

New Music

This year, for the first time, the Proms has commissioned a new work for each of the eight Proms at ... Cadogan Hall concerts. DAVID KETTLE talks to the composers – all female and all receiving their first Proms commissions



Eight women composers, and eight gloriously contrasting new pieces of music. Each of this year's Proms at ... Cadogan Hall concerts features a brand-new work, bringing together an international collection of female voices, 100 years after women in Britain first won the right to vote. What the new creations highlight is the sheer richness and diversity of composition today, straddling a variety of musical genres and styles.

Slovenian Nina Šenk draws heavily on classical traditions in her ensemble work inspired by the qualities and connotations of glass, while Australian Lisa Illean tackles the nature of sound itself in her music – and the inspiration for her new work is the voice of the mezzo-soprano Dame Sarah Connolly, who will give its premiere. New York-born Suzanne Farrin reflects on natural forces at work in Rome, in music for percussionist Colin Currie and the JACK Quartet, while Pulitzer Prize-winning Caroline Shaw is creating two new works for the Calidore String Quartet, tackling the subject of the transformation and manipulation of language.

Jessica Wells explores the virtuosity of fellow Australian Joseph Tawadros in a work for solo oud, and British-Lebanese composer Bushra El-Turk, writing for Canadian mezzo-soprano Wallis Giunta, is on a mission to bring together different musical traditions. Finally, Parisian keyboardist and improviser Eve Risser is creating a new piece for her compatriot, harpsichordist Jean Rondeau, and Birmingham-born singer-songwriter Laura Mvula draws on her love of choral music in a new piece for the BBC Singers inspired by the Black Madonna of Montserrat in Catalonia. •

David Kettle writes for *The Scotsman*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Arts Desk*, as well as broadly across other publications. He has a special interest in contemporary music and world music.

Bushra El-Turk (born 1982)
Crème Brûlée on a Tree (2018)



PROMS AT ... CADOGAN HALL 7 • 27 AUGUST

'I'm interested in the blurring of things – trying to find the line where one thing dissolves into another.' For London-born composer Bushra El-Turk, that can mean everyday gesture transforming into a new language of movement, as in her recent opera *Woman at Point Zero*, where 'notation also blurs into improvisation', she explains. And, drawing on El-Turk's own Lebanese roots, it can also mean contrasting musical traditions colliding and interpenetrating. 'The opera's wind ensemble is made up of musicians from different ancient traditions,' she explains. 'I've also written a string trio, *Zwareeb*, for violin, Chinese erhu and Azeri kamancha.' She directs her own Ensemble Zar, bringing together 14 musicians from Middle-Eastern and Western traditions.

How does she go about maintaining or blending the different identities of the instruments she uses? 'I try to perceive each instrument and player, from wherever they may be, as carrying the imprint of the tradition of which they're part. In a sense, I'm writing for different personalities. Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* inspires the way I strive to make music. In the chapter on marriage, he says: "Let there be spaces in your togetherness ... for the pillars of the temple stand apart." That has influenced the way I notate my music for musicians of different traditions: to provide space for musicians in that space to flourish. I sow the seeds and, in the right conditions, they will grow.'

El-Turk's Proms commission is a response to Leonard Bernstein's comic song-cycle of recipes *La bonne cuisine*, for Canadian mezzo-soprano Wallis Giunta, and draws inspiration from Giunta's singing. 'Performers' musical personalities influence the way I think of writing for them,' she explains. 'Pre-echoes of the piece begin to form in this way.'

Suzanne Farrin (born 1976)
new work (2018)



PROMS AT ... CADOGAN HALL 5 • 13 AUGUST

Usually based in New York, where she's a professor at both Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, US composer Suzanne Farrin is currently living in the Italian capital on a Fellowship from the American Academy in Rome. 'It's a quiet place for me to work and reflect, without being distracted by other things – and it's really interesting to be in a city that's so important to human history.'

There's an Italian slant to several of Farrin's works, not least the dramatic cantata *Dolce la morte* setting love poetry by Michelangelo, acclaimed at its 2016 unveiling in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. 'For me, writing music is a reflective process,' she explains. 'I wouldn't say there's a particular sound or style that interests me. It's more the chance to reflect on the experience of living, the deep tidal forces in our lives.'

Her BBC Proms commission is for Scottish percussionist Colin Currie and the JACK Quartet: 'I've been corresponding with Colin,' she says, 'but I do know the JACK players personally because they're also based in New York. I'm sort of in awe of their sound, their energy, their powerful openness.'

Her new work, she says, will reflect on her experiences in Italy. 'I've been inspired by how much Rome relates to the natural world – I've been thinking, for example, about the stone pines versus the olive trees, two very thoughtfully planted but contrasting elements in the city. Also on my mind is how powerful a symbol water has been in Rome – how it demonstrates power and success in the city's fountains, for example, but also the destructive forces of the River Tiber that were part of the struggle for the city.'

