

Elsewhereness





Joe Cutler

photo © Rose Redgrave

**1 Elsewhereness** 8'40  
Royal Birmingham Conservatoire Symphony Orchestra • Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla *conductor*

**2 McNulty** 10'29  
Fidelio Trio

**3 For Frederic Lagnau** 7'00  
Workers Union Ensemble

#### Akhmatova Fragments

**4 I** 2'34

**5 II** 1'30

**6 III** 1'32

**7 IV** 1'23

**8 V** 7'27

Sarah Leonard *soprano* • Project Instrumental • Daniele Rosina *conductor*

Violin: David Le Page, Catherine Leech, Tadasuke Iijima, Lucy McKay, Flora Curzon, Harri Allan

Viola: Rose Redgrave, Francesca Gilbert • Cello: Kirsten Jenson, Sergio Serra • Double bass: Ed Babar

**9 Sikorski B** 7'11  
Noszferatu

**10 Karembeu's Guide to the Complete Defensive Midfielder** 24'23  
Emulsion Sinfonietta featuring Iain Ballamy *saxophone*

Total timing 72'07

## Note by Mark Storey

Joe Cutler's first album on NMC (*Bartlebooth*, 2008) announced a new and distinctive voice: here was music full of life and energy, with an urgent rhythmic drive. Alongside the questioning of each and every generic convention was an invigorating formal variety. At the heart of the programme lay four settings of poems by Wisława Szymborska, a demonstration of Cutler's wide cultural affinities. With *Boogie Nights* (2013) Cutler pushed these various aspects of his music in different directions, bringing to the fore the complex relationship between hitherto unrelated types of music: *Slippery Music*, for example, or *Comfortable Music*, or *Music for Parakeets*, lead the listener in explorations hinted at in *Bartlebooth* but here pursued more fully. This process is continued in this latest album with wonderful side-steps and nudges, affirmations and denials, as Cutler further establishes himself within the ever-widening canon of contemporary music.

***Elsewhereness*** is a fine example of Cutler's compositional tact: an 'occasional' piece, written for the opening of the newly built Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, it has just the right sense of occasion, both celebratory and communal (it is dedicated to the Conservatoire and 'all who inhabit it'). But as his programme note suggests, Cutler is exploring, with characteristic modesty, the metaphysics of place, of moving from one building as it is dismantled to the new one as it rises from its foundations. 'Some place elsewhere', he writes, 'a city is envisioned, with hope and zeal it is constructed, with imagination and love it is inhabited, and eventually with stealth it is reclaimed by nature.' Short and concise, *Elsewhereness* opens with a characteristic Cutlerian flourish, an almost jaunty brass theme played over plucked strings; the ingenious use of repetition and answering phrases allows for a wonderfully insistent rhythmic pulse, as complexity intrudes with extraordinary

percussive cross-rhythms. If we can hear the repeated sound of creative anvils, the cumulative effect of the barking rhythms reminds us of the disturbing unsettledness of this process. Cutler cleverly moulds one concept into another, both similar and different: towards the end the 'impermanence of the cities we construct' is mirrored in the gradual collapse of the music, as it fragments, punctuated by almost desperate chords over the subterranean growling of the lower strings. As the music fades away, there might appear to be a sense of resolution; but beneath that hushed conclusion lurks the unease Cutler refuses to ignore. The generosity of his warm embrace does not preclude a quiet hesitancy.

***Karembu's Guide to the Complete Defensive Midfielder*** is a typically wild Cutlerian title (there are videos to be found online, appropriately brief and teasing, of the French footballer

Christian Karembu demonstrating the importance of short passing and the combination of movement and control). It reflects the nature of this particular exploration of what Cutler calls, drily, 'the creation of a hybrid compositional aesthetic'. He pushes the boundaries of jazz, contemporary classical and post-minimalism, in a work that grew out of close collaboration with Trish Clowes's wonderful Emulsion Sinfonietta and the duo Food (Thomas Stronen and Iain Ballamy). This is a piece of virtuosic improvisation, as the players outvie each other in their brilliant flights of fancy; but it is held together by the intriguing, and constantly demanding, structure, which takes the listener perhaps further in all directions than in any previous Cutler work. The mysterious opening, with the saxophone searching for some kind of way to begin, is echoed by the final minutes of the piece, as things appear to come full circle. But there are manifold diversions along the way: there are

moments of high comedy, as one skittish rhythm merges into another, as lines pile upon lines in a complex interplay, before, a third of the way through, the music halts, and is held in some kind of stasis, as though wondering quite where it might go next. It is soon apparent that the almost crazy virtuosity that follows is in fact a working out of its own inherent puzzles. There are moments of cerebral interrogation, before a startling change of mood, as a high string note floats above a soulful saxophone line, which in turn descends into something deeper and richer, as fluttermonguing gives way, against all the odds, to music reminiscent of a revivalist meeting hall, as everything slows: all the high jinks have led to exhaustion, but also to the kind of musical resolution that is one of the hallmarks of Cutler's work. Whilst this is predominantly a piece for a jazz group that goes beyond jazz, it is not fanciful to hear in those final extended trills an echo of the last pages of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata*, where trills are used as never before and seldom since.

