

*Composer Portraits*

# Rebecca Saunders

Either/Or  
Richard Carrick, conductor

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Thursday, April 4, 8:00 p.m.

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*vermilion* (2003) **New York premiere**

Rebecca Saunders (b. 1967)

Anthony Burr, *clarinet*  
Kobe Van Cauwenberghe, *electric guitar*  
Alex Waterman, *cello*

*dichroic seventeen* (1998) **New York premiere**

William Shimmel, *accordion*  
Kobe Van Cauwenberghe, *electric guitar*  
John Popham, *cello*  
Aaron Baird, *double bass*  
Doug Balliett, *double bass*  
Taka Kigawa, *piano*  
Matthew Gold, *percussion*  
David Shively, *percussion*

INTERMISSION

Onstage discussion with Rebecca Saunders and Richard Carrick

*murmurs* (2009) **U.S. premiere**

Esther Noh, *violin*  
Erin Wight, *viola*  
Alex Waterman, *cello*  
Anthony Burr, *bass clarinet*  
Margaret Lancaster, *bass flute*  
Michelle Farah, *oboe*  
David Shively, *percussion*  
Richard Carrick, *piano*  
Taka Kigawa, *piano*



This program runs approximately one hour and 30 minutes, including a brief intermission.

Major support for Composer Portraits is provided by  
the Francis Goelet Charitable Lead Trusts.

Composer Portraits is presented with the friendly support of  ernst von siemens  
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*Please note that photography and the use of recording devices are not permitted. Remember to turn off all cellular phones and pagers before tonight's performance begins. Miller Theatre is wheelchair accessible. Large print programs are available upon request. For more information or to arrange accommodations, please call 212-854-7799.*

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# About the Program

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*Surface, weight and feel are part of the reality of musical performance: the weight of the bow on the string; the differentiation of touch of the finger on the piano key; the expansion of the muscles between the shoulder-blades drawing sound out of the accordion; the in-breath preceding the 'heard' tone....*

Born in London in 1967, Rebecca Saunders is a near contemporary of such other British composers as Thomas Adès, Julian Anderson, Sam Hayden, and Kenneth Hesketh. However, she both belongs to this generation and does not. She followed a standard route in training at Edinburgh University, but took three years out to study with Wolfgang Rihm and returned to settle in Germany. Her music participates in a continental European tradition, where Lachenmann and Sciarrino are presiding deities, and it was through performances in the German-speaking world that she began to make her reputation. A commission for the 1998 festival of new chamber music in Witten (Quartet for clarinet, accordion, double bass, and piano) seems to have been crucial, for soon after that came the beginnings of productive relationships with the two leading new-music ensembles in Germany: musikFabrik of Cologne, for whom she wrote *dichroic seventeen* (1998), and the Ensemble Modern of Frankfurt, whose first work of hers was *cinnabar* (1999), a double concerto with violin and trumpet soloists. She created *chroma*, a site-specific piece for soloists and groups in different parts of the available space, for Tate Modern in London in 2003, but most of its recreations then happened on the continent, in France, Switzerland, Germany, and Sweden.

As some of these titles suggest — along with others, those of *Crimson* for piano (2003–2005) or *Blue and Gray* for two double basses (2005) — Saunders makes us aware of sound as color, and especially as the freshly intense color that comes from new and carefully prescribed performing techniques. Often she lays down her music strand by strand, breath by breath, in a widening exploration of a novel sound palette. At the same time, the gestures are tight and highly expressive. Other titles convey a disposition toward violence, as in the case of *cholera* for two pianos (2004), *fury* for double bass (2005), or more recently *Ire* for cello, strings, and percussion (2012). But the sense is likely to be of an elemental rage held in check, unable to speak, seething — a potential that gives her music its potency, and also its strange compulsion and allure.

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### ***vermilion* (2003)**

Vermilion, orange-red, is an ancient pigment, the color of fire — hence what must be the most celebrated use of the word in the English language, at the end of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “The Windhover,” where “blue-bleak embers” fall to “gash gold-vermilion.” This music is hot. It is also raw, with the rawness of unusual sounds produced under pressure, and the rawness, too, of things new, sounds that have not been cooked into our experience by previous music. Yet the piece seems to speak of fire at a great distance, or from long ago, the memory of fire. Or perhaps, as the three instruments move gradually from one note-area to another, often close together but microtonally apart, projecting an arc that rises and then folds back, they track the life of a single flame in extreme slow motion.

The work, as much as *murmurs*, is made of vestiges, even if these are incised with greater force and suddenness, sometimes to vanish into the upper atmosphere of tone, more often to leave behind a lingering echo, the trace of a trace, with the electric guitar as much capable of these as the clarinet and the cello, thanks to the use of an electric bow. As in *murmurs*, too, but even more so, two notes slightly out of tune with each other will produce beats or combination tones, further troubling these already troubled sound-mixes, out of which a pure tone will often survive, only to disappear into the always waiting silence.

