



3D Chamber Opera by Michel van der Aa
Makes North American Premiere at Park Avenue Armory

Reimagined for the Armory's Drill Hall, *Blank Out* Unites Live Performance and Film in Haunting Work Starring Miah Persson, Roderick Williams, and the Netherlands Chamber Choir

September 21 - 27, 2017



Miah Persson and Roderick Williams in *Blank Out*. Photo by Marco Borggreve.

New York, NY - May 25, 2017 - Composer and director Michel van der Aa's perspective-bending chamber opera *Blank Out*, based on the life and work of South African poet Ingrid Jonker, is reimagined within Park Avenue Armory's Wade Thompson Drill Hall in its North American premiere this September. Miah Persson performs live and is accompanied by a 3D film featuring Roderick Williams and the Netherlands Chamber Choir. The design of the space will capitalize on the malleability of the Drill Hall and the unique backdrop of its architecture with elements that heighten the panoramic landscapes found in the film, utilize the room's iconic vaulted ceiling, and create a stage that is interchangeably vast and intimate throughout the production. The resulting effect blurs the lines between virtual and live performance and heightens the dissonance between perception and reality within the opera itself. Weaving together Jonker's poetry and elements of her life story, van der Aa's work explores the reconstruction of memory, fragility of human nature, response to trauma, and the notion of individual realities. *Blank Out* premiered at the Dutch National Opera as part of the Opera Forward Festival in March 2016 and since has seen success in Rome, Beijing, Helsinki, Hannover, and Luzern.

"Michel van der Aa is a groundbreaking artist and composer who brings a new kind of vocabulary to opera—one that embraces technology and transcends what can sometimes be rigid barriers between styles of music," said Pierre Audi, Artistic Director of Park Avenue Armory. "*Blank Out* is a beautiful example of his

work and, through its exploration of grief and motherhood, is both deeply personal and universal in its theme.”

“We are thrilled to host the North American premiere of *Blank Out*, a production that so poignantly represents the type of genre-bending work to which the Wade Thompson Drill Hall lends itself,” said Rebecca Robertson, Executive Producer and President of Park Avenue Armory. “We are always excited to see how artists reimagine their works within such a dynamic canvas, and Michel’s work, with its simultaneous grandness and intimacy—told through performance by Persson, Williams, and Michel’s vivid and visually stunning film—is sure to provide an evocative and unforgettable experience.”

Set along the rolling banks of the desolate Dutch countryside, *Blank Out* follows the story of unnamed archetypes “woman” and “man,” a mother and son attempting to reconstruct memories of their lives together. The woman (played by Persson) physically rebuilds a model of their home while, behind and around her, the man (played by Williams) inhabits that very same space in 3D film in an isolated house on the banks of a river. Both are working through the same traumatic event, piecing fragments of their lives together and confronting the devastation of loss. The two worlds—on stage and in film—begin to intertwine, making it increasingly difficult for the audience to discern perspective and dimension, until they ultimately collide.

Van der Aa’s composition for *Blank Out* is a colorful mix of vocal and choral music, synthesized electronic music, pop, and abstract sound, accentuating the mystery conjured by *Blank Out*’s plot. The Netherlands Chamber Choir, though never seen, provides haunting counterpoint to Persson and Williams through a cappella performance within the film. The work marks Michel van der Aa’s second foray into 3D film.

While not strictly autobiographical, *Blank Out* is based on the life and work of Ingrid Jonker, who tragically ended her own life when she walked into the sea and committed suicide by drowning in 1965. Jonker is a literary icon throughout South Africa and internationally, renowned for her characteristic free verse, sensual yet surrealistic imagery, and her work to challenge the conservative literary norms of the time.

Blank Out

September 21 - 27

Music, Lyrics, and Concept by Michel van der Aa

Film and Stage Direction by Michel van der Aa

Sophie Motley, Dramaturg

Floriaan Ganzevoort, Lighting Designer

Tom Gelissen, Sound Designer

Starring Miah Persson

With Roderick Williams and Netherlands Chamber Choir (film)

Thursday - Friday, Monday, Wednesday at 8:00pm

Sunday at 3:00pm

A production of Dutch National Opera adapted by Park Avenue Armory.

