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"Fiercely committed, immaculately delivered disc. There's plenty here to captivate...Barley is bright and energetic amid the frenetic electronic activity...It makes for an eclectic collection of pieces, but what brings them together is Barley's rich, supple playing, which he varies dramatically in tone and style as he allies himself with each composer's music across the disc's carefully considered emotional journey. Recorded sound is so rich and detailed that its something of a sonic marvel in itself" **The Strad**

"'Electric' is a timely album...it's the longer works that draw the best from Barley's warm tone and sensitive playing...moonmoons brilliantly blends legato Lydian-key phrasing and electronic accompaniment, the cello's expressive voice surrounded by halo of pitch-shifted pizzicato. [Honeyed Words] a simple, playful work, and has a winning charm" **Gramophone**

★★★★ *"As a collected work, Electric is haunting and otherworldly...beautifully raw...With electronic technology that is constantly in development, it's important to see these works set down with strong recordings that reflect the landscape for and possibilities of contemporary performers and technology. Electric offers us just that."* **BBC Music Magazine**



LIGHT STORIES

- 1 SPELL Matthew Barley [01:48]
- 2 THE DREAMING Matthew Barley [06:24]
- 3 CATHEDRALS AND CAVES Matthew Barley [06:00]
- 4 UNRAVELLING Matthew Barley [04:16]
- 5 HELL 1 Giovanni Sollima *arr. Matthew Barley* [04:44]
- 6 IN THE CROSSHAIRS Matthew Barley [02:39]
- 7 TIMEFOLDING Matthew Barley [02:37]
- 8 ICH RUF ZU DIR, HERR JESU CHRIST
Johann Sebastian Bach *arr. Matthew Barley* [02:19]
- 9 FULL, EMPTY Matthew Barley [04:09]
- 10 THE UNWAITING SKY Matthew Barley [10:52]

Total Timings: [45:48]

Matthew Barley

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At the age of 16 I experienced a psychotic episode during a drug overdose that resulted in a suicide attempt, and the following morning returned to boarding music school in Manchester and didn't speak about the previous day for decades.

Some 35 years later, during an ayahuasca ceremony in Brazil (amongst others, Sting and Gabor Maté have documented their experiences at this kind of ceremony in some detail), I had a kind of recapitulation that left me terrified, but inspired me to finally seek help to deal with what had happened as a teenager.

Light Stories is an attempt in music to tell that story of trauma and recovery – and how it placed music so deeply in my heart and my life.

As a confused teenager, music was my medicine – as I think it might be for many a confused teenager. This relationship with music as a healing force really began in my bedroom, listening (on a hi-fi made by my very clever older brother) to Genesis, and then trying to copy the cello solos from Pink Floyd's *Animals* and the Lloyd-Webber *Variations*. This was my safe place in a world where I didn't speak to anybody about what was actually going on in my life.

I was blessed to have some talent for music and Chetham's School of Music was just the right place for me. The teaching was great and I bathed in the wonder of orchestras, chamber groups, the magnificent choir, exacting cello lessons...and when not involved in any of these I would lie under a grand piano listening to a friend improvise jazz.

The vibrations of music, the way sounds collided into and through my body, brought me a peace and joy that nothing else could, order in a disordered world, the solace of hearing deep into the recesses of other musicians through their music, that mystical communication from one soul to another.

At Chetham's I was encouraged to train for a solo career – something that had not crossed my mind previously. And although music was a pursuit of enduring quality, it was to be many years before I gained any sense of discipline and clarity enough to really improve my playing significantly. I was a wild teenager without any work ethic, and when I did practice I had no idea how to do it properly. But at least this cocoon of music began to help my heart to open and my nervous system to relax.

Maybe more importantly I was away from the dangerous crowd I had fallen in with in my hometown of Sheffield, where, not long after I left, one young woman in the group died of a heroin overdose.

Music may have saved my life – of course we never know “what might have happened if...”, but I do know that it saved me from the dangerous environment I was in. Music gave me a focus, a purpose, and it filled my heart with unnameable longings and an understanding of what love sounded like.

I became a collector of music: anything I could lay my hands on that resonated, and it didn't matter if it was Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony or Weather Report, Brian Eno, Bob Marley or Joni Mitchell. Soon it expanded to Indian music during my first tour in India, then branched into many kinds of electronic and dance music as I immersed myself in Gabrielle Roth's Five Rhythms and began to shake my body loose and find a beat.

