

Sign in

Contribute →

News Opinion Sport Culture Lifestyle

Film Music TV & radio Books Art & design Stage Games Classical



The Observer

The week in classical: New Dark Age; Quartet for the End of Time - review

Royal Opera House; St Paul's Cathedral, London

Hannah Kendall, Anna Meredith, Missy Mazzoli and Anna Thorvaldsdottir share the ROH limelight. Elsewhere, memorably reverberant Messiaen



Fiona Maddocks

Twitter: @FionaMaddocks

Sat 31 Oct 2020 12.30 GMT



The Royal Opera House chose sombre works for its **New Dark Age** evening: two contemporary chamber pieces, the first a monodrama about the poet [Martin Carter](#), incarcerated in 1950s British Guyana, the other an amalgam of existing music reflecting on the Covid world we now live in. Both would have worked well in the smaller ROH Linbury Studio. They were left somewhat overwhelmed in the main auditorium, despite high-quality music-making and sharp stagings (designer Vicki Mortimer, lighting by Adam Silverman).

Hannah Kendall's *The Knife of Dawn* (2016), to a libretto by Tessa McWatt, directed by Ola Ince, needs a more intimate space to draw us into its quiet, troubling intensity. The composer has a gift for making subtle timbres from modest resources - [here a harp](#), whispered and glassy, at its highest register, with imaginative writing for string trio (conductor Jonathon Heyward). Baritone Peter Braithwaite gave a committed performance as the poet. Offstage female voices acted as ghostly memories that haunt the poet and add aural richness.



▲ Susan Bickley, Nadine Benjamin and Anna Dennis in *A New Dark Age*, directed by Katie Mitchell. Photograph: Tristram Kenton/The Observer

The American composer [Missy Mazzoli](#) wrote her *Vespers for a New Dark Age* in 2014, some of which is included in a 10-part meditation that takes its name, directed by Katie Mitchell (conductor Natalie Murray Beale). Elegiac choral pieces by the Icelandic composer [Anna Thorvaldsdottir](#) and songs including the lovely *Heal You*, by the British composer [Anna Meredith](#), offered sonic variety. All was beautifully sung by sopranos Nadine Benjamin and Anna Dennis and the mezzo-soprano Susan Bickley, who also featured in [Grant Gee](#)'s accompanying video: overlaid, slow-motion images of lockdown life. Some will have found this a telling encapsulation of pandemic reality. Others, myself included, longed to be carried to a different horizon.

High praise to [City Music Foundation](#) artists Emily Sun, violin, Joseph Shiner, clarinet, Ariana Kashefi, cello, and Alexander Soares, piano, who played Messiaen's **Quartet for the End of Time** in St Paul's Cathedral. Usually this music, searing and poetic, burns its way into our consciousness. Here, beneath the building's giant dome, the sound multiplying and coming back to greet itself, it felt indeed timeless.

Star ratings (out of five)

New Dark Age ★★★

Quartet for the End of Time ★★★★★

[New Dark Age](#) at the Royal Opera House is available to stream for £10 at roh.org.uk

Messiaen's [Quartet for the End of Time](#) from St Paul's Cathedral is available to watch free via the [City Music Foundation's YouTube channel](#) (donations welcome).

Since you're here ...

... we have a small favour to ask. Millions are flocking to the Guardian for open, independent, quality news every day, and readers in 180 countries around the world now support us financially.

We believe everyone deserves access to information that's grounded in science and truth, and analysis rooted in authority and integrity. That's why we made a different choice: to keep our reporting open for all readers, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay. This means more people can be better informed, united, and inspired to take meaningful action.

In these perilous times, an independent, truth-seeking global news organisation like the Guardian is essential. We have no shareholders or billionaire owner, meaning our journalism is free from commercial and political bias - this makes us different. When it's never been more pertinent, our independence allows us to fearlessly investigate, challenge and expose those in power.

Amid the various intersecting crises of 2020 - from Covid-19 to police brutality - the Guardian has not, and will never, sideline the climate emergency. We are determined to uphold our reputation for producing urgent, powerful, high-impact reporting on the environment that's read by around the world.

We've made institutional progress too, working hard to live up to the climate promises we made in 2019. We no longer take advertising from fossil fuel companies, and we're on course to achieve net zero emissions by 2030.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. Your funding powers our journalism, it protects our independence, and ensures we can remain open for all. You can support us through these challenging economic times and enable real-world impact.

Every contribution, however big or small, makes a real difference for our future. **Support the Guardian from as little as £1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support the Guardian →

Remind me in December

VISA



AMERICAN EXPRESS

PayPal

Topics

Classical music / The Observer

Royal Opera House / Anna Meredith / Katie Mitchell / live music reviews



comments (3)

[Sign in](#) or [create your Guardian account](#) to join the discussion.

Most popular

Film **Music** TV & radio Books Art & design Stage Games Classical

News Opinion Sport **Culture** Lifestyle

Sign up for the Guardian Today email

All the day's headlines and highlights from the Guardian, direct to you every morning

Sign up

[About us](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Complaints & corrections](#)

[SecureDrop](#)

[Work for us](#)

[Privacy settings](#)

[Privacy policy](#)

[Cookie policy](#)

[Terms & conditions](#)

[Help](#)

[Advertise with us](#)

[Guardian Labs](#)

[Search jobs](#)

[Patrons](#)

[All topics](#)

[All writers](#)

[Modern Slavery Act](#)

[Digital newspaper archive](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Back to top](#) 