

FESTIVAL PROGRAMME  
21 – 22 APRIL 2012

THE MUSIC OF

# CONLON NANCARROW

IMPOSSIBLE BRILLIANCE

TRINITY  
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CONSERVATOIRE  
OF MUSIC AND DANCE

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London  
Sinfonietta

**SOUTHBANK  
CENTRE**

**Southbank Centre has always celebrated musical mavericks and masterminds, and Conlon Nancarrow can be said to fit into both these categories.** His music, written for mechanical player pianos, is largely impossible for humans to play as it experiments with rhythms, speeds and harmonies. But whilst our hands would stumble over his notes, our ears are given real pleasure in the sounds that he has produced.

This weekend we are very lucky to welcome Rex Lawson and Wolfgang Heisig, both internationally renowned pianolaists, to Southbank Centre to perform Nancarrow's music on exact replicas of the player pianos he would have used. The sounds you hear this weekend are as close as we can get to the sounds Nancarrow would have heard, working in his studio in Mexico City.

Dominic Murcott, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, the London Sinfonietta and Southbank Centre have worked together to produce a festival for Nancarrow enthusiasts, jazz lovers and people who are totally new to this music and just want the thrill of witnessing a piano playing with no one at the keyboard.

Nancarrow's music continues to inspire performers, artists and writers as we can see this in the programme this weekend with artwork by Trimpin, arrangements of Nancarrow's studies performed by London Sinfonietta, and new music from students at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Dance and Music.

If you enjoy getting to know this modern composer, don't miss our festival **Jubilation: the music of George Benjamin on 12 and 13 May**. The London Sinfonietta will be back along with George Benjamin himself to celebrate another influential composer of the 21st century.

**Jude Kelly OBE**  
Southbank Centre Artistic Director

*The Music of Conlon Nancarrow: Impossible Brilliance* is presented by Southbank Centre, the London Sinfonietta and Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance.

Festival Artistic Advisor: Dominic Murcott

Introducing Conlon Nancarrow 2

Conference: Nancarrow in the 21st century 4

Trimpin and sound sculptures 4

SATURDAY 21 APRIL

Complete Studies For Player Piano 6

London Sinfonietta 10

Film: Virtuoso of the Player Piano 14

SUNDAY 22 APRIL

Complete Studies For Player Piano 16

Arditti String Quartet 20

Trinity Laban Contemporary Music Group 23

I was fooled by a Player Piano 24

**Welcome to Southbank Centre and we hope you enjoy your visit. We have a Duty Manager available at all times. If you have any queries please ask any member of staff for assistance.**

Eating, drinking and shopping? Southbank Centre shops and restaurants include Foyles, EAT, Giraffe, Strada, YO! Sushi, wagamama, Le Pain Quotidien, Las Iguanas, ping pong, Canteen, Caffè Vergnano 1882, Skylon, Concrete and Feng Sushi, as well as cafes, restaurants and shops inside Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall and Hayward Gallery.

If you wish to make a comment following your visit please contact the Visitor Experience Team, Southbank Centre, Belvedere Road, London SE1 8XX, phone 020 7960 4250 or email [customer@southbankcentre.co.uk](mailto:customer@southbankcentre.co.uk)

We look forward to seeing you again soon.

**‘the key to appreciating this extraordinary music is to recognise Nancarrow’s obsession with time’**

**Conlon Nancarrow (1912-1997) is invariably mentioned alongside the great American musical innovators such as Charles Ives, John Cage and Steve Reich, whose compositions are free from the constraints of European traditions. As John Adams put it they ‘burnt the house down and started over’.** Of these, Nancarrow remains ubiquitously admired by musicians and other artists but the density and complexity of much of his music, plus the fact that the majority of it is written for the player piano – an instrument that was becoming antiquated even when he began using it in 1948 – mean that his work remains something of a mystery to a wider public. While there are in fact numerous pieces

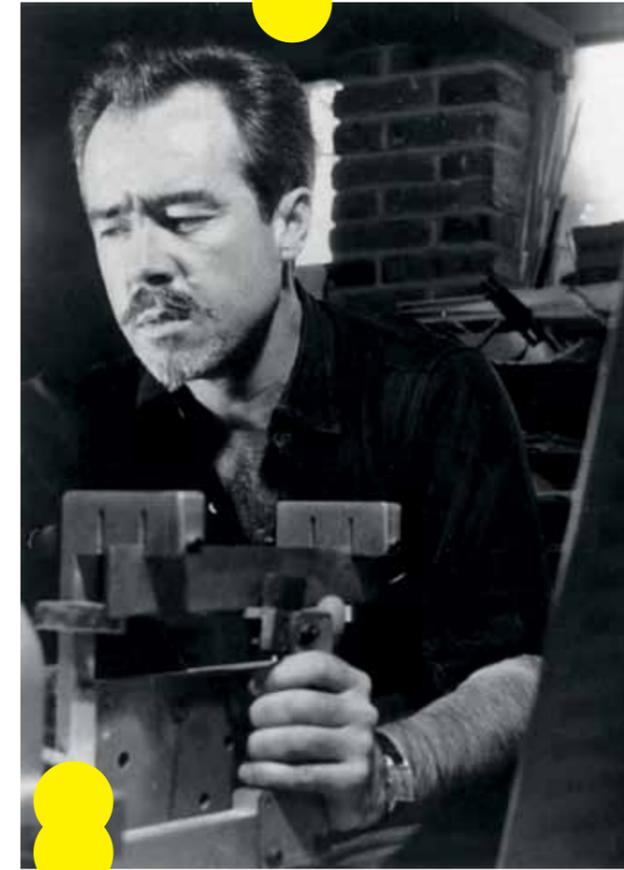
that are accessibly melodic, jazzy and contemplative, the key to appreciating this extraordinary body of music is to recognise Nancarrow’s obsession with time; not just as the unifying force that binds sounds into music, but time manipulated into something that can exist in multiple ways at once. Indeed almost all his pieces explore this concept in one way or another and his investigations produced an impressive number of new techniques that predated their use by far better known composers including Xenakis and Ligeti.

In discussing Nancarrow’s music a new descriptive language has emerged. Many of his works are canons: traditionally two or more versions of the same musical line played together but starting at different points (think *London’s Burning*). However, Nancarrow commonly uses two or more versions of the same piece played at different speeds, described as ‘tempo canons’. The relationship between the speeds is expressed as a *ratio* ranging

from the ‘entertaining’ (4:5 in Study #14) to the ‘irrational’ ( $\sqrt{2}:2$  – Study #33) to the ‘hilarious’ ( $1/\sqrt{\pi}:\sqrt{2}/3$  – Study #41A).

For Nancarrow fans a mythology has built up around the man that is almost as beguiling as the music itself. Born to middle class parents in Texarkana Arkansas, he played trumpet in jazz bands and orchestras as a youth before rejecting his father’s ambitions for him to become an engineer by studying composition in Cincinnati and then Boston. Having already caught the attention of Aaron Copland in his early twenties, his idealism and convictions led him to join first the Communist Party and then the thousands of volunteers from around the world who fought in the Spanish Civil War. Injured and malnourished, he returned to America two years later to discover a country descending into anti-communist paranoia and found that even anti-fascist fighters were viewed with suspicion and were being denied passports. Within a year of his return, in what seems an extraordinary decision, he emigrated to Mexico and lived there for the rest of his life.

Softly spoken, with a mild-mannered belligerence, Nancarrow was not the kind of leader who could enthuse reluctant musicians and having spent several years failing to get players to rise to the challenges of his music he turned his back on human performers and concentrated on the player piano. A real piano with a mechanism for playing automatically from rolls of paper with music punched in them as a series of holes, player pianos and the related pianolas were commonplace in middle class homes from around 1900 until the commercialisation of radio in the 1920s. Nancarrow bought one on his first trip back to the US in 1947 (where he also attended a performance of Cage’s *Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano* in New York) and had his own hole-punching machine made. He then set about painstakingly punching compositions, initially titled ‘Rhythmic Studies’, and later changed to ‘Studies



Nancarrow using a hole-punching machine c.1955

For Player Piano’ in a 30-year period of artistic solitude that has become part of the Nancarrow legend. In reality his solitude may not always have been as extreme: he was an avid reader and subscribed to the main musical journals of the day as well as maintaining friendships with Elliott Carter and Cage who were both instrumental in getting his music known. The former through supporting the publication of his first study in 1951, the latter via the Merce Cunningham Dance Company’s use of several studies in 1960.

This festival is the first time that the complete story is told through his music: the Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall is metaphorically transformed into Nancarrow’s home studio for the complete works for player piano.

The London Sinfonietta explores the man himself with a multimedia journey through his best-loved chamber works

to bold new arrangements, including some landmarks from influential friends along the way (Andrew Burke, their Chief Executive immediately recognised the synergy between this event and the ensemble’s ethos and has championed it from its earliest days). The string quartets are some of his finest works, the third being written for the Arditto Quartet who are present to recount that chapter in his life’s work. An important character in an unusual story is the sound sculptor Trimpin, whose exquisite installation *Conlon in purple* is resident in The Front Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall playing Nancarrow and new compositions specially written for this event by a network of composers from around the world. Next to this is a line of 12 speakers playing spatialised versions of yet more Nancarrow and new works.

In addition there is the conference *Nancarrow in the 21st century*, which runs alongside the festival and brings

**‘This festival is the first time that the complete story is told through his music’**

together some of the finest Nancarrow scholars to explore his continuing, and indeed developing influence.

Southbank Centre’s Head of Classical Music, Gillian Moore says: ‘It has always been a dream to put on a festival of Nancarrow, since first hearing this impossibly amazing music in the 1980s. Thanks to the passion and energy of Dominic Murcott, and the creativity of the London Sinfonietta, we have been able to do it. I feel confident that this wonderfully off-the-wall music will be loved by a whole new generation of listeners.’

