WISCONSIN UNION THEATER

2017-2018 Season

Eighth Blackbird

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800 Langdon St., Madison, WI 53706
Presented by the Wisconsin Union Directorate Performing Arts Committee, directed this year by Marilyn Feldner.

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SEXTET

I. Omie Wise
II. Young Emily
III. Wave the Sea
IV. Brushy Fork

Dan Trueman: Suite from Olagón (2016)
SEXTET

Stirrings I
Marbhan’s Shadow
Ululations II
Reeling Reels

Ned McGowan: Garden of Iniquitous Creatures (2016) SEXTET

-Intermission-


Ted Hearne: By-By Huey (2014) SEXTET

Robert Honstein: Conduit, II. Pulse (2014) SEXTET

Timo Andres: Checkered Shade (2014) SEXTET

ABOUT THE MUSIC | BY ROSE GEAR

Musician and composer Bryce Dessner (b. 1976) is a guitarist for the popular indie rock band The National. Dessner has received numerous commissions from high-profile ensembles including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Ensemble Intercontemporain, and Sō Percussion. Tonight, we will hear four movements from Murder Ballades (2013, rev. 2015), a seven-movement piece penned by Dessner for Eighth Blackbird. Murder Ballades was inspired by the American murder ballad tradition, which describes the sordid details of homicides through song.
Omie Wise begins as a cheery folk dance, but it’s not long before darker elements start to intrude. Obsessive syncopations, sickeningly slow glissandi (sliding pitches), and creeping dissonances hint at something lurking beneath the surface, and the movement ends with an eerily definitive chord in the piano. Sharply ascending glissandi inject an element of playfulness into the otherwise sullen Young Emily; the movement’s rhythmic texture gradually gains complexity before thinning out suddenly at the conclusion. Wave the Sea is anchored by a trembling, shivering ostinato in the flute coupled with violent interjections from percussion, strings, and piano, alongside goosebump-inducing tremolos in the strings. The cello, violin, and clarinet gradually join the flute’s ostinato, and the movement closes forbiddingly with the interval of a tritone (known commonly as “the devil’s interval”). Brushy Fork is a frantic, off-kilter country fiddle tune played in tutti unison.

Composer and fiddle player Dan Trueman (b. 1968) teaches composition, electronic music, and counterpoint at Princeton University. He is a co-founder of the Princeton Laptop Orchestra and a lover of the Norwegian Hardanger fiddle. Trueman’s work explores the relationships between the seemingly disparate milieus of traditional music and music constructed with digital instruments.


Stirrings I evokes feelings of nervousness and suspicion. Tension is gradually created through the use of effects such as glissando and sul ponticello (playing close to the bridge on stringed instruments). Deliberate and grave, Marbhan’s Shadow builds on a repeated melodic fragment, while the stuttering Ululations II leads directly into Reeling Reels, a lively country jig.

Ned McGowan (b. 1970) is a composer and flutist living in Holland. McGowan has made significant contributions to the flute, contrabass flute, and flute ensemble repertories; such works frequently incorporate virtuosic elements and unorthodox techniques. McGowan’s love for the European classical tradition is coupled with a penchant for improvisation and a fascination with Indian classical music. His 2012 composition Concerto for iPad and Orchestra has been performed on three continents. In music critic Alex Ross’ book The Rest is Noise, Ross wrote that “if you are having a slow day, [Ned McGowan’s] samples will wake you right up.”

McGowan’s Garden of Iniquitous Creatures (2016) is jaunty, groovy, and at times evocative of rock, heavy metal, and jazz. The mood is furious from the very start, as the percussion and piano join forces to lay down thumping rhythms. The stringed instruments deliver a melody reminiscent of power chords from rock music, and the wind instruments answer with a contrasting chromatic figure, which is then elaborated upon and passed between the piano and winds. A quieter passage sees the strings and piano conversing with the glockenspiel, whose statements seem almost improvised. When the solo flute sounds, it’s time for the volume and intensity to once again increase, and we are treated to a recap of the work’s earlier themes before a manic finale.

American composer David Lang (b. 1957) is co-founder and co-artistic director of New York’s music consortium Bang on a Can, alongside composers Julia Wolfe and Michael Gordon. He has written orchestra, opera, chamber, and solo works, and modeled the
form of his Pulitzer Prize-winning piece *the little match girl passion* (2007) after Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Lang is a member of the Yale School of Music composition faculty.

