



ALWYNNE PRITCHARD

Rockaby

The Norwegian Naval Forces' Band

ensemble recherche

SWR Experimentalstudio

BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra

**KAIROS**  
1999 20 YEARS 2019



## **ALWYNNE PRITCHARD** (\*1968)

<b>1</b>	<b>Loser (2014)</b>	<b>09:28</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>March, March, March (2013)</b>	<b>05:41</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Decoy (2004)</b>	<b>19:03</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Rockaby (2016)</b>	<b>11:57</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Graffiti (2006)</b>	<b>13:49</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Glorvina (2012)</b>	<b>03:20</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Irene Electric (2013)</b>	<b>13:03</b>

**TT 76:00**

- 1 Klaus Steffes-Holländer, piano / voice / objects
- 2 The Norwegian Naval Forces' Band  
Bjarte Engeset, conductor
- 3 ensemble recherche  
SWR Experimentalstudio
- 4 Alwynne Pritchard, voice / movement  
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra  
Ilan Volkov, conductor
- 5 Christian Dierstein, percussion  
SWR Experimentalstudio
- 6 SWR Experimentalstudio
- 7 Victoria Johnson, violin  
Thorolf Thuestad, electronics  
Children from the Philippine High School for the Arts, voices





## Gun on the Table

A telling moment comes about two minutes into Alwynne Pritchard's *Loser*, for piano, voice and objects. A cluster of keys is silently depressed, the piano's hammers lifting to let the strings resonate sympathetically. A small bag of sand is used to hold them in place. The bag is open, we notice, as it perches precariously on the keyboard's edge. We can feel its weight, a ball of potential energy, over which the pianist's hands continue to play.

Suddenly, the spell is broken. With a swipe of the hand, the pianist casts the bag onto the ground. It lands with a squelching thud, its contents spilling across the floor. One

thing follows another (the swipe and the thud), joined by a physical force (gravity). More things follow, and somehow, they must be related too. The pianist coughs five times (should we read this as embarrassment?) before launching, unexpectedly, into a de-ranked and dissonant riff that vaults across the entire keyboard.

**Alwynne Pritchard:** *I like that you notice these things. Actually, I've revised the score so you don't see the bag: the piece should now be performed behind a curtain so only the pianist's ankles are visible. You use the word embarrassment, and I think partly concealing the pianist, like a bather in a changing room, adds to this mood; something is being partly concealed from the public but of course it is also being partly exposed. There's something funny and sad about that. Naked ankles are funny and sad in themselves!*

Connections and contradictions, empirical and esoteric, run throughout Pritchard's music. Decoy, for ensemble and electronics, derives its form and rhythmic structure from a six-by-six magic square (using the numbers 1 to 36). This act of pragmatic translation has roots in another, more mystical one, since the square is identical with that

devised by the sixteenth-century occultist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa to represent the Sun. Another kind of translation takes place in *Graffiti* for percussion and electronics: the sounds of drums are transformed into those of gongs. The drums are played through a loudspeaker set-up whose soundwaves activate two large gongs and a tam-tam; these sounds in turn are transformed through contact mics and live electronics.

**AP:** *I have a need for extreme order in everything I do. So these very organised things that I set up are a way to escape that. They're like booby traps, or they're like the box and I'm the jack coming out of the box. The early pieces are only the box, I think, and now I make these structures that I can then burst out of or I can have the performers burst out of; it's full of unpredictable energy, it's funny, but still there are these contradictory forces and this obsessive need to control. ... I think already in Graffiti it's using the electronics to break out of the extreme order of the percussion part. It's that first cry for freedom.*

In *Loser* the pianist speaks short extracts from Thomas Bernhard's 1983 novel *Der Untergeher*, in which a youthful encounter between two piano students (Bernhard's narrator and his friend Wertheimer)

and Glenn Gould in 1953 launches the students into self-destructive spirals of inadequacy and anxiety. There are Gouldisms in Pritchard's score: it concludes with a desiccated reworking of Bach's Goldberg Variation no. 30 (the piece Gould played at that fictional meeting). Gould's devotion to technology is ironically represented, in the form of a karaoke machine and a noisily skipping CD. And, of course, the pianist is asked to whistle. Wertheimer's travails (it is he who Gould names "the loser", and who eventually takes his own life) are conveyed in the cries, coughs and strangled expression of the vocal part, the bag of sand knocked angrily to the floor, perhaps even the comically inadequate sound of a small, battery-powered milk frother attempting to play along with the real Bach at the end.

Writings by others inform several of the works on this disc: not only *Loser*, but also *Rockaby* (after Samuel Beckett's play) and *Glorvina* (after a novel by the early nineteenth-century Irish author Sydney, Lady Morgan). Yet although Pritchard's works frequently echo aspects of them, in no sense are they depictions: her sources serve more to activate a field of thematic possibilities than to circumscribe a palette of ideas and images.