Befitting a legend there is a fairytale ending to Nancarrow’s story: recordings of his player piano studies began to be released and when Ligeti heard them he declared Nancarrow’s brilliance and importance. Then, in 1982 at the age of 70, he received the first ever MacArthur ‘Genius’ Award worth \$300,000. World tours and commissions followed. The world’s best contemporary players began to perform his instrumental works with the skill and commitment they demand. Others made highly successful instrumental arrangements of the player piano studies. More recordings were made, PhDs were written and in a modest way fame and fortune arrived at Nancarrow’s door. There is however little evidence that he craved either. It seems that he made the music he wanted to make simply because it interested him – no more, no less.

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*The Music of Conlon Nancarrow: Impossible Brilliance* Festival Artistic Advisor

**PODCAST** 

Download our Nancarrow podcast to find out more about the composer who shunned performers to create perfectly constructed masterpieces:  
[soundcloud.com/southbankcentre/nancarrow](https://soundcloud.com/southbankcentre/nancarrow)

## Saturday 21 – Sunday 22 April

### Level 5 Function Room at Royal Festival Hall

This conference brings together some of the most important Nancarrow scholars and commentators from around the world to explore the composer's continuing and developing influence on contemporary musical thinking.

We are also delighted to welcome Yoko Sugiura-Nancarrow, Conlon's widow who will give a brief presentation on the second day.

### Conference Director and Festival Artistic Advisor

Dr Dominic Murcott (Head of Composition, Trinity Laban)

### Conference Committee

Dr Dominic Murcott (Trinity Laban)  
Dr Jonathan Owen Clark (Head of Research, Trinity Laban)  
Kyle Gann (Bard College USA)  
Dr Felix Meyer (Paul Sacher Foundation Switzerland)  
Prof. James Greeson (University of Arkansas)

### Conference Co-ordinator

Dr Steve Gisby

### Additional Co-ordination

Dr Chris Sarantis  
Dr Leo Grant

### Conference Partners

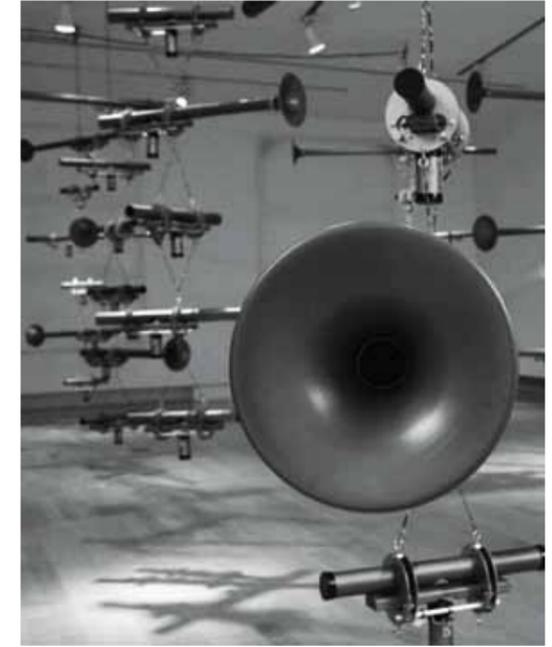
Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London  
Southbank Centre, London  
Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel  
Institute of Musical Research, London  
The Berthold Goldschmidt Lecture Series

### Saturday 21 April 9.15am – 5pm

- 9.15AM** Registration
- 10AM** Welcome
- 10.15AM** Presentation by Charles Amirkhanian, Artistic Director of Other Minds, who produced and promoted Nancarrow's music and is responsible, perhaps more than any other person, for helping the composer achieve recognition.
- 11.15AM** Paper 1: Mark Gotham
- 11.45AM** BREAK
- 12 NOON** Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall  
*Conlon Nancarrow: Virtuoso of the Player Piano* A new film by Jim Greeson with an introduction by the film maker. This film is also part of the festival. Entrance is free, but booking is essential.
- 1PM** Lunch
- 2PM** Paper 2: Clifton Callendar
- 2.30PM** Paper 3: Alistair Zaldua
- 2.50PM** Break
- 3.20PM** Special Guest: Felix Meyer, author and Director of the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland which holds the archive of Nancarrow's work.
- 4PM** Discussion with sound-sculptor Trimpin, whose work is displayed in The Front Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall this weekend (see opposite page).

### Sunday 22 April 9.30am – 5pm

- 9.30AM** Registration (only for those who did not attend the previous day)
- 10AM** Welcome
- 10.15AM** Paper 4
- 10.45AM** Paper 5
- 11.15AM** Presentation by Kyle Gann, author of the most important text on the subject *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow*
- 12.15PM** Break
- 12.30PM** Free concert in The Front Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall
- 1.30PM** Lunch
- 2.30PM** Dominic Murcott: Percussion>Tape>Percussion: Context, Analysis and Reinvention of Nancarrow's Piece for Tape. With special guest Joby Burgess
- 3PM** Special Guest: Yoko Sugiura-Nancarrow
- 3.30PM** Round table discussion: Charles Amirkhanian, Kyle Gann, Felix Meyer and Southbank Centre's Gillian Moore, chaired by Paul Archibold
- 4.45PM** Plenary Session



### APRIL-JULY TRIMPIN: CONLONINPURPLE TWELVE CHANNEL NANCARROW

This weekend don't miss the room-sized mechanical marimba by the celebrated German inventor and sound sculptor Trimpin in The Front Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall.

It is called Conloninpurple in honour of Nancarrow and for this event it will play Nancarrow Studies plus a host of new compositions by composers from around the world.

Trimpin, who is resident in Seattle, specialises in combining computers with traditional instruments to develop different ways of playing. His work is celebrated across the world but he has never been represented by a gallery or a dealer. He does not permit recordings of his work to be released commercially.

Trimpin sets up the marimba differently to suit each new location – so it will never sound the same as it does at Southbank Centre. He is speaking about his work with Nancarrow at the conference during the weekend (see page 4).

Next to Conloninpurple is Twelve Channel Nancarrow, a line of 12 speakers. It is inspired by the multi-channel arrangements of Nancarrow pieces that have been created by various artists in the last 20 years including Carlos Sandoval and Robert Willey. This weekend it will play specially adapted versions of Nancarrow Studies as well as pieces by composers from around the world.

This event is kindly supported by Genelec.

What constitutes an authentic performance of Nancarrow's Studies For Player Piano? It has often been said that a personal audience with the composer, his pianos and a glass of wine in his soundproofed studio in Mexico City was as good as it gets. For this weekend's concerts we are imagining the Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall has been transformed into Nancarrow's studio. Even though he is no longer here to guide us we have Rex Lawson and Wolfgang Heisig, the two leading experts in the field, playing the rolls on a Marshall and Wendell Ampico Reproducing Piano identical to Nancarrow's, the hammers of which have been prepared with metal tacks to produce a bright, sharp attack. The pieces that require two pianos are performed by Rex and Wolfgang on pedalled pianolas.

For each piece we have picked out a feature or two that may help you to get more out of the music. Now you'll just have to imagine you're clutching a glass of Nancarrow's favourite Irish whisky and breathing the rich aroma of his Cuban cigarettes.

These concerts are kindly supported by Denis Hall of the Pianola Institute and the Paul Sacher Foundation.

**CONLON NANCARROW:  
COMPLETE STUDIES  
FOR PLAYER PIANO**

**The Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall**

**Rex Lawson** – Ampico Reproducing Piano  
**Wolfgang Heisig** – Ampico Reproducing Piano

**Boogie Woogie I**

**2pm – 2.30pm**

Conlon Nancarrow:  
Player Piano Study No.3a  
Player Piano Study No.3b  
Player Piano Study No.3c  
Player Piano Study No.3d  
Player Piano Study No.3e  
Player Piano Study No.2a  
Player Piano Study No.2b  
Player Piano Study No.9

While Stravinsky was probably his favourite composer at the time, Nancarrow's earliest studies were informed by his experience as a jazz trumpeter and his love of pre-bebop jazz, in particular Earl 'Fatha' Hines, Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. Studies 3a-e were probably the very first to be written and were only grouped together as the Boogie Woogie Suite in retrospect. Nancarrow was notoriously vague about the dates of the early studies but they were probably begun in 1948 and completed in the following year.

**Study No.3a**  
Begins with a 'right hand' melody over a superhuman bass line. Syncopated ideas are added ending with no fewer than eight simultaneous lines.

**Study No.3b**  
Ten choruses of a twelve-bar blues over a repeating bass line. Angular lines emerge that appear to be running at different speeds before a sudden quiet return to the 'head'.

**Study No.3c**  
A far less obvious blues with clear canonic elements. Hints of 'cowboy' music could be the influence of his friend Aaron Copland.

**Study No.3d**  
It feels like a lazy blues but the structure is almost impossible to grasp on a single listening. A piece that is simultaneously comfortable and intangible with a lone, unexpected burst of Nancarrow's high-speed virtuosity which he was just starting to develop.

**Study No.3e**  
Almost a return to 3a but with the tempo pushed so far that the relatively simple twelve-bar blues becomes too fast for us to perceive accurately. Listen out for an end which slows down by removing notes rather than actually changing speed.

**Study No.2a**  
Probably written straight after Study No. 3, it has a similarly bluesy harmonic basis but with an intriguing rhythmic structure. The whole piece is over a bass line in 5/8 against a ticking pair of notes in 3/4. The bass line however is three notes and a rest in length so it doesn't fit the five-note bar length and seems to change chord at unexpected places as a result.

**Study No.2b**  
Sounding more like a supercharged Gershwin than Fatha Hines, this is one of the shortest pieces in the series.

**Study No.9**  
A series of ostinato passages in three sections. The ostinati always play against each other at different tempi but never more than three at once so it is just generally possible to hear them clearly. The false end provides a great sense of drama.

