

THURSDAY 23RD SEPTEMBER 2010

PURCELL ROOM AT QUEEN ELIZABETH HALL
7.45PM

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Jean Cocteau, Le Mystère Laïc (1928)

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PROGRAMME

Tim Benjamin

Le Gâteau d'Anniversaire (2010) *

Marie: Laura Sheerin

Antoinette: Emma Hall

Louis: Jonathan Ainscough

Piano: Jamie Thompson

Directed by Rebecca Lea

– Interval –

Francis Poulenc

Jean Cocteau

La Voix Humaine (1959)

Elle: Rebecca Lea

Piano: Jamie Thompson

Directed by Rebecca Lea

* – UK premiere

PLEASE NOTE

Would patrons please ensure that mobile phones are switched off. Please stifle coughing as much as possible and ensure that watch alarms and any other electronic devices which may become audible are switched off.

TIM BENJAMIN

LE GÂTEAU D'ANNIVERSAIRE (2010)

Le Gâteau d'Anniversaire was conceived as a theatrical investigation of two subjects. First, the oppression of, and liberation from, accepted convention and custom (why must we all declare our love on St Valentine's Day? Why must we all send cards at Christmas to those we otherwise ignore?) Secondly, the power of the subconscious to influence the conscious self through the medium of dreams. While we are asleep, we are free from custom and public displays of conservatism and convention. I chose to combine these two subjects in a farcical comedy combining linguistic puns with poking some fun at the sometimes pompous and self-absorbed traits of the serious bread enthusiast (or "paniphile").

The power and functional capability of dreams, or the subconscious in general, is of particular interest to me as a composer. Many of my recent works have been concerned with the expression of the subconscious (guilt, death, and sex in *Mrs Lazarus*; institutionalisation and self-identity in *The Rosenhan Experiment*; paranoia and perception in *The Corley Conspiracy*) and *Le Gâteau* follows in this line of works.

Problems that dog us in waking hours often meld and merge in sleeping hours to form a bizarre stream of (sub)consciousness in our dreams. When we wake, the solution to problems can crystallise from the incoherence of our dreams - or sometimes, things forgotten to our conscious selves are remembered by our subconscious.

Following the early interpretations of Freud and Jung, dreams are now thought to be continuous with waking behaviour - if you are outgoing and extrovert while awake, then you will tend to be the same in your dreams. The idea that dreams exist to solve problems, however, has relatively little scientific support, despite famous anecdotes such as that of Elias Howe. Struggling to invent a machine to sew fast and efficiently, Howe fell asleep at his workbench one night and dreamt he was chased by cannibals with spears that had holes in the points. When he woke, he realised that if he used a needle with a hole in the tip, his sewing machine would be viable - and to this day, sewing machines have just such a needle. This sensation is familiar to me as a composer: frequently, an intractable episode in a new piece will be resolved while I sleep, and I often awake to find the solution ready-formed in my mind.

Such "problem solving" aspects to dreams reflect the Jungian archetype of the "shadow" and its creative and gift-giving aspects and are reflected in my new work. The character of the baker Louis is consistent through his dreaming and waking self, but his dream-world is in shadow or inversion, in which he is tormented to give up his singular passion and his beloved sisters become terrifying apparitions.

I chose to present such deep subjects through a comedy or farce based on the famous words "let them eat cake" apocryphally uttered by Marie Antoinette upon hearing that the public had no bread. In English, the distinction between "cake" and "bread" is clear, but in French there is a finer difference between "brioche" and "pain". Nonetheless, after meeting several friends so obsessed with breadmaking that they gave names to their sourdough starters, I decided that this, together with the traditional figure of the comic baker, would provide a fun vehicle for a comedy and a narrative for the more serious material. Along with several musical jokes and various French puns the text takes in the 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen*, and with the subsequent transformation of the apparitions Marie and Antoinette into Olympe de Gouges and Théroigne de Méricourt we recall the satirical *Déclaration des droits de la femme*, and its invocation: "Femme, réveille-toi!"

Le Gâteau d'Anniversaire was commissioned by the Centre National d'Artistes Lyriques, France, and was premiered at the Opéra Municipal de Marseille in March this year. I am grateful for the invaluable assistance of Nicolas Flandrin-Jones in preparing the libretto.

Tim Benjamin

FRANCIS POULENC / JEAN COCTEAU

LA VOIX HUMAINE (1959)

Francis Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine* ("The Human Voice") is a one-act opera monologue to a libretto by Jean Cocteau, based on his 1932 monodrama of the same name, which also inspired Roberto Rossellini to make his film *La voce umana*, starring Anna Magnani. *La Voix Humaine* was first performed at the Opéra Comique in Paris on 6th February 1959 by the French soprano Denise Duval – for whom the opera was written – directed by Cocteau (who also designed the set) and conducted by Georges Prêtre. A virtuoso piece for the solo singer, the opera has quickly become popular, both with audiences and with notable sopranos including Felicity Lott and Gwyneth Jones.

