside the venue and one watching it live - and have the two groups come together afterwards to compare experiences.

To fulfil this brief, I decided on a 'multisensory suite' entitled *Music for 5 Silent Poems*. I first created 5 gestural poems in Irish Sign Language, and then composed 5 one-minute pieces of music based on the poems for signer, piano, trombone, double bass and sampler.

In fact, I ended up creating six poems, which are as follows:

Silent Poem #1

Fill nothing
Full of nothing

Silent Poem #2

Narrow Nonsense
Noise at Night

Silent Poem #3

Letters large as lightning
Lose the law of language

Silent Poem #4

Heaven heavy
Hopeful Hell

Silent Poem #5

Mountain move mouse
Mouse move mountain

Silent Poem #6

Wild wheel of life
We animals battle the world
And drown in the air

It's worth emphasising that while these six poems are represented here as written words, I originally conceived them as physical gestures in Irish Sign Language. Over the past ten years, I've worked extensively with sign language as a musical resource, approaching it as a gestural lyric around which I can compose.

Just as words are always spoken with a certain rhythm, signs can also present a distinctive rhythm when arranged in a series and repeated. These rhythms are not only visual, but can also contain actual sounds when the signs involve percussive elements such as clapping or rubbing of hands.

I thus chose the signs for *5 Silent Poems* on the combined merits of their visual rhythm, their percussive quality and their meaning. Clearly, my title for the work is slightly misleading: that is, the signs aren't always 'silent', as those witnessing the performance will discover.

It's likely that a true practitioner of ISL might be disappointed if he or she looks for literal usage of sign language in the musical renditions of these poems. But I believe that all composers take liberties when transmuting language into song. Whether signed or spoken, words undergo a fundamental change when set to music.

The approach I used in setting the signs to music varies a great deal from poem to poem. In *Silent Poem 3*, I based the music directly on the rhythm of the signs, right down to the fact that I recorded the percussive bodily sounds of the signs so that I could 'play' them live with a sampler.

By contrast, *Silent Poem 5* isn't really based metrically on the rhythm of the gestural lyric. I merely used the flow and meaning of the signs to inform the 'feel' of the piece. Specifically, the notion of a 'mouse moving a mountain' inspired the inexorable rhythmic drive of this composition, i.e., once the mouse gets the mountain moving, it cannot be stopped.

As always, there was considerable input from the performers during rehearsal. Jessica Kennedy, with whom I've worked before with signing and music, was of course particularly involved in the process of 'interpreting' my gestural poems. I think of her as singing with her body. Like all gifted singers, the voice of her body made the gestural lyric her own poem to inhabit.

A final word:

I call this piece 'multisensory', but what does that really mean?

For me, all music is multisensory in essence: a whole-body phenomenon that is produced and experienced through physical movement.

So, I'm arguably not doing anything new by creating a multisensory musical work. I'm simply looking for ways to draw an audience's attention to this reality.

To be honest, I don't feel there should be any borders to the musical experience: a place where music ends or begins.

Music can and should be present in everything I see, feel, touch, taste and hear.

I just have to remember to listen.

I'd like to say a big THANK YOU to New Music Dublin for commissioning and producing this work, the National Concert Hall for hosting it, the CMC for running the podcast of the event (Amplify), and the 4 excellent musicians (Jessica, Billy, Brian and Rossa) for all the hard work they put into the performance.

—George Higgs

BIOGRAPHIES

George Higgs

George Higgs is a composer whose work comprises opera, film music, songs, chamber work, experimental electronics and music for instruments of his own making. 'Higgstruments' include *The Lost and Found Sound Assembly* (a large instrument for deaf musicians), *The Machine of Song* (also for deaf musicians) *The Jimmy Rig Slip Jig* (where the performers assemble an instrument in the act of playing it), *The Joculator* (a human powered electro acoustic vehicle which Higgs pedals around while recording and composing music) and *DOOR* (a musical door which two musicians trundle through a city). The invention he is most proud of, however, is his *Kahoogaphone*, a musical machine ingeniously engineered not to work.