“What we call silence,” the composer has said, “is for me comparable to a dense knot of noise, frequencies, and sounds. From this surface of apparent silence I try to draw out and mould sound and color. I have explored the phenomenon of silence often, but never so precisely as in *vermilion*. How does silence sound, what are its inner qualities, what are its weight and body, how does it relate to past and future sounds, how does it frame musical gestures, what function does it have between stasis and passion? These questions were foremost in my mind.”

Commissioned by the Munich Biennale, *vermilion* was first performed by the Ensemble TrioLog on March 17, 2004. It was included by musikFabrik on their second Saunders album, *Stirrings Still*, on the Wergo label.

### ***dichroic seventeen* (1998)**

As this program steps back in time, it arrives at one of the pieces that brought Saunders fully into her own world and established her reputation. The first performance was

given by musikFabrik, Stefan Asbury conducting, in Cologne on December 1, 1999. Immediately after that, the ensemble recorded this and earlier Saunders pieces for West German Radio, and in 2003 these recordings were released on CD by Kairos.

As this program moves also forward, we may begin to feel we know this composer's designs and sensibilities. But while *dichroic seventeen* has features in common with *mur-murs* and *vermilion* in its generally suppressed dynamic level, its melding of dissimilar resources, its use of discrepant tunings for their own sake and as sources of beats or combination tones, or altogether its immediacy of utterance, communicating itself as pure sound, innocent of harmonic or rhythmic systems, the piece is itself alone.

Once more, the score bears an epigraph, comprising this time several dictionary definitions of dichroic — “showing two colors” is one, as tourmaline is often simultaneously pink and green — along with an extract from Gertrude Stein's notes on her novel *Ida*: ‘...a person who demands attention purely by her being there...processes of development are not unfolded, but instead ‘conditions of being’ are presented in hard-edged sections that cut into each other....figures that did nothing but simply were.’

Perhaps we are to imagine that Saunders' work is composed of seventeen “hard-edged sections that cut into each other” — the first would be for cello and two double basses plus percussion — and to conceive the music as dichroic by virtue of how it may be at once almost motionless and highly intense, slow (and low) and incandescent. But perhaps the more important echoes from Stein concern the absence of rhetoric, how this music, too, demands attention by being there, does nothing but simply is.

As it proceeds, though, it certainly shows different “conditions of being.” The three string players and two percussionists are soon joined by three instruments widely spaced: accordion, electric guitar, and piano (whose presence we may not notice until it neatly captures the accordion's first chord, in an early example of the sound-matching that is as important to this piece as the delicate sound-mismatching). New, precisely judged sounds — from detuned strings of the basses, from inside the piano, from all kinds of devices that produce tones with a patina of noise, or noises with a patina of tone — abound. The focus, around a low bass G at the start, moves elsewhere. A synopsis, however, would be out of place, for the piece must be left to spring its own surprises — as, for example, from the pianist, in the last couple of its seventeen (hence that part of the title) minutes.

“Primarily,” Saunders has said, “I was interested in working against a dramatic development of material, allowing passion and expression, yet creating single states of being to



be heard, perceived, and appreciated for what they are. I also had at that point an acute awareness of the brutality by which life throws one into a new state of being, a new phase of life, a new challenge, through sudden occurrences, tragic or overwhelmingly wonderful (less common admittedly).”

### ***murmurs* (2009)**

Another facet of Saunders’ poetics, along with color and stifled outburst, is the search for the trace, for the faint evidence of what has been lost, the absence that betokens a presence. This, too, can emerge in her titles, as with two pieces from 2006: *a visible trace* for eleven-piece ensemble and *Stirrings Still* for five players. To these one could add *murmurs*, which, like *Stirrings Still*, carries an allusion to Beckett, in this case to *Company*, from which the composer takes her epigraph: “Light infinitely faint it is true since now no more than a mere murmur.”

This program note could easily be continued, and certainly completed, with further quotations from the same text: “Whence the shadowy light?...She murmurs, Listen to the leaves....The fable of one with you in the dark...Light dying. Soon none left to die.”

