

Sky Disc

Himmelsscheibe / Disc del Cel
an opera oratorio

Idea and libretto by Rebecca Simpson
Music by Ramon Humet



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“Music that is teeming, subtle, living, sensitive to the world’s breathing. A spread of different qualities crowned by a rare capacity to bring together opposites, lightness and depth, objectivity and expression.”

Philippe Danel. *January 3, 2008*

“Simpson made of Juana a universal symbol of those condemned to be ostracised by the machinations of power.”

El Universal Online. *June 26, 2005.*

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Concept

In the explosively creative period at the end of the Early Bronze Age in Central and Northern Europe, remarkable cultures were connected by trade and travel. Prized bronze workers were the elite technology experts of the time. The Nebra Sky-disc, unearthed in 1999 near the village of Nebra, Germany, and retrieved from black market dealers in 2001, is the world's earliest known representation of the night sky. It encodes information that enabled the alignment of the solar and lunar calendars, permitting more effective agriculture. Its decipherment has revolutionised the understanding of the Bronze Age in Europe.

Made perhaps as early as 1800 BC, with copper from the Alps in Austria and tin and gold from Cornwall in South West Britain, the Nebra Sky-disc was twice modified with further inlaid forms. It was dismantled, probably ritually when it ceased to be of use following a natural disaster, and was buried between 1600 and 1550 BC. It is now believed that the eruption of Thera (Santorini) caused the skies of Northern Europe to be covered with clouds of volcanic ash for twenty to twenty-five years, thus causing the - previously unexplained - disappearance of the Unetice people (Aunjetitz in German) who created the Sky-disc.

In June 2013, the Nebra Sky-disc was included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register.

The libretto of the opera-oratorio ***Sky Disc*** both contemplates the archeological object, the Nebra Sky-disc (die Himmelsscheibe von Nebra), from a modern perspective, and tells the story of a fictional drama set in the Bronze Age. The opera-oratorio reaches back and forwards in time, weaving together strands of a common European culture.

The opera scenes take place on a single day in the region where the Nebra Sky-disc was discovered: in the Bronze Age village where it belongs, on a river by night, and on the Mittelberg hilltop. A smith intends to add two gold arcs to the precious object. These arcs will indicate sections of the horizon as seen from the Mittelberg, thus converting the disc into a portable solstice calendar in addition to its original use. But lack of sufficient gold, and the arrival of a woman the smith had met on a recent journey complicate the day.

Towards the end of ***Sky Disc***, time stretches and its treatment becomes more symbolic, as opera and oratorio –text, music and singers– meld together. In one passage, led by a young solo voice, the claim is made that we, -singers, audience and, by extension, humanity- are an expression of Time, its inhabitants, rather than simply its victims. Before the end of the work we see the

disc buried, after which **Sky Disc** is brought to a powerful yet delicate close.

The richly developed characters are: a smith, his apprentice, this same boy's grandmother, a woman who is travelling and escaping from danger, and her cousin who translates and mediates; other figures are a mysterious boatman and a priest. In the oratorio sections, solo voices sometimes emerge from, and interact with, the choir, which has its own strong presence and personality. The protagonist of the work is ultimately the Sky-disc, given voice by the choir at a central moment of the work.

Three of Europe's modern languages are used in **Sky Disc**, in a relationship with place that is unconnected to modern geographical usage: **English** by the Sky-disc villagers, **German** by the woman who brings gold from the island in the west, and **Catalan** by the young woman from a region in between and by the Boatman. Furthermore, carefully chosen works or fragments by writers in each language are incorporated into the libretto.

The music of **Sky Disc** revolves around a mixed choir (SATB) which serves as a musical allegory of the 32 gold-encrusted stars on the surface of the bronze disc. This choir is the protagonist of the oratorio sections. Divisi and other vocal resources are used to build the musical framework for the work's reflective moments, and to link the dramatic action of the operatic scenes.

The sound-world created for the oratorio coexists with that of the opera, interrelating musically as well as dramatically on various differentiated, parallel levels. The openings and closings of each scene dissolve, so as to bathe and flood the adjacent scenes, creating a sound continuum as the time framework. This flux provides the substrata from which the initial questions of the opera-libretto are generated: What? Why? Who? How? The harmony is built from a collection of 32 resonant chords, of seven notes each, which evoke once again the 32 stars that include the Pleiades constellation of seven stars, depicted on the Nebra Sky-disc.

The continuous movement of the act of breathing is another key element that runs through the work. The opera-oratorio opens with waves of "audible air" which bring with them the fundamental questions raised by the archeological object found at Nebra. Later, at a moment of great intimacy, the individual breathing of Gueren, one of the opera's main characters, merges with silence and with the audience's presence. By means of these formal processes related to breathing and the vital breath of living beings, the music develops structurally through the whole work, following organic curves and outlines.

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Overview

Idea and libretto by Rebecca Simpson

Music by Ramon Humet

Duration 110 minutes

Instrumentation 2 (II=doubling piccolo). 2 (II=doubling English horn). 2 (II=doubling bass clarinet). 2 (II=doubling contrabassoon).- 2. 2. 2. 1. - perc (2): timpani / crotales set / suspended crotales (F, F#, G, G#, A) / 2 anvils / 3 temple blocks / 2 crash cymbals / 3 toms / 2 metal chimes / Tibetan bowl / rainstick / flexatone / marimba / large tamtam / tambourine / whip / ocean drum / bamboo chimes / sleigh bells – harp – strings (8.8.6.6.4.)

