



National Gallery of Art

79th Season of
Concerts

June 5, 2022

Concert in celebration of American Silence: The Photographs of Robert Adams

Exhibition on view

May 29 – October 2, 2022

West Building, Ground Floor

Galleries 23 – 29

For 50 years, Robert Adams (b. 1937) has made compelling, provocative, and highly influential photographs that show us the wonder and fragility of the American landscape, its inherent beauty, and the inadequacy of our response to it. *American Silence* explores the reverential way he looks at the world around him and the almost palpable silence of his work. Many of these photographs of the American West capture the sense of peace and harmony that the beauty of nature can instill in us — “the silence of light,” as Adams calls it, that he sees on the prairie, in the woods, and by the ocean. Other pictures question our silent complicity in the desecration of that beauty by consumerism, industrialization, and lack of environmental stewardship. While these photographs lament the ravages that have been inflicted on the land, they also pay homage to what remains.

Cover: American, *Birds* (detail), c. 1840, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Gift of Edgar William and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch, 1978.80.12

Program

June 5, 1:00 & 3:00 p.m.

West Building, West Garden Court

Alarm Will Sound

John Luther Adams (b. 1953)

Ten Thousand Birds (2014)

Written for Alarm Will Sound

Conceived, designed, and directed by Alan Pierson

National Gallery of Art performance staged and led

by Peter Ferry

Musicians

Alarm Will Sound

Alarm Will Sound is committed to innovative performances and recordings of today's music. They have established a reputation for performing demanding music with energetic skill. Their performances have been described as "equal parts exuberance, nonchalance, and virtuosity" by the *Financial Times* (London) and as "a triumph of ensemble playing" by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The *New York Times* says Alarm Will Sound is "one of the most vital and original ensembles on the American music scene."

The repertoire of Alarm Will Sound ranges from European to American works, from the arch-modernist to the pop-influenced. Since its inception Alarm Will Sound has been associated with composers at the forefront of contemporary music, premiering pieces by John Adams, Steve Reich, David Lang, Michael Gordon, Aaron Jay Kernis, and Augusta Read Thomas, among others.

Music performed by Alarm Will Sound may be heard on fifteen recordings, including *For George Lewis / Autoshchediasms*, the group's most recent release featuring music of Tyshawn Sorey; *Omnisphere*, with jazz trio Medeski Martin & Wood; *Splitting Adams*, a collaboration with the Peabody Award-winning podcast *Meet the Composer*; and the premiere recording of Steve Reich's *Radio Rewrite*.

Alarm Will Sound is the resident ensemble at the Mizzou International Composers Festival, which is held each July at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Other notable performances include presenting the world premiere of the staged version of Donnacha Dennehy's *The Hunger* at the BAM Next Wave Festival and the Touhill Performing Arts Center in 2016 and serving as artists-in-residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 2013 – 2014. In 2011 at Carnegie Hall, the group presented *1969*, a multimedia event that told the compelling story of great musicians — John Lennon, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Paul McCartney, Luciano Berio, Yoko Ono, and Leonard Bernstein — striving for a new music and a new world amidst the turmoil of the late 1960s.

The group has performed at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, (le) Poisson Rouge, Miller Theatre, Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Kitchen, the Bang on a Can Marathon, Disney Hall, Kimmel Center, Library of Congress, and the Walker Arts Center, among other venues. International tours include the Holland Festival, Sacrum Profanum, Moscow's Art November, St. Petersburg's Pro Arte Festival, and the Barbican.

Members of the ensemble have also demonstrated their commitment to the education of young performers and composers through residency performances and activities at locations across the country, including the Community Music School of Webster University, Cleveland State University, University of Colorado at Boulder, University of Missouri, and Eastman School of Music.

Notes

Ten Thousand Birds

Ten Thousand Birds is based on the songs of birds that are native to or migrate through the American Northeast and Midwest. It explores the connections between nature and music, a topic that American composer John Luther Adams has pursued over the course of his remarkable career. Most recently in *Sila: Breath of the World* and his orchestral work *Become Ocean* (for which he won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize and a Grammy Award), Adams has portrayed — in big musical gestures — the awe experienced in response to nature’s grandeur. In *Ten Thousand Birds*, on the other hand, the source of inspiration are the details of particular birdsongs.

