

## **Manchester Collective: Different Trains Programme Notes**

### **Setlist**

Cassandra Miller 'Warblework' (17")  
Samuel Barber 'String Quartet Op. 11, Adagio' (9")  
Jasmin Kent Rodgman 'four-person simulation' (14")

*Interval (20")*

Steve Reich 'Different Trains' (28")

Please note the programme and timings may slightly vary from venue to venue. In Manchester, we perform Hans Abrahamsen's '10 Preludes' in the place of Cassandra Miller's 'Warblework'.

### **Line-up**

Sara Wolstenholme – Violin  
Anna Tulchinskaya – Violin  
Alex Mitchell – Viola  
Christian Elliott – Cello

### **Cassandra Miller 'Warblework'**

String quartet, 2011

1. Swainson's Thrush
2. Hermit Thrush
3. Wood Thrush
4. Veery

What happens when the whole reason for composing shifts in focus, from prioritising the stuff you get at the end, to embracing the act of getting there? Cassandra Miller asks exactly that question. From pieces that actively deny development ('About Bach') to transcription as a creative process ('Duet for Cello and Orchestra'), Miller quietly subverts many of the things the classical music world takes as read.

'Warblework' continues in that vein. Needing to raise funds for study composition in Europe, Miller auctioned off bars of an unwritten score to friends and family, creating a giant, crowdfunded future composition that eventually became this piece. 'Warblework' contains some of the lyricism found in Miller's other work, which often involves an intricate process of transcribing, improvising and singing to determine her core musical materials. Here, she explores the connections between the vocal characteristics of humans and

animals by examining four different types of thrush found in the forests around her Canadian homeland.

### **Samuel Barber ‘String Quartet Op. 11, Adagio’**

String quartet, 1935-36

It’s the end of September 2022, the country is still adjusting after the death of Queen Elizabeth, and for some reason, I’m in the departure lounge of Edinburgh Airport. Out of nowhere the most inappropriate music for this sombre moment appears: Tiësto’s trance remix of Barber’s ‘Adagio for Strings’, pumping out of an unremarkable duty-free store to bemused listeners.

What made it feel inappropriate? For a large chunk of society, this is deeply solemn music; for its grave character, yes, but perhaps more so for its place in our social memory, as the designated music for moments of collective grieving around tragic events like the 9/11 attacks, or following the funeral of John F. Kennedy. For others who came to Barber through dance music, it unlocks a totally different set of associations: the elated, unbridled hedonism of losing yourself in the moment. Either way, it’s an emotional experience. Heard here in its original orchestration, the ‘Adagio’ is quintessential Barber: plainchant-like melodies unfold agonisingly, revelling in raw, unfiltered emotions.

### **Jasmin Kent Rodgman ‘four-person simulation’**

String quartet, tape & electronics, 2023

1. hello
2. do you have feelings?
3. data received from interaction
4. smiley face smiley face smiley face
5. how do you express them
6. updating...

“‘four-person simulation’ is inspired by the notion of loneliness, longing and memory,” Jasmin Kent Rodgman writes. “In an increasingly manufactured and automated world, under pressure to continually construct narratives for ourselves, who will keep us spiritually connected, grounded? Or is that yet another element of our lives we’re willing to outsource to the tech gods?”

Rodgman’s piece begins with a profoundly human impulse—the desire to get to know someone—but things quickly unravel because, as it turns out, the people speaking are AI ‘companions’, capable of imitating feelings, but unable to properly experience them. Rodgman succinctly captures the moment when feelings just become words, and pokes around in the space after that realisation.

Like Steve Reich's 'Different Trains', the piece responds to speech and field recordings, and uses ostinato (a repeated rhythmic unit) as an anchoring element, but it adds its own language of autotuned vocals—sung by the quartet—to build a peculiarly liminal atmosphere which feels free and enclosed simultaneously.

*Commissioned by Manchester Collective with support from PRS Foundation's The Open Fund*

### **Steve Reich 'Different Trains'**

String quartet & tape, 1988

I: America – Before the war

II: Europe – During the war

III: After the war

For fifty years, travel was a significant part of Steve Reich's life. Grounded in 2020, he set the Traveler's Prayer (verses found in Hebrew prayer books) for a typically Reichian combination of four voices, two vibraphones, piano and strings. "While these verses can certainly apply to travels by air, car, or boat, they can also be applied to travel from this world to the next," he wrote at the time.

Reflecting on travel, early life and afterlife also informed the composition of 'Different Trains' some thirty years ago. 'Different Trains' was inspired by the long journeys of Reich's childhood, as he travelled between his separated parents in New York and Los Angeles. The romanticism of the journeys was undercut by later thoughts that Reich, who is Jewish, might have been making very different train journeys in that period—between 1939 and 1942—had he been born on the other side of the Atlantic.

The composition process began not with music, but with interviews. Reich interviewed his governess Virginia, who had accompanied him on the journey; a railway porter who travelled the routes many times; and a handful of Holocaust survivors of Reich's age. Then, he sampled their speech, pitch-matching particularly tuneful moments, and added strings imitating those vocal lines. From there, a block-like structure with sections that switch like particularly clunky gear-changes.

Eisenbahnscheingbewegung is a German word meaning "railway-illusion-motion," that describes the moment when your train is in a station and another train departs. This piece is kind of like that phenomenon. With a core of juddering string paradiddles (listen to the rhythms and imagine a drummer practising their rudiments), motion—or the illusion of—is experienced through all the external sounds: snippets of speech melody, harsh train whistles, rattling carriages. But in the end, it's not clear if we're going quickly or slowly, or even if we've moved anywhere at all.

## **Hans Abrahamsen '10 Preludes'**

String quartet, 1973

Recent music by Danish composer Hans Abrahamsen—the fragile 'Schnee', or the weightlessness of acclaimed song-cycle 'Let me tell you'—has a glistening, wintry quality. These ten short pieces, written in 1973, are more solid and direct. They represent a series of beginnings, the composer later wrote, as he moved towards “a new simplistic (or minimalistic) and poly-stylistical style.” Each prelude is its own short declaration of a way forward—whether that's bone-shaking repeated rhythms, baroque pastiche, gentle yet deliberate ensemble tiptoeing, or extended meanders reminiscent of folk music.

***Programme notes © Hugh Morris for Manchester Collective, 2023***