



Mark Shelby Perry

23|24 SEASON

 UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

presents

**AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY  
MUSIC ENSEMBLE**

**CLARICE JENSEN**, artistic director and cello

*The Chamber Music of Jóhann Jóhannsson*

FRI, FEB 9, 7:30 pm

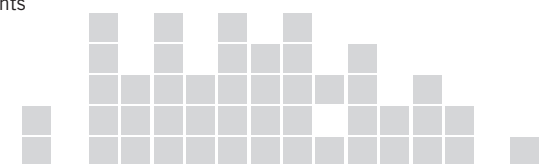
Ramsey Concert Hall

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## PROGRAM

### **JÓHANN JÓHANSSON** (1969-2018)

Odi et amo

### **JÓHANSSON**

Corpus Camera

### **JÓHANSSON**

Ég heyrði allt án þess að hlusta

### **JÓHANSSON**

Englabörn

### **JÓHANSSON**

Sálfræðingur

### **JÓHANSSON**

Fordlandia

### **JÓHANSSON**

IBM 1

### **CLARICE JENSEN & JÓHANN JÓHANSSON**

BC

### **JÓHANSSON**

Flight from the City

Following the concert, the artists will engage in a question and answer session with the audience.

Program is subject to change.

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Steve Smith

“I think my music is a way of communicating very directly with people and with people’s emotions,” the Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson said of his work in a 2015 conversation recorded for The Talks, an online interview series sponsored by Rolex. “I try to make music that doesn’t need layers of complexity or obfuscation to speak to people. Music should resonate with people on an emotional level.”

Until his untimely death in 2018 at age 48, Jóhannsson made art that lived up to that credo. For cellist Clarice Jensen, who founded the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME) in 2004, the emotional resonance in Jóhannsson’s music is what makes it so satisfying to play—and so challenging, as well. During ACME’s early years, the Juilliard-trained musician and her colleagues embraced a broad range of styles, playing works by uncompromising modernist Elliott Carter, experimental maverick John Cage, and groundbreaking minimalist Steve Reich alongside newly composed pieces.

In 2009, ACME was engaged to present Jóhannsson’s music in collaboration with the composer, who had only recently begun to present his concert works live. The ensemble had toured previously with the ambient-music group Stars of the Lid, one of whose founders, Adam Wiltzie, was road-managing Jóhannsson’s debut U.S. tour.

ACME would supply the strings; the composer brought along a percussionist, Matthias Hemstock, and fleshed out

his beautifully spare textures and timbres with piano and electronics. *The New York Times* praised the fledgling collaboration: “The concert was Mr. Jóhannsson’s first in New York, and in ACME he had flexible collaborators who understand (and individually dabble in) the stylistic alchemy that underpins his work.”

Common ground between contemporary chamber music and ambient music spheres has become commonplace, with artists like Brian Eno, Max Richter, and Balmorhea now rubbing elbows on the prestigious Deutsche Grammophon label. Back then, though, the intersection was new. For Jensen, discovering Jóhannsson’s music was revelatory.

“On a surface level, it’s just very beautiful, it’s not pretentious, and it’s straight from the heart,” Jensen says. “It asks a lot of the players, without giving them a lot to do in terms of worrying about super-complicated rhythms.” The simplicity of Jóhannsson’s writing, she asserts, presents its own kind of technical challenge: as in the slow movement of a Beethoven quartet, stitching a slow sequence of half and whole notes into an elegiac meditation demands focus, poise, and commitment.

“You can’t just show up; you have to really open your heart,” Jensen says. “On tour, that can be hard to do several nights in a row, or if you’re really tired. But even if we had a crappy sound check, people were grouchy, and the backstage food was terrible, somehow it never went away—every time there was an opportunity to play, we were just right there.”

Touring like a rock band was new for Jensen, but not to Jóhannsson,

who'd cut his artistic teeth in a series of Reykjavík-based indie-rock bands during the late 1980s. In 1999 he co-founded a multimedia art collective and record label, Kitchen Motors, and established the Apparat Organ Quartet, which transformed his fascination with Steve Reich—specifically the 1970 piece *Four Organs*—into playful grooves suited to the dance floor.

