

The Lammermuir Festival celebrates beautiful spaces with beautiful music



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Concerts need space around them – you try to create a sense of space within a concert, and it's even better if you can feel space around it as well." Edinburgh-born pianist Steven Osborne is talking about the glorious landscapes that form the backdrop to East Lothian's Lammermuir Festival. "There are so many beautiful spaces where Lammermuir concerts take place," he continues, "and there's something very special about walking through nature to get to a concert."

Not only is he the festival's patron, Osborne is also doing two concerts himself at this year's event, which kicks off this coming Friday. And landscapes – perhaps more metaphysical than literal – take on a special significance in one of them, which promises to be quite a remarkable late-night event: "In terms of a sense of space, it's all about space."

In it, Osborne brings together works by two 20th-century US experimentalists, Morton Feldman and George Crumb, both with their own uncompromising but deeply rewarding approach to music. Feldman's creations are notoriously quiet, sometimes unfathomably unpredictable, intensely poetic yet almost impossible to pin down.

"Feldman was obsessed with a numinous quality of sound, music as a gateway to – well, he left it extremely vague, and didn't really talk in spiritual terms. But there's a philosophical sense that a piece of music is nothing in itself, but instead the gateway to something else – an experience that's very hard to define."

Although a contemporary and a compatriot of Feldman, Crumb's music is very different. "He's very much in the Debussy mould of sound painting," explains the pianist. And in Osborne's programme, that aspect is most evident in Crumb's exquisite *Little Suite for Christmas AD1979*, a set of seasonal miniatures in which the composer evokes clanging bells, piping shepherds and plenty more through some unusual pianistic techniques.



Photographs: Benjamin Ealovsaga

Pianist and Lammermuir Festival patron, Steven Osborne

"I have to pluck the piano strings, create harmonics by putting my finger at very specific points on the strings, even bang on the strings with the palm of my hand – that's rather fun. I always have my heart in my mouth because it's so easy to do something that sounds crashingly inappropriate. That's what's so lovely about Crumb's music – there's such an engagement with what it actually sounds like. You can really tell if something's not right."

That importance of direct communication is something Osborne feels unites the two

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composers. "So many composers in the late 20th century got a bit obsessed with the technical aspects of music, but Crumb and Feldman are essentially concerned with tactile, visceral sounds. When people moan about contemporary music having lost its way, there are composers like these who are saying something that can really touch you deeply."

Osborne's second Lammermuir concert is a recital alongside his long-time collaborator, the cellist Alban Gerhardt. ("I always look forward to his gigs enormously. He's a great friend. It feels like musically we can really trust each other.") And

significantly, both musicians play solo pieces before coming together for sonatas by Debussy, Brahms and Beethoven in the concert's second half.

"Both of us have a horror of playing to the gallery," Osborne continues. "We'd almost run in the opposite direction. When we first met, I was a very good Scottish boy, well-behaved, polite, and he helped me to realise that you sometimes have to exaggerate things quite a lot for them to even register with the audience."

Lammermuir has a particularly strong programme this year, with three concerts from the Quatuor Mosaïques, Bach's Goldberg Variations from John Butt, Mozart opera and a new piano trio by Stuart MacRae among other highlights. That strong programme is only fitting for an event that's been singled out by the Royal Philharmonic Society for its 2017 festival award. It's quite an accolade, and one that Osborne is also familiar with, having won RPS instrumentalist of the year in 2012. "It's lovely to be recognised in that way, and I'm delighted for Lammermuir as well. You're always hoping that what you do is reaching people and touching them, and it's fantastic to have that public affirmation as well." ■

The Lammermuir Festival runs in venues across East Lothian from 15 to 24 September, with Steven Osborne performing on 17 and 21 September. For full programme information, www.lammermuirfestival.co.uk