



NOTES
FROM THE
UNDERGROWTH

an ecosystem of piano miniatures

Hannah Watson Emmrich, piano

I conceived *Notes from the Undergrowth* as a kind of 'ecosystem' of miniatures exploring a day and night in the forest: a web of interlinked pieces by different composers, talking to each other across time and space. The links between the works are sometimes explicit: Marion Bauer and Amy Beach were possibly inspired by the very same birch trees, at the MacDowell colony, an artistic retreat in New Hampshire. Pieces are sometimes bound together by chance thematic similarities, such as the last two tracks on the disc. And sometimes the relationship is competitive: the prosaic buzzing of Bartók's fly upsetting the blustery drama of Pejáčević's *Blütenwirbel*.

Perhaps the most famous piece on this disc comes from Schumann's *Waldszenen* (Forest Scenes), a cycle of piano pieces which explores the contrast between the familiar human world and the mysterious, at times dangerous, world of the forest. The cycle is structured like a hike: we start with an 'Eintritt', an entry, move through different landscapes, beautiful, mysterious or spooky, pause for a snack at a friendly 'Herberge', and finish with a tender 'Abschied', farewell, as we return home.

Over the last few years, my hiking has been constrained by the presence of small children. Going for a walk in the woods with a small child is largely a matter of doubling back on yourself and poking mushrooms with sticks. It is meandering and by necessity focuses on small things, strange things, things low to the ground: the undergrowth. It is this experience of the forest that underpins the disc: I leaned toward pieces that paid attention to individual species or moments rather than broad landscapes, that were evocative but not 'merely' beautiful, that had some irregularity or strangeness, some quirk that caught the attention.

In the interests of proper ecological planning, I needed some pieces about species other than birds, bees and birch trees. It was a joke about the lack of fungi-inspired piano music that led to the first of the new pieces, Timothy Salter's *Midnight Mushrooms*; followed by Joshua Borin's *Grex*, inspired by the fascinating properties of slime moulds; and Maki Gajic Murata's *Fireflies*. I am hugely grateful to all three of the composers for entering into this rather strange ask so creatively, and I have enormously enjoyed playing the pieces. ■

NOTES ON THE PIECES

Janáček's cycle *On an overgrown path* is a journey into the tangled weeds of memory, its title taken from a Moravian wedding song where the bride mourns that "the path to my mother's has become overgrown with clover". This movement has no individual title, but its sense of tentative exploration, things unfurling, make it a perfect path into the early-morning forest.

The disc would be almost entirely drawn from the 20th and 21st century were it not for the imaginative harpsichord miniatures of the French Baroque. In Rameau's imitation of dawn birdsong **Le rappel des oiseaux**, an ornament passed between left hand and right imitates a lively, perhaps competitive, call-and-response between a pair of birds.

Written in 1917, Dillon's **Birds at Dawn** is an early experiment in the kind of meticulous notation of birdsong that Olivier Messiaen attempts in his later music. The title page includes excerpts of six separate birdsongs which feature 'in Canon style' in the dawn chorus, all from the mountains of California. Dillon writes the 'these themes are written as accurately as

possible' but does concede that she has chosen some unusually musical birds!

Bauer's **White Birches** is one of the most haunting pieces on the disc, beautifully capturing the rustling of hanging birch leaves and their dappled light and shade. **Blütenwirbel** provides a release of tension: the piece is light and virtuosic, with a soaring melody over a giddy, irregular accompaniment. The bitonal buzzing of Bartók's **From the diary of a fly** is created by the very simple technique of using the left hand on the white keys and the right hand on the black. The score is annotated partway through with 'Ouch! A cobweb!' – but presumably the fly escapes, as the last section is marked 'with joy, lightly' as it fades into the distance.

Latching on to the G left hanging, **Grex** takes its inspiration from the extraordinary behaviours displayed by slime moulds. Normally single-celled amoebas, individual cells can join together into a 'grex', from the Latin for 'flock', a slug-like form which allows the slime mould to move to new environments and find food. In this piece, complex ▶

and rapidly-changing small-scale activity provides the impetus for slower, larger-scale motion, as materials and ideas combine to reach a common goal.

Messiaen wrote **La colombe** at the age of just 20, shortly after the death of his mother, the poet Cecile Sauvage. The piece captures the mournful, falling tone of a dove's cooing with deceptive simplicity. The real magic is in the last three bars, where high not-quite-octaves create a far-away, shimmering effect.