Lisa Illean (born 1983)
Sleeplessness ... Sails (2018)



PROMS AT ... CADOGAN HALL 4 • 6 AUGUST

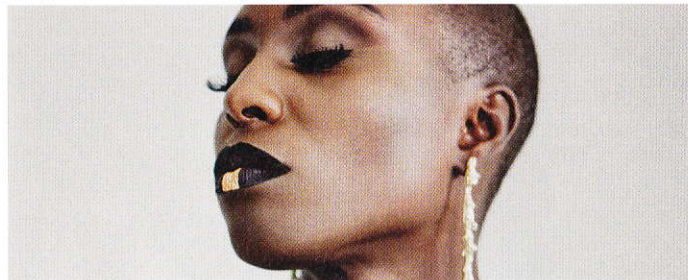
Australian-born, London-based composer Lisa Illean is in her final year as a doctoral student at the Royal College of Music, and her music, she says, is often about ‘the instability of perception’, focusing on the nature of sound itself – through electronics, adapting conventional instruments, even creating sound-works for specific spaces.

‘My research arises out of working with non-tempered tuning systems,’ she explains, ‘paying close attention to sonority, subtly unfolding harmonic forms, auditory phenomena and perspective.’ Her BBC Proms commission, *Sleeplessness ... Sails*, is for the very different environment of a song recital, however, where it nestles alongside vocal works by Vaughan Williams, Howells, Britten and others – all, like Illean, with Royal College of Music connections – given by Dame Sarah Connolly and pianist Joseph Middleton.

‘The text is a translation of an untitled poem by Osip Mandelstam,’ Illean explains. ‘It opens with the graceful image of a fleet of ships suspended mid-voyage – resembling cranes in flight – and closes with the thunderous roars and recitations of the encroaching sea.’ It’s clear that the poem’s sonic content is one of the things that attracted her. ‘Mandelstam was fascinated by the interplay of language and music, and the sea – here both orator and noise-maker – resounds in elemental sound patterning. It’s an incredibly rich poem and the grave, dark roll of the final lines has a striking drama.’

How has she been inspired by the two musicians she’s writing for? ‘At the moment I’ve been listening a lot: Sarah’s voice (in the fullest sense) and Joseph’s playing have been in my ear and my imagination. It’s very exciting and inspiring to be working with such wonderful musicians.’

Laura Mvula (born 1986)
The Virgin of Montserrat (2018)



PROMS AT ... CADOGAN HALL 6 • 20 AUGUST

Birmingham-born singer-songwriter Laura Mvula has made three appearances at the BBC Proms, beginning in 2013 with the Urban Classic Prom. But 2018 marks the first time that the classically trained musician is being featured as a composer of music for others – in this case, the BBC Singers, under conductor Sakari Oramo.

Choral music is a medium that Mvula knows intimately. ‘I grew up watching my auntie, Carol Pemberton, leading singers in gospel, folk and jazz song all over the world,’ she explains. ‘Group singing has always been a transcendent and visceral experience for me. I loved singing in gospel choirs and chamber groups as a teenager, mostly for my love of harmony and the challenge of making seemingly independent parts work together as a whole.’

It’s far from the first time that Mvula herself has worked with choral ensembles. ‘I realised the magnitude of my appetite for choral music when I had the opportunity to write for choir and orchestra for the first time in 2005. I was struck by how individual human voices could together make such a raw, powerful collective sound! Since then, I’ve been lucky enough to work with the Eric Whitacre Singers, the Town Hall Gospel Choir in Birmingham, Lichfield Gospel Choir, London Contemporary Voices and lots of others.’

For her new work, Mvula is taking inspiration from a controversial religious icon in Spain. ‘I visited Mount Montserrat in Catalonia, and I was taken by the whole Black Madonna phenomenon. I was doing some research, and I came across the inscription it at one time carried: *Nigra sum sed formosa*, which means “I am black, but beautiful”. It was strange to feel awe and disgust all at once.’

Eve Risser (born 1982)
Furakèla (2018)



PROMS AT ... CADOGAN HALL 2 • 23 JULY

Composer, improviser, harpsichordist, pianist, prepared-piano player and more; Paris-based Eve Risser straddles jazz and contemporary classical in her unconventional, highly distinctive music. 'The music I have in me is very influenced by different scenes,' she says. 'For years I've been trying to get closer to who I am without too much of my intellectual mask. I like to be in a state of listening where I go down into myself, almost into a trance – that's what I'm looking for when I play or listen to or create music.'

The prepared piano – in which objects of various materials are placed between the strings to create a range of unusual sounds – provided a particularly potent route into the kind of direct experience she was looking for, she says. 'It was a completely new vocabulary for me, so I was finally free of any musical education when I explored that side to the piano. It was a very useful experience to find my own way and my own sincerity through music.'

Another keyboard instrument is the vehicle for her BBC Proms commission, however. 'I am a harpsichord lover, for sure!' Risser enthuses. 'I play a vintage electric harpsichord myself and I'm a total fan. It's a good instrument for contemporary music – the sound is close to a computer sometimes.'