He's recently released two new albums - *Music for Modern Animals* and *The Sense Ensemble* - and plans to release a new album entitled *DOOR* shortly.

He holds a PhD from Trinity College Dublin on an approach to music composition for deaf and hearing alike (funded by the Irish Research Council), and is represented by the Contemporary Music Centre of Ireland. georgehiggs.com

Jessica Kennedy (performing silent sign language poems)

Jessica Kennedy is an award-winning choreographer and dance artist based in Dublin. She is co-founder and CoArtistic Director of Junk Ensemble, a multi-award winning Irish dance-theatre company. She trained in the United States, Dublin and London, completing a BA in Dance Performance & English Literature at Middlesex University, and a Photography Diploma at Dun Laoghaire College of Art & Design. She has performed extensively with dance and theatre companies throughout Europe including Blast Theory (UK), Retina Dance Company (UK), Tanz Lange (Germany), Firefly Productions (Belgium). In Ireland she has collaborated regularly with Brokentaklers and has performed in and choreographed for numerous short and feature films and opera work. She was awarded Best Female Performer for Dublin Fringe Festival 2006. Jessica co-created the internationally acclaimed short film *Motion Sickness* (2012) which has screened worldwide, and has worked as a movement director for productions with The Tron (Glasgow/Beijing) & Theatre Gu Leor. She is part of an all-female experimental electronica group *Everything Shook*.

Billy O'Brien (piano)

Billy O'Brien enjoys a varied musical career as solo pianist, chamber musician and teacher. He is currently completing doctoral studies at the RIAM. He previously studied in Paris under Prof Rena Shereshevskaya, where he was awarded a Prix d'Excellence in Piano and Chamber Music. He has performed as soloist in concertos by Ravel, Grieg, Beethoven and Gershwin with the RTÉ Concert Orchestra, RIAM Symphony Orchestra, Trinity Orchestra and Wexford Sinfonia. He has given solo recitals throughout Ireland, and has performed in Spain, France, Finland and the UK. In chamber music he has performed as a member of the Alberi Piano Trio, and his interest in contemporary music has led to collaborations with the Kirkos Ensemble. He won the Hibernian Orchestra Concerto Competition 2020.

Rossa O'Neil (trombone)

Rossa O'Neill plays lead trombone with the Army No. 1 Band. He joined the Defence Forces School of Music in 2002 after studying in DIT Conservatoire of Music and the Royal Irish Academy of Music. Over the last 20 years he has performed with numerous ensembles premiering contemporary Irish works including modern brass music with the Ottoni Ensemble, modern operas and previous projects with George Higgs.

Brian Kelly (double bass)

Brian Kelly studied Double Bass in the Royal Irish Academy of Music with Dominic Dudley where he earned a Diploma in performance and teaching. In his career he has played with numerous groups all around Ireland, including the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland and the RTÉ Concert Orchestra. Since 2005, he has had the pleasure of serving in the Army No. 1 Band in Dublin where he is both the principal Double Bassist and Euphonium player.

NEW MUSIC DUBLIN 2022

Welcome one and welcome all to New Music Dublin 2022. It's so good to see you!

I very well remember just after the end of the last live, in-person festival in March 2020, standing at the bus stop on what was the day of the first confirmed Covid case in Ireland, wondering how long it would be before we were all together again: a few months at most, I reckoned. Certainly not later than the 2021 Festival?

And yet ... here we all are, 2 years and one fully-digital 2021 lockdown New Music Dublin later - finally together, Back in the Room. I'm not feeling the need to add to the screeds and reams that have been written and will be written about the pandemic; suffice to say, I suspect very few of us right now are able to say exactly how we feel about what just happened to us for the past 2 years.