Janáček's **Blown-away leaf**, from the first book of *On an overgrown path*, floats dreamily along at first, before being caught up in sudden eddies and gusts of wind. The piece started life as 'A declaration of love' and then 'A love song' before the composer settled on the final title. It is followed by the spiky and humorous **Il pleut**, which nods to Debussy's *Jardins sous la pluie*, the rustling **Young birches** and sparkling, frenetic **A hummingbird**.

Margrit Schencker's series *Baumklang (Tree sound)*, published in 2002, was written collaboratively with her piano students as a tool for teaching improvisation in lessons. The pieces are simple and freely notated, with sections where the right hand improvises over a

repeated bass. As well as an organist and composer, Schencker is an accordionist, and there is more than a hint of this forthright soundworld in the generous ripples of **Chinese Cherry Tree**.

Schumann discarded most of his planned epigraphs for *Waldszenen*, feeling that the music should speak for itself, but he had originally planned to publish **Vogel als Prophet** with a line from an Eichendorff poem, *Zwielicht* (Twilight): 'Hüte dich, sei wach und munter!' ('Be careful, stay awake and alert!') For me, it is not the song but the curious stop-start movement of a bird that is evoked in this spare and spooky piece: perhaps it is the bird's tense watchfulness, its stillness interspersed with sudden head movements, that is 'prophetic', a reminder of coming danger as the darkness falls.

Dusk continues to gather in the padding footfall of Couperin's **Les ombres errantes**, its low C minor coda providing the perfect backdrop for the opening sparks of Maki Gajic Murata's **Fireflies**. The piece is prefaced by a quote from Robert A Johnson: 'The place where light and dark begin to touch is where miracles arise'. Its meditative ending gives way to the gentle motion of **Evening Breeze**, a cooler and more comfortable vision

of nightfall. Ethiopian composer Emahoy Tsegue Mariam Gebru's fascinating life is well worth reading about: she died in 2023 and her legacy is the Emahoy Tsege Mariam Music Foundation, a self-financed non-profit that funds music education programs in Ethiopia and the US.

The real night starts with the wayward, often ungainly fluttering of Ravel's **Noctuelles**, from *Miroirs*. The title of **Midnight Mushrooms**, the last of the new commissions, is taken from the Tempest '...and you whose pastime/ is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice / To hear the solemn curfew...' The piece opens with faraway bells, interspersed with more sinuous,

Hannah Watson Emmrich's performances have included solo, chamber and song recitals at the Barbican, St Martin-in-the-Fields, LSO St Luke's, Sinfonia Smith Square, Cardiff's St David's Hall and the Royal Festival Hall, as well as performances on Radio 3's In Tune and Afternoon on 3, and in the film *The Lady in the Van*.

Hannah studied Modern Languages at Cambridge with an Erasmus year at the ENS de Lyon. After

fleeting gestures and richer, earthier textures. It is followed by Couperin's fragile and supremely beautiful **Le rossignol en amour**.

Palme mit Schnee, a palm tree covered in snow, evokes Torquay in January perhaps more than an actual forest: but I couldn't resist its slow strangeness here and the magical coincidence of themes as it melts into the **Nocturne**. Pejčević sets her own text at the head of this late work: 'On crown and boughs the moonshine weaves, the birch in white just like a bride, love-heralding through jasmine, lilac, the dreamy trilling of the nightingale.' ■
Hannah Watson Emmrich

graduating, she moved to London for a solo piano Masters and Artist Diploma at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, taught by Martin Roscoe and Caroline Palmer. Her studies were generously funded by Help Musicians and the Countess of Munster Musical Trust, the Worshipful Company of Tallow Chandlers, the Kenneth Loveland Gift and others. From 2017-2021, Hannah worked as Music Director at All Saints' Cathedral, Nairobi, leading a team of around ▶

200 musicians over 8 adult and children's choirs, as well as a major organ restoration project. She continued to give solo, song and chamber recitals and perform as a concerto soloist with local orchestras. She also taught and mentored several talented teenagers, two of whom went on to study at US conservatoires. She maintains an ongoing link with music in Kenya and returned in 2025 to perform Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 4 in G major with the Nairobi Orchestra and for recitals and masterclasses with a longstanding duo partner, violist Luba Tunnicliffe.

