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Guest Recital, Randall Hall, saxophones, November 3, 2016

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Guest Recital

Randall Hall, saxophones

Thursday, November 3, 2016
6:00 p.m.
Harper Hall
Flamenco

Christian Lauba
(b. 1952)

From Partita No. 2, BWV 1004
Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1785)
trans. Randall Hall

Allemanda
Corrente
Sarabanda
Giga

Randall Hall, alto saxophone

Sequenza VIIb
Luciano Berio
(1925-2003)

Randall Hall, soprano saxophone

Of Earth and Starry Sky: The Orphic Gold Tablets
Randall Hall
(b. 1969)

Katabasis
Tablet No. 1
Ritual Action 1
Tablet No. 4
Ritual Action 2
Tablet No. 29
Ritual Action 3

Randall Hall, soprano and alto saxophones
and electronic sounds
PROGRAM NOTES

*Of Earth and Starry Sky* is a collection of different pieces presented as a single multi-movement work. It is based on the Orphic Gold Tablets, small pieces of gold foil inscribed with texts found in ancient Greek graves. Orpheus, the greatest of all musicians, was also the teacher of religious mysteries designed to secure eternal life after death. The mysterious and cryptic texts inscribed on the tablets may have been associated with his cult, giving the soul the instructions and passwords needed to complete its underworld journey to immortality. The three Tablet pieces are based on recordings of these texts. The original Greek text is electronically altered, but the English translations are presented without manipulation to allow the listener to follow the text.

Katabasis, literally ‘descent’ in Greek, is based on the aria *Posente sprito* (Oh, powerful spirits) from Act III of Claudio Monteverdi’s opera *L’Orfeo* (1607). Orpheus is journeying to the underworld in order to petition Hades and Persephone for the return of his dead wife Eurydice. This is the moment when Orpheus uses the power of his song to compel Chrion, who guards the entrance to the underworld, to allow him to enter the realm of the dead. In many traditions shamans are the spiritual leaders who make such descents – through the use of ritual and sacred songs they enter a trance where their soul leaves their body and travels to the underworld. In this state they have visions, guide the souls of the dead, and heal the sick. The parallels to Orpheus are striking, and I wanted to explore the shamanic aspects of Orpheus in this piece. I used the vocal part from *Posente sprito* as a sort of cantus firmus, rewriting it for saxophone in order to invoke an imaginary archaic wind instrument that could have been played by a shaman while inducing a trance.

Tablet No. 4, as well as in other Greek ritual and magic texts, includes voces magicae or magical voices (these are easily found in the translation). These are essentially non-sense words that have no linguistic meaning, which seem to be some form of magical invocation. Ritual Action is based on one such magical formula found in the Greek Magical Papyri:

\[ \text{Αβεραμενθωνλερθεξαναξεθρελνωθνεμαρεβα} \]
which is transliterated as aberamenthōoulerthezanaxethreluōothnemareba
While this has no lexical meaning, it does have a clear formal arrangement – it is a palindrome. This is reminiscent of the work on mantras (ritual recitation formulas from India) by Vedic scholar Frits Staal. He theorizes that mantras have no semantic meaning, rather they are simply formal arrangements of syllables that are order and reorder according to various rules of transformation, i.e., the words are not words, they are precisely arranged collections of sounds. This idea seemed ripe with musical possibility. To explore it I wrote a short motive for each letter of the Greek alphabet. The first part begins with improvisations on the motives for the seven vowels (the intoning of vowels is also found in Greek magic), followed by the rest of the letter-motives ordered to ‘spell’ our magical formula. In the second section the various motives of the formula are developed according to some more or less arbitrary rules of transformation (following Staal’s ideas on mantras). In the final section the original letter-motives of the magic formula return, but now used as motives for improvisation. All of this is supported by electronic enhancement of the saxophone sound.

Taken as a whole, this set simultaneously imagines ritually induced trance states experienced by initiates of the Orphic mysteries, as well as the soul’s passage through the underworld for which these rites were preparation. For many listeners, the unusual musical qualities will be disorienting, placing them in an analogous situation to the soul in its liminal journey. The Tablets address certain eschatological and soteriological issues, universal human questions of life, death, and the yearning for immortality – the simple longing that my consciousness, my awareness of myself, will not be extinguished despite the great inevitability of death. The Orphic initiates approached these question in their mystical rites and on the golden plates they buried with their dead. In this performance, these issues are reframed in the language of experimental music for saxophone and electronics. In so doing we can imagine what an Orphic rite might have sounded like. While this is obviously not an accurate recreation of such ancient ceremonies, it does animate the Gold Tablets, giving them tangible, audible form, through which we may better experience the same human conditions that originally inspired them.