The murmurs and the dying light come from various quarters, in a work that exemplifies a further aspect of Saunders’ enterprise: dispersal. She describes the piece as a “collage of seven parts,” for soloists (bass flute, oboe, bass clarinet, violin, piano) and duos (piano and percussion, viola and cello) stationed apart from each other. The dynamic level is indeed murmurous, never rising above *mezzopiano*, drawing us in to listen to the fine detail of the sound, how it emerges and changes and falls below the threshold of hearing. Fascination is heightened, too, by estrangement — by microtonal tuning, woodwind multiphonics (two or more notes being heard at once, thanks to particular fingerings), or interferences between sounds to produce beats or combination tones. Everything is carefully notated, with precise timings of when each murmur should begin and end, but Saunders encourages her musicians also to listen to each other in order to bring forward these interference patterns or to convey a phrase across the gaps, in space and sound, that divide them from their colleagues. The timings, too, can be adjusted so that the piece may last for more or less than the prescribed twenty-six minutes or so, in its uncertain but also determined progress toward a final high point. From isolated individuals and couples, a hazardous ensemble is created, and lost, and created again. Separate breaths will constitute, now and then, a whole breathing organism. Saunders wrote *murmurs* for the Ensemble Recherche, and characteristically includes a note in the score acknowledging how, along with other instrumentalists, they helped

her in “tracing the borders of these sounds.” The first performance took place in Graz on October 9, 2009.

One last quotation, also cited by the composer in the context of *murmurs*, comes from Derrida: “Since the trace is not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site; erasure belongs to its structure. And not only the erasure which must always be able to overtake it (without which it would not be a trace but an indestructible and monumental substance), but also the erasure which constitutes it from the outset as a trace, which situates it as the change of site, and makes it disappear in its appearance, makes it emerge from itself in its production.”

Program notes by Paul Griffiths

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# About the Artists

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**Either/Or** is a cutting-edge contemporary music ensemble based in New York City. Founded in 2004 by pianist and composer Richard Carrick and percussionist David Shively, Either/Or focuses on compelling new and recent works for unconventional ensemble formations rarely heard elsewhere. The group draws upon its roster, featuring some of New York's leading interpreters, to present intense chamber music alongside larger ensemble works. Either/Or has performed to critical acclaim at Miller Theatre, Merkin Concert Hall, The Kitchen, MATA Festival, the Austrian Cultural Forum, and ICA:Boston, in addition to frequent appearances at experimental music venues such as The Stone, Roulette, and Issue Project Room. Programs have included numerous world, U.S., and New York premieres; these range from major works of American experimental music to rarely heard classics from the dynamic margins of the European avant-garde. In addition to its ongoing collaborations with emerging artists, Either/Or has brought distinguished composers such as Helmut Lachenmann (2008), Paolo Aralla (2009), Chaya Czernowin (2010, 2011), and Karin Rehnqvist (2012) to New York for concerts and lectures. Either/Or released its first two CDs in 2011.

**Richard Carrick**, born in Paris of French-Algerian and British descent, is a composer, pianist, and conductor. Described as “charming, with exoticism and sheer infectiousness” by Allan Kozinn of *The New York Times*, Richard Carrick's music has been performed throughout the Americas, Europe, and Japan by the New York Philharmonic, Vienna's Konzerthaus, ISCM World Music Days, Darmstadt Summer Festival, the Nieuw Ensemble, the JACK Quartet, Magnus Andersson, Rohan de Saraam, and others. Recent works include *The Flow Cycle for Strings* (commercially released on New World Records in 2011), *Adagios for String Quartet*, and *Harmonixity for Saxophone Quartet*. He also writes large-scale multi-media works, such as *Cosmicomics* (based on stories by Italo Calvino), combining video, electronics, and live musicians. As a critically acclaimed performer (pianist, conductor, guitarist) he regularly premieres works by leading composers. He currently teaches composition at Columbia University and New York University, and for The New York Philharmonic, and has taught and guest lectured about his music in Japan, South Korea, Sweden, France, Germany, The Netherlands, and the U.S. His scores are published by Project Schott New York.

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**Miller Theatre at Columbia University** is the leading presenter of new music in New York City and one of the most vital forces nationwide for innovative programming. In partnership with Columbia University School of the Arts, Miller is dedicated to producing and presenting unique events in dance, contemporary and early music, jazz, opera, and performance. Founded in 1988 with funding from John Goelet, Brooke Astor, and the Kathryn Bache Miller Fund, Miller Theatre has built a reputation for attracting new and diverse audiences to the performing arts and expanding public knowledge of contemporary music.

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**Saturday, April 6, 8:00 p.m.**

EARLY MUSIC

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**Thursday, April 18, 8:00 p.m.**

COMPOSER PORTRAITS

**Oliver Knussen**

Ensemble Signal

Brad Lubman, *conductor*

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Courtney Orlando, *violin*

**Tuesday, April 23, 6:00 p.m.**

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**New Music by Laura Kaminsky**

Ensemble II

Cassatt String Quartet

**Saturday, April 27, 8:00 p.m.**

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**The Baroque Vanguard**

Ensemble Signal

Kristian Bezuidenhout, *harpsichord*

Brad Lubman, *conductor*

**Tuesday, May 7, 6:00 p.m.**

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