Singers Fierket (Bar) / Guueren (M) / Estria (A) / Pyrpi (T) / Tamar (S) / Boatman (Bass) / Priest (Bass)

Languages English, German and Catalan

World premiere October 2, 2013. 19'30h. Oper Halle, Germany

Other performances October 6, 18, 23. November 9, 2013

Musical direction Andreas Henning

Stage direction G.H. Seebach

Costumes Ragna Heiny

Choir Jens Pete montar

Theater Hartmut Schörghofer

Dramaturgy André Meyer

Video Anke Tornow

Fierket Gerd Vogel

Guueren Sandra Maxheimer

Estria Maria Petrašovská

Pyrpi Robert Sellier

Tamar Hiltrud Kuhlmann

Boatman Ulrich Burdack

Priest Ki-Hyun Park

Boy soprano Julia Preußler

Solo voice Kaori Sekigawa

Commissioned by Bühnen Halle, and with financial support from the Government of Catalonia

Rebecca Simpson

Rebecca Simpson was born in the UK and has lived in Barcelona for half her life. She is a writer, actor, translator and teacher. She has a degree in English Literature and a Spanish Language qualification from Cambridge University. She studied at the Theatre Institute in Barcelona, and has a diploma in Dance Movement Therapy from Barcelona Autonomous University (UAB).

She has taken writing courses with: April de Angelis, Alejandro Tantanian and, at Barcelona's Sala Beckett, with José Sanchís Sinisterra, Willem Bruhls, Händl Klaus, and Enzo Cormann.

She was an actress and writer for many years with various theatre companies, among others Cambridge Experimental Theatre with which she performed, co-wrote, directed or produced 17 productions, including works by Shakespeare and original group-devised shows with a strong physical theatre base. She has performed the Narrator in „Façade“ by William Walton and Edith Sitwell, and directed „Savitri“ by Gustav Holst, (Òpera de tres Rals, Gran Teatre de la Maestranza, Seville).

Rebecca Simpson's opera libretti to date have stemmed from her own strong ideas. They are skillfully constructed and characterised by supple language that is both poetic and credible. She wrote the libretto for the opera **Juana**, with music by Enric Palomar, premiered in Halle, Germany in June 2005 and at the Romea Theatre in Barcelona, later performed at the Darmstadt State Opera (2007). *Juana* was a co-production between Opernhaus Halle, Gran Teatre del Liceu, Festival of New and Pocket Opera, and Romea Theatre Foundation. **Tales of Liberation**

with music by Andy Pape, was commissioned by Den Ny Opera, Denmark and awaits production. **Himmelscheibe / Sky Disc / Disc del Cel** is her third full length libretto.



Ramon Humet

Ramon Humet has a wide repertoire of vocal, instrumental, electroacoustic and stage music. Composer and engineer, his music has been warmly received by both audiences and critics given his relentless search for a highly refined personal language and the balance he has achieved between form and expression. After studying composition with the composer Josep Soler, he met the British composer Jonathan Harvey, an encounter that deeply marked his creative path.

In 2007 he was awarded the Olivier Messiaen International Composition Prize, which led to the commission — on the initiative of conductor Kent Nagano — of the orchestral composition 'Scenes of Wind' for the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, premiered in 2008 and conducted by Jacques Lacombe. Other awards for his orchestral music include the XXIV Queen Sofia International Composition Prize.

Ramon Humet's music exudes an intense love of nature, embodied in symphonic works such as 'Música del no ésser' (Music of Non-being), premiered by the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra under Pablo Gonzalez, or 'Escenes d'ocells' (Scenes of Birds) which has been the subject of multiple performances, conducted by Jean François Rivest, Adrian Leaper, Roberto Minczuk and Rubén Gimeno with various orchestras. Piano music is key in the catalogue of Humet's works, notably Volume III in the series 'Escenes del bosc' (Forest Scenes), commissioned by the Association pour la Création et la Diffusion Artistique and premiered at the Cité de la Musique, Paris, in 2007, as a mandatory piece in the prestigious Concours Olivier Messiaen for piano.



Often inspired by Japanese traditional music for shakuhachi, some of Ramon Humet's most important chamber works have been released on a specially designed compact disc recorded by London Sinfonietta conducted by Nicholas Collon. **Niwa**, produced by Neu Records, has been recorded in high definition sound and 5.1 surround format.

Ramon Humet has taught composition at the Liceu Conservatory since 2009. The scores of the composer's catalogue are published by Tritó Edicions (www.trito.es). **Himmelsscheibe / Sky Disc / Disc del Cel**, which receives its premiere by Oper Halle, Germany, in October 2013, is his first opera.

Excerpt of libretto, page 40

ORATORIO VII

This is a love song
love-of-life-song

Circles!
Orbits of satellites
the pupil of your eye
lips' "o"
crowns, rings and haloes
the sun we think we see

Sphere!
The eye's globe
fish-eggs, pollen, ovules
our image
of the over-arching sky
moon

Hexagon!
Chambers of the honeycomb;
under pressure, no escape.
Rock crystals. Snow

Pentagon!
Growth from the centre
outwards, hawthorn flowers
apple blossom, apple core
delicate, one-celled ocean creatures
reptiles' feet, our hands

Sphere, pentagon, hexagon!

From dying stars,
spherical carbon molecules
- hollow cages -
with pentagon and hexagon faces
transport elements
else...where

Aeons ago
hydrogen carbon combined
gave rise to cells
sea creatures
flowers, honey
hands, lips, eyes

my hands your lips our eyes

Contact information

Manager

Dietrich Grosse info@mondigromax.com
www.mondigromax.com

Score publisher

Toni Cruanyes toni@trito.es (hire materials)
Leticia Martín lmartin@trito.es (promotion)
www.trito.es

Authors

Ramon Humet info@ramonhumet.com
www.ramonhumet.com

Rebecca Simpson info@rebeccasimpson.com
www.rebeccasimpson.com