Jóhannsson's growing interest in contemporary concert music and the electronic avant-garde, combined with his extensive D.I.Y. experience, came to early fruition on his debut solo album, *Englabörn*, issued in 2002 on the influential sound-art label Touch. (Deutsche Grammophon issued an expanded version of the album, *Englabörn & Variations*, in 2018.)

Adapting music he originally composed for a theater production, Jóhannsson recorded a string quartet and percussionist, and then digitally processed their sounds. Responding to Jóhannsson's complex web of influences and sounds, a reviewer for Pitchfork cited the spirits of composer Morton Feldman, art-music rebel Moondog, and the Radiohead album *Kid A*.

*Englabörn* set the stage for much of what would develop in Jóhannsson's distinguished career, both as a touring performer and increasingly as an in-demand composer of film scores. Small wonder, then, that music from that album—"Odi et amo," "Ég heyrði allt án þess að hlusta," the title track, and "Sálfræðingur"—comprises nearly half of ACME's present concert program, which Jensen initially assembled for a concert honoring Jóhannsson's memory just months after his passing.

The rest of the bill spans Jóhannsson's life and work. "Corpus Camera," the

earliest piece on the program, comes from a 1999 score for an Icelandic television series. "Fordlândia" comes from Jóhannsson's 2008 solo album of the same title, released on the internationally influential indie-pop label 4AD.

Jóhannsson's connection with 4AD had begun with one of his deepest, most multilayered creations: *IBM 1401, A User's Manual*, a 2006 concept album, which opened with "Part 1/IBM 1401 Processing Unit." The album paid homage to IBM's first mass-produced computer, introduced in 1959 and withdrawn from service in 1971. It also honored Jóhannsson's father, an Icelandic engineer, who had programmed an IBM 1401 to play music. Ruminating on progress, obsolescence, and loss, Jóhannsson incorporated into his piece a melody his father had taught the computer to play.

Jensen understandably feels especially close to *BC*, a piece she created jointly with Jóhannsson and included on her first solo album, *For This from That Will Be Filled*, which was issued just two months after the composer's death in 2018. Working together in the studio, the pair had fused Jóhannsson's notion of a piece involving tape loops, which would slow down without altering in pitch, with melodic and harmonic material Jensen provided. Rather than glossing over little warbles in the tapes, Jensen left them exposed, giving her plaintive soliloquy an uncannily handmade aspect.

One last work on the ACME program, "Flight from the City," attests to the close-knit relationship that developed during a decade of collaboration between Jóhannsson and ACME, who played on the album from which it came, *Orphée*. Issued by Deutsche



Jóhann Jóhannsson  
(1969–2018)

Grammophon in 2016, the album found the composer at the height of his expressive powers, in the wake of his widely acclaimed scores for *The Theory of Everything* (2014) and *Sicario* (2015), and *Drone Mass*, a potent oratorio ACME performed with Jóhannsson in 2015, and then recorded and performed on tour after his death.

An imaginary soundtrack itself, in a sense, *Orphée* was partly inspired by the ancient Greek myth of the dauntless musician who descended into hell in the name of love—and, as the title suggests, by Jean Cocteau's dreamy 1950 film of the same title. The album contains some of the composer's richest, most penetrating music.

In the wake of Jóhannsson's passing, it now falls to close collaborators like ACME to keep his music in front of audiences, and his questing spirit alive. New players have joined the group since that formative road trip, but the arrangements still suit these players as if composed just for them. Jensen—who splits her time between cello and piano in this program—is increasingly in demand as a composer herself, writing concert works and scores for film and TV: a process that had begun in earnest with an original

piece that appeared alongside Jóhannsson's on *For This from That Will Be Filled*.

Her drive to grow and reinvent herself echoes Jóhannsson's own view of the myriad creative paths he pursued during an all-too-brief career. "For me, this kind of restlessness keeps things fresh and keeps me engaged and excited about what I'm doing," he said in his interview with *The Talks*. "I don't like to do the same thing twice really, and I like to challenge myself with every project."

