

Michael Parsons, *Space/Time Pianos*

Tuesday 4th November 2025, 7pm

City St George's, University of London

Michael Parsons, Siwan Rhys *pianos*

Programme

- Piano Piece March 1968
- Space/Time Piano Piece September 2001
- Piano Piece 1962
- Oblique Piece 14 (2012)
- Piano Piece December 2000 (for Philip Thomas)
- Krapp Music (after Samuel Beckett) (version for 2 pianos 2025) :
 - Prologue ('Thirty-nine today . . .')
 - Section 2 ('Just been listening ...')
 - Section 3 ('Her eyes closed . . .')
 - Epilogue ('Past midnight . . .')
- Two Canons (1979, 2025)
- Oblique Pieces 2, 16, 21 (1996 - 2016)
- Jive, Jive 2 (1996)
- Space/Time Piano Piece February 2002 (for Tania Chen and John Tilbury)

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The programme lasts about 1 hour (no interval)

Programme notes

The two short pieces from the 1960s (pre-Scratch Orchestra) reflect my earlier interest in the European post-Webern avant-garde of that period. ***Piano Piece 1962*** is a study in 12-note serial technique, combining disjunct angular motifs derived from 3-note segments of the chromatic series. ***Piano Piece March 1968***, no longer serial, explores the antithesis between dense chromatic aggregates and brief linear fragments at opposite ends of the keyboard, with extreme sonorities and dynamic contrasts. I discontinued writing in this style after the experience of the Scratch Orchestra, but an interest in experimental ways of exploring the full chromatic pitch range still informs much of my more recent music.

Space/Time Piano Pieces (2000 - 2003) were written using an open form of notation without barlines, time-signatures or precise durations. Distribution and length of sounds are estimated flexibly by each player in response to the way the notes are spaced on the page. Dynamics, articulation and other aspects of performance are also freely chosen.

Piano Piece December 2000 (for Philip Thomas) was the first of the space/time pieces to be written. One of the aims of using this form of notation was to escape from the momentum of an underlying pulse and to allow the sounds to resonate freely, to 'float' within the given time frame.

In the pieces for two pianos (***September 2001*** and ***February 2002***) the two parts are played together without exact co-ordination. Silently depressed keys are used to create harmonic resonances which 'colour' the spaces between sounds. Durations and rhythmic relationships between the players are not intended to be measured exactly, but are chosen spontaneously, by listening rather than counting.

The harmonic material for each part is determined systematically and prepared in advance, but each performance explores different ways in which the pitches can be combined and contrasted. Harmonic continuity is disrupted, the interaction of the players creating unpredictable juxtapositions, clashes and collisions between the two parts.

Oblique Pieces (of which there are 25 so far) are occasional pieces that share a common method of composition, although they are stylistically diverse. A permutational system is used to create 12-note pitch charts which provide a basis for intuitive development in terms of rhythm, texture and articulation. The results are predominantly chromatic, sometimes allowing fleeting tonal references to arise in unfamiliar contexts. The two jazz-inflected **Jives** also belong to this series.

Krapp Music is based on the monodrama by Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*.

It was originally written for John Tilbury in 1999, for live and pre-recorded piano.

This version was made in 2025, using selections from the original pitch material, but without the pre-recorded parts.

Letter-to-pitch codes were used to derive all the pitch sequences from the original text.

These sequences are played in a free rubato, recitative-like manner, like speech rhythms abstracted from their original meanings. A possible precedent may be found in a passage from Beckett's novel *Molloy*, in which the protagonist remarks:

'not that I was hard of hearing, for I had quite a sensitive ear, and sounds unencumbered with precise meaning were registered perhaps better by me than by most. . . . Yes, the words I heard, and heard distinctly, having quite a sensitive ear, were heard a first time, then a second, and often even a third, as pure sounds, free of all meaning . . . ' (*Molloy*, p. 50)

Michael Parsons

About Michael Parsons

After taking a degree in Classics at St. John's College Oxford (1957-61), Michael Parsons studied composition at Royal College of Music with P. Racine Fricker (1961-2). Early music influenced by Schoenberg, Webern and European avant-garde of the 1950s. In 1969 he was co-founder with Cardew and Skempton of the Scratch Orchestra, collaborating with improvisors and performance artists from diverse backgrounds. Taught in art schools in London and Portsmouth (1970 - 90), formed a close association with the Systems group of visual artists. Renewed interest in indeterminacy and improvisation during the 1990s. Recent works include settings of Greek lyrics for the Finnish vocal ensemble Fiori, *Saitenspiel* for string orchestra (2020) and *Levels for Orchestra* (BBC commission (2021-22)).

About Siwan Rhys

Welsh pianist Siwan Rhys enjoys a varied career of solo, chamber, and ensemble work with a strong focus on contemporary music and collaboration with composers and other artists. Her work has taken her to venues including all the major London concert halls, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Philharmonie de Paris, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Carnegie Hall, Walt Disney Hall, and Tokyo Opera City. She has appeared at the BBC Proms, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Aldeburgh Festival, Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, MaerzMusik Berlin, Darmstadt Festival, Warsaw Autumn and many others. Her recordings include solo music by Barbara Monk Feldman, Ryoko Akama, James Weeks, and Mira Calix/John Cage, and chamber music by Lisa Illean, Oliver Leith, Alex Paxton, Stockhausen, Cassandra Miller, Eva-Maria Houben, Lawrence Dunn, and Steve Reich, featuring on labels such as NMC, Platoon, HCR, all that dust, Nonesuch, and Another Timbre. With percussionist George Barton, she makes up one half of award-winning piano-percussion duo GBSR Duo. She is also a member of new music groups Explore Ensemble and the Colin Currie Group, and works regularly with other ensembles including London Sinfonietta, London Symphony Orchestra, and Riot Ensemble.

November Concerts at City

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Made at City: 50 Years of Electroacoustic Music Created at City St George's

A celebration of electroacoustic music created at the City St George's, curated by Professor Simon Emmerson.

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Tuesday 18 November 2025, 7pm

Hayley Suviste: *Sounding Place*

Field recordings, oral histories, and moving image woven together to explore how people and environments shape one another.

[TICKETS HERE](#)

Tuesday 25 November 2025, 7pm

Bea Hebron: *I don't know what the water wanted*

The artistic process laid bare, in this audiovisual "live songwriting" performance.

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