

Manchester Collective: Rothko Chapel Programme Notes

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SANSARA	

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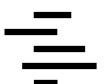
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Approximate runtime: 90'

Manchester Collective: Rothko Chapel is co-commissioned by the Southbank Centre and supported by Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a donor-advised fund held at The London Community Foundation.

Programme notes © Manchester Collective



Line-up

Creative team

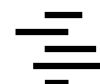
Rakhi Singh Creative Director
Tom Herring SANSARA: Artistic Director
Lewis Howell Lighting Designer
Tomoya Forster Sound Engineer
Kate Green Producer
Declan Kennedy Producer
Alex Benn Stage Manager

Manchester Collective

Rakhi Singh Violin
Donald Grant Violin
Ruth Gibson Viola
Nick Trygstad Cello
Delia Stevens Percussion
Katherine Tinker Celeste

SANSARA

Lucinda Cox Soprano
Fiona Fraser Soprano
Daisy Walford Soprano
Clover Willis Soprano
Laura Baldwin Alto
Amy Blythe Alto
Anna Semple Alto
Jack Granby Tenor
Will Wright Tenor
Piers Connor Kennedy Bass
Ben Tomlin Bass
Tom Herring Conductor, Bass



Programme notes

A stillness that moves. A quiet disruption. A sanctuary for the seeker.

Mark Rothko died the year before Rothko Chapel opened in 1971 in Houston, Texas. Both Rothko and Morton Feldman, whose work of the same name concludes this performance, sought to find intimacy through the use of vast structures.

Our commitment to the commissioning of new music is at the heart of this performance. We invited musical responses to Rothko's art from Katherine Balch, Edmund Finnis and Isobel Waller-Bridge to sit alongside Morton Feldman's titular work. Friend and collaborator of Manchester Collective, Lewis Howell, was commissioned to create a lighting design. Our collaboration with vocal collective SANSARA feels organic, their mission to give voice to powerful human stories alongside our mission to create intimate and intense human experiences.

Speaking at the premiere of his composition, Feldman described Rothko's 'relentless confrontation with reality'. Our inspiration for this performance is to embody the principles of Rothko Chapel. To invite contemplation. To create a spiritual space, a place for solitude and gathering. To give the opportunity for a moment of respite and reflection in a chaotic world.

—Manchester Collective

Arvo Pärt 'Solfeggio'

Choir, 1963

If there's a piece that epitomises the cleansing idea of Feldman's music, it's Arvo Pärt's 'Solfeggio', yet conversely, it comes out of the kind of systemic rigour that Feldman would have shunned. In the piece, Pärt treats the C major scale as a tone row, and follows strict serial procedure, meaning certain notes only overlap at certain times, and immediate repetition of tones is avoided. The text is drawn directly from the solfeggio tradition, in which each note corresponds to a distinct syllable; accordingly, the only words Pärt sets are do re mi fa so la ti, and do. Coming relatively early in Pärt's career in 1963, 'Solfeggio' is an interesting stylistic junction: between Pärt the serial composer of sonorous, timbre-driven music, and the Pärt of today, best known for his religious, tonal, bell-like compositions.

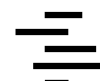
—Hugh Morris

Giacinto Scelsi, 'Ave Maria'

Solo cello, 1972

Scelsi, the lovably eccentric Italian composer who died in 1988, initially composed within the smallest musical bandwidth—his was music with a focused centre, with tiny microtonal murmurations and subtle timbral changes blurring the music's edges. But after World War II, he returned to composing wishing to deny the idea of composing altogether—or at least, the notion of authorship. Using processes of improvisation and detailed transcription, Scelsi reinvented his process. The 'Ave Maria' heard here, from Scelsi's 'Three Latin Prayers', reach further back in time; originally cast as an austere plainsong-like chant for choir, it's pared back further here in a version for solo cello.

—Hugh Morris



Isobel Waller-Bridge, ‘No. 9’

Choir, string quartet, celeste and percussion, 2024

In Rothko’s own words about his painting, No. 9 ‘White on Black on Wine’: “when you turned your back to the painting, you would feel that presence the way you feel the sun on your back”.

The bold heavy colour of this painting, the imposing scale of the work, and the powerful balance of contrasting tones generates a personal feeling – I stood in front of this painting for a long time. Sound emanated from it.