Alongside her performing work, Hannah is currently music director for Norwich-based chamber choir Sine Nomine and St Anselm's Church Kennington, leading a vibrant mixed-tradition department including adult and children's choirs, choral scholars and a steel pan band.

Joshua Borin read music at Clare College, Cambridge, studying composition with Robin Holloway and Jeremy Thurlow, and continued his studies under the tutelage of Julian Philips and Julian Anderson at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, where he was a Leverhulme Arts Scholar and was also generously supported by the Countess of Munster Musical Trust and the RVW Trust.

He has written major commissions for Vienna Philharmonic trombonist and ARD Competition Winner Michael Buchanan, and after winning the Galliard Ensemble's 20th anniversary composition competition was commissioned to write a new work for the group. His song *Nature is Returning*, commissioned by BBC New Generation Artist Helen Charlston, was selected by Martin Handley as his pick for Radio 3's programme "New Year, New



PHOTO BY JANESE THORNTON

Music". Joshua's works have been performed in major venues including the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, Wigmore Hall, Barbican Hall and Westminster Abbey, at festivals around the UK and abroad, and broadcast on UK and Netherlands radio.

Maki Gajic Murata is a composer, accompanist, conductor, and an enthusiastic educator. In 2025, she completed a Master's in Composition at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and learnt with the fabulous Hollie Harding. Maki currently works at a leading school in London where she shares her love of music with great gusto! Recent works have been written for Exaudi, Plus Minus, Gloucestershire Youth Wind Band, and the Gaia Singers. Maki's work is grounded in autobiography and integrating aspects of her heritage and identity. She is really passionate about creating accessible contemporary music for amateur and young musicians and making them excited about new music.

Timothy Salter is a composer, conductor and pianist, whose works include instrumental, chamber and orchestral music, choral music and songs. He was born in Yorkshire and read music at St. John's

College, Cambridge. His numerous public and private commissions comprise concert music in many genres but also include incidental music for television. His compositions appear on several recording labels and have been broadcast throughout the world. As a pianist he performs with singers and instrumentalists in Britain and overseas.

He is musical director of The Ionian Singers, with whom he records and performs internationally. He is a strong advocate of the composer-performer, believing that executant experience has an invaluable effect on composition. In pursuit of this he has written a substantial body of choral works and works including chorus, and much of his wide-ranging instrumental music has been written for colleague performers.

For many years he taught composition and performance studies at the Royal College of Music, London. As a composer and performer he has considerable experience in working with musicians, student and professional, on the performance of contemporary music. In 1995 he founded Usk Recordings for the promulgation of new music and neglected works from the past. ■

DXL1223

1 Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) On an overgrown path book 2 no. 1	3:20	12 Amy Beach (1867-1944) A hummingbird	1:12
2 Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) Le rappel des oiseaux / The call of the birds.....	3:01	13 Margrit Schenker (1960-) Chinesischer Kirschbaum / Chinese Cherry Tree... 2:02	
3 Fannie Charles Dillon (1881-1947) Birds at Dawn.....	2:57	14 Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Vogel als Prophet / The bird as prophet.....	3:17
4 Marion Bauer (1882-1955) White Birches	2:24	15 François Couperin (1668-1733) Les ombres errantes / Wandering shadows.....	3:19
5 Dora Pejáčević (1885-1923) Blütenwirbel / A whirl of blossoms.....	2:26	16 Maki Gajic Murata Fireflies (*new commission)	5:32
6 Béla Bartók (1881-1945) From the diary of a fly	1:28	17 Emahoy Tsegue Mariam Gebru (1923-2023) Evening Breeze	3:25
7 Joshua Borin (1989-) GreX (*new commission).....	4:04	18 Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) Noctuelles / Night moths	5:31
8 Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) La colombe / The dove	1:59	19 Timothy Salter Midnight Mushrooms (*new commission).....	1:55
9 Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) A blown-away leaf	2:57	20 François Couperin (1668-1733) Le rossignol en amour / The nightingale in love	3:40
10 Mel Bonis (1858-1937) Il pleut / It is raining.....	2:22	21 Margrit Schenker (1960-) Palme mit Schnee / Palm with snow	2:51
11 Amy Beach (1867-1944) Young birches.....	2:24	22 Dora Pejáčević (1885-1923) Nocturne	2:44

Total playing time: 64:49

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