

SOUVENIR PROGRAMME

MATTHEW GEE'S
AMAZING
SLIDING
CIRCUS!

RINGMASTER MATTHEW GEE

LION TAMER

CHRISTOPHER GLYNN

CHIEF CLOWN

MATTHEW KNIGHT

AUDIO VENTRILOQUIST

JIM UNWIN

FEATURING THE FREAKS, FORTUNE TELLERS & FIRE EATERS OF
THE ROYAL PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

SCENERY BY MARTYN KING

Where my first release, *Paradiso e inferno*, sought to challenge the trombone's buffoonish stereotype, this second solo album, **Matthew Gee's Amazing Sliding Circus**, seeks to embrace it.

The trombone's ability to produce raucous glissandos has naturally drawn composers to focus on the instrument's comic potential – its undeniable clownishness. Of course, those with a deeper understanding of the instrument, such as the composers and arranger represented on this disc, also exploit the trombone's vast array of colours, and its capacity for nuance and beauty.

The tension between beauty and profundity on the one hand, and comedy and clownishness on the other mimics an ambivalence which exists in the art of clowning itself: the 'tragic clown', smiling on the outside whilst crying within. This disc embraces those contrasts embodied in the clown identity through a broad range of repertoire – pieces by established masters as well as brand new commissions – brought together under the cover of the Big Top.

Overture and Introduction

Simon Vincent's evocative and atmospheric overture **A Most Grand and Marvellous Spectacle** sets the scene. The raw material for this electro-acoustic miniature was recorded one afternoon whilst indulging in a little 'tromfoolery' with a multitude of mutes, and is the perfect preface to the curtain raiser, Karl King's **The Melody Shop**. In its original form for wind band, this classic screamer march is well known for its fiendish Euphonium part. An intriguing parallel with clowning springs to mind here, when, during Federico Fellini's wonderful mockumentary *I Clowns*, a retired clown turns to Fellini and says "*Do you know how hard it is to slap someone?*" His exasperation at the public's inability to appreciate the skills needed for his profession go hand-in-hand with musical virtuosity. For the purpose of this disc it was superbly arranged for trombone quartet by Matthew Knight, who insisted that I perform all the parts, multi-tracked with the help of a click track. Having studied hard with the RPO's Professor Major Gerald Kirby, and after slaving away in a practice room for literally minutes, I became proficient enough to accompany myself on bass drum, cymbals and wood-block.

Act I - Pulcinella

This disc mainly showcases the versatility of the trombone with various chamber ensembles. Stravinsky's **Pulcinella** is seemingly an exception being with piano, but Daniel-Benn Pienaar's clever arrangement of Stravinsky's 1922 Suite for chamber orchestra allows the many layers, colours and textures of the original to dance between the piano and trombone. The character Pulcinella evolved from the first form of professional theatre – the *commedia dell'arte* movement of 16th-century Italy. Many of the characters continue to be well known today. They usually represent fixed social types, especially those foolish and full of bravado, and alongside Pulcinella include famous names such as Punch and Judy, Colombina and the sad clown Pierrot. Traditionally Pulcinella is either stupid pretending to be clever, or clever pretending to be stupid, and often provides a source of comedy to the story. This duality is key to his character and references the aforementioned ambivalence we find in many clown characters. It is often considered to be the first piece of Stravinsky's second compositional phase, his neoclassical period; the music was contemporaneously attributed to Giovanni Pergolesi – this is more than likely false.

The movement in which we hear Stravinsky's original writing for the trombone, is the Vivo. Here Pulcinella's foolishness is evoked through some highly idiomatic and comic gestures, leaving no-one in doubt as to what Stravinsky thought of the trombone.

Interval

The entertainment continues through the interval, with **Mrs. Nisbett's Particular Lament** – another miniature from Simon Vincent's curiosity pit of electro-acoustic delight. A famous 19th-century comedienne, Mrs. Nisbett was equally celebrated for her striking beauty. These somewhat etherial, uncertain wanderings set an intriguing atmosphere for Act II, and focuses the spotlight firmly on what for many epitomises the circus: Clowns.

Act II - Grock, Desirée and Fischietto

Despite being composed over 50 years ago, Berio's masterpiece **Sequenza V** still provokes a stronger reaction than almost any other piece in the trombone repertoire. Dedicated to the memory of Berio's neighbour Karl Adrien Wettach (aka Grock the Clown) the piece draws on the subtle, yet perfectly planned gestures, which according to Pat Cashin, once made Grock the highest paid entertainer in the world! Although recording such a visual piece on an audio CD comes with certain problems, it is important to explore how one of the greatest 20th-century composers created and associated a completely unique sound-world with the instrument. Much of the piece is written polyphonically with the performer singing whilst playing, and so I have allowed the piece space through which to explore the spectral nature of the music, and focus on the interaction between the two parts and their resulting colours.

The idea of the 'tragic clown' is embraced through Stephen Sondheim's **Send in the Clowns**, a ballad from the 1973 musical *A Little Night Music*. Clowns at the circus have a dual purpose – comedic, but also functional, covering the circus scene changes. And so, set to suitably melancholic music, Desirée reflects on the ironies and disappointments of her life *"if the show isn't going well, let's send in the clowns"*.