TICKETS

Tickets start at \$40 for performances and can be purchased at armoryonpark.org / (212) 933-5812.

Thompson Arts Center at Park Avenue Armory
643 Park Avenue at 67th Street, New York, NY

ADDITIONAL PROGRAMS

As part of its *Interrogations of Form: Conversation Series*, the Armory will host the following program in its historic period rooms focused on *Blank Out*. The *Interrogations of Form* conversations feature artists and scholars exploring the realization of Armory productions and their resonances today, encouraging active discussion on a range of themes and complex issues:

Blank Out: Artists Talk

Friday, September 22 at 6:00 p.m.

Blank Out composer and director Michel van der Aa and collaborators discuss the creation of the chamber opera and 3D film.

ARMORY AFTER HOURS

Audiences also have the opportunity stay at the Armory following evening performances for libations with fellow attendees—and often the evening’s artists—at a special bar in one of our historic period rooms.

SPONSORSHIP

Blank Out is made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature.

Citi; Pershing Square Capital Management, LP; and Bloomberg Philanthropies are the Armory’s 2017 season sponsors.

Support for Park Avenue Armory’s artistic season has been generously provided by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Altman Foundation, The Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust, the Achelis and Bodman Foundation, the Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation, the Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation, The Shubert Foundation, The Emma and Georgina Bloomberg Foundation, the Marc Haas Foundation, The Kaplen Brothers Fund, the Juliet Lea Hillman Simonds Foundation, the Leon Levy Foundation, the May and Samuel Rudin Family Foundation, and the Isak and Rose Weinman Foundation.

ABOUT MICHEL VAN DER AA

Michel van der Aa, winner of the 2015 Johannes Vermeer Award and 2013 Grawemeyer Award, is one of today’s most sought-after composers and stage directors. A pioneer in the realms of new music and technology, his staged works—incorporating film and sampled soundtrack—are a seamless hybrid of musical theater and multimedia.

Van der Aa’s imaginative music theater works *Sunken Garden* (2011-12), *The Book of Disquiet* (2008), *After Life* (2005-06), and *One* (2002) have received critical and public acclaim internationally. His repertoire also includes concert works and chamber music for small ensemble, soloists, and soundtrack. He collaborated with Sol Gabetta on the cross-media cello concerto *Up-close* (2010), which has been performed in 15 countries. His 3D film opera, *Sunken Garden* (2013), an ‘occult-mystery film-opera,’ was created in partnership with the English novelist David Mitchell, the author of *Cloud Atlas*.

Van der Aa’s music has been featured at many leading international festivals and is performed regularly by orchestras and ensembles worldwide. Central to Van der Aa’s practice is collaboration and interdisciplinarity. He has worked with classical performers such as Sol Gabetta, Barbara Hannigan, Janine

Jansen, Christianne Stotijn, and Roderick Williams, as well as the Portuguese fado singer Ana Moura, pop acts Kate Miller-Heidke and These New Puritans, and well-known European actors like Klaus Maria Brandauer, Samuel West, and João Reis.

Since 2011 Van der Aa has been a 'house composer' with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. This position led to the creation of several major works, including a new violin concerto written for Janine Jansen.

He will be composer-in-residence at the 2017 Lucerne Summer Festival, and featured composer at the 2017 Musica nova Helsinki Festival.

Michel van der Aa's music is published by Boosey & Hawkes.

ABOUT MIAH PERSSON

Internationally renowned Swedish soprano Miah Persson has worked all over the world as recitalist and concert artist, as well as on the operatic stage.

Throughout her distinguished career Miah has performed Gretel in *Hansel und Gretel*, Fiordiligi in *Così fan tutte* and Pamina *Die Zauberflöte* at the Metropolitan Opera; Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro* and Zerlina in *Don Giovanni* at Covent Garden; the title role in *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* at La Scala; Fiordiligi, Sophie and Susanna at the Vienna State Opera; The Governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, Fiordiligi, Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*, and Anne Trulove in *The Rake's Progress* at the Glyndebourne Festival; Donna Elvira at the Theatre Champs Elysees; Fiordiligi at the Bayerische Staatsoper, Hamburgische Staatsoper, New National Theatre Tokyo, Bayerische Staatsoper, in Stockholm, in concerts, and for a Deutsche Grammophon recording at the Festspielhaus Baden-Baden; Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* on a concert tour of Europe with the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin, conducted by Rene Jacobs; Countess in concerts of *Figaro* with the Budapest Festival Orchestra in Berlin and New York; and a new opera by Michel Van der Aa for Netherlands Opera, with performances in Amsterdam and at Opera di Roma.