Her performer is iconoclastic young French showman Jean Rondeau, in among a recital of Baroque French keyboard music by Couperin, Rameau and Royer. 'I always write for the person in particular,' Risser continues. 'I try to guess their reactions to the music, try to manipulate them through the music, to play with them. I am eager – maybe too much! – to write this piece for such a huge and amazing artist.'

Nina Šenk (born 1982)
Baca (2018)



PROMS AT ... CADOGAN HALL 8 • 3 SEPTEMBER

'With everything that's currently going on about women breaking through the glass ceiling, and other related movements, I found that glass itself had become the inspiration for my new piece.' Slovenian musician Nina Šenk is already well established as a composer, with performances from several major international orchestras and ensembles, and it's soloists from the Berliner Philharmoniker who premiere her new work on 3 September.

Šenk feels strong links with tradition in her music. 'It's about how the music influences the listener, which has been the same for a long time,' she explains. 'Now we're in the 21st century, it doesn't mean that the things the great masters did centuries ago no longer apply. There are elements that are still relevant, and those are the basic pillars of how classical music works. I just like to change them a bit, recompose them in a fresher, more contemporary style.'

But what inspiration has she taken from glass? 'It has a duality – it's very strong, but it's also very fragile. I wouldn't say the piece is going to be overtly political, but those are also qualities I have to have as a mother and an artist – you have to be soft and fragile with your children, but I also have to be hard when I need to work. I'm aiming to convey the cycle of glass's physical states that go from sand to hot, molten glass, then cold, solid glass, and then to the recycling of glass.'

The title of her new piece is *Baca*. 'It's Latin, and it refers to small glass beads, originally made more than 3,000 years ago and still made now. They're fragile but also strong and beautiful; each one is a tiny piece of art. It's also a small, fragile piece of art that I'm creating – it won't change the world, but it will be done with love, and a lot of hard work.'

Caroline Shaw (born 1982)
Second Essay: Echo; Third Essay: Ruby (2018)



PROMS AT ... CADOGAN HALL 1 • 16 JULY

'I'm probably the worst person to try and describe my own music.' New York-based composer, vocalist and violinist Caroline Shaw – the youngest ever recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for Music, in 2013 for her *Partita for 8 Voices* – instead points to a whole range of things that inspire her. 'I'm in love with harmony, and that's what has always driven me to make music. I'm in love with radical switches from chaos to order. I love pacing, and organising, time – which I think is what some people call form. I love Buxtehude and [singer-songwriter and rapper] Childish Gambino, and Adele and Gérard Grisey.'

It's no surprise that Shaw mentions contemporary pop names alongside classical composers of all eras: she's remixed tracks by Kanye West, and collaborated with him on others. Does she see different musical genres as separate, interconnected or all part of the same thing? 'Definitely part of the same thing. The more I live and make music, the more I understand what it was that first drew me to these other worlds. I can't really say what it is, because I think it takes a lifetime to begin to understand music.'

For her Proms commission, Shaw has added two further pieces to her *First Essay* (2016), also written for the Calidore String Quartet. 'They're an incredible ensemble, and I'm very lucky to have gotten to write for them already. I used to play in a quartet, in grad school, with their cellist, Estelle Choi. We all knew she was destined for greatness.' But what is the attraction of the idea of an 'Essay'? 'The first piece began as a consideration of essay-writing structures, and the way that some of my favourite writers develop ideas. Ultimately, the music became about the breakdown, deterioration and transformation of language. It was written during the fall of 2016, in the heat of the US election.'

Jessica Wells (born 1974)
Rhapsody for solo oud (2018)



PROMS AT ... CADOGAN HALL 3 • 30 JULY

Born in Florida, but based in Australia since the age of 11, Jessica Wells describes herself as 'a bit of a chameleon – I'm just as comfortable working with jazz or contemporary musicians as I am with classical players. I like to cross boundaries between musical genres.' It's an eclecticism borne out in her current projects – from a piece for carillon (an array of bells) and electronics to a cabaret show, by way of a new work for a babies' prom concert at the Sydney Opera House, and also a piece for saxophonist Amy Dickson and string quartet. 'I've always been drawn to orchestral music,' she adds, 'but I also arrange music electronically, and I love writing music for film when I get a chance to.'

Her Proms commission fits in well with her broad-ranging activities: it's a piece for a solo recital by Joseph Tawadros, one of today's most exciting performers of the oud, a lute from the Middle East, Mediterranean and North Africa. 'I was fortunate enough to work with Joe on Nigel Westlake's film score for *Ali's Wedding*, and last year I arranged a full concerto for him to perform with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra,' Wells explains. 'He's a virtuoso and his performances have great light and shade. He's able to play at lightning speed with great energy, as well as creating a softer, more emotional mood focusing on harmony and colour.'

Wells is also aware of the centuries of tradition that lie behind the instrument she's writing for. 'I'm keen to explore the sound-world of the oud, and to bring out Joe's flair for performance in my ideas. The instrument has many traditions, which are fascinating to explore, but Joe has also shown me in his own writing how you can bring out new styles of playing that are "outside the box".'