

ADVENTURES IN MUSIC
**scottish
ensemble**
WITH SCOTLAND'S PIONEERING STRING ORCHESTRA

Babel

with Gabriela Montero

Programme

Fri 8 February

Glasgow Royal Concert Halls

Sun 10 February

Eden Court, Inverness

Tue 12 February

The Queen's Hall, Edinburgh

Wed 13 February

Perth Concert Hall



welcome to Babel

We are thrilled to welcome back Gabriela Montero for a second collaboration with SE. This time we wish to showcase her voice not only as the phenomenal performer and improviser that she is, but also as a composer, and I am delighted that we were able to commission her to write tonight's new work, *Babel*.

Music and politics tend to have an ambiguous relationship. Some of the music you will hear tonight was written by composers who experienced varying degrees of repression to their individual freedom and dignity (Shostakovich, Messiaen, Vasks). For Gabriela, addressing the catastrophic crisis in her home country Venezuela is

central to her mission as a human being and artist, as she eloquently writes in her programme notes for *Babel*.

What shines through these pieces of music is, in part, the immense power of the individual voice, which we all possess. How can we deploy our individuality in today's ever more complex world? With deepening polarisation and the emergence of a certain mob-like mentality taking hold of our shared sense-making faculties, can music remind us of some central truths?

Jonathan Morton
Artistic Director

Performers

Guest soloist

Piano
Gabriela Montero

Scottish Ensemble

Artistic Director and Violin
Jonathan Morton

Violin
Cheryl Crockett, Daniel Piro, Liza Johnson, Tristan Gurney, Laura Ghiro, Alastair Savage

Viola
Jane Atkins, Andrew Berridge

Cello
Alison Lawrance, Naomi Pavri

Double Bass
Diane Clark

Part One

Approx. 45 mins

Shostakovich
Chamber Symphony

- 1 Andante
- 2 Allegretto furioso
- 3 Adagio, attacca
- 4 Allegretto – Andante

Glass
Echorus

Interval (approx. 20 minutes)

Part Two

Approx. 50 mins

Vasks
Viatore

Montero*
Babel

Messiaen*
Quartet for The End of Time

8 Louange à l'Immortalité
de Jésus

* with Gabriela Montero

All timings are approximate.
Programme order correct at time of printing; any changes will be announced from the stage.

notes on the music

Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906 - 1975)

Chamber Symphony,
Op. 118a (1961)
[arr. Barshai]

- I Andante
- II Allegretto furioso
- III Adagio, attacca
- IV Allegretto – Andante

Anyone familiar with the bolder, more brutal works of Dmitri Shostakovich, will likely be familiar with their context; how could anyone, upon hearing them, fail to immediately wonder about the source of the anger, anxiety, and devastation they seem to scream into the air? Not all of the Russian composer's works are like this, of course; his compositional output reflects the complexity of his relationship with the Soviet Party whose reign, and brutality, dominated his lifetime. Battered in and out of favour, his work

includes patriotic pro-Soviet anthems as well as those which are full of his disillusionment with the regime.

The death of Stalin in 1953 is seen by many as the first step in his healing process as a creative artist, resulting, around a decade later, in the emergence of some of his most creatively bold compositions – including this, his tenth string quartet, performed tonight in its arrangement for string orchestra.

Across the four movements, we are led from a sense of emergent, questioning anxiety through to fury, fear, anxiety, mourning and depression. It opens with a four-note motif that is immediately alert and doubting, winding through a subdued but dark first movement. We are jolted from the darkness by the anxious fury of the second movement, its severe, chopping chords supporting and interrupting the increasingly

anxious violin line. The third movement sinks back into a restless, questioning depressive mood – before the surprise of the almost carefree theme that begins the fascinating final movement.

Between these jaunty outbursts come snippets of the theme from the first movement and memories of themes from the Adagio, but also a moment of grotesque parody – listen out for the distorted upbeat patriotic ditty – before its ending of soft melodic sweetness. It's interpreted by some as the ultimate statement of the piece – the triumph of human feeling over evil (the evil, represented so viscerally in the second movement, is not alluded to musically in the ending, unlike themes from other movements).

Whilst all is speculation, it feels almost fraudulent to suggest that, in this emotional piece, Shostakovich was not trying to tell us something of vital importance.