The dialogic soliloquy of *La Voix Humaine*, in which the heroine (named simply "Elle" – "Her") makes her final pleas to her soon-to-be ex-lover, is in Poulenc's setting a suggestive psychological study. We, the audience, hear only one side of this intimate and harrowing conversation which plays out on an unreliable telephone network: a plot device that heightens the tension in a way to which we can still relate. While perhaps typical of 1930s telecommunications, despite many technical advances we are only too familiar with dropped connections, faulty network signals, and frustrating attempts to re-dial. In this sense the drama is not, as it might appear, a "period piece" of the 1920s or 1930s, but in reality addresses the universal tension and heightened emotion of remote communication with our closest acquaintances: waiting for a letter, or a phone call, or an email – placing our faith in disgruntled postmen, variable telephone networks, or flaky Internet connections.

But the telephone is a special proxy for a physical relationship, even more so today: the voice of our loved one touches our earlobes, our lips murmur millimetres from the mouthpiece, and we cradle the precious handset closely – and when we are not whispering sweet nothings, we keep our mobile telephones at all times within sight or safely tucked away next to our breast or groin.

Thus, the universally-felt raw emotion of a break-up is played out through Cocteau's sharply-observed telephone as sign for depersonalised communication. It is not the only proxy or substitute for the unfaithful lover in the piece, all of which are in some way failing: the couple's pet dog (who shuns Elle), their photographs (torn up by Elle), food (Elle cannot eat), and ultimately medicine (an overdose of sleeping pills through which Elle seeks respite). Through these disintegrating signs, these metaphors, Elle's life (which she has "lived through" her lover) comes apart.

Cocteau was very taken with Poulenc's reworking of his play. After the premiere of the opera, he wrote to Poulenc: "My dear Francis, you have found the only way to say my text". Poulenc captures every nuance of the text in the music; he avoids easy melodies and long poetic flights, and instead concentrates on the expressive elements of the human voice – whispers, sighs, sobs – and captures the essence of Elle's anguish.

Like Wagner, the drama unfolds inside the character, while it is depicted in the music. But utterly unlike Wagner, Poulenc avoids heated lyricism, following instead a pattern of broken and prosaic sentences, and rapid, almost hysterical changes in mood. As a psychological drama for solo soprano, one might be drawn to comparisons with Schoenberg's expressionist masterpiece *Erwartung* – which also demands a virtuoso performance on an almost empty stage – but Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine* could hardly be more different in its transparency and realism.

Jemima Bannit

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Radius's full line-up includes members of the BCMG, the London Sinfonietta, a former BBC Young Musician of the Year, a regular BBC Symphony Orchestra guest leader, and the recipient of the highest degree result in the Royal Academy of Music's history. Radius was founded in 2007 and is directed by award-winning composer Tim Benjamin.

REBECCA LEA (soprano: "Elle", director)

Together with Elle (*La Voix Humaine*), Rebecca's previous roles include Susanna (*Le nozze di Figaro*), Cis (*Albert Herring*), Venus (*The Judgement of Paris*), and Galatea (*Acis and Galatea*). Recent performances include Alexander Goehr's *Sing Ariel* at Wigmore Hall, Judith Weir's *King Harald's Saga*, and the world premiere of Bernard Focroulle's *Rilke Lieder* with Markus Bellheim, Tatiana Samouil and Justus Grimm in Montepulciano, Italy. Future solo engagements include Berio's *Folk Songs* with Manchester Camerata and Stravinsky's *Les Noces* at the Contact Theatre, Manchester. Her directorial debut was Tom Lane's *Flatpack: An Opera in IKEA* (Mammoth Music Theatre), which received national critical acclaim. After studying at Oxford University and RADA, Rebecca received the Kate Snape Scholarship to the Royal Northern College of Music, where she was also awarded the Contemporary Performance prize.



LAURA SHEERIN (soprano: "Marie")

Laura's previous solo roles include Vespina (Haydn's *L'infideltà delusa*), The Frog (*The Cunning Little Vixen*), The Bridesmaid (*Le nozze di Figaro*), L'Écureuil (*L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*), Anne Trulove (*The Rake's Progress*), Pallade (*L'incoronazione di Poppea*), Belinda (*Dido and Aeneas*) and Despina (*Così fan tutte*). Laura is also keen choral singer, performing regularly with Codetta, a chamber choir based in her home town of Derry (with whom she features annually as a soloist in *Messiah*), South Creake Chorus in the Yorke Trust Easter project, and the Phoenix Opera Chorus. Recent chorus appearances include Puccini's *La Rondine*, Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* and Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. Laura has recently given a series of chamber concerts in Ireland celebrating the French chanson, performing Fauré's cycle *La Bonne Chanson* and Chausson's *Chanson perpétuelle*. Forthcoming engagements include Micaëla (*Carmen*) this December, Poulenc's *Gloria* and Dvorak's *Te Deum*. Laura Sheerin is the grateful recipient of the Yamaha Vocal Scholarship (2009-10), and is a postgraduate at the Royal Northern College of Music, studying with Peter Alexander Wilson.