**Tempo Canons**

**3pm – 3.30pm**

Conlon Nancarrow:  
Player Piano Study No.13  
Player Piano Study No.14  
Player Piano Study No.15  
Player Piano Study No.16  
Player Piano Study No.17  
Player Piano Study No.18  
Player Piano Study No.19  
Player Piano Study No.24  
Player Piano Study No.31  
Player Piano Study No.34

Though not the only composer to conceive pieces with similar melodic material related by different temporal relationships, Nancarrow has undoubtedly explored this area in greater variety and complexity than any other.

In contrast to the retrospective grouping of the Boogie Woogie Suite, studies 13-19 were intended as a single collection, but developed individual identities.

**Study No.13**  
Nancarrow was apparently unhappy with this study and declined to publish it. It may not have succeeded in terms of structural clarity but its pointillistic texture is reminiscent of Xenakis and Penderecki pieces that were probably written several years later.

**Study No.14 – Canon 4/5**  
Conceptually pure, it consists of the same material at two different speeds at two different transpositions. The midpoint of each coincides so the faster one naturally starts later and ends earlier.

**Study No.15 – Canon 3/4**  
Two versions of the same frenetic material at a ratio of first 3:4 then 3:3 then 4:3. Whether you can hear this is another matter entirely! At a minute long it makes more sense to just fasten your seatbelts and close your eyes...

**Study No.16 – Canon 3/5**  
Two sections at a tempo ratio of 3:5, each made up of four lines at four different tempi. We hear the first group, then the second, then both at the same time.

**Study No.17 – Canon 12/15/20**  
The tempo ratios are starting to become more complex (almost impossible to play and hard to hear). The three lines of different material blur into a single 'swarm' ending with Nancarrow's trademark perfect cadence to let the audience know it has really ended!

**Study No.18 – Canon 3/4**  
Another use of the same material at different speeds to create complexity. Here the faster voice enters later but both finish their material at the same time.

**Study No.19 – Canon 12/15/20**  
This short study is the last of the intended canonic collection, and while once again it is hard to hear the canons at work the material is more strident and suggests a composer learning how to put this new technique to dramatic effect.

**Study No.24 – Canon 14/15/16**  
A more mature work and a brilliant example of how Nancarrow used his canonic research for sophisticated results. Dramatically different sections each contain the same material at three different speeds, but now the lines can be heard clearly chasing each other. The unique mechanical trills of the instrument are featured for the first time.

**Study No.31 – Canon 21/24/25**  
Written in the late '60s probably more than five years after the previous piece, this is one of the most transparent of all the tempo canonic pieces. The listener is being invited to enjoy the structure as well as the material.

**'fasten your seatbelts and close your eyes...'**

## Study No.34 – Canon 9/10/11

Canonic passages are apparent throughout this study but there is clearly something more complex occurring. In fact tempo canons are ‘nested’ within tempo canons. Improbably, Nancarrow made a string trio version for the Arditti Quartet, who even more improbably could play it!

## Boogie Woogie II

### 4pm – 4.30pm

Conlon Nancarrow:  
Player Piano Study No.45a  
Player Piano Study No.45b  
Player Piano Study No.45c  
Player Piano Study No.46  
Player Piano Study No.47  
Player Piano Study No.11

Commissioned by Betty Freeman around 1982, Studies Nos.45 to 47 represent a return to Nancarrow’s Boogie Woogie influenced work, but with the maturity that 32 years of player piano composing afforded him.

## Study No.45a

As in the earliest studies everything is underpinned by a bluesy bass line. This one judders and stutters throughout while the melodies stretch the jazz language beyond the obvious.

## Study No.45b

Once again the blues bass line is more like an egg rather than a ball rolling down a hill. Some lovely sparse melodic lines reminiscent of Thelonius Monk.

## Study No.45c

The first quiet section uses a similar technique to Henry Cowell’s Aeolian Harp where only certain notes are allowed to resonate after a glissando.

## Study No.46

This begins by presenting a collection of disjointed fragments before stitching them together over a series of three simultaneous ostinati. Could the tremolos provide a hint of Spain once again?

## Study No.47

Again this has shades of Spain (even more than blues). A mighty six-minute work culminating in a unique set of fast rhythmic glissandi, a reiteration of the opening material at three different tempi producing a chorale-like effect and the almost obligatory perfect cadence from nowhere.

## Study No.11

Study No.11 is from a much earlier period, but its staccato chords and cascading lines suggest post-bop vamping (the act of improvising a chordal backing for a soloist) in all likelihood by chance rather than design.

## The Nancarrow Lick

### 5pm – 5.30pm

Conlon Nancarrow:  
Player Piano Study No.25  
Player Piano Study No.43  
Player Piano Study No.7  
Player Piano Study No.40a  
Player Piano Study No.40b

The incandescent Study No.25 marks the point at which Nancarrow found a sonic language for the player piano

that was entirely unique to it. Using ultra-fast glissandi and arpeggios, the so-called ‘Nancarrow Lick’, this is one of the most entertaining works in the collection. The concert is rounded off with the mathematical exploration that is Study No.40. A two movement work whose second movement consists of the first movement played on two pianos with a tempo relationship of  $e/\pi$ !

## Study No.25

The super fast glissandi have a different qualities about them according to the dynamics and whether the sustain pedal is down. The final twelve seconds contain 1,028 notes!

## Study No.43 – Canon 24/25

Split into three sections, the outer two are soft while the middle one features virtuosic and incandescent glissandi plus snarling trills.

## Study No.7

The longest and most sophisticated of the early studies in which the opening staccato theme returns in an increasingly elaborated manner. Yvar Mikhashoff’s arrangement for chamber orchestra has arguably become more well known than the study itself.

## Study No.40a – Canon $e/\pi$ Study No.40b – Canon $(e/\pi)$

The first of Nancarrow’s experiments with two synchronised player pianos and made up of chords, note clusters and glissandi, this is probably quite freely composed and has almost no melodic lines or repeating structural elements. While we cannot possibly hear the exact

relationship between two lines at the so-called ‘irrational’ speeds of  $e$  (the logarithmic base – approximately 2.72) against  $\pi$  (the ratio of a circle’s circumference to its diameter – approximately 3.14), what can be heard is the entrance of the second piano playing the same material as the first, with the echo distance between the two decreasing until they coincide on the last chord.

## Acceleration

### 6pm – 6.30pm

Conlon Nancarrow:  
Player Piano Study No.21 (Canon X)  
Player Piano Study No.8  
Player Piano Study No.22  
Player Piano Study No.23  
Player Piano Study No.27  
Player Piano Study No.28  
Player Piano Study No.29

While computers have created the opportunity for any conceivable change in tempo to be realised it is still Nancarrow and his antiquated technology that have produced the most gratifying explorations of the phenomenon. The iconic Study No.21 ‘Canon X’ with its clear and thrilling crossing of parts is featured alongside the other ‘acceleration’ studies, including the exquisite Study No.27, nicknamed the ‘Ontological Clock’ by Kyle Gann because of its fixed tempo voice against which the other voices speed up and slow down.

## Study No.21 – Canon X

The archetypal Nancarrow work. Two lines of broadly atonal music cross as one gets faster while the other gets slower. The pitches are merely a tool to allow the structure to unfold.

## Study No.8

An earlier work and the first study to explore acceleration. Each of the voices speeds up and slows down in an independent but overlapping way, producing a kind of musical roller coaster. When notating the work for publication, Nancarrow realised that the western notation system was inadequate for such ideas and instead developed his own proportional method.

## Study No.22 – Canon 1%/1.5%/2.25%

Three voices can clearly be heard entering at different places with the same melodies. They then accelerate at speeds of 1%, 1.5% and 2.25% per note respectively until they reach their fastest point before decelerating back to the starting point in a near perfect palindrome. Interestingly, fast doesn’t always mean loud so the biggest musical surprises occur approximately half way along the acceleration and deceleration processes.

## Study No.23

While containing lightning fast gestures this study remains delicate throughout. Based on a complex series of accelerations and decelerations, it is almost as if Study No.21 is embedded in it many times over. Tiny ornaments (or perhaps ‘squiggles’) of sound are a feature from the central section at about three minutes.

## Study No.28

Apparently originally conceived for prepared piano, it features a series of scales that gradually accelerate at different speeds.

## Study No.29

Another study apparently conceived for prepared player piano, it is like a musical overlapping of Morse codes with two separate acceleration processes occurring at once.

## Study No.27 – Canon 5%/6%/8%/11%

The joy of this study is to see how the perception of the fixed ‘clock’ (the first phrase that is heard) changes as the other material curls around it, trying but never managing to make it waver from its path – though it does find a sudden faster tempo near the conclusion.

## Clarity

### 10pm – 10.30pm

Conlon Nancarrow:  
Player Piano Study No.44  
Player Piano Study No.26  
Player Piano Study No.5  
Player Piano Study No.6  
Player Piano Study No.20  
Player Piano Study No.12

Though Nancarrow is known for producing some of the most complex pieces of our times, these studies reveal some delightfully accessible melodies, from the glassy surface of Study No.26, to the almost pop-like tunes of Study No.44.

The Spanish flavour of Study No.12 may recall Nancarrow’s time fighting the Fascists in the civil war while Study No.5 is a brutal piece that wears its contracting concertina-like structure on its sleeve.

## Study No.44

Nicknamed ‘Aleatoric Round’ and scored for two un-synchronised player pianos, this gently bubbling piece can be played with any tempo relationship between them. Every performance is therefore unique and the winsome melodies produced are strangely addictive.

## Study No.26 – Canon 1/1

The antithesis of Nancarrow’s trademark complexity, this was championed by John Cage and is the only canon in the collection with all voices at the same tempo. The cool texture and ambivalent harmonic material is indeed reminiscent of Cage.

