

VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

French composer Benoît Menut's new concept album of songs and chamber works takes its listeners on a single, continuous journey across the sea. He and cellist Patrick Langot speak to Tom Stewart about the project

A collection of songs and chamber pieces by French composer Benoît Menut, the album *Les îles* traces an imaginary journey of some 4,000 miles from the jagged coast of Brittany, jutting out into the Atlantic, to the Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. 'I'm from Brest, right on the westernmost tip of France,' says Menut. 'I feel very connected to that part of the world and I'm always inspired by how close it feels to the elements. That's what I wanted to capture in this music – a sense of the poetry of nature distilled into sound.' Scored for soprano, violin, two cellos and piano, the works that make up *Les îles* are a combination of solos, duets, trios and quartets that each evoke a sense of place and possibility.

Menut wrote most of the music just a few months before the recording sessions began, and conceived of the disc as a single entity – not the disparate collection of pieces often found on new contemporary classical releases. 'It's a concept album,' he says, comparing it to Pink Floyd's 1975 release *Wish You Were Here*, which, like *Les îles*, features a mix of long and shorter tracks. 'That said,' he continues, 'I prefer reality over concept. I want people to get as close as possible to my music, and having an idea that frames the whole thing allows you to take people by the hand and take them with you. I think contemporary composers have to find new ways of bringing their ideas across; we need to make ourselves relevant to new and different kinds of people.'



'PEOPLE WHO DON'T LISTEN TO CLASSICAL MUSIC WILL RECOGNISE THE STRUCTURE OF THIS DISC' – PATRICK LANGOT

Cellist Patrick Langot, a performer on the disc and Menut's long-time collaborator, sees their new release's form as an opportunity to engage with listeners unaccustomed to classical recordings. 'People who don't listen to classical music will recognise the structure of the disc,' he explains. 'It's an opportunity to reach a new audience, but on the other hand, streaming services have given listeners so much choice. We have to grab them from the first track if we don't want them to switch to something else.'

Listeners meet their guide for the transoceanic voyage in the first piece, *L'oiseau Didariel*. It takes its name from a sculpture by French artist Nicolas Dariel of a bird whose abstracted form in white marble could be a wind-beaten seagull from the chilly waters of the Celtic Sea, or the splendour of a half-seen tropical bird gliding over the Caribbean. 'The beauty of its curves seemed to suggest music with diatonic contours and different modalities laid on top of each other,' says Menut. 'I wanted to hear the bird soaring above the sea but also in the water, beneath the waves. Like the rest of the music on the disc, it had to be simple and direct – a bold image that didn't get lost in detail.' The piece opens gently, like a distant, swaying set of chimes, before the aeolian stillness is overcome by a chromatic swirling and frothing of the water as Dariel's bird plunges beneath its surface.

Especially in Menut's ability to capture the elusive and quicksilver character of water, the spirit of Ravel never seems far from the music. *Iroise*, a solo cello piece written for Langot, recalls the bell-like sounds of the disc's opening, overlaid with harmonic glissandos like birds calling or the wind whistling over the waves. The piece was inspired by a journey Menut made by boat to the small island of Ouessant, off the coast of Brittany, and is cast in two parts, 'Ar mor' and 'Ar douar' – 'the sea' and 'the land' in Breton, the endangered Celtic language once spoken throughout the region. Like that of its Celtic cousins in the British Isles, traditional music from Brittany



Violinist Stéphanie Moraly and cellist Patrick Langot perform with soprano Maya Villanueva

often features a bagpipe, known as a *binioù*, the heavy drone of which might be heard in the pummelling of the cello's open G and C strings in the dance-like stomp of 'Ar douar'.

Alongside settings of words by Belgian poet Dominique Lambert, *Les îles* includes songs to texts by Martiniquan writer and politician Aimé Césaire. Each of them crystallises a different image of the French-speaking Caribbean, rendered by Menut in forceful declamations and long, intricate melismas. Elsewhere, a cello duo titled *Caraiïbes* includes elements of the *bélé*, a type of Creole folk dance that emerged from the culture of the West African people brought to the Caribbean as slaves by European plantation owners. 'It combines music, dance and storytelling,' says Menut. 'I've tried to incorporate the effect of interplay of a solo voice and a choir, too, as well as preserve the rhythmic character of the original dance.' Both cellists are called on to tap parts of themselves and their

instruments, and to make squeaking noises by playing behind the bridge of the cello.

'Benoît and I have been friends since we were four years old,' explains Langot, who has been playing his music for nearly as long. The cellist recorded a short piece by Menut early last year, but *Les îles* was the first time the pair had embarked on such an ambitious recording project together. 'His music isn't easy to play!' Langot says. 'But I can always find pleasure in its difficulties. It isn't ever hard just for the sake of it – his art is very logical. The clarity of his forms and structures makes it much easier for us as performers to understand the essence of his music, something that's especially helpful during the rehearsal and recording processes.'

The sessions took place not far from the Provençal city of Avignon, at La Courroie – a former clothes factory converted into an unusual performance

space. 'Harmonia Mundi uses it for many recordings,' Langot says. 'It's a very special place, not just because of the acoustics, which are some of the best, but also because of the environment and the atmosphere it creates. There was room for all of us to stay for the four days we were recording there, and our hosts were incredibly kind and devoted. It was a real privilege to be able to work so closely with such an amazing team.' ●

WORKS Benoît Menut: Canto per Matteo; Caraiïbes; Duo les îles; Iroise; L'oiseau Didariel; Paroles d'îles; 16 Quantas; Qui donc, qui donc...
ARTISTS Maya Villanueva (sop)
Emmanuelle Bertrand (vc) Syntonia Trio
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