

Manchester Collective: Rosewood Programme Notes

Setlist

John Cage 'Six Melodies' (13")
David Fennessy 'Rosewoods' (12")
Kelly Moran 'Living Again' (10")
David Lang 'Killer' (5")

Interval (20")

Emily Hall 'Potential Space' (12")
Trad. 'La Folia' (10")
Julius Eastman 'Buddha' (9")

Line-up

Sean Shibe – Electric guitar, classical guitar
Rakhi Singh – Music Director, violin
Lily Whitehurst – Violin
Ruth Gibson – Viola
Reinoud Ford – Cello

John Cage 'Six Melodies'

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

If you're looking for a gentle introduction to the engrossing and at times unforgiving music of John Cage, 'Six Melodies', originally written in 1950 for violin and piano, is a great place to start.

'Six Melodies' is an epilogue to his 'String Quartet in Four Parts' from the same year, as Cage continues to form the basis of the indeterminate techniques he would later be known for. Introducing the score (in his instantly recognisable gothic print) on the opening page, Cage presents a select library of ideas that he draws from in the piece, along with his small collection of rhythmic patterns. There's also an

instruction for the violinist to use as little bow pressure as possible – the resulting sound is cool and detached, verging on expressionless.

‘Six Melodies’ is like watching a glass mobile twirl around above your head; these shards orbit each other, occasionally brushing, but mostly just spinning of their own accord.

David Fennessy ‘Rosewoods’

- I.
- II.
- III.
- IV.
- V.

It’s an oddly liberating feeling to let a composition out into the world, and sometimes, anticipation of that moment can seep into the creative process. David Fennessy’s original ‘rosewood’ was constructed in full knowledge that its first outing would be in Orkney’s Italian Chapel, two wartime Nissen huts turned into an extremely ornate chapel by Italian Prisoners of War. “Without wishing to somehow create a musical evocation of the place, notions of calm, reflection, open spaces, echoes and resonances permeate the music,” Fennessy says. The title is similarly resonant, referencing the particularly aromatic wood used to make the fingerboard of guitars.

Fennessy was inspired to make a bigger work, ‘Rosewoods’ when Shibe started playing the solo guitar version in public. It’s music that turns howls and hushes—made even more intimate in this new version for string quartet and guitar—into more expansive statements, but the overall pace remains slow, even in the angular fourth movement. ‘Rosewoods’ opens with lithe flickers that turn into pin-pricks in the second movement, and gentle oscillations in the third; after the insistent rhythms of the fourth, there’s something more plaintive to close.

Kelly Moran ‘Living Again’

“I wrote ‘Living Again’ while ruminating on the death of my first love, D, who passed away suddenly in early 2022,” writes Brooklyn-based composer Kelly Moran. D played the cello, and Moran would admire the back of his head from the double bass section as they played together in their school orchestra.

‘Living Again’ is about connection and reconnection, which manifests in achingly slow movements. Cello and guitar share a few lines of quiet conversation that

dissolve into big washes of sound. The picture Moran paints is calm and warm, filled with the honeyed reflections that emerge when a life that's passed is celebrated. "We may not ever feel repaired or whole in the same way again," she says, "but we can expand the ways we love and connect with others, and that's truly the only way to keep going."

Julius Eastman 'Buddha'

On a large sheet of manuscript paper, Julius Eastman draws an egg shape, framed by a couple of protective brackets. Inside that egg, he places a small selection of notes. Some of the five-line musical staves are healthily populated, others not.

And... that's the piece! Which way is up? Who starts, how does it develop, and how does it end? How long might the piece be? Do performers choose a single path through the written notes, or realise them altogether in one almighty collision? Like so much of Eastman's mysterious life, 'Buddha' prompts more questions than answers.

Emily Hall 'Potential Space'

- I.
- II.
- III.
- IV.

In 1971, psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott coined the term potential space, referring to "the space between reality and fantasy." Emily Hall transfers that idea into the concert hall, describing the gap "between the listener [and] the music, where something will happen, and it will be different for everyone. As the composer, I invite you, the listener, to be playful in your mind as you listen," she writes. "Nothing is set, it is a collaboration between you and me."

Hall's composition, for "electric guitar (occasionally bowed) and amplified string quartet," seeps into the spaces her conceptual realm opens up. Like 'Rosewood', there's the meditative feeling of music guided by breath (the opening chords are marked "let ring until sound dies") and, like Moran, Hall also writes remembering the loss of a close ally: the final movement is dedicated to the experimental musician Mira Calix, who died last year.

Trad. 'La Folia'

Arranged by Rakhi Singh and Simon Parkin

Before the four-chord song in pop music, there was the 'folia', a folk form that's been around since the 15th century. It's popular, because, well... it's easy: everyone can join in with the simple chord sequence, and confident individuals can dazzle by spinning increasingly virtuosic variations.

Composers like Lully and Vivaldi added fiery variations that might seem a little tame to modern ears. The Manchester Collective version promises fireworks too, but the slightly outsized fireworks you might let off with friends in a back garden that's not **quite** big enough to accommodate them. In other words, it's far from a safe listen.

David Lang 'Killer'

One of my best friends at college spent the majority of his lunchtimes exploring the "crunch" setting on the school's Line 6 guitar amp. 'Killer', in a new mash-up arrangement by Manchester Collective of the Bang on a Can co-founder's composition, takes that sound and runs: expect big stabs, crunchy guitar lines, and rhythms that twist and tumble until everyone present is properly disorientated.

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