## Study No.5

An extraordinary series of repeating lines stacked on top of each other. Some remain unchanged throughout but others consist of gestures separated by a diminishing number of rests. As a result the statements get closer and closer until everything is compressed into a manic conclusion.

## Study No.6

A deceptively simple bass line sounds like an ostinato but through a numerical trick is always unstable, while a ‘cowboy’ melody unfolds over the top. In the final moments the melody uses the same rhythmic pattern as the bass.

## Study No.20

A tempo canon in which each voice contains one repeating note only. These ‘horizontal’ layers of notes produce ‘vertical’ melodies in a similar way that wind chimes do.

## Study No.12

A beautiful study with a character unlike almost all the others. Using the Phrygian mode, irregular bar lengths and guitar-strum like glissandi, the spirit of flamenco is captured in a work of pure genius.

All Complete Studies for Player Piano programme notes ©Dominic Murcott, 2012

**‘The final 12 seconds contain 1,028 notes!’**

Saturday 21 April

**IMPOSSIBLE BRILLIANCE:  
THE MUSIC OF CONLON NANCARROW**

Queen Elizabeth Hall, 7.30pm

London Sinfonietta  
Baldur Brönnimann *conductor*  
Ben Gernon *conductor*  
Rex Lawson *pianola*  
Iain Farringdon *harpsichord*  
David Hockings *percussion*  
Sound Intermedia *sound projection*  
Netia Jones *projection design*

**Conlon Nancarrow:** Player Piano Study No.21 (Canon X) arr. Dominic Murcott  
Piece No.2 for Small Orchestra  
Player Piano Study No.6 arr. Yvar Mikhashoff

**John Cage:** Five

**Conlon Nancarrow:** Player Piano Study No.5 arr. Mikhashoff  
Player Piano Study No.26 arr. Matt Rogers

**James Tenney:** Spectral Canon for Conlon Nancarrow

**Interval**

**Conlon Nancarrow:** Toccata for violin and player piano  
Tango? arr. Yvar Mikhashoff  
Piece No.1 for Small Orchestra  
Piece for Tape arr. Dominic Murcott

**György Ligeti:** Continuum for solo harpsichord

**Conlon Nancarrow:** Player Piano Study No.49a  
Study No.49a, b, c arr. John Ashton Thomas

**Concert curated by:**  
Dominic Murcott (Festival Artistic Advisor)  
Andrew Burke (Chief Executive, London Sinfonietta)

**Of all the 20th century's musical inventors and innovators, Conlon Nancarrow is the one whose imagination stretched furthest beyond his available resources.**

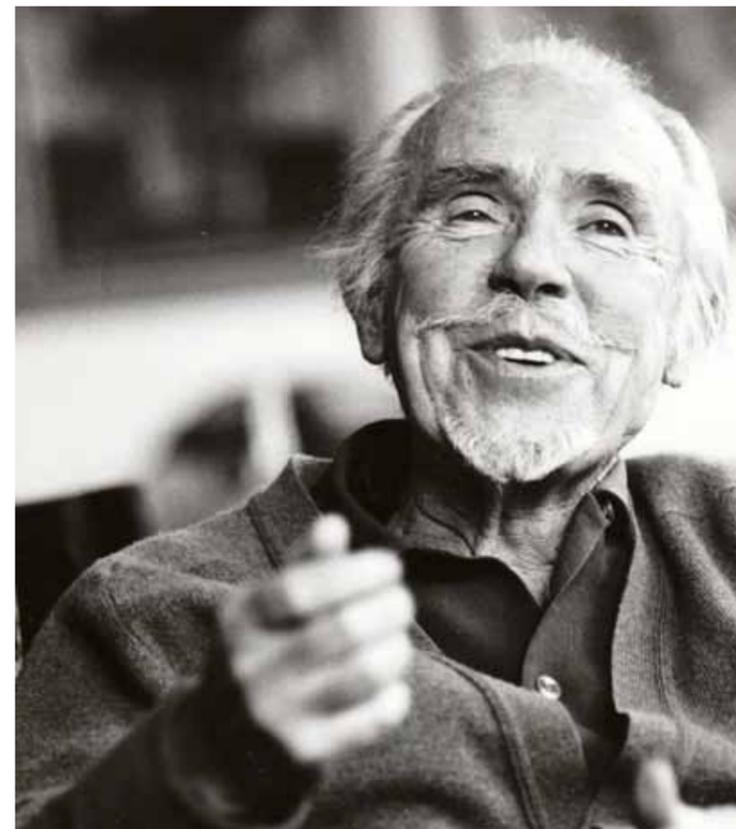
Yes, he made a virtue out of his devotion to the player piano. But the question lingers: what if he had had access to today's technology; or, better still, today's players, many of whom are well capable of meeting the unique challenges of his music?

We have a few clues to how Nancarrow might have orchestrated his studies. Pieces 1 and 2 for Small Orchestra are concrete hints. Although separated by 42 years, they show a marked continuity of approach, with their contrapuntal layers clearly defined, Stravinsky-like, through hard-edged timbres. And when the pianist Yvar Mikhashoff arranged 11 studies for ensemble Nancarrow provided guidelines that reflected this enduring taste: 'Strong preference given to oboe, horn and trumpet, and the other winds; general avoidance of prominent flute or strings soloistically; and an awareness of the instrumentation trying to preserve some of the attack properties of the player piano.'

**Undanceable and only just playable**

Mikhashoff is one of those performers who might have changed Nancarrow's path had he been born around 40 years earlier. Indeed, he was one of the first to play a Nancarrow study live – number 15. He also performed *Tango?* (undanceable, but just about playable), one of more than 100 he commissioned from composers from around the world. His arrangements of Studies 5 and 6 certainly reflect Nancarrow's suggestions: number 5 in particular echoes Piece 2 in the way its canonic lines have been distinctly stratified.

Nancarrow's more recent arrangers may disregard these prescriptions, but they have to contend with many of the same issues. Timbre remains prominent. Nancarrow's own player pianos were souped-up, with metal hammers designed for a brash sound. Their bass notes were particularly tinny. Mikhashoff gave his basslines weight, but a truly



Nancarrow at his home in Mexico City, 1983

authentic approach might choose otherwise. In arranging Study 26, the flat sound of the player piano is the problem. The study unfolds in even notes, without Nancarrow's usual rhythmic invention. The canons are therefore disguised within regular chords thanks to Nancarrow's limited use of the player piano's dynamic nuance. Arranging for the diverse palette of a small orchestra means holding this tricky balance between chords and counterpoint.

**A unique set of problems**

Study 21 – in which two melodic lines, one accelerating, the other decelerating, cross each other – brings a unique set of problems. First, it begins and ends with music faster than any human can play. Dominic Murcott has tackled this issue electronically, allowing an altered, digitally sampled Nancarrow piano to take over when flesh gives up. Second, no single conductor can handle two simultaneous tempi, moving in opposite directions. Again, the answer is digital: a split-screen video of the two tempos being conducted, co-ordinated by click track. This solution was theorised by Nancarrow, but it's only recently become possible to carry out his vision.

Two further wishes fulfilled – extensions rather than revisitings – are the Piece for Tape and Concerto for Player Piano. Nancarrow experimented once with tape as the solution to his rhythmic imaginings. Piece for Tape's technique of spliced drum patterns would be recognisable to any modern drum 'n' bass producer, but Nancarrow didn't judge it a success. In its arrangement for live percussionist, however, it becomes a different creature. Study 49 has a more complex history. It is subtitled 'excerpts from the forthcoming Concerto for Pianola and Orchestra' (a pianola is a manually pedalled version of a player piano), and while some sketches for this larger work exist the intended relationship between the two remains largely unknown. Indeed, the study exists happily in its own right. Two of the three movements have however been previously arranged for orchestra by Thomas Adès, and Paul Usher has created his own piece based on the material. Even so, tonight's version by John Ashton Thomas is the first time all three sections have been orchestrated together. Furthermore, the performance includes guest pianolaist Rex Lawson, for whom Nancarrow intended the concerto after they met in the 1980s. To allow the audience the luxury of comparing the player piano version with the new arrangement, Rex plays 49a in its original form before the orchestrated version.

**Deranged mechanisms**

And then there is the experimental groundwork Nancarrow laid out. His influence on late 20th-century music was diverse and profound. The machine gun clatter of György Ligeti's *Continuum for harpsichord* seems closest to Nancarrow's aesthetic of deranged mechanisms, but that's just a coincidence – Ligeti wouldn't become aware of Nancarrow for another 12 years. Nancarrow's early admirers included Frank Zappa, John Cage and James Tenney. Zappa knew his early Columbia recordings, and cites him as an influence – 'ragtime that's totally bionic' – as early as 1969.

Cage and Nancarrow knew each other's work even earlier. For a time Nancarrow experimented in Cageian fashion, altering the sound of his player pianos with screws, bolts and so on wedged between the strings. (Cage also secured the survival of Study 26 – Nancarrow was going to discard it until Cage expressed admiration for its harmonies.) Yet any musical influence in the other direction may not have emerged until Cage's late, 'time bracket' pieces, of which *Five* is typical. In these works, small groups of pitches are given a period in which they should begin (between 0 and 20 seconds after the start, say) and another in which they should end (between 30 and 70 seconds after the start, say). This means that the window in which the pitches sound can vary in duration and relative position, but within strictly defined limits. The results are a long way from Nancarrow's canons – not least because of their glacial pace – but both men shared an idea of music in which pitch material was conceived separately from the durational framework in which it sat.