Due to the open, modular structure of *Ten Thousand Birds*, each page of music can be combined in various ways. Our interpretation follows the cycle of a day, starting with birdsongs heard in the morning, then afternoon, evening, night, and return to morning. It also uses space by having performers move as they play and by encouraging the audience to walk around and experience the music from different perspectives.

A Personal Statement by Artistic Director Alan Pierson

I've lived my entire life in urban spaces, mostly hectic ones: Chicago, New York, Boston. The rumble of cars and trucks has always felt like home. So when I closed my eyes for my first night of camping out in the wilds of Alaska's Denali National Park, the thing that hit me was the depth of the quiet all around me. The world felt so strangely silent. It was only after some minutes that my ears, gradually acclimating to this unfamiliar world, began to perceive just how alive that world was with sound.

Similarly, when I first looked at John Luther Adams's music for *Ten Thousand Birds*, my very first reaction was shock at what was absent: there was no score in a conventional sense, just page after page of songs for individual instruments, with no indication of how they were to be played in relation to each other. Which songs are played simultaneously? What order should the other songs be played in? And what material would be left out entirely? (This was surely more music than we would play in a single performance!) And where should the players be in relation to each other? I'm used to scores that more specifically convey a composer's vision for a piece, and in the absence of that, I felt confused and unmoored. The possibilities were overwhelming. I called John. "Um, what do I do here?" John said that it was up to me to structure the performance

using the material he'd created. He gave me just one suggestion: "Think about structuring the piece around the cycle of a day."

I loved that idea, which seemed the perfect way to structure music that's so deeply connected to the natural world. John is an artist who grew up in urban spaces too, but it was when he moved to Alaska in the 1970s that he found his voice. So I carved out some quiet time at my desk, spread out all the pages of music that John had given me, and began to imagine how to put all of this together. Like that first night in Denali, it was only after adjusting to what was missing that I began to appreciate the richness of what was all around me. The day structure suggested a natural arc: beginning and ending with the delicate sounds of wind and the brightly delicate calls of morning birds, with thrilling climaxes that could be created out of aggressive afternoon calls and a cacophony of nighttime frog sounds. There were harmonic shapes to be created. There were opportunities for dialogue, and for moments of surprise, drama, and humor. And because John hadn't predetermined where players would be placed, I could uniquely create the piece for each environment we'd perform it in, immersing the audience in a naturalistic musical environment for them to explore.

This experience of connecting with the natural world through John's music has become particularly poignant during the pandemic, since so many of us, myself included, have spent so much time indoors, cut off from natural spaces. This poignancy inspired me to create a short online experience of John's piece, called *Ten Thousand Birds / Ten Thousand Screens*, in 2020 (see youtube.com/watch?v=NesxKxGSkg4). And because this is not a conducted work, I not only

get to share *Ten Thousand Birds* with you but also to experience it alongside you. There are surprises in every performance. This music is utterly alive to the moment and to the ever-changing environment. I'm so happy to enjoy it with all of you. Let's explore it together.

Acknowledgments

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General Information

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

The use of cameras or recording equipment during the performance is not allowed. Please be sure that all portable electronic devices are turned off.

Concerts are made possible in part through the generosity of donors to the National Gallery of Art through the Circle. Reserved seating is available in recognition of their support. Please contact the development office at 202.842.6450 or circle@nga.gov for more information.

National Gallery of Art Podcast: Sound Thoughts on Art

Sound Thoughts on Art, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art, explores the intersection of sight and sound. Hosted by musician and journalist Celeste Headlee, each episode focuses on a work of art in the National Gallery's collection. This season features performers Jenny Scheinman, Dom Flemons, Sa-Roc, Delfeayo Marsalis, Daniel Ho, Maria Schneider, Peter Sheppard Skaerved, and others. Listen and dig deeper at nga.gov/music-programs/podcasts.