In concert Miah has appeared with Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Bayerischer Rundfunk Munich, the Accademia Santa Cecilia, Simon Bolivar Orchestra and Gustavo Dudamel in Salzburg, and for the Proms in London (televised and broadcast by the BBC), Strauss's *Four Last Songs* with Montreal Symphony Orchestra, a tour of South America with Budapest Festival Orchestra singing *Mahler 4* and Strauss's *Four Last Songs* with Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, *Mozart Concert Arias* at the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, *Mahler 2* with the New York Philharmonic, the MDR Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk, Philharmonia and London Symphony Orchestra, Bach's *B Minor Mass* at La Fenice, *Mahler 2* and *Mahler 4* and Mozart Arias with Los Angeles Philharmonic, Bach's *St Matthew Passion* with the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, *Peer Gynt* with the Vienna Symphony at the Wiener Staatsoper and with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, as well as recitals at London's Wigmore Hall, Wiener Konzerthaus, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Schubertiade, and at the Tonhalle Zurich.

Engagements in the 2016/17 season include Donna Elvira *Don Giovanni* with Opera de Lyon at the Royal Opera House Muscat; Haydn *Nelson Mass* at the Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum Salzburg; Mahler Symphony no.4 at the Philharmonie Luxembourg and with Basque National Orchestra; title role *L'incoronazione di Poppea* with Concerto Italiano at Carnegie Hall; a US recital tour with Florian Boesch and Malcolm Martineau, at venues including Spivey Hall, the Schubert Club of St Paul, Carnegie Hall, Cal Performances at Berkeley and for Vancouver Recital Society; Donna Elvira *Don Giovanni* at the Liceu Barcelona, and Van der Aa's *Blank Out* at the Lucerne Festival. Further ahead Miah will sing Mozart

Requiem with the LA Philharmonic, *Blank Out* at the Park Avenue Armory, and Mahler Symphony no.2 at Teatro alla Scala.

ABOUT RODERICK WILLIAMS

Roderick Williams encompasses a wide repertoire, from baroque to contemporary music, in the opera house, on the concert platform, and in recital.

He enjoys relationships with all the major UK opera houses. He has also sung world premieres of operas by, among others, David Sawer, Sally Beamish, Michael van der Aa, Robert Saxton, and Alexander Knaifel.

Roderick Williams has sung concert repertoire with all the BBC orchestras, and many other ensembles including the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, the Philharmonia, London Sinfonietta, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, the Hallé, Britten Sinfonia, Bournemouth Symphony, and Scottish Chamber Orchestra. Abroad he has worked with the Berlin Philharmonic, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Russian National Orchestra, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Ensemble Orchestral de Paris, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, and Bach Collegium Japan, amongst others. His many festival appearances include the BBC Proms (including the Last Night in 2014), Edinburgh, Cheltenham, Aldeburgh, and Melbourne.

Recent opera engagements include *Oronte* in Charpentier's *Medée*; *Toby Kramer* in Van der Aa's *Sunken Garden* in the Netherlands, Lyon and London; *Pollux* in *Castor and Pollux* for English National Opera; Van der Aa's *After Life* at Melbourne State Theatre; and *Sharpless* in *Madam Butterfly* for the Nederlandse Reisopera. Future performances include the title roles of *Eugene Onegin* for Garsington Opera and *Billy Budd* for Opera North. Recent and future concert engagements include concerts with the Tonkünstler Orchester at the Musikverein, Cincinnati Symphony, Music of the Baroque Chicago, Virginia Arts Festival, BBC Proms, as well as many recitals and concerts in the UK and worldwide.