**Rich and surprising**

Tenney was another early devotee. His player piano piece *Spectral Canon* for Conlon Nancarrow was written in 1972 but not realised until Nancarrow punched the roll for him two years later. (Tenney had already written detailed notes to Nancarrow's first recordings, so a favour was being returned.) The instrument is retuned to give the first 24 notes of a harmonic series. Each note enters in sequence, from lowest to highest, sounding a rhythm that gets progressively faster, then slower. Each entry is also faster than the last, according to a mathematical sequence that relates harmonic position to tempo. It reads like a mathematical conceit, but the music is rich and surprising. The execution is pure Tenney, but most of the ideas (multiple canons, harmonically related tempos, and so on) are Nancarrow's, and would be explored by the spectral school then emerging in France and Germany.

©Tim Rutherford-Johnson, 2012

Briony Campbell



Byron Fulcher, London Sinfonietta principal trombone

**Biographies**

**London Sinfonietta**

The London Sinfonietta is one of the world's leading contemporary music ensembles with a reputation built on the virtuosity of its performances, ambitious programming and commitment to placing new music at the heart of contemporary culture. The ensemble is Resident Orchestra at Southbank Centre with its headquarters at Kings Place.

Famed for its commitment to the creation of new music, the London Sinfonietta has commissioned over 250 works and premiered many hundreds more. Its pioneering participation work includes *Blue Touch Paper*, an innovative programme which nurtures and promotes the next generation of inventive partnerships across a variety of disciplines, and the *Writing the Future* scheme which enables composers to

work closely with London Sinfonietta musicians. The London Sinfonietta Academy entered its fourth year in 2012, giving the opportunity for the UK's finest young musicians to come together to further their performance experience and training in a week-long course.

Visit [londonsinfonietta.org.uk](http://londonsinfonietta.org.uk) for exclusive interviews, music and films, and information on our three recent releases on NMC Recordings and Signum Records. Sign up to the London Sinfonietta e-zine for all the latest news and information.

*London Sinfonietta performs with the generous support of Arts Council England and the PRS for Music foundation and is grateful for the vision and investment of many other individuals, trusts and foundations, all of whom make their work possible.*

**Baldur Brönnimann – Conductor**

Baldur Brönnimann has earned a reputation as a conductor of great flexibility with a broad-minded approach to music-making and a particular affinity for the most complex contemporary scores. In 2008 Brönnimann made his English National Opera debut with a controversial new production of Olga Neuwirth's *Lost Highway*, the success of which led to his conducting the new La Fura dels Baus production of Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* in 2009/10 and John Adams's *Death of Klinghoffer* in spring 2012. He also returns to Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires, for a double-bill of Schoenberg and Szymanowski in summer 2012.

Brönnimann's debut at the Bergen International Festival 2008, conducting Saariaho's *L'Amour de Loin*, led to a close and increasingly fruitful relationship with the musical life in Bergen, which resulted in his appointment in 2011 as Artistic Director of their contemporary music group, BIT20 Ensemble, and an ongoing relationship with the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra. Recognised internationally as an artist of diverse skills and qualities, Brönnimann is also Music Director of the National Symphony Orchestra of Colombia in Bogotá. As well as focusing on much of the 18th- and 19th-century repertoire, his third season has included a performance of the original version of Falla's *El amor brujo* with the flamenco singer Carmen Linares, performances with soloists such as Natalie Klein, Gabriela Montero, Johannes Moser and Benjamin Schmid, and the first complete performance in Colombia of Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin*.

Highly in demand by orchestras worldwide for his expertise in contemporary music, Brönnimann has conducted, for example, the Seoul Philharmonic, Stockholm Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, Philharmonia and Rai Turin orchestras, in celebrations of music by Adès, Birtwistle, Chin and Dean. He is a favourite of the orchestras in Australia and New Zealand, and he also works regularly with the Scottish Chamber and

Iceland Symphony orchestras and with the London Sinfonietta. In December 2010 he caught the headlines when he travelled to the Middle East to conduct the newly-formed Palestine National Orchestra in Ramallah, Jerusalem and Haifa.

Committed to his work with young musicians, Brönnimann helped to set up the Colombian National Youth Orchestra in 2010 and has initiated a whole range of education activities in Bogotá.

**Netia Jones – Projection designer for Lightmap**

Netia Jones is director of Lightmap – creating video and projection for live performance, installation and film projects – and Transition, the multimedia performance group which presents concerts and opera with integrated video and film.

She has worked at Royal Opera House, Linbury Theatre and Southbank Centre, and at site-specific works for Sizewell nuclear power station and Tilbury Docks; Batignano Festival, Italy; Aldeburgh Festival and Opera North projects.

Projects with Transition include works by Schoenberg, Berg, Purcell, Stravinsky, Handel, Bartók, Britten, Blow, Dowland, Berio and Couperin. Recent work includes 'Everlasting Light' at Sizewell, 'The Way To the Sea' in Thorpeness, 'The Seafarer', – an installation around Messiaen's *Louange à L'Éternité de Jésus* at the South Bank – and 'O Let Me Weep', a performance installation for Opera North.

**Rex Lawson**

For Rex Lawson's biography see page 19.

Saturday 21 April

**London Sinfonietta Players**

Helen Keen – flute (doubling piccolo)  
Melinda Maxwell – oboe (doubling cor anglais)  
Mark van de Wiel \* – clarinet (doubling bass clarinet and eflat clarinet)  
Timothy Lines – bass clarinet  
John Orford \* – bassoon (doubling contra bassoon)  
Philip Eastop – horn  
Chris Davies – horn  
Alistair Mackie \* – trumpet  
Bruce Nockles – trumpet  
Ryan Linham – trumpet  
Byron Fulcher \* – trombone  
Alexandra Wood – violin  
Joan Atherton \* – violin  
Paul Silverthorne \* – viola  
Lionel Handy – cello  
Markus van Horn – double bass  
Andrew Zolinsky – piano (doubling celeste)  
John Alley – piano  
Iain Farrington – celeste (doubling harpsichord)  
David Hockings \* – percussion  
Oliver Lowe – percussion  
\* *London Sinfonietta Principal player*

Christopher Alderton – Concerts Manager  
Lesley Wynne – Orchestra Personnel Manager

**CONLON NANCARROW:  
VIRTUOSO OF THE PLAYER PIANO,  
A FILM BY JAMES GREESON**

**The Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall  
12 noon**

A screening of a film by James Greeson that gives a biographical overview of composer Conlon Nancarrow's life and times, from his beginnings in Texarkana and his years in Boston to fighting in the Spanish Civil War and his emigration to Mexico.

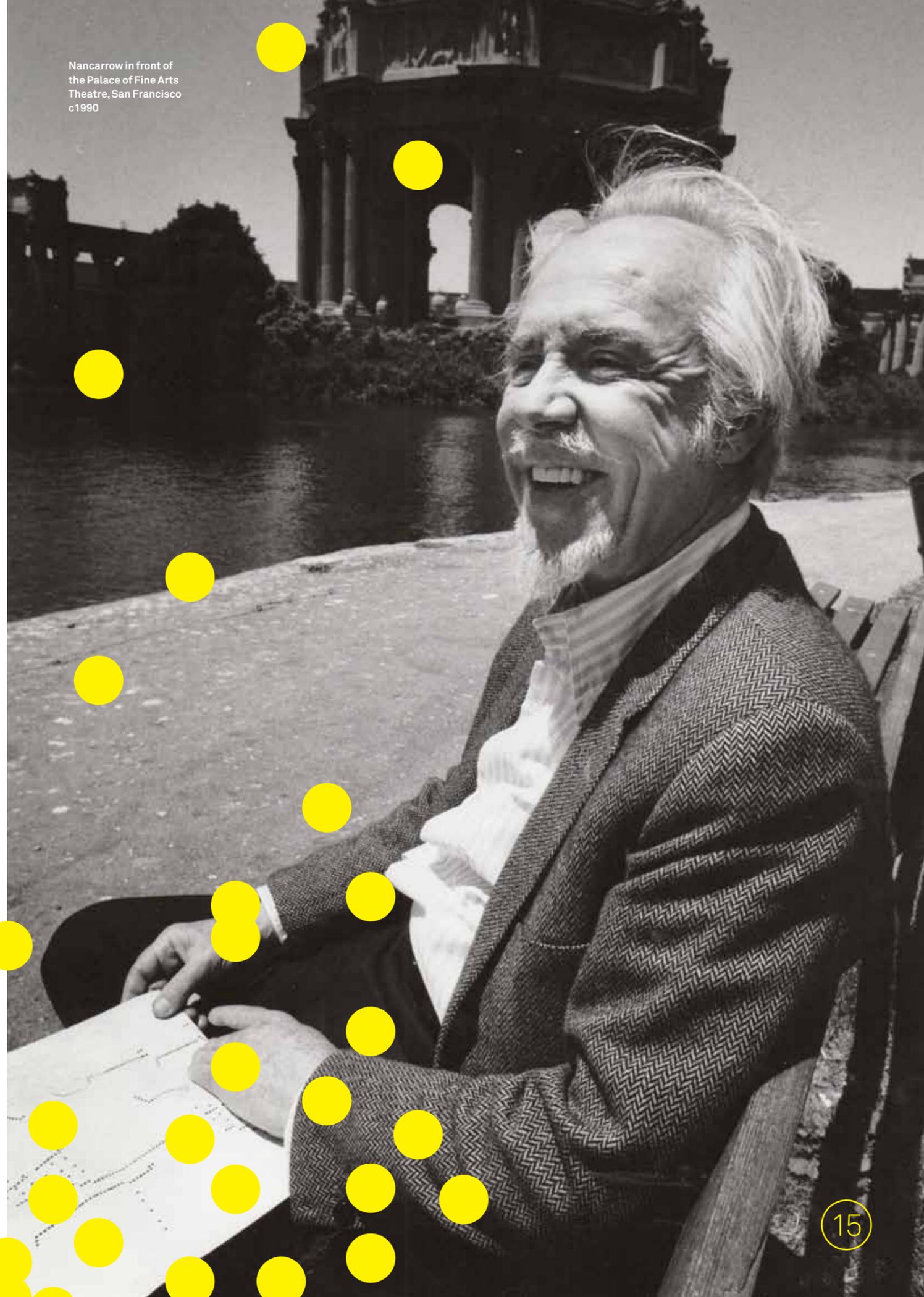
The film features interviews with his family members and those who were closest to Nancarrow during his amazing career, including Yoko Nancarrow, Charles Amirkhanian, Kyle Gann and Trimpin, among others.

