



**Dreamcatcher**  
**James McVinnie**

**Dreamcatcher** is an intimate sequence of contemporary classical music centred around the act of imagining; imaginings of place, architecture, form and movement implied through music—as well as political imaginings of & yearnings for better social justice in the fabric of our society. It's also a summation of my identity as a performer as both organist and pianist reflecting my taste in music, featuring work by composers to whom I have a close personal connection.

*Dreamcatcher* features the organ of St Albans Cathedral—an epoch making instrument from 1962 designed by Ralph Downes and the then cathedral organist Peter Hurford. I spent two formative years working as one of the organists at the Cathedral when I was 18; playing this organ daily helped forge the basis of my technique and approach to organ registration more than anything else.

The St Albans organ—together with its counterpart in London's Royal Festival Hall also designed by Ralph Downes some 8 years earlier—involved a radical return to the organ building practises and principles of 200 years past, a move which has made a lasting impression on organ building in the UK. The outstanding beauty of its registers have been captured up-close on this recording, whilst honouring the cathedral's generous acoustic. Returning to this organ to make this record I was struck both by how intuitive it is to play, whilst also presenting sonorities that one would never think of—a true and inspirational instrumental collaborator.

The piano segments of the record were recorded on a darkly expressive Steinway D at Studio Richter Mahr, home to a growing extended family of like minded resident artists and an extraordinary artistic statement of

intent by Max Richter and Yulia Mahr. I'm indebted to them both for their warm welcome.

**Gabriella Smith**, 'a force to be reckoned with' (Steve Reich) is an environmentalist and composer from the Bay Area in California, whose work invites listeners to find joy in climate action. Her music comes from a love of play, exploring new instrumental sounds, and creating musical arcs that transport audiences into sonic

landscapes inspired by the natural world. I asked Gabriella to explain the title *Imaginary Pancake*—and this was her reply:

*When I was asked to write a solo piano piece, I started thinking back to all the most memorable solo piano moments in my life. And the memory I kept coming back to was when I was 7 years old, I was at some kind of summer music program, and I remember there was this kid there who was a couple*



years older than me and was a super good pianist. I remember he would always play this piece that started at both extreme registers of the piano, which he had to totally flatten out to reach with his short, kid arms, and would just gleefully hammer away. And I just thought this was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. So one day I asked him what piece it was and he said "Beethoven!" (I forget what Beethoven he said...)

So 20 years later when I was asked to write this piece I thought I should figure out what piece that was and write something inspired by it. So I listened to all the Beethoven piano sonatas, concertos, bagatelles...everything I could possibly think of...and it wasn't one of them. This piece does not exist. I have no idea what it was. My guess is that it really was Beethoven but that my memory of it just became so exaggerated over 20 years to the

point of being unrecognisable from the original. So the piece is not inspired by any actual Beethoven but by what I imagined that piece to be.

Originally written for pianist Timo Andres, *Imaginary Pancake* is a knockout; not only a blisteringly virtuosic showpiece but a beautiful, grand, sculptural form displaying all the hallmarks of Gabriella's unique compositional style. The climax of the piece is reached with 'glorious hammering' at either end of the piano's keyboard which slowly subsides into a plaintive 4 note cluster, played by the right hand whilst the left hand reaches forwards into the piano, dampening the strings of the sounding notes, producing string harmonics and unusual sonorities.

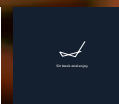
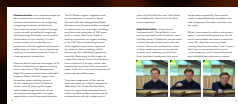
*Patterns* was written for organist John Scott in 2013 by **Nico Muhly**, who writes: '[the piece] is composed in four

sections, each of which is sort of a rhythmic étude. The first (*Move along*) is a perpetual motion machine with staggered and angular rhythms thrown between the pedals and the left hand. The second movement (*Palindromes*) is calmer and is centred around an idée fixe in the left hand while the right hand interjects and ornaments. The pedals, here, are a clumsy cousin, constantly upturning the sense of rhythmic stability. The third movement (*Similar*) is all to do with ways to divide up the bar: seven, eight, six, five, four—it's all there. Then the finale (*Very Fast Music*) is a perpetual motion machine on its highest setting—manic and hyper, with hiccoughs offsetting the regularity of some of the rhythms.' It is impossible to overestimate the influence John Scott had over so many of us in the organ playing world and his sudden death (soon after the premiere of *Patterns*) at the age of 59 was both unbelievable and shocking. For me, the piece—and

especially its final movement—has a quiet melancholy to it. Perhaps *Patterns* has become a fitting posthumous tribute to its dedicatee. I'm touched to have made this first recording of the piece, by kind permission of the composer.

I have always been interested in the connection between synthesisers and their forerunner, the pipe organ. **Laurie Spiegel's** *The Unquestioned Answer* from her seminal album *The Expanding Universe* seemed a work ripe for exploring this relationship. Originally for looped synthesisers, I have reimagined the piece with a simple arrangement for organ, applying a registration technique originally conceived by Olivier Messiaen to depict droplets of water around a shimmering accompanimental drone.

*Ellis Island* by **Meredith Monk** originally accompanied her 1981 film of the same





St Albans Cathedral Organ

name about about the experience of immigrants entering America at the turn of the century. Monk refers to the people in her film 'as ghosts who serve as a reminder to contemporary Americans of the many heritages that make up who they are as a society today. I sensed the spirits of people still in those rooms. The strength

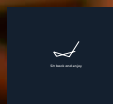
and courage of the human spirit in a situation like that was very moving...'  
Originally scored for two pianos, the piece has easily transferred to the version heard here for solo organ, with some ingenious arrangement of notes for the pedals.