Meeting violinist Viktoria Mullova – with whom I fell in love and married – took me deeper into the world of music. I was so inspired to hear her playing every day that I started to practise with new intent and finally began to unlock a little more of the sound I wanted– this was both exciting and rewarding and made me want more. I was a late developer.

In 2019 I was at the ceremony in Brazil (where drinking Ayahuasca is common and legal), and, as I have said, experienced a very frightening recapitulation of my teenaged suicide attempt, which left me deeply shaken. I discovered that the psychotic episode I suffered, and the subsequent suicide attempt, had left me traumatised on levels I simply was not aware of, until this moment. This mysterious psychedelic brew seems to heal in much the same way as a lot of therapeutic paths – it makes you feel (although I imagine a kindly bespectacled therapist in Islington would be gentler). It is somehow able to unlock hidden parts of the psyche and bring things (carefully chosen words) to light.

So, after all those years I was finally *feeling* what had happened to me. It took several months of trauma therapy to integrate the parts of my body that had shut down as I dissociated when faced with expected death. It's very hard to describe, but was so palpable, and for the first time in my life I was feeling whole, as though I was all there in some new way. Another of the consequences of

this was that quite suddenly I found myself more connected with music and my cello. I was somehow able to hear better what I was doing from a less-stressed nervous system, and to make music more deeply and joyfully than ever before.

During the lockdowns I began to realise that I could make art out of my experiences and thereby create another healing step of understanding and feeling what I had been through.

So I created Light Stories.

I had just read *The Seven Basic Plots* by Christopher Booker which fascinated me with its illuminations of the seven types of stories that humans have been telling each other for hundreds of years, and the plot of *Voyage and Return* especially resonated, in which the protagonist sets out on his journey full of confidence and ambition, and through a series of adventures and the inevitable brush with death, is healed (often by a magical agent), and returns home to share stories and wisdom gathered during the time away. I listed five main parts of this 'template' and fifteen detailed headings, looking for pieces of music to fit each one and flesh out the musical narrative according to how those parts of my own journey felt. Where I couldn't find a piece in my repertoire I decided to compose something to fit. It's the first time I have composed and has brought with it equal amounts of trepidation and exhilaration!

As well as this recording I'm preparing a concert programme which contains all 15 pieces I found, whereas on this recording I'm just showcasing the pieces that I've written myself and two other pieces that complete the narrative. Several of the pieces from the live version were on my last album so I could not include them here.

Part One: The beginnings, dreams and ambitions, preparing for the journey.

Spell sets the scene, especially for the concert programme where I was imagining notes that would bring everyone together in one space, ready to embark upon a journey in sound...a sort of 'gather round and listen carefully'. The first four notes just arrived one day while I was warming up and I remember liking the energy of three plummeting Cs and an A natural...so I recorded it on my phone, parking it for later use. Then while I was improvising with it a little later the next

plucked notes rocking between D and Ab completed the very opening statement that served as inspiration for many parts of the eight pieces. The interjections, like a Greek Chorus, come from a collection of small Brazilian wooden pipes that imitate birdcalls.

The Dreaming is a written-out improvisation over a B pedal...the feeling of singing in nature, far from anyone, dreaming my future as a child, full of hopes and fears as we all are. I tried to compose something that would sound like a stream of consciousness – a free flow of connected but independent musical thoughts.

Cathedrals and Caves also began as an improvisation, and captured both the melancholy mood I was in when playing it, and also something of my early childhood, with mysteries in cathedrals and metaphorical caves weaving into my life. The form unfolds over a repeated bass line like a chaconne.

Part Two: Journeys of discovery, strange worlds and mysterious encounters.

Hell 1 is a beautiful piece by talented Italian cellist-composer Giovanni Sollima – it is from the composer's suite *The Divine Comedy* for cello and strings – another epic journey, and I love the feeling that it is describing something far away and unfamiliar. It has a similar form to the previous track, with the accompaniment to the florid melody being a repeated 10-bar pattern.

Part Three: Things begin to fall apart: danger lurks, and finally, the inevitable brush with death.

Unravelling documents a time in my adolescence when outwardly everything seemed as though it was bobbing along nicely, yet underneath all was not well.

In the Crosshairs was inspired by a very frightening dream I had some years ago of being hunted in the cosmos by a black arrowhead, it reminded me of that teenage feeling of something about to go horribly wrong, and yet I was oblivious to the danger until it was too late. The piece leads straight into *Timefolding*, the sound of death and madness, where time seems to fold in on itself. In this piece I went for fragmented soundscapes and effects, and also used the opening of

the Elgar Cello Concerto as a symbol of goodness at the centre of my life that dramatically fell apart in that moment.