*Rockaby* is perhaps the most complex work here. Written for orchestra and vocal performer it also calls for two foley artists and a prominent (although not virtuoso) pianist. In addition, the vocal performer is required to wear an elaborate, custom-made costume – equal parts geisha, crazed steam-punk inventor and military commander – that is transformed throughout the course of the piece by way of zips, hidden panels and velcro strips. The resulting work is therefore a rich mix of words, music, sound effects, dance and textile art, with all the sensual depth and polyphony that this implies.

**Tim Rutherford-Johnson:** *What you're doing with the curtain in Loser is almost an inversion of the foley idea in Rockaby. Foley is about using things that sound like something else, and in Rockaby you're actually showing what's going on, breaking bits of celery and so on.*

**AP:** *Yes. Just to clarify, celery is used by foley artists to create the sound effect of a nose being broken, of bone being crushed. I expanded these kinds of conventional foley effects with, for example, the sound of scraping metal, to build a sort of hybrid sound effect palette for my costume as it moves. And everything the live foley artists are doing is*

*visible to the audience. But I'm wondering if that should be the case in future. Maybe I will also hang a curtain in front of them, so that only the top of their heads and a strip lower down is visible, revealing some hint – nothing more – of what they're doing, the objects they're using. It could be more intriguing, less demonstrative that way. I don't know. Very often with my pieces I feel as though there are a number of alternative possibilities. Certainly, with pieces where there are these processes that are theatrical, let's say. They can be directed differently each time.*

The choice of Beckett's *Rockaby* is suggestive: the playwright's image of a dying woman in her rocking chair offers another collision between human being and gravity. Pritchard's vocal text is not taken from Beckett, however, but is made up of fragments assembled from readings of Cervantes, Moshé Feldenkrais (founder of the Feldenkrais Method for increasing self-awareness through movement) and the psychologist Daniel Stern (author of *Forms of Vitality*). Beckett's text, meanwhile, is translated into the piano part, using a simple cryptographic technique in which each new word is assigned to the next note down on the chromatic scale, starting with the fourth A above middle C (the play's first word: "More") and

reaching its lowest point seventy semitones down the scale at the word “somewhere”. (In fact, Beckett’s play contains 108 different words, more than the piano’s keyboard could accommodate, but Pritchard avoids this problem by not setting its fourth and final scene.)

**TR-J:** *Was part of the appeal of the Beckett text this in-built clock-ness?*

**AP:** *Absolutely. Also, reading it I thought you could do a very simple note-by-note transcription of this and it would be very effective but much longer. If I hadn’t been told that my piece was longer than it had to be, I would have set the final scene. It was really pragmatic.*

**TR-J:** *I counted them up – you would have run out of notes!*

**AP:** *I think I could have found a way around going off the bottom of the piano. There would probably have been a way.*

A similar act of translation takes place in *Glorvina*. This short electronic piece was composed as part of a London “Music Walk” that marked John Cage’s centenary in 2012. Once again, words, music and vi-

suals are brought together and interrelated. The work’s rhythms, pitches and text are all derived from the preface to *St Claire*; or, *The Heiress of Desmond*, by the early nineteenth-century Irish author Sydney, Lady Morgan (who was nicknamed *Glorvina* after the heroine of her most famous book, *The Wild Irish Girl*), and the piece was written to be listened to in front of her bust, which is held in London’s Victoria and Albert Museum.

Returning to *Rockaby*: Beckett’s recursive, repetition-laden script echoes the rock back and forth of the old woman’s chair. The piano part of Pritchard’s piece drains that text of linguistic content but highlights its internal patterns. Against this relatively regular framework Pritchard’s performance is angry, even vengeful (“The demands of your ambition/ ... And it shall be so revered by my own/ My will/ To you/ Submissively I mould”) – a great contrast to the existential resignation of Beckett’s woman (“till in the end/the day came/in the end came/close of a long day”). Again, we are invited to make a connection: is this the other half of the woman’s story? The part that Beckett chose not to show us, but that might be hidden behind the shocking “fuck life” (words 107 and 108) at the very end of his play?

**TR-J:** *Texts haunt many of the works on this disc. At one stage wasn't there also going to be a vocal part to March, March, March as well?*

**AP:** *March, March, March was originally composed as it's presented here - for navy band alone. But since writing it, I've imagined a vocal part (with an American accent), part spoken, part sprechgesang, somewhere between a crazed (but very suppressed) political rant and a teenager gossiping on the telephone. Think Donald Trump meets Janice from Friends meets Sergeant Hartman from Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket" meets Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire! And Frank Zappa is in on this conversation in my head too. We had a recording session and I made several versions, intending to present the piece with vocal part here, but somehow, I couldn't make it work. I'd still like to try it in live performance, but for this recording I invite listeners to contribute their own theatre of voices (imagined or out loud - it's up to you!).*

At the heart of *Irene Electric*, for violin and tape, are not so much texts and language, although these also figure prominently, but the piece's origin in two particular and very different locales. Pritchard began work in 2011

in New York City. This was the summer of hurricane Irene. Pritchard's apartment was in a designated Red (ie danger) Zone: she describes being paralysed with fear by the hype and anxiety and electricity in the air. A year later she was in a wooden hut in a Philippine rainforest, undertaking a residency at the Philippine High School for the Arts. Under conditions of extreme heat and humidity life here had adapted to the inevitability of change and decay. Inspired by the "unique lyricism" she heard in the voices of the students with whom she was working, she compiled a tape part from their words that captured both the grounded organicism of the Philippines and the tension of New York.