—Isobel Waller-Bridge

Katherine Balch, ‘songs and interludes’

Choir (soprano and alto), harmonica, celeste and percussion, 2024

My response to Rothko Chapel pulls from a few disparate sources. The first is Morton Feldman’s ‘Rothko Chapel’. As my title identifies, I have borrowed Feldman’s formal structure of alternating songs with instrumental interludes.

Then there’s the question of Rothko’s art, especially the triptychs in Rothko Chapel itself — massive, a space of patience and bold commitment. I don’t think the “colour” of my music matches their blacks and near-blacks, so I’ve turned to earlier Color Field works as inspiration for musical textures and timbres — the bold complimentary hues of works like *Untitled* (1955), *Yellow and Blue* (1955), and the warm, enveloping tones of *No. 7 (Green and Maroon)* (1953) and *Orange* (1957).

Rothko and Feldman’s works seem the opposite of what I tend to do: intensely detailed and intricate pieces on the shorter side. I wanted to find a text that could be the bridge.

Virginia Woolf’s essay, ‘A Room of One’s Own’, offered this. I am attracted to it for a lot of reasons, but mainly for its elegance of language and storytelling. I cannot set a one-hundred-something-page essay to song, so I filtered out words, bit by bit. This process, black-out poetry, results in a page of writing that is mostly blacked out with only a word or two visible. It resembles, in my mind, Rothko Chapel’s black triptychs — mostly monochromatic, with textural ripples. My piece sets several of these black-out texts, each corresponding to a chapter in Virginia Woolf’s essay.

I wonder how Woolf, who died of suicide just shy of 30 years prior to Rothko, would have felt sitting in Rothko Chapel, or hearing Feldman’s response. Would they feel a resonance between their works as I do?

—Katherine Balch

Kaija Saariaho, ‘7 Papillons’, No.2’

Solo cello, 2000

Following the successful staging of her opera ‘L’Amour de loin’, Kaija Saariaho wanted to tread new musical ground. To do so, she imagined the metaphor of the butterfly. If the first movement of her ‘Papillons’ set can be heard as a birth, then the second is a first flight. Fast string crossings, fluttering bow-movements, and shiny overtones make this short movement exceedingly characterful.

—Hugh Morris



Missy Mazzoli ‘Vespers for Violin’

Solo violin and electronics, 2014

Mazzoli, a Collective favourite, composed ‘Vespers for a New Dark Age’ in 2014. It represented her attempt to reimagine the traditional evening service for the digital age, interspersing modern poetry alongside the ancient texts and in turn, questioning our relationship with God in an age of technology. In ‘Vespers for Violin’ Mazzoli intensely respun her musical material until it was something almost completely new. A solo violin cuts through a murky electronic texture, leaving a trail of its own through the air. Yet, unlike the clean glow of the Feldman, the Vespers is altogether dirtier; like dredging up a precious artefact from the bottom of a muddy pool, we hear a memory at purity alongside with the grimy residue, and a gravity dragging it back into the depths.

—Hugh Morris

Edmund Finnis, ‘Blue Divided by Blue’

Choir, string quartet and tubular bells, 2024

“I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. If you are moved only by their colour relationships then you miss the point.”—Mark Rothko

This piece is a lament, written in remembrance of absent friends. It is scored for choir, string quartet and bells. The music is made in three connected parts:

a viola solo, elegiac and searching, eventually bleeds into harmonies voiced by the rest of the quartet.

The choir sings a text assembled exclusively from words found in titles of paintings by Rothko: ‘blue divided by blue ... light, earth and blue ... four darks in red ...’ These colour words become a fabric of sounds that are interwoven and layered with the string quartet and resonances from the bells. The final word sung alludes to a place of suffering (and is the subject of one of Rothko’s striking earlier paintings). Finally the coursing lines of the quartet come to the fore, overlapping and reaching outwards. Against this the choir, now wordless, sings slowly falling lines.

Bells toll.

—Edmund Finnis

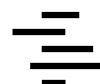
Morton Feldman, ‘Rothko Chapel’

Choir, solo viola, celeste and percussion, 1971

Where Morton Feldman was tall, stocky, and talkative, his most famous music is quite the opposite: flat, spare, and quiet. Perhaps where man and music overlapped was in expansion—that one of New York’s best talkers could write music that would last for five hours is hardly surprising.

