



**Kate Moore**

Dances and Canons

**Saskia Lankhoorn**

ECM NEW SERIES







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Piano



**Kate Moore** (\*1979)

## **Dances and Canons**

**Spin Bird** 3:24

Solo Piano

**Stories For Ocean Shells** 9:06

Solo Piano

**The Body Is An Ear** 11:01

Two Pianos

**Canon** 15:39

Four Pianos

**Zomer** 4:01

Solo Piano

**Joy** 12:03

Solo Piano

**Sensitive Spot** 9:08

Multiple Pianos

**Spin Bird** 3:38

Solo Piano











## Dances and Canons

The beats of the pulse and the heart,  
the inhaling and exhaling of the breath,  
are all the work of rhythm...  
The sound without and the sound  
within ourselves: that is music.

Hazrat Inayat Khan

Australian composer Kate Moore remembers her first encounter with Hazrat Inayat Khan's book, *The Mysticism of Sound and Music*. She kept reading late into the night, so eloquently did the Sufi philosopher's words capture how she herself perceived the relationship between sound, music and the natural world. Khan's writing provided direct inspiration for *The Body Is An Ear*, one of seven pieces on *Dances and Canons*, but their shared sense of the interrelationship between the human and the natural worlds is a thread connecting all the compositions presented here. Moore's long-term collaborator, pianist Saskia Lankhoorn, who performs all the pieces on this recording, recounts how the composer in rehearsal instinctively reaches for comparisons with the natural world to convey a particular effect she is seeking: "Kate would say, 'play it a little bit more like [the sound of] leaves', and then you have an image which can help you find a certain sound".

In talking about music, we reach for metaphor to take us beyond mere technical description, and for Moore the deep structures that give shape to her compositions most closely resemble the shifting of tectonic plates: "A lot of my pieces deal with a melody line or motivic



shapes that I squeeze and pull out and then layer one on top of the other, so you sense the overall shape of the original material, but within that shape everything is twisting and turning and bouncing off itself.” Geology seems a particularly apt metaphor for this music: both unfold through the accumulation of small changes over expanses of time. At first these changes may be imperceptible and their effects unpredictable: but over time, forces interact with each other and are transformed; patterns emerge that seem to possess an unstoppable elemental energy. The sort of energy that moves mountains: the summit of Mount Everest is marine limestone that once lay at the bottom of the long-vanished Tethys Sea. “Looking at landscape resembles a slow, still soundscape”, Moore believes.

Given the nature of some of Moore’s processes and practices, the question inevitably arises: is she a minimalist? Moore acknowledges affinities but does not find the label particularly illuminating: “Minimalism to me denotes a very specific group of people at a very specific time and place. I think that movement had a very different objective to mine, which made perfect sense for that time and that place (and still does). I’m generations down the line, though, in terms of my musical influences. I think perhaps some of my idioms have resonances with minimalism – I use tonal material and repetitive patterns – but I’m not strict about it. I use them as colours or ways to create shapes and fields of sound, whereas I think the minimalists used those patterns to create a process over a period of time in a synthetic way. There are parallels of course, I don’t deny that, but I think of my work as very much more organic, and maybe more philosophical.”



Kate Moore was born in England in 1979 and has lived in the Netherlands for over a decade, but it is the Australia of her childhood and youth which made the deepest impression on her imagination: "When I write music I'm looking for something I get from the Australian landscape, though not necessarily its shape. It's possibly a sense of the soundscape of Australia. It has had huge impact on me and it's possibly what I miss most. In Australia you immediately encounter this vast flat landscape almost everywhere you go. In the evening when the stars come out, they are so clear they look as though they are coming towards you. You can hear the horizon: there are thousands of insects, little birds, frogs. This amazing three-dimensional soundscape is the most beautiful orchestration imaginable."

Moore's interest in composing dates back to her earliest encounter with the piano in childhood. She grew up in a musical household and was writing down tunes and making up stories at the piano almost as soon as she could read music. Though she has a strong interest in new instruments and sonorities (such as her own invention, the "percussion harp"), the piano has remained central to her compositional language. "I have played it all my life", she says, "so it feels very natural to build up a sound world using all those keys and strings and hammers. I feel sound through the piano in a very direct way."

Visual arts are also important to her and play their role in the compositional process. "The moments when I feel most fluent [as a composer] and things are going really quickly, I'm also combining that with drawing and painting. Always at least once in the process of writing a piece, I've spent a day or two with a big piece of paper drawing abstract struc-



tures. I keep notebooks filled with notes about ideas but also obsessive doodles. My notebooks go from doodling and fluid, creative, slightly chaotic shapes into very square and diagonal and graphical geometric shapes.” Moore works out a strict structure before she puts pen to paper, which she much prefers to composing on the computer. Once the overall structure has been blocked out, she will – in the manner of a painter – apply the fine detail that gives her compositions their organic quality and softens the geometry of their edges.

Moore left Australia in 2002 to pursue her studies at the Royal Conservatorium in The Hague with teachers who included Louis Andriessen. It was here too that she met Saskia Lankhoorn and their long-lasting collaboration and a friendship began. Lankhoorn’s commitment to new music was already well developed; her first broadcast performance on Dutch national radio at the age of sixteen was of Schoenberg’s *Sechs Kleine Klavierstücke* and in 2003 she co-founded the contemporary music group Ensemble Klang, with which she still performs. Lankhoorn recalls: “When I first played Kate’s music in Ensemble Klang, it felt like a synthesis between two worlds, the classical sound world and the more contemporary pop, rock groove we had in the band when we played really new music. For me, her music was a meeting between those two things.”