EMMA HALL (mezzo-soprano: "Antoinette")

Australian soprano Emma Hall's previous roles include the title role in Strauss' *Arabella*, The Fox (*The Cunning Little Vixen*), Ado Annie (*Oklahoma!*) and Constance Partlet (*The Sorcerer*) with the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of South Australia. Forthcoming performances include the Royal Northern College of Music's *John Cage Songbook* and *Cinderella (Into the Woods)*. Emma was a member of the Adelaide Chamber Singers. She received a scholarship and graduated with Distinction from the Elder School of Music at Adelaide University, followed by a Masters of Music at the Royal Northern College of Music with Deborah Rees.

JONATHAN AINSCOUGH (baritone: “Louis”)

Jonathan’s most recent appearance was as Prospero in James Redwood’s new opera *The Tempest*, for Opera North Education; he has previously appeared as the title role in Britten’s *Noye’s Fludde*, Samuel (*Saul*), the Messenger (*Belshazzar*), various roles in Britten’s *Paul Bunyan*, and as Figaro, Don Giovanni, Papageno, Don Alfonso, Albert (Massenet’s *Werther*) and Demetrius in staged operatic excerpts. Alongside regular recitals, previous solo engagements have included D’Astorga’s *Stabat Mater*, Purcell’s *Welcome to all the Pleasures* and *Come ye Sons of Arts*, Bach’s *Weihnachts-Oratorium* and Cantata 151, Handel’s *Messiah* and *Dixit Dominus*, Haydn’s *Creation*, Brahms’s Requiem, Dyson’s *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, Britten’s *Rejoice in the Lamb*, Vaughan Williams’ *Serenade to Music* and Karl Jenkins’ *The Armed Man*.

Jonathan is heavily involved in education work as a project deviser and leader for several organisations including Opera North, the RNCM’s SingUp! and MusicLeader. He is currently the Artistic Director of Opera Hesperia, a new opera company for young performers, for whom he has directed Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* in the Cathedrals of Manchester and Chester, and has directed two series of opera excerpts for Manchester University. Currently at the Royal Northern College of Music studying with Stuart MacIntyre, Jonathan previously studied at Manchester University, where he graduated with a First Class Honours degree.

JAMIE THOMPSON (piano)

Jamie received the Olive Marsh piano scholarship to study at the Royal Northern College of Music where he graduated with a First class honours degree as well as completing both his Fellowship of the Royal Schools of Music (FRSM) and Certificate of Teaching (CTABRSM) diplomas with distinction. Jamie enjoys a fruitful musical life through composing, arranging, improvising, teaching and giving solo piano recitals. As a passionate and enthusiastic collaborator, chamber musician and accompanist he has enjoyed much success as a past winner of the RNCM’s prestigious two-piano prize and the English Song, Elsie Thurston, Lieder, Song Cycle and Violin scholarship accompanist prizes. After successful performances of Grieg, Rachmaninoff and Beethoven piano concertos this year he will perform Tchaikovsky’s *Piano Concerto No. 1* in the forthcoming season.

TIM BENJAMIN

Tim Benjamin was winner of the BBC Young Musician of the Year Composer’s Award in 1993, at the age of 17, with his work *Antagony*. He also won the Stephen Oliver Trust’s Prize for Contemporary Opera, for his first opera *The Bridge*. Benjamin’s music has been widely performed, by groups including the London Sinfonietta, the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, and at the BOC Covent Garden Festival, and broadcast on BBC 2 and BBC Radio 3.

Tim Benjamin has studied with Anthony Gilbert at the Royal Northern College of Music, privately with Steve Martland, and with Robert Saxton at Oxford University where he received a doctorate. He is the founder and Director of the critically acclaimed contemporary music group Radius.

Past commissioners include the European Community Chamber Orchestra (*Möbius*), the Segovia Trio (*Hypocrisy*), the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra (*Un Jeu de Tarot*), and the London Design Festival (his second opera, *The Corley Conspiracy*).

Tim Benjamin lives and works in Todmorden, Yorkshire, and also plays the trombone.

www.timbenjamin.com



Tim Benjamin
photo: Ray McCarthy

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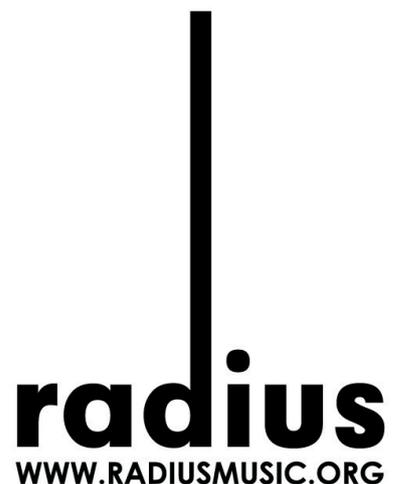
Tim Benjamin

Founder and Director, Radius

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