Philip Glass
(1937 -)

Echorus (1995)

Echorus was inspired by “thoughts of compassion”, and is intended

to evoke a feeling of serenity and peace. Its title is derived from the word ‘echo’ – an element explored in the relationship between the two solo violins. Rather than a more literal representation – of a call, and a

response – the notion of echoing seems to be one of mutual understanding. As the two violins experience unity in their melodic lines, we get a sense of two individuals finding harmony in sentiment.

Pēteris Vasks

(1946 -)

Viatore (2002)

Most people today no longer possess beliefs, love and ideals. The spiritual dimension has been lost. My intention is to provide food for the soul and this is what I preach in my works.

Viatore tells the story of a wanderer who arrives in this world, grows up in it, develops, falls in love, fills himself up and then departs. The journey is illuminated by the endless and starry universe. This composition is in one movement but is made up of two sound images. The theme of the traveller is

subject to growth and development. The theme of eternity, however, does not change and is played pianissimo. Viatore is dedicated to Arvo Pärt, who has been my guiding light for many decades.”

As well as musical influences of Latvian folk music and minimalism, the majority of Vasks' work is influenced by strong personal feelings - a love for nature, a deep concern for the environment, and a desire to re-find the spiritual dimension of life that he refers to above. Perhaps understandably, these themes are not portrayed in overly literal, showy ways. His works are less 'musical paintings'

than an evocation of a feeling; in listening to them, you can feel the complexity, and often the nub of inherent contradiction, of his messages.

In *Viatore*, the unchanging beauty of the natural world - this unchanging 'theme of eternity' of which Vasks speaks - is offset by mankind's self-centred and destructive journey cutting through it. The interplay creates a host of powerful feelings: tension, melancholy and anxiety, but also awe, wonder and a sense of something larger than us all.

Gabriela Montero

(1970 -)

Babel (2018)

Programme note by Gabriela Montero

The Babel etiology, an origin myth familiar to most school children, attempts to explain how human beings, assembling in Shinar with their common language, came to be confounded by the inability to comprehend each other.

In recent years - first and foremost as a member of our global society, and secondarily as an artist - I have adopted both the spoken word and the less evident metaphors of music to address what I consider to be the most urgent challenge of my lifetime: the hijacking and collapse of Venezuela, the beloved country of

my birth, by unprecedented forces of criminality, barbarism and nihilism.

The empirical truth of my claims, expressed in language understandable to all, is self-evident. However, when passed through the corrupting filter of competing self-interest, those truths emerge as an opaque blurring of interpretation and opinion, subjective entitlements which today have come to usurp truth itself until, in Macbeth's words, "Nothing is, but what is not."

My first composition, *Ex Patria*, painted a polemical portrait of an undeniable, criminal kleptocracy. It attempted to supplement the journalist's language of statistics with the musician's language of personal consequence. Musical themes were presented by the individual voice, only to be stolen,

overwhelmed, corrupted and corroded by collective, irresistible forces. Its intention was to generate a musical impression of suffocation and helplessness, while lamenting such a brutal imposition on the individual. It was dedicated to the 19,336 individual victims of homicide in 2011, the year of its composition.

In my 2015 *Piano Concerto No. 1 (Latin Concerto)*, I set out, in a more conciliatory tone perhaps, to celebrate the idiomatic codes - both musical and behavioral - of the broader South American continent, while noting musically that the continent's collective progress seems destined to be weighed down by the ever-present forces of corruption, short-termism, and even superstition.

Babel emerged from the frustration I have encountered throughout the creative process

itself, beginning with alarmingly hostile – and historically amnesic – challenges to the very presumption that I, as a member of society who makes a living from creative processes, should be entitled to comment on society’s most urgent matters. “Just shut up and play!” is the most egregious expression of that irrational censorship. “If you prick us, do we not bleed?”, after all.

Surmounting and rejecting that foundational misunderstanding, the piece begins with a solitary voice, joined only by thin string textures, talking largely in a

vacuum. Statements beget counterattacking narratives, questions elicit competing questions. A confusion of arpeggios arises from the competing discourse. The discourse is at times playful, rhythmical and percussive, even collaborative. But the incoherence of babbling, competing forces is never far away, with the mocking absurdity of madness and incoherence a pervasive presence throughout the piece.

Perhaps we are all to blame. Perhaps we are victims of our own success as the most interconnected

generation in human history. Perhaps the democratized possibility to communicate at will has created the new Babel, a world of indecipherable noise and alternative truths which resists all attempts to prioritize truth and responsibility to our fellow man.