Fellini's film *I Clowns* was an important influence on the concept for this disc, and so it is fitting that Gary Carpenter's new work **Fischietto è morto** takes as its departure point the mock funeral scene towards the end of the film. This is *"performed by a troupe of largely veteran clowns that becomes ever more anarchic... [thereafter] the Fellini connection becomes metaphorical and philosophical rather than descriptive."* Gary goes on to say that a clown's make-up both keeps the revulsion of the audience at a distance while also giving them permission to laugh, and *"is represented by occasional flat, raw statements of complete twelve-tone rows in their various forms.... The traditional role of the trombone as joker/clown is absorbed by the occasional intervention of aural slapstick interwoven with the odd moment of maudlin self-pity mitigated (I hope!) by a pervasive lyricism and showman-like virtuosity."*

A quote from a Scarlatti sonata just before the Corteo Funebre signals the one direct emotional link with loss – and that is offset by the trombone's self-mockery: *"Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world."* (Samuel Beckett) For Gary's full programme note on the piece, please visit www.matthewgee.info

Act III - Keeley and Canio

The third part of the show concerns the entire circus troupe. As Rob Keeley explains, his work **Circus Games** *"was written above all as a fun piece...I imagine the trombone as a circus ringleader, and the wind, piano and vibraphone as members of a circus troupe. Like much of my recent work, the piece is relatively short in duration, but tight and concentrated in its invention, reflecting my view that any language, even a relatively complex one such as I use, can be used in an entertaining and communicative manner."*

The commedia troupe is also behind the action in Leoncavallo's 1892 opera *Pagliacci*. Supposedly based on an incident from his childhood involving the murder of one of their servants, *Pagliacci* tells a story full of romantic entanglement and affairs. The plot is complex, essentially because it is a *mise en abîme*, with the audience left questioning what is real and what is not. The beautiful **Intermezzo** from the beginning of the second act now preludes the great aria **Vesti la giubba** (Put on the costume), in which Canio, having discovered his wife's infidelity, must go and prepare for his performance as *Pagliacci* regardless. In his arrangement for strings and wind, Matthew Knight chose some of the most musically rich parts of the opera, which both embrace the concept behind the disc and also showcase the trombone at its most sparkingly lyrical. The work is brought to conclusion as in the opera, with the famous utterance "*la commedia è finita*" (*the comedy is finished!*), a poignant point at which to present Simon Vincent's final miniature.

Finale - Coulrobonia

Coulrophobia – the irrational fear of clowns – draws the final parallel between these two art forms.

Coulrobonia [kool-rub-bohn-ee-uh] noun

1. the working title of this disc
2. the irrational fear of trombone playing clowns

Origin: coulro - from Greek for stilt walker, hence - clown + phobia + bon, from 'bone (trombone)

Simon Vincent's finale, **The Triumphant Coulrobonia**, addresses a seemingly perennial condition affecting much of the classical music world, by referencing perhaps the most well-known piece in the trombone's repertoire - J A Greenwood's "The Acrobat". This is not the first time the piece has been quoted on the disc (it also makes an appearance in *Fischietto è morto*), further demonstrating how firmly it is tied to the instrument's stereotype.

After listening to the disc, I hope you will agree that this fear is now misplaced. This disc and its accompanying recital is designed to expand audience's listening tastes, to join with contemporary opinion and celebrate the comic side of the trombone, but to show that when you deconstruct the instrument there is in fact a deeply artistic and expressive musical medium beneath. In the same way that clowning necessitates great artistry and *"holds a mirror up to the human condition"* (Fellini), so does the trombone, and - unlike almost any other art form - they do so with humour.

Matthew Gee, Matthew Knight

PERFORMERS

Tenor Trombone, Bass Trombone, Bass Drum, Cymbals, Woodblock

MATTHEW GEE

Piano

CHRISTOPHER GLYNN

Violin I

SULKI YU*, SHANA DOUGLAS*, JOANA VALENTINAVICIUTE

Violin II

ANNA SMITH, CHARLOTTE ANSBERGS, MANUEL PORTA

Viola

ABIGAIL FENNA*, LIZ VARLOW

Cello

JONATHAN AYLING*

Double Bass

CHRIS WEST*

Flute

EMER MCDONOUGH

Clarinets

KATHERINE LACY, EMILY MEREDITH

Bass Clarinet

KATY AYLING

French Horn

LAURENCE DAVIES

Vibraphone

GERALD KIRBY

Mandolin

NIGEL WOODHOUSE*

* Players who recorded Gary Carpenter's *Fischietto è morto*.

AMAZING SLIDING CIRCUS

OVERTURE & INTRODUCTION

1. A Most Grand and Marvellous Spectacle - **Simon Vincent** (1.32)
 2. The Melody Shop - **Karl King** arranged by Matthew Knight (2.38)
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ACT I - PULCINELLA

- Pulcinella - **Igor Stravinsky** arr. Daniel-Ben Pienaar
3. Sinfonia (Overture) (1.57)
 4. Serenata (2.56)
 5. Scherzino (4.36)
 6. Tarantella (2.31)
 7. Toccata (1.01)
 8. Gavotta con due variazioni (3.47)
 9. Vivo (1.53)
 10. Minuetto-Finale (4.31)
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INTERVAL

11. Mrs. Nisbett's Particular Lament - **Simon Vincent** (1.10)
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ACT II - GROCK, DESIRÉE & FISCHIETTO

12. Sequenza V - **Luciano Berio** (9.54)
 13. Send in the Clowns - **Stephen Sondheim** arranged by Matthew Knight (3.15)
 14. Fischietto è morto - composed and conducted by **Gary Carpenter** (15.07)
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ACT III - KEELEY & CANIO

15. Circus Games - composed and conducted by **Rob Keeley** (11.19)
- Pagliacci - **Ruggero Leoncavallo** arranged and conducted by Matthew Knight
16. Intermezzo (3.17)
 17. Vesti la giubba (3.42)
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FINALE - COULROBONIA

18. The Triumphal Coulrobonia **Simon Vincent** (0.52)
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