Success comes more reliably, he wryly observed, when you find what you're good at, and then keep doing it again and again. "But I'm not really interested in that," he said. "I'm interested in expanding my language as an artist and as a composer. And I try to expand it with every project."

*Steve Smith is a journalist, critic, and editor based in New York City. He has written about music for The New York Times and The New Yorker, among many other outlets, and served as an editor for the Boston Globe, Time Out New York, and NPR.*

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

### AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC ENSEMBLE

Since 2004, led by cellist and artistic director Clarice Jensen, the American Contemporary Music Ensemble (ACME) has risen to the highest ranks of American new music through a mix of meticulous musicianship, artistic vision, engaging collaborations, and unwavering standards in every regard. The membership of the amorphous collective includes some of the brightest stars in the field. *NPR* calls them “contemporary music dynamos,” and *Strings* reports, “ACME’s absorbing playing pulsed with warm energy . . . Shared glances and inhales triggered transitions in a flow so seamless it seemed learned in a Jedi temple.” ACME was honored by ASCAP during its 10th anniversary season in 2015 for the “virtuosity, passion, and commitment with which it performs and champions American composers.”

The ensemble has performed at leading international venues including Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, BAM, The Kennedy Center, Washington Performing Arts, UCLA’s Royce Hall, Stanford Live, Chicago’s Millennium Park, Duke Performances, The Satellite in Los Angeles, STG Presents in Seattle, Melbourne Recital Hall and Sydney Opera House in Australia, and at festivals including the Sacrum Profanum Festival in Poland, All Tomorrow’s Parties in England, Auckland Arts Festival in New Zealand, Summer Nostos Festival in Greece, Boston Calling, and Big Ears in Knoxville, TN. ACME has performed Max Richter’s *Sleep*, an eight-hour lullaby for a sleeping audience, with him around the world, including at the Great Wall of China; on the piers of Auckland, New Zealand; in Hobart, Tasmania; at the Sydney Opera House; and in LA’s Grand Park, among others.

World premieres given by ACME include Clarice Jensen’s evening-length piece *The Exaltation of Inanna*, Ingram Marshall’s *Psalmbook*, Jóhann Jóhannsson’s *Drone Mass* (commissioned by ACME in 2015) Caroline Shaw’s *Ritornello*, Phil Kline’s *Out Cold*, William Brittle’s *Loving the Chambered Nautilus*, Timo Andres’ *Senior* and *Thrive on Routine*, Caleb Burhans’ *Jahrzeit*, and many more. In 2016 at The Kitchen, ACME premiered Clarice Jensen’s transcription of Julius Eastman’s *The Holy Presence of Joan d’Arc* for ten cellos, the score of which had been lost since the premiere in 1981. Jensen transcribed a recording of the work to recreate the score.

ACME’s collaborators have included The Richard Alston Dance Company, Wayne McGregor’s *Random Dance*, Gibney Dance, Satellite Ballet, Meredith Monk, Jóhann Jóhannsson, Max Richter, actress Barbara Sukowa, filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, Blonde Redhead, Grizzly Bear, Low, Matmos, Micachu & The Shapes, Jeff Mangum, A Winged Victory for the Sullen, Roomful of Teeth, Lionheart, and Theo Bleckmann.

In March 2022, ACME released the world premiere recording of Jóhann Jóhannsson’s contemporary oratorio *Drone Mass* on Deutsche Grammophon, with Theatre of Voices led by Paul Hillier. *Gramophone* included the album on its list of Best New Classical Recordings. Of the album, *Gramophone* wrote, “The compelling sound world of the late Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson is powerfully captured in this epic work” and says ACME is “superb on this recording.” ACME’s recordings also appear on Sono Luminus, Deutsche Grammophon, Butterscotch Records, New World Records, and New Amsterdam Records.

For more information, visit [www.acmemusic.org](http://www.acmemusic.org).