Which is probably the perfect state to be in for coming to this smorgasbord of a festival! Here you will find musical expression for a vast array of emotional states: joy, elation, confusion, melancholy, nostalgia, awe, contentment, despair, exasperation, bliss, relief, rapture, dismay, tenderness - and many others we don't really have words for, often all at the same time, and often all piled one on top of the other.

You'll also find an increasing variety and diversity of people writing and performing the music that you hear. This festival we are delighted to include world premieres by young composers for young performers in the Cór na nÓg and Cór Linn programme, thrilling new work from emerging under-represented voices in the NCH Creative Lab project, new work by and for young musicians in BrassFest, new work with sign language in George Higgs' ground-breaking new performance, and the up-and-coming compositional voices represented by the Irish Composers' Collective. Add to this work by a whole raft of Ireland's most garlanded, radical and highly-regarded professional composers and music creators, and - well - there's something by everyone, not just for everyone!

Our hope is that somewhere in amongst the 39 world premieres, 10 Irish premieres, multiple repeat listens and everything else that is going on in the 25 concerts this weekend, there are likely to be expressions for many things you have been feeling recently. Whether it's something massive and orchestral, or something choral, or something played by a solo musician, or something heard via a hidden loudspeaker somewhere, it may catch you unawares, just like that - and remind you, that although we have all been desperately separated from each other these past two years, someone somewhere, maybe quite a lot like you, also felt what you were going through back there. Although we went through it all by ourselves, we also, in no small measure, went through it all together.

And here we all are! Welcome back!!

John Harris

Festival Director, New Music Dublin

NEW MUSIC DUBLIN

Thursday 28 April 2022

MUSIC ALLIANCE IRELAND LAUNCH

TOTEMIC: Nathan Sherman and Alex Petcu
presented by Ergodos

CHORAL SKETCHES: Chamber Choir Ireland

ÉTUDES: Kevin Volans and Jill Richards

PERSONHOOD: Oslo Sinfonietta and Andreas
Borregaard

TONNTA presented by Ergodos

Friday 29 April 2022

AMPLIFY LIVE with Contemporary Music Centre

CORCORAN AT NMD: Hard Rain
SoloistEnsemble

YOU HEARD IT FIRST: Crash Ensemble

ICC ALBUM LAUNCH

IN MEMORIAM / IN CELEBRATION:
National Symphony Orchestra and Ensemble
Interforma

AVENUE AZURE presented by Ergodos

SONGS FROM THE BRAIN BOOK: Diatribe
album launch with Diamanda La Berge Dramm

Saturday 30 April 2022

BRASSFEST in partnership with RIAM

LANDSCAPE SERIES presented by Diatribe

MUSIC FOR 5 SILENT POEMS: George Higgs

PUTTING IT INTO MUSIC: Crash Ensemble

A BRIEF DESCENT INTO DEEP TIME:
Chamber Choir Ireland

DIATRIBE – JAZZ TRIPLE BILL

Sunday 1 May 2022

NARLI RECORD FAIR

THINGS THAT NEVER DIE: Cór na nÓg and
Cór Linn

NCH CREATIVE LAB FINALE

NARLI AGM 2022

ISABELLE O'CONNELL PIANO

DELIVERANCE: RTÉ Concert Orchestra

**THE POSSIBILITIES FROM HERE ARE
ENDLESS:** Crash X Diamanda Dramm

COLM O'HARA 10TET presented by Diatribe

Throughout the festival:

ULYSSES JOURNEY 2022: newly
commissioned music and film works

WINGFORM: an installation of music and
light

REACTIONS film screenings

HAUNTOLOGY

NMDX (hosted by The Contemporary Music
Centre, Ireland and New Music Dublin)

New Music Dublin is a partnership between:

RTÉ

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Festival Box Office 01 417 0000 | New Music Dublin, c/o National Concert Hall Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2
www.nch.ie | email: info@newmusicdublin.ie