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The Recycling Concerto creating a smash out of trash

Composer Gregor A Mayrhofer and percussionist Vivi Vassileva have taken everyday waste, from plastic bags and bottles to coffee capsules, and written a concerto for our rubbish times

CLAIRE JACKSON | 15 Jul 2022



The Recycling Concerto at Aldeburgh Festival

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The rustling of plastic bags is not usually a sound that is tolerated in an otherwise silent concert hall. On this occasion, the noise was coming from the musicians, rather than the audience.

The unmistakable timbre is featured throughout Gregor A Mayrhofer's *Recycling Concerto*, a new work recently premiered by percussionist Vivi Vassileva and the Britten Sinfonia at Snape Maltings as part of Aldeburgh Festival.

Composers have a habit of incorporating unlikely items into their orchestration: Mahler famously added cowbells to his *Sixth Symphony*, Malcolm Arnold's parodic *A Grand, Grand Overture* is scored for four rifles, three vacuum cleaners and an electric floor

polisher and Laura Bowler's *Houses Slide* requires the pianist to 'play' a crinkly high-vis jacket. Mayrhofer included the plastic bags for their symbolism as well as their tone – the *Recycling Concerto* is a powerful aural and visual statement about our impact on the environment.

A distinctive tinkling dances over the orchestra. Vassileva is pouring Nespresso capsules and bottle-tops on to the xylophone, merging old and new soundworlds. She moves between 'proper' percussion and newly invented instruments, such as hanging ceramic flower pots, each painstakingly tuned. While the water-bottle marimba and kitchen utensil kit look like something from *Blue Peter*, they are capable of surprisingly complex music. Vassileva's virtuosic cadenza – in which the percussionist taps, flicks and drags two plastic bottles – has everyone, including her colleagues in the Britten Sinfonia, on the edge of their seats.



Interview with Gregor A. Mayrhofer and Vivi Vassileva

The *Recycling Concerto* will sound different in the next place it is performed. Mayrhofer asks his soloist to build new percussion in situ, using local rubbish. Although the piece is about waste in general, it also highlights the cost of musical instrument manufacture, something that is slowly revealing itself as an industry sore.

Many instruments are made from scarce materials, and the use of rare trees such as African blackwood (for clarinets) and rosewood (guitars) is a particular concern. A collective of musicians including cellist Steven Isserlis and violinist Tasmin Little are campaigning to raise awareness of the plight of the pernambuco (also known as brazilwood), which has been favoured by bowmakers for centuries due to its unusual

Brazilwood), which has been favoured by bowmakers for centuries due to its unusual ability to hold a fixed curve. Illegal deforestation has meant that pernambuco is now an endangered species and Brazil's Atlantic Forest, the tree's native and only habitat, has shrunk to just six per cent of its original size.

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In 2018, over 20,000 violin bows made with illegally logged wood from the black market were seized. It's likely that without interference, the pernambuco could be wiped out within a decade. Trees of Music aims to plant 50,000 pernambuco saplings and train 70 farmers to cultivate sustainable pernambuco.

Music and nature have always gone hand in hand, but lately it feels as though the two have renewed their wedding vows. The pastoral landscapes created by the likes of Beethoven and Vaughan Williams were imbued with birdlife. Bird calls inspired Mahler (who references the cuckoo in the first symphony), Messiaen (whose extensive field recordings fed into his piano works) and now Roderick Williams, who mimics the flapping of turtle doves in the Knepp Piano Trio, composed to commemorate the successful reintroduction of the species to the Knepp Estate.

A second movement has been added to the work, which was just premiered by the Stradivarius Piano Trio as part of Shipley Arts Festival in Sussex. It pays homage to Knepp Castle Estate's rewilding programme, with references to the wild boar and sunrise over the campsite. The trio follows on from Helen Ottaway's *Wild Storks*, which was composed to mark the first wild hatching of the birds at Knepp back in 2020.

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