Part Four: the healing, recuperation and spiritual guidance.

In JS Bach's *Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ* (I call to you, Lord Jesus Christ) this timeless music with extraordinary simplicity shows the magical capacity of music to console and ease the heart.

Full, Empty was also mostly an improvisation I then shaped to become the piece it is here. At first the cello line in the second half was sung at the same time as I played the lower notes, although sadly I couldn't sing well enough to record the voice. But I still retained the solitary D, sung in the first half. I love the harmonics and rough sounds the bow can make in the string crossing, evoking different worlds from the normal cello sound.

Part Five: The Return.

The Unwaiting Sky began life while I was staring, peacefully, at the sky at dawn one day, and the title popped into my head – describing the way nature just carries on doing its thing while we are so busy with our stories... the opening chords hang in the sky and give way to a rocking motion that carries on for much of the first half of the movement in one form or another. I wanted to finish *Light Stories* with a dance of celebration and thanksgiving (and why not dance to seven beats in a bar?), and found myself trying to evoke spinning and whirling... like peals of bells...maybe that feeling of being thrown in the air by a joyous and loving parent...

Creating this music has been an adventure in itself that has brought a great deal to my life, and I'm grateful to all I met along the way, especially to Vika, to whom *Light Stories* is dedicated.

© Matthew Barley
July 2024



“... his virtuoso control at all dynamic levels just has to be heard to be believed...”

International Record Review

“I wish more people would think about music the way Matthew Barley does”

The Times (London)

“Stunning cello - words cannot do justice to the strength and effect of his playing”

Capital Times (New Zealand)

“This was brilliant playing, fully in baroque style, announcing to all that here was a cellist to reckon with.”

Dominion Post (New Zealand)

“One of the most talented cellists I’ve ever heard”

Leonard Bernstein

Cello playing is at the centre of **Matthew Barley**’s career, while his musical world has virtually no geographical, social or stylistic boundaries. His passions include improvisation, education, multi-genre music-making, electronics, and pioneering community programmes.

Matthew is a world-renowned cellist who has performed in over 50 countries, including concertos with the BBC Philharmonic, Czech Philharmonic, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Hong Kong Sinfonietta, Kremerata Baltica, London Sinfonietta, Melbourne Symphony, New Zealand Symphony, Royal Scottish National, Swedish Chamber, Vienna Radio Symphony orchestras and the Metropole Jazz Orchestra. With Viktoria Mullova he premiered and toured *At Swim-Two-Birds*, a double concerto by Pascal Dusapin, with the Leipzig Gewandhaus, London Philharmonic, Netherlands Radio Symphony, Orchestre National de France, RAI National Symphony and Seattle Symphony orchestras.

Matthew's collaborations include with Matthias Goerne, the Labèque sisters, Avi Avital, Manu Delago, Martin Fröst, Shai Wosner, Calefax, Thomas Larcher, Amjad Ali Khan, Julian Joseph, Nitin Sawhney and Jon Lord (of Deep Purple), appearing in venues ranging from Ronnie Scott's and the WOMAD festivals to London's Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Vienna's Konzerthaus, Sydney Opera House and Zürich's Tonhalle. In the 2000s Matthew's new music group, *Between The Notes* undertook over 60 creative community projects with young people and orchestral players around the world.

Matthew has given premieres by Pascal Dusapin, Dai Fujikura, Detlev Glanert, Thomas Larcher, James MacMillan, Roxana Panufnik, and recently a concerto by Misha Mullov-Abbado with a cello part that is more than half improvised, at the London Jazz Festival for the BBC.

Since 2003 he has recorded for Onyx and Black Box and is now a Signum Classics artist. His 2019 recording of Tavener's *The Protecting Veil* with the Riga Sinfonietta was described by *Gramophone* as "A magnificent performance... Even if you have other recordings of *The Protecting Veil*, I recommend this utterly beautiful and originally framed version unreservedly." His latest recording, *Electric* ("A sonic marvel", *The Strad*) is an anthology of works for cello and electronics.

In the future Matthew is looking forward to building on the skills he has developed in *Light Stories* - especially the composing and producing - as well as running workshops with a new charity he has formed to help university students with their mental health using creative music and movement.

www.matthewbarley.com
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