Spitalfields music festival

Late Night Music

Jonathan Dove

Thursday 3rd July | St Giles Cripplegate

Late Night Music is a radical departure from my usual work. Generally, I am telling stories, in opera, anthem or song. Stories involve drama, tension, contrast, a sense of movement. Even in more abstract instrumental work I have a fondness for the dynamic, the kinetic.

But here, I am exploring stillness. The music is a set of six meditations. The first three are each meditations on a single phrase, repeating it as if it were a mantra. Each repetition of the mantra is allowed to reverberate through use of the sustaining pedal, like ripples spreading from a drop of water falling into a pool. The mantra is usually in the right hand, while the left gently and slowly moves through different harmonies or bass-lines.

The fourth meditation is the calmest, a kind of spacious lullaby which always returns to a repeated refrain. It might be the middle of the night. The fifth is like a memory, a phrase of a remembered melody, reverberating in the mind. The sixth meditation is again on a mantra, but this time flowing continuously. There is a feeling of growing animation, of awakening.

I wrote the first meditation over thirty years ago, as part of a much larger work, originally for steel pans, organ and choir, with dance. It was then called simply "Meditation" - a moment for quiet reflection amidst all the movement in the rest of the piece. The choreographer took an especial liking to it, and asked me to record a piano version. I then forgot all about it, until quite recently, when a friend asked me if I could create a 'soundscape' to accompany a poem about silence. I suddenly remembered this meditation. Somewhat revised, it became Meditation for Rena, the first meditation in Late Night Music.

Finding the old score reminded me of a musical state I had not visited for a long time, and awakened a desire to spend more time in this reflective space. I remembered another piece I'd written, a few years after that first meditation, as part of the score for a film about the architect Carlo Scarpa. Originally written for a small group of instruments, this also had a twinkling ostinato inspired by images of water in Venetian buildings and gardens designed by the architect. Meditation on Carlo Scarpa became the second movement in this growing collection.

I now felt an urge to write more. In Meditation on a ripple, the right hand repeats and undulating figure, while the left gradually moves lower and lower, and then resurfaces. The lullaby-like Meditation on the black notes is entirely on the black notes of the piano.

Just before I started exploring the idea of musical meditations, I had been asked for a short piano piece as a birthday present for a friend. I had been wondering what kind of event might include such a piece. My friend's favourite piece of classical music is Sibelius's 5th Symphony, so Meditation for Johnny meditates on the most famous phrase in the symphony.

I started to imagine putting all these meditations together to form an experience, an informal sharing for a gathering. Five-finger meditation on the white notes seemed more animated than the others, so it became a finale in which the listener could be gradually awakened from the trance into which they might have sunk.

I am very grateful to Rena Meyer-Wiel for asking the question which led to Late Night Music.

Jonathan Dove

Jonathan Dove's music has filled opera houses with delighted audiences of all ages on five continents. He is one of the most performed living opera composers and few, if any, contemporary composers have so successfully or consistently explored the potential of opera to communicate, to create wonder and to enrich people's lives.

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Born in 1959 to architect parents, Dove's early musical experience came from playing the piano, organ and viola. Later he studied composition with Robin Holloway at Cambridge and, after graduation, worked as a freelance accompanist, repetiteur, animateur and arranger. His early professional experience gave him a deep understanding of singers and the complex mechanics of the opera house. Opera and the voice have been the central priorities in Dove's output throughout his subsequent career.

Starting with his breakthrough opera Flight, commissioned by Glyndebourne in 1998, Dove has gone on to write more than thirty operatic works including The Adventures of Pinocchio (2007), Mansfield Park (2011) and Marx in London (2018). Flight, the most successful modern comic opera, has had over thirty productions to date in Europe, the USA and Australia. His television opera When She Died... (2002) was seen by 2.5 million people worldwide.

Dove's innate understanding of the individual voice is exemplified in his large and varied choral and song output, and his confident optimism has made him the natural choice as the composer for big occasions. In 2010, A Song of Joys for chorus and orchestra opened the festivities at the Last Night of the Proms, and in 2016 an expanded version of Our Revels Now Are Ended premiered at the same occasion. In 2018 They will Rise commissioned by the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey was premiered to commemorate the centenary of the Royal Air Force.

Throughout his career Dove has made a serious commitment to community development through innovative musical projects. Tobias and the Angel, a 75-minute opera written in 1999, brings together children, community choirs, and professional singers and musicians in a vivid and moving retelling of the Book of Tobit. His 2012 opera Life is a Dream, written for Birmingham Opera Company, was performed by professionals and community choruses in a disused Birmingham warehouse. 2015 brought the World Premiere of The Monster in the Maze, a community opera co-commissioned by the London Symphony Orchestra, Berliner Philharmoniker and Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, premiered under the baton of Sir Simon Rattle in three separate translations and productions. The Monster in the Maze has since been performed around the world, translated further into Taiwanese, Portuguese, Swedish Dutch and Catalan, and received a BASCA British Composer Award in 2016's 'Amateur and Young Performers' category.

Dove's work for orchestra has included a Proms commission for the BBC Symphony Orchestra Gaia Theory (2014) which takes its inspiration from the ground-breaking writings of scientist and environmentalist James Lovelock. His work for children and family audiences Gaspard's Foxtrot, based on the book by Zeb Soanes with illustrations by James Mayhew, was co-commissioned by the Philharmonia Orchestra, Three Choirs Festival Association, Docklands Sinfonia, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic and Royal Scottish National Orchestra and premiered in 2019. A film of the work, featuring the RSNO with Zeb Soanes alongside moving illustrations from the book, had already been seen by 104,000 children in 2022. A second Musical Tale, Gaspard's Christmas, commissioned by the RSNO, premiered in 2022. In Exile (2021) for solo baritone, solo cello and orchestra, depicts a day in the life of an involuntary exile. Written for Simon Keenlyside and Raphael Wallfisch, it was commissioned by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra as part of its centenary commission series.

Jonathan Dove won the 2008 Ivor Novello Award for classical music and was made a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in the Queen's 2019 Birthday Honours for services to music.

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