**Marcos Balter's** *Dreamcatcher*, written in 2018 reflects on the horrors of the family separation crisis: 'Thousands of children were separated from their families due to the Trump administration's heartless "zero-tolerance policy" at the US border which resulted in children being taken away and put in detention facilities. The battle for humane treatment of immigrants continues...'

**inti figgis-vizueta** (b.1993) is a composer and cultural artist who works to reconcile historical aesthetics and experimental practices with trans & Indigenous futures. As the title suggests, her miniature for solo piano 'build-it-yourself ' invites the soloist to find their own sense of structural form in the music—the score is tantalisingly sparse and features nothing more than the basic elements of pitch and relative rhythm. Each performance is unique to the taste and instinct of the player in the moment of its conception.

In a recent podcast about his career, composer **John Adams** talks about moving to the west coast of America, now over fifty years ago, in search a new compositional voice, and his desire to break away from European influences that had suffused his studies at Harvard University. Today, Adams's compositional style is instantly recognisable as truly 'American' music and has become for many, the sound of California itself, capturing the essence of its vastness, beauty and strangeness.

For me, *China Gates* is really synthesiser music for the piano, in the sense that the sound and resonance of the piano produced by the notes is as integral to the work as the notes themselves. The work was written as a companion piece to his much longer *Phyrgian Gates*—both are minimalist in style and represent Adams's use of simple repetition enriched by other



compositional devices. One such device is his use of 'gates'—(a term derived from electronics), described by Adams as 'the moments when the modes abruptly and without warning, shift'. Adams's inspiration for the piece was the repetitive, rhythmic 'endless winter rain' that he experienced in San Francisco in 1977.

About *Riff-raff* **Giles Swayne** writes 'the title reflects my concern at the

time with the gulf between classical music and its popular roots. The piece [is] inspired by my interest in African music and a field trip which I had made [in 1982] to record music of the Jola community in Casamance, southern Senegal'. Commissioned by the St Albans International Organ Festival in 1983, *Riff-raff* was premiered by Andrew Parnell on the organ of St Albans Cathedral. This is the first recorded document of the work played on the

organ for which it was written. For me there is a perfect synergy between the work's unique character and the tonal design of this great instrument. The composer's detailed note about the piece seems too good to miss here in full:

*The basic refrain, which begins and ends the piece (and crops up several times in between), consists of three simple chords played staccato, separated by measured silences, and repeated in many dynamics and registrations. Between its appearances, the piece develops (like Gwendolen in The importance of being Earnest) in many directions: a heavy riff on the pedals; a tinkly minimalist episode underpinned by a pedal ground which takes us through the next refrain into another tinkly passage at double speed; and what can only be described as a boogy-woogy combined with a Rossini crescendo which brings the piece to*

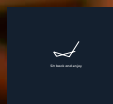
*its first climax – after which the pedals introduce a variant of the earlier riff, and the dynamic level is lowered to introduce another version of the refrain.*

*Beneath this a pedal ostinato grows into a fanfare for the entire instrument in modal A Minor, blazing into A Major for a passage which owes much to the music I heard in Casamance in 1982: over a bass in parallel fifths reminiscent of Jola male-voice singing (which is often of a lewd nature), a repeated descending melody drifts out of phase with itself, then returns to synch. This is a musical greeting to my friend Kajalli Bojang, whose guest I was in Wassadu, The Gambia, when I recorded the twenty-seven reels of Jola music which are now in the British Library Sound Archive.*

*After a short pause for breath, a new episode begins, based on a tune I heard (I think) in a village in Casamance. This*

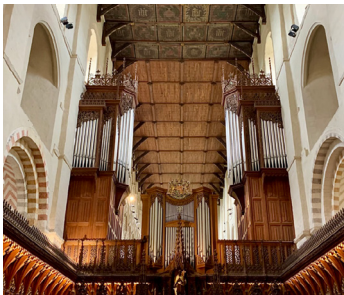


James McVinnie at Studio Richter Mahr





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*starts quietly, but gradually grows louder and more athletic, reaching a climax at which the full organ is unleashed, and which takes us into the last section, which is much faster, and couched in a muscular Dorian mode on A. This culminates in a varied reprise of the opening refrain, in which the chords are sustained rather than staccato, and are underpinned by a wild solo on the pedals. The dynamic level then comes quickly down, and the piece ends with a repeat of the opening – but played backwards.*

*Dreamcatcher* closes with a simple and beautiful lullaby written by my dear friend **Bryce Dessner** for his new-born son, Octave.

**James McVinnie**  
June 2024

## Acknowledgements

### PRODUCTION TEAM

Executive producers **James McVinnie & Kasper van Kooten** (PENTATONE)  
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Recording producer & engineer (tracks 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11)\*\* **Matthew Swan**  
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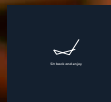
\* Tracks 1, 8, 9, 10, 12 recorded at Studio Richter Mahr on May 7, 8, 9 2024.

\*\* Tracks 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11 recorded at the Cathedral & Abbey Church of St Alban by kind permission of the Dean & Chapter on May 29 & 30 2024.

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