Though brief in duration, Lang’s *wed* (1992) carries a sense of profound gravitas. It is one of eight *memory pieces*, a series of solo piano vignettes written to commemorate Lang’s friends who have died. As an homage to conceptual artist Kate Ericson, *wed* memorializes the moment she and her boyfriend Mel Ziegler married while Ericson was in the hospital dying of brain cancer. Of *wed*, Lang said “I tried to make a piece to make sense of that [memory], so I designed a piece in which little changes in accidentals keep the music oscillating between major and minor, between restfulness and sudden dissonance.” While the original work is for solo piano, tonight we will hear an arrangement for piano and percussion by Lisa Kaplan and Matthew Duvall. *Wed* is mesmerizing; persistent repeated notes in the piano’s upper register give this piece a twinkling, celestial quality.

**Ted Hearne**’s *By-By Huey* takes its cue from Robert Arneson’s painting entitled “By-By Huey P,” a jarring portrait of 24-year-old Tyrone Robinson, who is the murderer of Black Panther Party co-founder Huey P. Newton. In Arneson’s painting, the outline of a sinister-looking praying mantis is superimposed atop the image of Robinson’s face. This music is by turns soulful and grating; the piano provides much of the rhythmic thrust while the remainder of the ensemble crashes, whines, growls, and buzzes.

**Robert Honstein**’s *Conduit* was inspired by *Six-Forty by Four-Eighty*, an interactive light installation designed by digital artists Zigelbaum and Coelho. *Six-Forty by Four-Eighty* features colorfully lit squares which pulse and change color when touched. The second of *Conduit*’s three movements, Honstein’s *Pulse* is appropriately vibrant and hypnotic.

**Timo Andre**’s *Checkered Shade* is based on the patterned pen-and-ink work of artist Astrid Bowlby. This music sparkles and flashes before giving way to subdued exchanges between the strings, winds, and piano.

*Rose Gear served as WUD Performing Arts Committee Director during the Wisconsin Union Theater’s 2009–2010 season. She currently works for Seattle Symphony as Personal Assistant to the Music Director & Artistic Coordinator and performs regularly as a classical bassist.*
Eighth Blackbird is “one of the smartest, most dynamic contemporary classical ensembles on the planet” (Chicago Tribune). Launched by six entrepreneurial Oberlin Conservatory undergraduates in 1996, this Chicago-based super-group has earned its status as “a brand-name...defined by adventure, vibrancy and quality....known for performing from memory, employing choreography and collaborations with theater artists, lighting designers and even puppetry artists” (Detroit Free Press).

Eighth Blackbird first gained wide recognition in 1998 as winners of the Concert Artists Guild Competition. Over the course of two decades, the group has commissioned and premiered hundreds of works by composers such as David Lang, Steven Mackey, Missy Mazzoli, and Steve Reich, whose Double Sextet went on to win the 2009 Pulitzer Prize. A long-term relationship with Chicago’s Cedille Records has produced eight acclaimed recordings and four Grammy Awards for Best Small Ensemble/Chamber Music Performance, most recently in 2016 for Filament. They were named Musical America’s 2017 Ensemble of the Year, and in 2016 were the inaugural recipients of Chamber Music America’s Visionary Award and the prestigious MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Eighth Blackbird's 2017-18 season marks debuts in Turin, Milan, Budapest, with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Cincinnati Ballet, tours through 11 states, and the release of Olagón, a new album featuring music by Dan Trueman, poetry by Paul Muldoon, and sean nós singer Iarla Ó Lionáird. Eighth Blackbird celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2016 with tours of music from Filament and Hand Eye, as well as keystone performances celebrating Steve Reich’s 80th birthday, a fresh round of raucous shows with “Appalachian post-punk solipsist” (The Wanderer) Will Oldham (Bonnie Prince Billy), and world premieres by Holly Harrison, Pulitzer Prize-winner David Lang, and Ned McGowan.

Eighth Blackbird’s mission—moving music forward through innovative performance, advocating for new music by living composers, and creating a legacy of guiding an emerging generation of musicians —extends beyond recording and touring to curation and education. The ensemble served as Music Director of the 2009 Ojai Music Festival, has held residencies at the Curtis Institute of Music and at the University of Chicago, and holds an ongoing Ensemble-in-Residence position at the University of Richmond. The 2015-16 season featured a pioneering residency at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art: a living installation with open rehearsals, performances, guest artists, and public talks. In 2017, Eighth Blackbird launched its boldest initiative yet with the creation of Blackbird Creative Laboratory, a tuition-free, two-week summer workshop and performance festival for performers and composers in Ojai, CA.

Eighth Blackbird’s members hail from the Great Lakes, Keystone, Golden, Empire and Bay states. The name “Eighth Blackbird” derives from the eighth stanza of Wallace Stevens’s evocative, imagistic poem, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird: “I know noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms; / But I know, too, / That the blackbird is involved / In what I know.”

Eighth Blackbird is managed by David Lieberman Artists, Hazard Chase and Paola Castellano.
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Brian Mani
Actor

Norman Gilliland
Narrator

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