The work is structured in two parts. The first establishes the dramatic tension. The violinist sits with her back to the audience. Another chair faces the front. An unlit candle stands on either side. The situation is one of yet to be realised potential. (A loudspeaker is placed behind a tam-tam. A performer is wrapped within a costume of zips and velcro. An open bag of sand rests on a piano keyboard.)

Theatre is, like translation, an art of connection-making, between text and performance, between performance and audience,

between this moment and that, between a desire inspired in the audience and its resolution. If there is a gun on the table in Act 1, wisdom has it, someone has to fire it in Act 5. In the second half of *Irene Electric* (tam-tam rings sympathetically, cloth falls away, bag drops to the floor) the violinist comes to the front of the stage, lights the two candles and sits in the second chair, the violin resting on her knee.

In many ways it is a simple gesture, theatre reduced almost to the banal (although Beckett would probably disagree). Yet it speaks to Pritchard's fascination with connecting things that is the source of her music's dramatic potency. Neither Hurricane Irene nor the Philippine rainforest are depicted overtly, but elements of both are present. In the first section of the piece, the taut, breathless violin sound coupled with the statements made by the Philippine students (they simply announce their names and the cities in which they were born) captures the physical, cognitive and psychological tension, the stasis (like a kind of static electrical hum) that was Pritchard's experience of the storm in New York City. By comparison, in the second section, dream and fantasy texts are intertwined as the tuning pegs of the violin are gradually released. Like Pritchard's experience of the

humid and stormy weather in the Philippines, all sounds, texts and materials here yield to motion, decay and transformation.

**AP:** *I want to hear the process of investigation. This dynamic of exploration, of investigating how to get out of something, or how to let go of something for a moment - where do you go, how do you reassess, how do you rebuild ... All of that, I like that. For me that's music.*

This text combines notes by  
Tim Rutherford-Johnson,  
written in February 2018, and  
transcriptions from a conversation  
around those notes with  
Alwynne Pritchard, recorded in  
March 2018



Dress: Kira Massara

## ALWYNNE PRITCHARD

Alwynne Pritchard is a British composer, vocalist and performer whose work explores relationships between musical expression and the human voice and body. She has appeared as an actor, vocalist and physical performer in stage productions, as well as directing and developing choreography for her work. In 2015, she formed the music-theatre company Neither Nor with Thorolf Thuestad.

As a teenager, Alwynne's first composition teacher was her father, Gwyn Pritchard. She then went on to study composition with Robert Saxton at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and with Melanie Daiken, Justin Connolly and Michael Finnissy at the Royal Academy of Music in London. Her PhD at the University of Bristol, which she diverted midway from musicology (looking at the music of Brian Ferneyhough) to composition, was supervised by Professor Jonathan Cross. While at the Academy, Alwynne also studied voice privately with mezzo-soprano Linda Hirst.

Alwynne has composed for, and performed with, leading musicians and ensembles across the globe. Her work *Decoy*, created

at the SWR Experimentalstudio in Freiburg in 2006, for the Donaueschingen Musiktage, was awarded the special prize given by the Foundation Ton Bruynèl, STEIM and the Foundation GAUDEAMUS. In 2016, she was awarded the commission to create a fanfare or "marker" to celebrate the opening of Snøhetta's building for the University of Bergen's newly created Department of Art, Music and Design, for which she created the book of text scores, *up without an insistent casting away*.

As a performer, projects include her own *Vitality Forms* solo vocal/physical pieces and the ongoing series of *DOG/GOD* commissions, launched at the Bergen International Festival in 2015 with works created for her by, among others, Vinko Globokar, Helmut Oehring, Gerhard Stäbler, Trond Reinholdtsen, François Sarhan and Felix Kubin. Alwynne also performs frequently as an improviser. Her professional life has included stints as a writer and presenter for BBC Radio, a composition teacher at Trinity College of Music in London and as Artistic Director of both the Borealis festival and BIT20 Ensemble in Bergen, Norway.

Alwynne is managed by Maestro Arts, and her music is published by Verlag Neue Musik.

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[3] Gewerbliche Schulen, Donaueschingen/Germany,  
[4] City Halls, Glasgow/UK,  
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# ALWYNNE PRITCHARD (\*1968)

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2	March, March, March	05:41
3	Decoy	19:03
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5	Graffiti	13:49
6	Glorvina	03:20
7	Irene Electric	13:03
		TT 76:00



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|---|---|---|---|
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