It also presents a performance of his first published piano pieces, as well as a newly discovered set of two-part inventions he composed in his first years in Mexico performed at the Sacher Archive by pianist Helena Bugallo.

Other highlights include 'live' performances of his powerful Player Piano Studies, Numbers 25, 3a, 37 and 21, his famous Canon X.

This free event requires a ticket.

Nancarrow in front of  
the Palace of Fine Arts  
Theatre, San Francisco  
c1990



What constitutes an authentic performance of Nancarrow's Studies For Player Piano? It has often been said that a personal audience with the composer, his pianos and a glass of wine in his soundproofed studio in Mexico City was as good as it gets. For this weekend's concerts we are imagining the Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall has been transformed into Nancarrow's studio. Even though he is no longer here to guide us we have Rex Lawson and Wolfgang Heisig, the two leading experts in the field, playing the rolls on a Marshall and Wendell Ampico Reproducing Piano identical to Nancarrow's, the hammers of which have been prepared with metal tacks to produce a bright, sharp attack. The pieces that require two pianos are performed by Rex and Wolfgang on pedalled pianolas.

For each piece we have picked out a feature or two that may help you to get more out of the music. Now you'll just have to imagine you're clutching a glass of Nancarrow's favourite Irish whisky and breathing the rich aroma of his Cuban cigarettes.

These concerts are kindly supported by Denis Hall of the Pianola Institute and the Paul Sacher Foundation.

**CONLON NANCARROW:  
COMPLETE STUDIES  
FOR PLAYER PIANO**

**The Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall**

**Rex Lawson Ampico  
Reproducing Piano  
Wolfgang Heisig Ampico  
Reproducing Piano**

**Synchronised Pianos I**

**2pm – 2.30pm**

Conlon Nancarrow:  
Player Piano Study No.41a  
Player Piano Study No.41b  
Player Piano Study No.41c  
Player Piano Study No.50  
Player Piano Study No.1

Described by James Tenney as one of the most astonishing pieces in the entire literature of 20th-century music, Study No.41 for two synchronised player pianos is the longest of all the studies and uses the most complex mathematical ratios. Exciting and unpredictable, the third movement is the superimposition of the first over the second.

**Study No.41a - Canon**

$$\frac{1}{\sqrt{\pi}} / \sqrt{\frac{2}{3}}$$

Despite the mind-boggling mathematical tempo ratio, the musical structure is perceptually accessible. Consisting of two lines of the same material and therefore a strict canon, the first begins alone and features two sides of Nancarrow's personality: a gentle Copland-esque melody is continually interrupted by 'Nancarrow Licks' – lightning-fast glissandi. The second line

appears at a higher register after two minutes, just as the first moves on to more brutal material. An astonishing duel of overlapping glissandi eventually develops.

**Study No.41b – Canon**

$$\frac{1}{\sqrt[3]{\pi}} / \sqrt[3]{\frac{13}{16}}$$

Once again a two-voice canon with the lower voice beginning. This time the glissandi interrupt a series of tense accelerating pulses and cautious fragments, but the pulses and fragments gradually gain dominance by speeding to a rattling crescendo before slowing down to a more sedate pace once more.

**Study No.41c – Canon**

$$\frac{1}{\sqrt[3]{\pi}} / \sqrt[3]{\frac{13}{16}}$$

$$\frac{1}{\sqrt{\pi}} / \sqrt{\frac{2}{3}}$$

Now the fun begins: two voices on each piano, both pianos at once! The crescendos of the first two movements overlap to create one of the most complex sections in musical history. Buried in the mix are almost all the techniques that Nancarrow has developed for the player piano.

**Study No.50**

Instead of a study arranged for ensemble, this is a player piano transcription of Piece No.2 for Small Orchestra. After Study 41, hearing three voices at a ratio of 5:6:7 should be child's play!

**Study No.1**

Not actually the first study to be written but the first to be published in 1951 (by Henry

Cowell, whose book *New Musical Recourses* was a major source of Nancarrow's inspiration). Listen for a series of lines and cross rhythms over a chugging train ostinato that speeds and slows.

**For Yoko and Others**

**3pm – 3.30pm**

Conlon Nancarrow:  
Para Yoko  
Player Piano Study No.51 (No.3750)  
Contraption No.1  
Player Piano Study No.49a  
Player Piano Study No.49b  
Player Piano Study No.49c  
Player Piano Study No.30  
Player Piano Study No.33

This concert features a fascinating group of studies that fall outside the suggested categories of the main body of work.

**Para Yoko**

The only study with a non-numerical title and dedicated to Nancarrow's wife and mother of his son David Makoto (Yoko is taking part in this weekend's celebrations of Nancarrow). Written in the early 1990s after a debilitating illness, this is a gentler, more lyrical work than the major studies. Contains three voices but not in strict canon.

**Study No.51 (No.3750)**

Study No.3750 is Nancarrow's humorous title but it is also known as Study No.51. Several voices using scale fragments reach an almost romantic cadenza before being swept away by a final gush of 'Nancarrow Licks'. This is the final study he wrote.

**Study No.49a – Canon 4/5/6  
Study No.49b – Canon 4/5/6  
Study No.49c – Canon 4/5/6**

Numbers 49 a, b and c were written after Nancarrow met pianolaist Rex Lawson and realised that the pedal operated pianola could integrate his player piano techniques with an orchestra. The plan was that these studies would become a concerto for player piano and orchestra but he never completed the work (Rex performs a new arrangement by John A Thomas with the London Sinfonietta at this festival).

All three movements are three-part canons, and the collection has a sense of classical concerto form about it with a slow middle movement and a flashy final one. Listen out for a bugle-type call that appears after a few seconds of the first movement and then is referred to throughout the set.

**Study No.30 for Prepared Player Piano**

Nancarrow attended an early performance of Cage's Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano in 1947 in New York. Undoubtedly influenced by this, Study No.30 is an unpublished work for prepared player piano. The instructions for preparation have not survived but as they were collected in tone clusters, it is remarkably effective in this non-prepared version where swarms of sound follow one another.

**Study No.33 – Canon  $\sqrt{2}/2$**

The first foray into so-called irrational tempo relationships. While we can't precisely hear the exact timing relationship it is not as irrational as it may

seem as the ratio is almost exactly the ratio of an interval of a diminished fifth. Two voices jump back and forth between the two tempi, changing textural character as they do so.

**Contraption No.1**

Arising from a collaboration with Trimpin, this was created for a mechanical piano that can automatically prepare itself and adjust the preparation throughout the piece.

You can find Trimpin's Conlon in purple in The Front Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall.

**Synchronised Pianos II**

**4pm – 4.30pm**

Conlon Nancarrow: Player Piano Study No.35  
Player Piano Study No.32  
Player Piano Study No.48a  
Player Piano Study No.48b  
Player Piano Study No.48c

Study No.48 stands alongside study No.41 in terms of duration and sophistication and is described by Kyle Gann as Nancarrow's magnum opus and by James Tenney as 'somehow perfect'. It is also one of only three studies that features two synchronised player pianos.

**Study No.35**

Unlike many of the studies this is not a strict canon but a series of canonic passages and melodic and chord textures. It has an improvisational jazz-like fluidity plus clarity of purpose that no doubt emerged after 30 years of player piano compositions – this was written in 1979.

## Study No.32 – Canon 5/6/7/8

Nancarrow generally uses canons so the relationship between the parts can be perceived. In this short work the four tempi jump around the four parts producing a melancholy atmosphere that is hard to grasp and almost absent minded.

## Study No.48a

## Study No.48b

## Study No.48c

Study 48a and 48b are both based on a tempo canon of two voices at an almost imperceptibly close ratio of 60 against 61. In each the higher voice begins after the lower, playing a transposed version of the same material. The distance between the two voices at first is great enough for them to seem like a counterpoint. As the works move to their conclusion the same motifs become recognisable in each, playing catch until they perfectly overlap at the very end. The third movement is the first two played together in such a way that they all end at the same time. Just about every one of Nancarrow's player piano techniques appear in this piece revealing a virtuoso at the top of his game.

**'grunts and snarls like a wild animal trying to escape'**

## Number 37: a perfect construction

5pm – 5.30pm

Conlon Nancarrow:  
Player Piano Study No.37  
Player Piano Study No.42  
Player Piano Study No.36  
Player Piano Study No.4

Nancarrow was inspired to write for the player piano by a suggestion in Henry Cowell's book *New Musical Resources*. It therefore seems fitting that this concert series ends with Study No. 37, one of the most extraordinary pieces in the collection and one which explores another of Cowell's ideas: connecting rhythm ratios to pitch ones.

## Study No.42

Starting cautiously with two voices, one low, one high, this piece has a single-minded mission to add more voices and have them all get faster! By the conclusion there are ten voices at ten speeds, but the ear perceives them more as a high 'swarm', a mid one and a low one.

## Study No.36 – Canon 17/18/19/20

A single line of music played at four different speeds at four different transpositions. The slowest and lowest starts first and ends last with each layer starting later and ending earlier on top. All four reach their mid-point at the same time for an extraordinary series of grunts and snarls like a wild animal trying to escape from within the piano. There may not be another piece of music in existence like it!

## Study No.4

Jumping back to an early work, there is an elegant simplicity about this piece. Based on a repeating 51-note cycle this is not a true canon as the rhythms of the voices are independent, meaning that we can hear the same qualities in each but not the same actual lines.