Tablet 1
This is the task of Memory, when you are about to die (and go) into the well-built halls of Hades. There is, on the right, a spring, and beside it stands a white cypress-tree.
There descending, the souls of the dead refresh themselves.  
Do not approach, do not go near this spring!  
But ahead, you will discover, from the Lake of Memory  
cold water flowing forth; and guards stand before it.  
They will ask you, with minds full of wisdom,  
what you are seeking from the darkness of shadowy Hades.  
Say, “I am a son of Earth and starry Sky,  
I am parched with thirst and I am perishing; but quickly grant me  
to drink cold water from the Lake of Memory.”  
And then they will announce you to the Under-Earth King;  
and then they will grant you to drink from the Lake of Memory;  
and then you too will drink and go along the sacred  
road by which other initiates and bacchoi travel as well.

Tablet 4  
To Protagonus τεμαίτητε Earth Mother ἐπα Cybele Maiden-daughter  
οσενταῖη of Demeter ἐτ ῖτ tataittapta  
O Zeus ἰατῆτυ Air sapta Sun, Fire στεινταῖησατοπε overcomes all ἔτε ἕρωτα  
Fortune istringstream Phanes, All-remembering Fates στεῖντογνυαπιατῆ  
You, O glorious daimon deuchi |s Father ἀτίκ Master of All  
pαντῆρνυνταισελαβδόντας  
Requital στήεςταΐς |τὴμεν Aiρ i Fire mem Mother ἱεστισωιλ entato Fasting ὑ  
Night ἰνήμενη Day meraneglchues Seven-Days τὶ ὕφ a fast ἔν  
O Zeus ῾Ηo-Digs-In and Watcher-Over-All  
Always ainiuo Mother, hear my ἐο prayer  
tακτᾶψαρχολκαπεδίοχαματεμαν  
beautiψελ d sacred things damneudamnoi |ظروفι τὸ ἐρ sacred things mar O  
Demeter, Fire, Zeus  
Maiden of Earth τριβδαῖτερονστῦησιὸνtn Hero ἱεγαυνῆ  
Light into the mind ματαίμεντῆςνυσχα the Mindful one seized the  
Maiden  
Earth φῆρτονοςσμмо eston Aiρ taipnillu into the mind ματῶ  

Tablet 29  
I am parched with thirst and I am perishing, but grant me to drink  
from the ever-flowing spring. On the right is a white cypress-tree.  
“Who are you? Where are you from?” I am a son of Earth and starry Sky.  
But my lineage is heavenly.
PERFORMER BIO

Randall Hall is a leading interpreter of contemporary music for saxophone. Equally at home in concert halls and alternative venues, his performances of new compositions and improvisations feature his mastery of extended techniques and cutting edge electronics. Innova Recordings describes his music as "high-octane, supercharged sax" while The Wire says he plays with "utter confidence," "fire and teeth," and "unexpectedly tough beauty."

Internationally active as a performer and clinician, Hall has given concerts throughout North America, Europe, and Asia, including concerts at the Karnatic Lab (Amsterdam), Logos Foundation (Belgium), Werstatt für improvisierte Musik (Zürich), Zeitgeist Gallery (Boston), Center for New Music (Iowa City), Electronic Music Midwest (Chicago), Outside the Box Festival (Carbondale), and the Electro Acoustic Juke Joint (Mississippi). An active educator, he has given lectures and master-classes on the aesthetics and techniques of new music at institutions around the world, including Harvard University, Cornell University, the Eastman School of Music, New England Conservatory, Bowling Green State University, University of Illinois, University of Iowa, the Luxembourg Conservatory, Conservatorio Superior de Música de las Islas Baleares, and the World Saxophone Congress. Dedicated to the continued development of new music, Randall Hall collaborates closely with composers and has premiered pieces by James R. Carlson, Joann Cho, Stuart Duncan, Kevin Ernste, Figure, Stephen Gorbos, Jing-Jing Luo, Colin J. P. Homiski, Jonathon Kirk, Christian Lauba, Nicolas Scherzinger, Mary Stiles, and Paul Swenson.

Randall Hall is the recipient of numerous honors including a Fulbright Grant, Frank Huntington Beebe Grant, Presser Music Award, and the Premier prix in the Concour Région Ile-de-France. He studied saxophone with Claude Delangle, Jean-Yves Fourmeau, Jean-Michel Goury, Kenneth Radnofsky, and Ramon Ricker. Dr. Hall holds degrees from the Eastman School of Music (DMA), the New England Conservatory (MM), the Conservatoire National de Région de Boulogne-Billancourt, France (Premier prix), and Warner Pacific College (BS). He is Associate Professor of Music at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, where he teaches saxophone, improvisation, music theory, and liberal studies.