Feldman, born in Queens, New York in 1926, consciously avoided the standard route of the American ‘Academy’ composer, preferring instead to work a day job at his family’s and dry-cleaning and children’s coat businesses. Conscious too was Feldman’s avoidance of the kinds of compositional systems preferred by those within musical institutions—tonality, serialism, other -isms—opting instead for a more intuitive practice of slowness, silence, and experiments in chance music.

If there’s something of a cool nighttime air to Feldman’s music, then it’s because most of his art-making happened after hours—with John Cage (whom he met after the pair walked out of a Webern



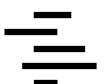
concert at the same time) and alongside a set of New York's most famous artists. Feldman enjoyed relationships with poet Frank O'Hara and visual artist Jackson Pollock; after painter Philip Guston immortalised Feldman in a famous painting of him smoking, Feldman returned the favour with the four-and-a-half hour piece for flute, percussion and piano.

And then there was Mark Rothko, the painter of glowing colour fields, whose legacy holds the key to this concert of musical art and visual music.

'Rothko Chapel' is short by Feldman's standards, lasting for thirty minutes rather than three hours. It was written to be performed inside what turned out to be Rothko's final masterpiece: an octagonal chapel in Houston, Texas, featuring fourteen of Rothko's darkest canvases. (Rothko would never see his creation, dying by suicide before the chapel opened in 1971.) It's a challenging space to enter, one where the viewer is surrounded, almost ambushed, by the art. And, though the chapel exists as a non-denominational space of worship, it's most profound in triggering reflection. Like many Rothko works, the chapel dislodges the clouded glass protecting souls, and peers right in, forcing the viewer to follow its gaze.

Feldman's score begins and ends with the viola, the second time a rare outbreak of melody in his distinctly abstract oeuvre. (Feldman described this moment as a "quasi-Hebraic melody," written when he was 15 years old.) The rest of the piece is slow and hallowed; wordless chords from the choir match the ring of a vibraphone, giving a shimmering, ethereal feel. "Rothko's imagery goes right to the edge of his canvas, and I wanted the same effect with the music," Feldman said of his work. "It should permeate the whole octagonal room and not be heard from a certain distance." Much like Rothko, Feldman paints on the widest canvases, with the rarest of means.

—Hugh Morris



Text

Isobel Waller-Bridge, 'No. 9'

Prototype
The face
The face closely resembles its prototype
The face resembles the face
Form

Edmund Finnis, 'Blue Divided by Blue'

blue divided by blue
divided by light
earth and green
earth and blue

blue over red
white over red
red over red

ochre
and red on red
on dark sienna
and four darks in red

on maroon
over violet
on rose
over black
in deep red

dark over light
over earth
over dark
divided by light

Gethsemane

Katherine Balch, 'songs and interludes'

I. Unsolve

I will try to explain:
I sat down on the banks of the river
and began to wonder what the words might mean,
consider them in that light.
but when I began to consider,

all I could do was
 unsolve.

[interlude i]



II. imagine a room

I must ask you to imagine a room,
the strife of the tongue and the confusion of the body
picking up a notebook and pencil.
Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed
animal in the universe?

I should need to be a herd of elephants,
a wildness of spiders,
longest lived and most
multitudinously eyed
to cope with all this.

[interlude ii]

III. Draw the curtains

Describe:

A spider's web still attached at all four corners,
A worm winged like an eagle
A vessel,
A glimpse of heaven

Imagine:

The universe, that refuge of Anonymity,
The act of creation,
The feat of prodigious difficulty,
The world's notorious indifference.

Let her have:

Time, and
thick gloves on her hands, and bars
to protect her of solid gold,

Incandescent, unimpeded.

IV. Impossible

My hand delights to trace
unusual things,
an itch for scribbling
grown about with weeds and
bound with briars.

It poured itself out,
a microscope to the
frame of a sentence, the
fashioning of a scene, the
extreme activity of the mind
which let flowers fall
upon the tomb of poetry.

If one shuts one's eyes and thinks:
this shape, this moment is not made



end to end
but built
and now lost and,
very likely,
devoured.

[interlude iii]

—black-out poetry fragments from Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, 'A Room of One's Own'