## Study No.37 – Canon 150//1605/7//168%//180//187½//200//210//225//240//250//262½//281%

Featuring 12 separate canons, each with 12 voices at tempo ratios approximating those of the pitches in a chromatic octave. The first canon is a simple five-note melody played at twelve different pitches at twelve speeds, so the music seems to cascade down the instrument. Each canon uses a different version of this technique and each has a contrasting texture so it is possible to recognise when a new one appears. With a surprisingly luscious ending, Study No.37 is arguably the perfect example of Nancarrow's innovative structural invention.

All Complete Studies for Player Piano programme notes ©Dominic Murcott, 2012

## Biographies

### Wolfgang Heisig

Wolfgang was born in Zwickau in 1952. Between 1972 and 1978 he studied piano and composition at the Dresden College of Music, then worked as a bank clerk, a Director of a church choir, a bar pianist, music therapist and honorary lecturer until 1990, when he became involved with phonola music.

He has given concerts, edited piano rolls, and reconstructed, produced and sold Nancarrow piano rolls. He developed musical objects and exhibitions and established Zwirn – a small theatre – with Andreas Jungwirth. He has produced compositions for the ensembles Musica Temporale, Xsemble, L'art pour l'art, TrioLog, Go Guitars, Singer Pur, Décadanse, Ensemble C, and Duo Slaatto Reinecke.

Between 2002-3 he was Vice President of the Free Academy of the Arts in Leipzig. In 2007 he was awarded the Gellert Prize. Wolfgang has worked as a visiting music teacher at Goethe-Gymnasium in Sebnitz (2002-3), Free Waldorf School in Magdeburg (2004-5), Vocational School in Döbeln (2006, 2011), Gymnasium Rochlitz (2009) and Gymnasium Bergstadt (2010).

### Rex Lawson

Rex Lawson's name is synonymous with the pianola; not the brash, mechanical variety from cowboy films, but the original, sophisticated instrument which responds well to serious study and fits in front of the keyboard of any normal concert grand, playing it by means of a set of felt-covered wooden fingers.

Rex was born in Bromley, Kent in 1948, to parents who met through playing two-pianos together. He studied music at

Dulwich College, as a junior exhibitor at the Royal College of Music, and at Nottingham University. Fascinated by his first pianola in 1971, he abandoned plans for a more traditional musical career, and initially concentrated on concerts with reproducing pianos, 'bringing back' Percy Grainger to play the Grieg Piano Concerto at Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1972, over ten years after the pianist's death.

At the same time, inspired by William Candy, once the music roll critic of the Gramophone and Musical Times, Rex began studying the pianola, the foot-operated player-piano, making his major international debut in 1981 in Paris, performing in the world première of Stravinsky's *Les Noces* (1919 version), under the direction of Pierre Boulez.

As well as recording extensively, highlights of an international career include a solo appearance at Carnegie Hall in George Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique*, the Last Night of the Proms in 1988, and the first concerts of nearly all of Stravinsky's pianola works, including the *Rite of Spring* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. The British composer, Paul Usher, and the Venezuelan, Julio d'Escrivan, have written pianola concertos especially for Rex. In 2007 he gave the first pianola performance of Rachmaninov's 3rd Piano Concerto, with Brussels Philharmonic Orchestra under Yoel Levi. In 2011 Rex accompanied the BBC Singers in the première of *Airplane Cantata*, commissioned by the BBC from Gabriel Jackson and broadcast live on Radio 3.



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Sunday 22 April

**INTERNATIONAL CHAMBER  
MUSIC SEASON 2011-12****IMPOSSIBLE BRILLIANCE:  
THE MUSIC OF CONLON NANCARROW**

Queen Elizabeth Hall, 6pm

Irvine Arditti *violin*  
Ashot Sarkissjan *violin*  
Ralf Ehlers *viola*  
Lucas Fels *cello*

Conlon Nancarrow: String Quartet No.1

György Ligeti: String Quartet No.2

Conlon Nancarrow: String Quartet No.3

Conlon Nancarrow: Player Piano Study  
No.33 arr. Paul Usher for string quartet

The **player piano** certainly dominates Nancarrow's output, but works for live musicians make up around a quarter of the entries in his catalogue. And if we count duration rather than sheer number, the ratio is perhaps even closer, given that so many of the player piano pieces are less than four minutes long. Among these 15 or so works, composed in the early and late years of his career, the string quartets hold special places. The first was Nancarrow's parting work for live performers before he turned to the player piano. It may not yet be mature Nancarrow, but it contains many of the seeds of his later work. There are canons, blues inflections, accelerations and decelerations, and even multiple simultaneous tempos. Although he would have to wait until 1982 and the Kronos Quartet to hear it properly, Nancarrow was obviously pleased enough with his contrapuntal experiments to want to find a medium in which he could explore them more fully. Two years later he was in New York, spending his inheritance on his first player piano.

**'If anyone can do it, they can'**

The First Quartet is undeniably complex, and it has vexed several groups who have tried to play it. Yet a few years after the Kronos premiere Nancarrow showed it to the Arditti Quartet at the Almeida Festival in London. They sightread it perfectly. 'Unbelievable,' the composer later said. The Arditti's skill prompted him to return to the medium for the first time in four decades. 'If anyone can do it, they can.' String Quartet No.3 was the result. (A second quartet dates from the 1940s, but it is unperformable and unfinished. Nancarrow retained its number, however, just in case he ever did complete it.) The Third is possibly Nancarrow's most significant statement for live performers. The canons are still there, of course. In fact all three movements are canons; they run at tempo ratios of 3:4:5:6, so each instrument is playing at a different speed throughout. All four instruments co-ordinate at only a handful of points in the entire piece, demanding tremendous discipline while giving the impression of great freedom.



**'He spent his inheritance  
on his first player piano'**

Nancarrow transcribing  
a score c1950

**Music that might tear the machine apart**

Although the string quartet is, like the piano, a relatively homogenous sound, the switch of instrumentation adds new dimensions and takes at least one important one away. The construction of the Third Quartet may be similar to many of the Studies, but its effect is remarkably different. Firstly, the mechanical anxiety is lost. The Studies push their instrument to its physical limits: part of the thrill of listening to them live is the chance that the music might just tear the machine apart. In the quartet, however, the challenges are all mental, internal. That physical tension has been displaced. On the other hand, distributing the contrapuntal lines between four players gives each one more character: the music is more apparent as a bundle of lines than as a shuddering mass. Nancarrow is also able to make use of a greater range of sounds. This he does to great effect in the second movement. Here, ethereal harmonics and scattered pizzicati bring a new emotional colour to his canonic technique that simply isn't heard anywhere else.

**Mathematically irrational**

Such pros and cons are even more pertinent to Paul Usher's arrangement of Study 33. The creative compromises begin with the simple fact of transcription. This study is the first piece (for Nancarrow and for history) to make use of mathematically irrational rhythms. In this case, tempos in the ratio 2: square root of 2. Marking these sorts of rhythms on piano roll paper is relatively easy – a geometric exercise. Transcribing them to the strictly rational musical world of beats and bars, however? Impossible. In practical terms, many of the rhythmic displacements in Nancarrow's original (some of them fall closer than 1/300th second apart) are so small as to be inaudible, so it was a simple decision to work towards a 'best fit' rather than complete accuracy. In this way the impossibility of literally transcribing Nancarrow's original opened the door to a freer approach. Usher chose instead not to be completely faithful to the original, but to seek an analogue to how the piece exploits the unique possibilities of its medium, and this informs his overall arranging approach.

**A great discovery**

György Ligeti first came across Nancarrow in 1980, when he saw a page of his music in an article on mechanical music. A few months later he picked up some recordings in a Paris music store. 'This music is the greatest discovery since Webern and Ives,' he enthused to the American composer Charles Amirkhania, another admirer. Ligeti's role in the world's 'discovery' of Nancarrow was significant. He arranged Nancarrow's invitation to the 1982 festival of the International Society for Contemporary Music, and facilitated his meeting with Jürgen Hocker, a player piano enthusiast. Hocker played a part in disseminating Nancarrow's music through recordings and, latterly, videos. Ligeti's Second String Quartet long predates this discovery, however. There are resemblances between the two, but they seem less uncanny when one observes that since Webern many European modernist composers,

from Stravinsky to Aldo Clementi and Ligeti himself had been drawn to the possibilities of canonic technique. None had quite separated themselves from the constraints of barred notation, however. Nancarrow remained unique for his exploration of hitherto unimagined tempo relationships.

Whilst Nancarrow de-mechanised his music when writing for string quartet, Ligeti sought to mechanise it in his Second Quartet. Rhythmic canons are used to create and unfurl delicate, inorganic forms. As in much of Ligeti's music, however, the machinery is poetically broken. The metronomes tick (most obviously in the third movement), but wind down or occasionally skip a beat. Heard side by side, Ligeti sounds a curious epitaph to Nancarrow, the sound of the machine finally shaking itself apart.

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## Biography

### Arditti String Quartet

The Arditti Quartet enjoys a worldwide reputation for their spirited and technically refined interpretations of contemporary and earlier 20th-century music. Several hundred string quartets and other chamber works have been written for the ensemble since its foundation by first violinist Irvine Arditti in 1974. These works have left a permanent mark on 20th-century repertoire and have given the Arditti Quartet a firm place in music history. World premieres of quartets by composers such as Adès, Bertrand, Britten, Cage, Denisov, Dusapin, Francesconi, Gubaidulina, Harvey, Kurtag, Lachenmann, Ligeti, Nancarrow, Rihm, Sciarrino, and Xenakis and hundreds more show the wide range of music in the Arditti Quartet's repertoire. The ensemble believes that close collaboration with composers is vital to the process of interpreting modern music and therefore attempts to co-operate with every composer whose works it plays.