Babel proposes an optimistic, unison denouement of mutual understanding and harmonic unity. Whether such an outcome is attainable, or simply my manifest wish to create a spirit of collaboration for the greater good of the misunderstood everywhere, is for the listener to decide.

Olivier Messiaen (1908 - 1992)

Quartet for the End of Time (1941)

8 Louange à l’Immortalité de Jésus

Messiaen’s composition is not only astonishing musically, but for its story. In 1940, Messiaen was captured and imprisoned in a German prisoner-of-war camp. Amongst his fellow prisoners were a professional clarinetist, a violinist and a cellist and, securing some paper and a pencil from a kind guard, Messiaen wrote what was to become one of his most important works.

It was premiered, outdoors, in the rain, to an audience of around 400 prisoners and guards, on a clutch of barely-working instruments and a cello bought with donations from camp

members. Such an image and a story is powerful enough, without adding in the extraordinary sound of this piece and the effect it must have had. As Messiaen himself later recalled: “Never was I listened to with such rapt attention and comprehension.”

Written for clarinet, violin, cello and piano, and spanning eight movements, the piece was inspired by the following text from the Book of Revelation:

And I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven, clothed with a cloud: and a rainbow was upon his head, and his face was as it were the sun, and his feet as pillars of fire...and he set his right foot upon the sea, and his left foot on the earth...And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever...that there should be time no longer.

According to the composer’s preface to the original score, this eighth and final movement represents “the ascent of man to his god, the child of God to his Father, the being made divine towards Paradise”. It’s difficult not to hear this rather evocative intention as we listen to the slowly rising violin, the supporting chords of the piano like a celestial cloud beneath it. Beginning in its lower register, the violin melody twists with its own awkwardness, itchy and frustrated, confined to the mundane. Slowly but surely, the melody begins to resolve its circular, corkscrew bends, turning back in on itself only to stretch out a little more each time. The result is an almost physical sense of rising as it begins to reach out to higher notes, climbing upwards towards its sheer, pure resolution – that highest of high notes – as we arrive, transformed and resolved, in Paradise.

about the performers



Gabriela Montero

Gabriela Montero's visionary interpretations and unique compositional gifts have garnered her critical acclaim and a devoted following on the world stage, as well as awards including the International Chopin Piano Competition and the prestigious 2018 Heidelberger Frühling Music Prize.

Her recent and forthcoming highlights include debuts with the San Francisco Symphony (Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla), New World Symphony (Michael Tilson Thomas), Yomiuri Nippon Symphony in Tokyo (Aziz Shokhakimov), Belgian National Orchestra (Hugh Wolff), and the Bournemouth Symphony (Carlos Miguel Prieto).

gabrielamontero.com



Scottish Ensemble

The UK's leading string orchestra, Scottish Ensemble (SE) is a group of outstanding musicians championing music for strings. Founded in 1969, and based in Glasgow, SE delivers dynamic, vibrant performances and musical events across Scotland, the UK and beyond.

Committed to musical collaboration, SE not only regularly collaborates with high-profile guest artists – from trumpeter Alison Balsom and mezzo-soprano Sarah Connolly to violinists Patricia Kopatchinskaja and Nicola Benedetti, to name only a few – but also with artists from other disciplines and art forms. Since 2014, SE has presented a series of annual cross-artform

collaborations that have so far included projects with visual artist Toby Paterson; Swedish contemporary dance company Andersson Dance; electronic-classical crossover composer Anna Meredith and visual artist Eleanor Meredith; and Scottish theatre company Vanishing Point. SE also has a long history of commissioning new works. In recent years SE's international reputation has also grown considerably and SE has now performed in Taiwan, China, Brazil, the USA and across Europe, at festivals from the Thuringia Bach Festival to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and venues including the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts (*Washington D.C.*) and the Barbican Centre (*London*).



Jonathan Morton *Artistic Director*

Violinist Jonathan Morton is in demand as a chamber musician, soloist, teacher and leader. As Principal First Violin with London Sinfonietta, Jon has worked closely with many of today's leading composers and performers, including Steve Reich, Harrison

Birtwhistle, Mica Levi, Jonny Greenwood, Louis Andriessen, Thurston Moore and many others. Regularly praised for his eclectic, engaging approach to programming and the presentation of music in general, he has a particular passion for 20th- and 21st-century music, as well as bringing a fresh perspective to older works.

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