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John Luther Adams breathes life into Mostly Mozart Festival

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★★★★☆

By *Rebecca Lentjes*, 28 July 2014

On Saturday evening at Lincoln Center's Hearst Plaza, over 80 musicians were arrayed like chessmen across a grassy knoll, around the Paul Milstein pool, and even, in the case of several megaphone-wielding vocalists, knee-deep in the pool itself. John Luther Adams's monumental new work *Sila: Breath of the World* calls for five choirs (woodwind, brass, strings, percussion, and voice) and for this, the world première, it featured familiar faces from many of the most stellar new music groups in New York: Asphalt Orchestra, Cadillac Moon Ensemble, Contemporaneous, The Crossing, eighth blackbird, Face the Music, Hotel Elephant, Grand Valley State University New Music Ensemble, JACK Quartet, and TILT Brass. Directed and choreographed by Doug Perkins and Mark DeChiazza,

**Reviewed at Lincoln Center, New York
City on 26 July 2014**

PROGRAMME

Adams, Sila: The Breath of the World
(World première)

PERFORMERS

Doug Perkins, *Director*

Mark DeChiazza, *Choreography*

respectively, the horde of musicians proceeded through the piece with no conductor, joined by the sounds of the natural world and of the traffic on 65th Street.[image:6411]

Though I was excited to witness a collaboration between so many talented young performers, I'll admit I was sceptical of the work. My most recent exposure to Mr Adams' output was *Become Ocean*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for music this past year, and which I found to be pretty but otherwise forgettable. *Become Ocean*, which like many of Mr Adams' works has a focus on nature, is a fairly conventional work that would be a nice soundtrack for a documentary about climate change. But where *Become Ocean* fell short of my expectations, *Sila* surpassed them. This outdoor piece wasn't just *about* nature; it took place *in* nature. The rumbles of bass drums and timpani mingled with the delicate sounds of the wind rustling through the trees and stones being scraped together by musicians (one of the many nice touches). There were waves of sound, but also peaks and valleys. Not only that, but Mr Adams' soundscape was just as intangible and unknowable as the natural world. It traverses 16 "harmonic clouds" based on the first 16 harmonics of a low B flat. The other tones can't be played on a traditional piano: they are "off the grid of 12-tone equal temperament", as Mr Adams puts it.[image:6412]

These elements contributed to an hour's worth of music that was intense, beautiful, and thought-provoking. In endeavoring to have the music become part of nature, and vice versa, Mr Adams encourages an open-minded and thoughtful kind of listening. The listeners sat on the ground between and in front of the musicians and, farther back, underneath a grove of trees. A garbage truck growled in the distance; birds chirruped nearby. These unscheduled sounds mingled with Mr Adams' clouds of sound as they gradually merged and evaporated and grew, letting some motifs imprint themselves and fossilize in our minds. Then a lovely murky dissonance would emerge as another chorus would introduce a new, mildly jarring idea and the music modulated into another harmonic cloud. Within these harmonic segments, the music was repetitive and meditative, seemingly static but subtly changing just like the nature that surrounded us.

The sounds were hushed at first: rumbles from the percussionists and otherworldly yet placid tones from the violins. Then the brass chimed in from their incline above the pool. And the vocalists, wading through the water in Sylvianne Shurman's drapery all-black costumes, became more and more forceful as the piece progressed. The inverted triad, echoed among the voice and brass choruses, modulated higher and higher against a backdrop of quietly penetrating strings and serging, then abating, percussion. Finally, joined by a constellation of lightly-struck triangles, the notes softened and receded. For some time after the final note dissolved into the air, the musicians blew across their instruments, emulating the wind breathing across the plaza in its own unpredictable microtones and rhythms.

eighth blackbird

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Mellow fruitfulness abounds in Fröst's Brahms

Mark Pullinger, 16th September

What a debt clarinetists owe to Anton Stadler and Richard Mühlfeld! Muses for Mozart and Brahms respectively, they were inspirations for some of the most glorious works written for the instrument.

★★★★☆

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Perfume or cigar smoke?

Zoltán Szabó, 16th September

Stephen Hough's solo piano recital had an immediate appeal even before the first note sounded. The programme's design followed perfect symmetry of Claude Debussy and Frédéric Chopin's *Four Ballades*.

★★★★☆

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Alan Coady, 15th September

Red Note Ensemble's Sounding Brass in a unique afternoon of brass, percussion and electronics in an imaginatively scouted industrial setting.

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Saori Kanemaki, 16th September

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★★★★☆

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