The players' commitment to educational work is indicated by their masterclasses and workshops for young performers and composers all over the world. The Arditti Quartet's extensive discography now features well over 170 CDs. 42 discs have so far been released as part of the ensemble's continuing series on the French label Naïve Montaigne. Renowned for recording many composers' portraits in their presence, the quartet recorded the complete quartets of Luciano Berio shortly before his death. The latest releases include Donaueschingen 2006, Lachenmann, Moe, Nancarrow, Paredes and Spahlinger. Over the past 35 years, the ensemble has received many prizes for its work including the Deutsche Schallplatten Preis several times and the Gramophone Award for the best recording of contemporary music in 1999 (Elliott Carter) and 2002 (Harrison Birtwistle). The prestigious Ernst von Siemens Music Prize was awarded to them in 1999 for 'lifetime achievement' in music.

## TRINITY LABAN CONSERVATOIRE OF MUSIC AND DANCE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC GROUP

The Front Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall  
12.30pm – 1.30pm

Gregory Rose conductor

Liam Mattison: Nix falling out of orbit

Emma-Jean Thackray: the first time i met judy

Aled Start: Helix

Ben Corrigan: Autonomous

Trinity Laban's contemporary music group works closely with emerging composers on a variety of projects, often involving contemporary dance and other art forms. In this concert they perform pieces by current composition students written in response to Nancarrow's music and mentored by composer Andrew Poppy. The students explain their pieces below.

### Nix Falling out of Orbit

Liam Mattison: 'Nix is a small, possibly the smallest, moon of Pluto. It is also the name of the Greek goddess of night (with an alternative spelling, to avoid confusion with the asteroid 3908 Nyx).

'Nix Falling out of Orbit creates relationships between players, sounds and textures which, throughout the piece, fall away from the expected paths.'

### Helix

Aled Start: 'Having spent some time deconstructing Nancarrow scores with Andrew poppy, I was drawn to the effectiveness of the techniques he used and decided to take a little foray into the enchanting world of multi-tempi. Bryan Appleyard's book *The Brain is Wider Than the Sky* was also an inspiration in seeking to convey the inherent complexity in biological systems.

'As the title suggests this music refers generically to the double helix, but could be transported to any situation, my main



point being that the music should convey more than the sum of its parts. I have also sought to musically convey aspects of chaos theory, namely that although there are some logical, casual sequences which immediately make sense to the ear, the way in which they play out in reality is far more complex and unpredictable than we would like to think.'

### the first time i met judy

Emma-Jean Thackray: 'This piece explores the essence of memory and focuses on the life of one particular character. By taking a melodic fragment to represent the protagonist, passing it through quasi-episodic musical surroundings and creating rhythmical interaction with adjacent lines, I wish to capture the tensions, experiences and the often ephemeral environments one passes through in the lineage of life.

'As the roles of, and relationships between, instruments are questioned, so are the people in our lives – both those of transient and perennial companionship. As this piece ends, it leaves us questioning the possible nihilism of our ventures.'

### Autonomous

Ben Corrigan: 'Although I only discovered the film *A.I.* after finishing *Autonomous* the synopsis for the film fits the piece perfectly: "A highly advanced robotic boy longs to become 'real' so that he can regain the love of his human mother."



**Player pianos are not just instruments for the concert hall – they were often found in family homes until the 1920s, and became something of a collector’s item by the 1960s. Many an uncle or grandad fooled little listeners into thinking he was a virtuoso pianist. However, these pianos could even fool their players, as Southbank Centre Member Karen Whelan shows.**

'It was a hot summer evening, in a small town in New Zealand in the 1950s and I was three.

The Baty’s were a family of three boys and one on the way. Mr. Baty, known as ‘Rusty’ to the neighbours, worked as a tanker driver for BP. He was a ‘real man’ but with a mellow, amber, playful vibe about him.

We lived opposite them at No 1. Miro Street, and this evening Rusty and his wife Marie had invited my parents and some of the neighbours in for an impromptu party. It was custom for the men to take a bottle of alcohol and the women to take a plate of food. The ‘kids’ were not always invited, but this evening my older sister and brother were away staying with an Aunt and I was too young to be left at home alone.

I was dressed in my favourite yellow dress and stood close beside my Mother as we entered by the back door of their house, through the kitchen, which was familiar, and then on into the living room which I had never been into.

The party was in full swing and Rusty was sitting at the piano as the most thrilling sounds filled the room. I always felt safe with Rusty and I stood close to him, my head just about reaching the piano keys. I could feel the energy and vibration of the sounds that flowed out of this structure. This was my first experience of a piano.

Everyone gathered around the piano (the only one in the street, I later discovered) and joined in singing to the marvelous sounds Rusty so skillfully and effortlessly played. After some time Rusty looked down and asked if I would like to play the piano. I turned the colour of cherries and wanted to escape. My mind was racing – how could I possibly play the piano? I looked to Mum to rescue me, but she was sitting on the sofa at the far end of the room with one of the neighbours, smoking and laughing, and there were too many people in the room for me to get her attention.

Before I could escape into the kitchen, Rusty had picked me up and sat me on his knee, and everyone clapped and cheered. My whole body flushed bright red and then turned deathly white and I froze with fear.

Rusty took my tiny hands in his big ones and positioned them on the keys. As if by magic I was playing the songs expertly and had visions of genius. I was so swept away in the hedonism of the feeling that it took me some time to realise that whatever keys I pressed at whatever pace the music played on.

When the music stopped the whole room cheered and laughed and I said: ‘But I don’t know how to play the piano!’, with tears in my eyes. Rusty stood up and opened the top of the piano. Very gently he lifted me up and showed me the rolling paper and how he made the sounds by pressing the pedals at the base of the piano.

He reloaded the music cylinder and we sat down again and continued to play. This time I loved the experience and giggled with sheer delight at making music by magic.

A few years later my Father bought a piano, and I had lessons. I soon discovered I had limited talent for playing a real piano. However, I have carefully nurtured my exceptional imagination and the world has continued to present me with wondrous experiences.'

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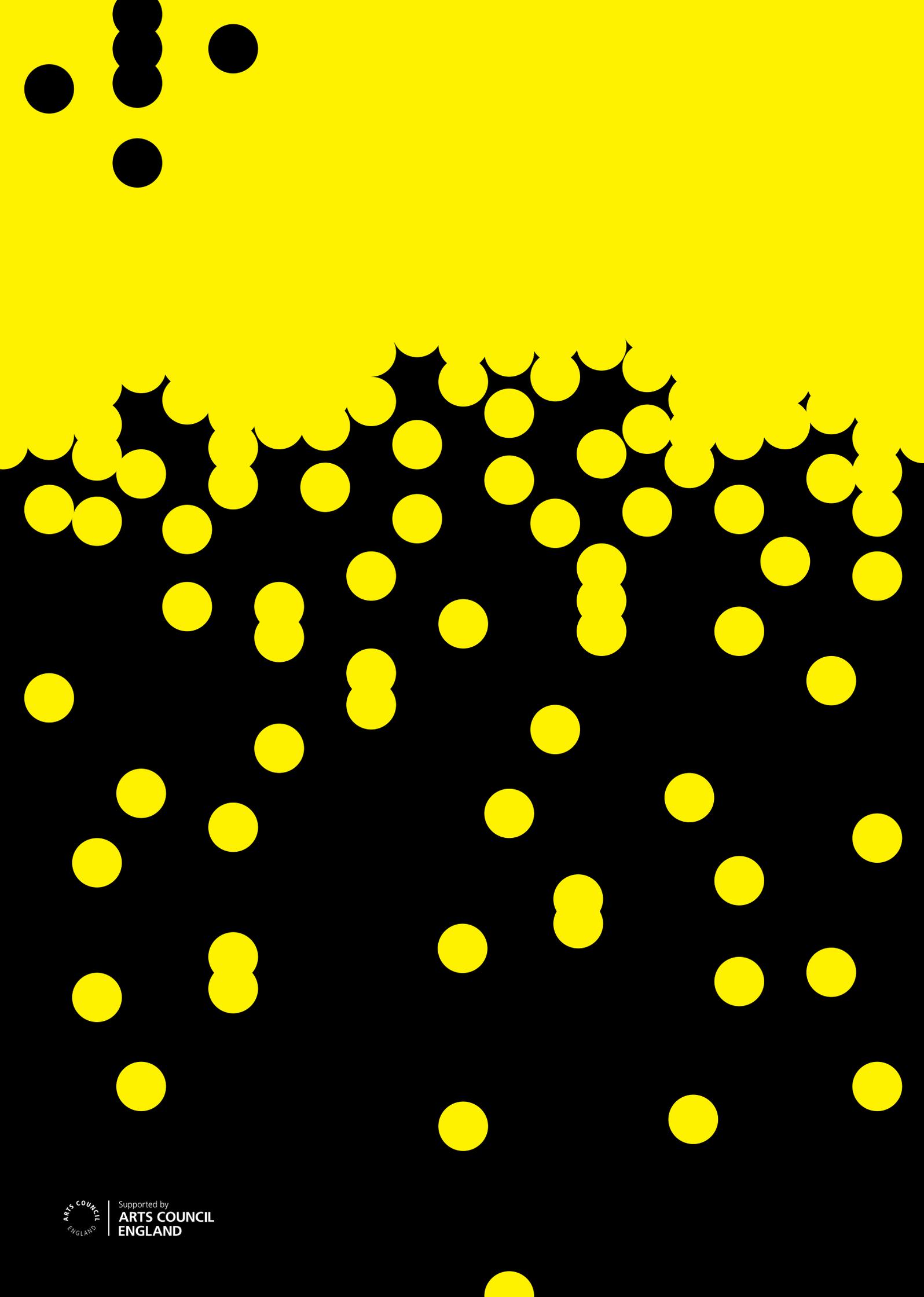
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