Cutler knows that what some might consider ornamentation can be the most important thing.

That notion occurs also in **McNulty** (commissioned by the Fidelio Trio in 2016), another example of Joe Cutler's ability to straddle several different kinds of aesthetics. There is the deeply flawed character of that name in the American TV drama *The Wire*, which leads Cutler to explore ideas of various kinds of identities, the extent to which material of any kind is 'pertinent or impertinent', and the way this can be reflected in music that 'goes off the rails'. There is also the nature of Irish traditional music – Cutler himself played fiddle in such music in the 90s, and this piece again shows his knowledge of the performative aspects of musicmaking, whereby he can engage in close collaboration with other musicians; as with *Karembau* there is a sense of the piece developing its own momentum, that improvisatory capacity that Cutler prizes. By the end of the piece the listener is left almost intoxicated by the seemingly zany

rhythmic and melodic repetitions. After the lengthy jig-like opening section, which includes an elaborate tune alongside percussive effects, there emerges a drawn-out violin melody above frenzied activity before everything slows down, as though for a breather, before going slightly crazy again as it speeds up, and trills (again) assert themselves. There follows a lull, quiet and dependent on harmonics, whilst the piano plays soft arpeggios in what amounts to one of Cutler's most poignant instrumental moments. Towards the end the music starts to wind itself up with a sort of sustained deep rumbling, before the finale in which repeated notes on the piano transmogrify into a chordal sense of relief, 'calm of mind all passion spent'.

**Sikorski B** is a fine example of Joe Cutler's readiness to rethink earlier work, his refusal to stand still. The Polish composer Tomasz Sikorski (1939-88) was one of his early influences, and *Sikorski* (2005) was an act of homage, written for Noszferatu, of which Cutler is

codirector. This piece explores a different possible response to Sikorski's work. For much of the first part it presents itself as a slow, quiet meditation between piano and saxophone: above a rippling piano accompaniment a saxophone sings its sad, long-held, notes, a descending phrase that is repeated, in an increasingly hypnotic fashion. The music hangs in the air in some kind of suspended animation, before from the depths the saxophone soars higher and more shrill, leaving far behind that almost impressionistic, quiet and reflective opening. There is then a sudden and brilliant silence before the piano starts again on a different tack, as though to tell us that we should not have thought those opening bars were to be left unchallenged; the demented saxophone yelps in the stratosphere like some crazed (and very un-Messiaen-like) bird. The music suddenly stops, as we are left hanging. If that was a bird, screeching its craziness, then it has, like the neighbour's pigeons in an early episode of *Mad Men*, been shot. Joe Cutler's settings of some

of Wisława Szymborska's poems (*In Praise of Dreams*, 2004), demonstrate not only his knowledge of, and love for, Polish culture in its many forms, but also his striking ability to match words to music. In the *Akhmatova Fragments* (2007-8) – also written, as were those earlier settings, for Sarah Leonard – he captures the fleeting moods of poems that are themselves often fragments. We can see how there is a connection between these fragments and those of *Elsewhereness*: as Akhmatova says in one of these poems, 'In canals around the Neva fire fragments'; it makes perfect sense for her work to appeal so strongly to Joe Cutler. These poems move from euphoria to despair: Cutler matches these shifts with exemplary concision. Whilst two of the songs ('*For Evening*' and '*We're all drunkards here*') explore the hysterical and desperate aspects of love and its thwartings, with wide soprano leaps, often over a plucked string accompaniment (occasionally jig-like, harking back to *McNulty* and the string quartet *Folk Music in Boogie Nights*),

two songs move much more slowly, with greater melancholy. '*Do you forgive me*' contains within its three lines a poignant desolation, whilst the much longer '*Summer Garden*' draws from Cutler the most beautiful of melodies, that feels as though it could go on forever; whereas most of the other songs end suddenly, this one lingers, imbued, as it seems to be, with 'the fragrant quiet/Between the lines of Tsarskoye.' There is a remarkable stillness here, hard earned but well earned.

Joe Cutler knew the French minimalist Frederic Lagnau when they were both at Darmstadt in 1992. They shared a determination to push beyond the boundaries of contemporary music. For Frederic Lagnau consists of miniatures, each with its own inner logic, within a larger framework that begins and ends with a chorale-like keyboard motif that has similarities to the end of *Karembeu*. The central sections combine the old-fashioned virtues of a 'good tune' and quietly subtle rhythmic twists and turns. There is a well-defined modesty about

this piece, which allows Cutler to call the music to a sudden halt before restarting with the keyboard chorale. But whereas there are several examples on this album of gentle resolutions, here the hectic final bars suddenly stop, and it feels like an inspired afterthought. It is a startling reminder that in Joe Cutler's musical world, things do not stay quiet and apparently resolved for long. He is a true heir of Heracleitus: everything is in a state of flux, and there are always more questions to ask.