He is also an accomplished recital artist who can be heard at venues and festivals including Wigmore Hall; Kings Place; LSO St Luke's; the Perth Concert Hall; Oxford Lieder Festival; London Song Festival; the Musikverein, Vienna; and on Radio 3, where he has participated on Iain Burnside's *Voices* programme. Williams made his North American recital debut at the Armory as part of their annual Recital Series in the Board of Officers Room.

His numerous recordings include Vaughan Williams, Berkeley and Britten operas for Chandos, and an extensive repertoire of English song with pianist Iain Burnside for Naxos.

Roderick Williams is also a composer, and has had works premiered at the Wigmore and Barbican Halls, the Purcell Room, and live on national radio.

He was Artistic Director of Leeds Lieder in April 2016.

ABOUT NETHERLANDS CHAMBER CHOIR

The Netherlands Chamber Choir has been in existence for almost 80 years and has been a world-class choir for decades. The choir has been internationally praised by critics for its homogeneous sound and for the soloist quality of the singers. One of the choir's missions is to keep choral music very much alive as an art form, by looking for new formats, by innovative commissions and exciting collaborations. It results in concerts that are not only perceived as beautiful to the ears, but that appeal to all senses.

Education and participation is a vital part of the choir's mission. The Netherlands has thousands of amateur choirs and numbers of youth choirs. The Netherlands Chamber Choir provides coaching, workshops, and 'adopts' choirs as supporting act for their own concerts.

Besides their own concert series, the choir often collaborates with renowned ensembles such as the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Concert Köln, Amsterdam Sinfonietta, and B'Rock. The choir has recorded over 75 CDs, of which many have been awarded.

Since September 2015 Peter Dijkstra is watching over the unique sound of the Netherlands Chamber Choir. The choir had Felix de Nobel as its first chief conductor. Amongst his successors were conductors like Uwe Gronostay, Tõnu Kaljuste, Stephen Layton, and Risto Joost. Each of them gave the Netherlands Chamber Choir and choral music in general major impulses.

ABOUT PARK AVENUE ARMORY

Part palace, part industrial shed, Park Avenue Armory fills a critical void in the cultural ecology of New York by enabling artists to create, students to explore, and audiences to experience unconventional work that cannot be mounted in traditional performance halls and museums. With its soaring 55,000-square-foot Wade Thompson Drill Hall—reminiscent of 19th-century European train stations—and an array of exuberant period rooms, the Armory offers a platform for creativity across all art forms. Together, these and other spaces within the historic building utilized for arts programming comprise the Thompson Arts Center, named in recognition of the Thompson family's ongoing support of the institution.

Since its first production in September 2007, the Armory has organized and commissioned immersive performances, installations, and cross-disciplinary collaborations in its Drill Hall that defy traditional categorization and challenge artists to push the boundaries of their practice. In its historic period rooms, the Armory presents small-scale performances and programs, including its acclaimed Recital Series, which showcases musical talent from across the globe within the intimate salon setting of the Board of Officers Room; and the new Artists Studio series in the newly restored Veterans Room, which features innovative artists and artistic pairings that harken back to the imaginative collaboration and improvisation of the original group of designers who conceived the space. The Armory also offers robust arts education programs at no cost to underserved New York City public school students, engaging them with the institution's artistic programming and the building's history and architecture.

Programmatic highlights from the Armory's first 10 years include Bernd Alois Zimmermann's harrowing *Die Soldaten*, in which the audience moved "through the music"; *the event of a thread*, a site-specific installation by Ann Hamilton; the final performances of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company across three separate stages; *WS* by Paul McCarthy, a monumental installation of fantasy, excess, and dystopia; an immersive *Macbeth* set in a Scottish heath and henge by Rob Ashford and Kenneth Branagh; a profound and radically inclusive staging of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* staged by Peter Sellars and performed by Sir Simon Rattle and the Berliner Philharmoniker; and Louis Andriessen's *De Materie* in a highly imaginative staging by director Heiner Goebbels that included floating zeppelins and a flock of 100 sheep.

Concurrent with its artistic program, the Armory has undertaken an ongoing \$210-million revitalization of its historic building, designed by architects Herzog & de Meuron. www.armoryonpark.org.

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