Born in the same year, Moore and Lankhoorn have developed and matured in parallel and collaborated on a wide range of projects. Moore feels that Lankhoorn is the perfect exponent of her music for this first disc devoted to her piano works, “like my ‘piano sister’ – or cousin”, she says with a laugh.



It's impossible to listen to this music – even though it is so human, organic, ballabile – and not wonder about the enormous technical demands it makes of the performer. Saskia Lankhoorn insists that, even though some of the pieces at first struck her as being almost unplayable, once their technical challenges have been mastered (though many of them remain unmemorable), “then the music comes alive, the music is there already. You don't have to add anything. Just as overtones sing when you play a piano, these pieces start singing when the piano sounds right.”

As a performer, Lankhoorn feels that there is something almost paradoxical in Moore's music that allows the pianist to go beyond the notion of the dogmatic score in which everything is precisely notated: “With her music I feel that, although there are a lot of rules, they are so clear that for the performer there is a great deal of freedom behind them.” This sense of freedom remains, even in the environment of the recording studio: “It felt like being able to breathe under water, the feeling of moving and being totally free. I had music in my mind and it could just flow through the instrument into space.”

The pieces on this CD span over a decade of Moore's development as a composer, from *Stories for Ocean Shells* (2000) to *Canon*, the ink on which was metaphorically still wet when composer and performer went into the studio in Lugano with ECM producer Manfred Eicher.

If the programme on the CD describes an arch, the springers where that arch begins and ends are provided by *Spin Bird*, a piece that originated in Moore's cycle of Walt Whitman settings, *The Open Road* (2008). The decision to feature two versions of this piece on the disc arose



spontaneously in the studio: one welcoming and introductory and the other more dreamy, retrospective and valedictory. "Saskia had this wonderful way of playing *Spin Bird*", Moore recalls, "where she brought out the notes in crystalline way. You can hear the notes come out in three-dimensional way which is like a crystal [track 8]. But then the other way she played it was warm and organic, which really sounded like a spinning bird, spinning from the sky to the ground [track 1]. The piece was about that, but the crystalline structure's there as well, so we wanted to keep both."

*Stories for Ocean Shells* was originally written for cello ensemble and later arranged for the piano. It was inspired by Moore's first visit to Thailand, a trip which left a deep impression on her. There she befriended a young girl who told the composer that her name translated as "ocean shells". During her travels, Moore also visited hill tribes in the north of the country and it was her encounter with the women of these tribes which gave her the idea for this piece. The beautiful examples of tribal weaving she saw, made of silks in distinctive, intricately patterned geometry, brought musical shapes to her mind, the loom like manuscript paper and the differently coloured silks like notes.

*The Body is An Ear* (2011) has its origins in Moore's reading of Hazrat Inayat Khan, whose words, she instantly felt, "sounded like gold". One story in Khan in particular captured Moore's imagination: There is an Eastern legend that has come from centuries ago that, when God made man out of clay and asked the soul to enter, the soul refused to enter into this prison house. Then God commanded the angels to sing, and as the angels sang the soul entered, intoxicated by the song.



The most recent piece on the disc, *Canon*, is part of an ongoing exploration of the different character of cadences that has fascinated Moore for several years: "I've plotted charts of different combinations and *Canon* is one of them. So the music that comes out is the result of this very pure musical, theoretical idea. Different progressions of chords have different emotional impacts, even though they are just notes. It's about the question of tempo and perceiving time and the way a performer translates and interprets the structuring of time over the piece." A click track anchored the first beat of the bar, but left Lankhoorn free to shape the music within that, producing a wonderfully dancing lilt as the pattern of subdivisions shifts.

Reflecting on it later, Lankhoorn was very glad that *Canon* made it into the set: "I think it's very good if some pieces are really fresh. It felt very natural to be so flexible... In some sense that approach really captures the feeling of the whole CD and the process of making it, of being flexible and open. *Canon* has an energy which is very positive. We actually changed its tempo in the studio; it was much faster originally, but it didn't feel like a dance. And then suddenly I felt this dance in the tempo. When we chose a slower tempo, the dance came out and it felt very organic."

Set between much larger-scale pieces, *Zomer* has a feeling of mid-summer stillness about it that evokes affinities with the sound world of *Música Callada* by the Catalan composer Federico Mompou.

*Joy*, written in 2003 for pianist Joy Lee, seems to explore the tension between the ostensible promise of the title and content, which ventures into darker expressive domains. In the demanding polyrhythmic section



in the middle, Lankhoorn says she must trust her hands to get on with the task since over-thinking it would lead to disaster. The piece is characterised by insistent clashes, abrupt shifts in rhythmic pattern, and a sense of urgency as it ascends to the highest region of the keyboard, as though its energy can only dissipate by climbing ever upwards. A final section in muted tones explores the expressive effects of adjacent notes in a quasi-Bartókian wandering.

In *Sensitive Spot*, written for “multiple pianos”, the pianist records the same piece over and over, trying to replicate her performance as exactly as possible. All the recordings are then layered together to produce a rippling, pointillist sound world. In concert performances, the performer plays the piece surrounded by eight speakers, which simultaneously reproduce her earlier renditions. Moore explains that her aim was to create a “human sense of delays” in contrast to a mathematically precise electronic reverb. Repeating a past performance perfectly is, of course, impossible, no matter how skilled the performer. Human tempo is always changing and the resultant layered recording produces shimmering sheets of sound that vibrates with the iridescence of hummingbird wings.

At the end of our conversation, I ask Moore to sum up the effect she wants her music to have on the listener. “When I listen to music”, she says, “I want to enter a state of total transcendence where you leave everything else behind and go completely into another, abstract world. That’s my aim, that’s how I want to reach people, to create a place that takes you somewhere else.”

George Miller















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