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## JOE CUTLER ON NMC

### **Bartlebooth** NMC D134

Andrew Sparling *clarinet* • Fidelio Trio  
Orkest de Ereprijs • Sarah Leonard *soprano*  
Robin Michael *cello* • BBC Concert Orchestra  
Charles Hazlewood *conductor*

### **Nosferatu: Drempe** NMC D134

featuring Joe Cutler's *Sikorski B*  
Nosferatu

### **Ping!** NMC DL201206

The Coull String Quartet (with Tom Cutler, John Dennison, Martin Smith and David Fraser)

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### **Bright Future** NMC D080

featuring Joe Cutler's *Jiggadibox*

### **Darragh Morgan: Opera** NMC D108

featuring Joe Cutler's *re(GAIA)*

### **The NMC Songbook** NMC D150

featuring Joe Cutler's *Bands*

### **Here Be Monsters** NMC DL3005

featuring Joe Cutler's *Visions Of A Floating World*

### **Magenta Cuts** NMC DL3006

featuring Joe Cutler's *Buckley's Hot Licks*

## Akhmatova Fragments

### Track 5 (from Evening)

The pillow hot  
On both sides,  
The second candle  
Dying, the ravens  
Crying. Haven't  
Slept all night, too late  
To dream of sleep ...  
How unbearably white  
The blind on the white window.  
Good morning, morning!

### Track 6 (from Rosary)

Do you forgive me these November days?  
In canals around the Neva fires fragment.  
Scant is tragic autumn's finery.

### Track 7 (from Rosary)

We're all drunkards here. Harlots.  
Joylessly we're stuck together.  
On the walls, scarlet  
Flowers, birds of a feather,

Pine for clouds. Your black pipe  
Makes strange shapes rise.  
I wear my skirt tight  
To my slim thighs.

### Track 8: Summer Garden (from Northern Elegies)

I want to visit the roses  
In that lonely  
Park where the statues remember me young  
And I remember them under the water  
Of the Neva. In the fragrant quiet  
Between the limes of Tsarskoye I hear  
A creak of masts. And the swan swims  
Still, admiring its lovely

Double. And a hundred thousand steps,  
Friend and enemy, enemy and friend,  
Sleep. Endless is the procession of shades  
Between granite vase and palace door.  
There my white nights  
Whisper of someone's discreet exalted  
Love. And everything is mother-  
Of-pearl and jasper,  
But the light's source is a secret

Anna Akhmatova

From Anna Akhmatova - Selected Poems  
(Penguin Twenty Century Classics,  
translated by D.M. Thomas).

Joe Cutler's music has been described as 'propulsive' (*BBC Music Magazine*), 'alluring' (*Scotsman*), 'neurotic' (*Re-Diffusion*) and 'the best thing to come out of Neasden since Twiggy' (*Gramophone*).

With collaborators ranging from the London Symphony Orchestra to Evan Parker and Orkest de Ereprijs to Vince Mendoza, his music has been performed in over 40 countries and on six continents including at festivals and venues such as Bang-on-a-Can Music Marathon (New York), Gaudeamus Music Week (Amsterdam and Utrecht), Opera City (Tokyo), Musik Monat (Basle), Concertgebouw (Amsterdam), Beijing Modern Music Festival, London Jazz Festival and the BBC Proms.

In 2008 a portrait CD entitled *Bartlebooth* was released on NMC and was one of *Gramophone Magazine's* Top 20 Releases of the Year. This was followed in 2014 by *Boogie Nights* released on Birmingham Record Company.

In 2008 he was awarded the British Composer Award in the chamber music category for *Folk Music*, written for the Smith Quartet, whilst in 2016 he received the British Composer Award in the jazz category for *Karembou's Guide to the Complete Defensive Midfielder*, a commission from Emulsion Sinfonietta. In 2016 he received an award from the PRS Foundation's Composers' Fund to support the composition of *Elsewhereness* for symphony orchestra.

Since 2000 he has been a founder member of the collective Noszferatu, and since 2005 he has been Head of Composition at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

His music is published by Chester Music and Composers Edition.

Information about the artists on this disc can be found on NMC's website:  
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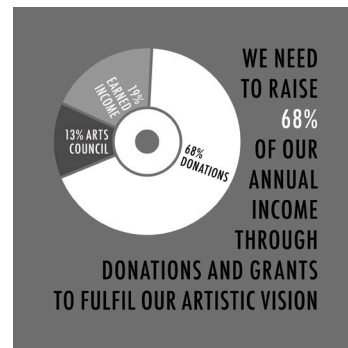
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in association with



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**SIMON HALL** *Recording Producer & Engineer, Mastering*

Music available from Composers' Edition.

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Cover image: *A barn losing its grip* by Chris Redgrave

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