



The Mirror of Speculation

New programme 2023

Introduction

Between the years 1370 and 1420, a style of composition flourished in Europe of unprecedented brilliance, complexity and strangeness. Composers around the courts of Northern Italy and Southern France delighted in exploring the limits of musical possibility – rhythmic, harmonic, polyphonic – experimenting with dizzying arithmetical forms and bizarre notations: music written in the shape of a harp, or a heart, or in concentric circles in different colours of ink. This age has been dubbed the *Ars Subtilior*, in which the innovations of the 14th-century *Ars Nova* were raised to new heights of beauty and expressiveness through a process of musical *speculation*.

The medieval act of *speculation* – intelligent contemplation or close observation (as opposed to the modern sense of conjecture) – is central to the *Ars Subtilior*, and connects it strongly to the music of the present day. In our own time, many composers have been fascinated this remarkable music, as well as by Guillaume de Machaut, the composer-poet whose astonishing achievements foreshadowed *Ars Subtilior*'s innovations.

In this programme, we create an *aula specularum* – a Hall of Mirrors – reflecting ancient and modern speculations back on each other until medieval and contemporary seem to merge. From the *Ars subtilior* repertoire, Ciconia's puzzle-canon *Le ray au soleyl* is 'solved' in a multitude of ways; Senleches' famous *La harpe de mellodie* is performed both with and without its canonic *triplum*; and Rodericus' notoriously hermetic *Angelorum psalat* is presented in competing notations and turned into a musical *uroboros*, eating its own tail. Machaut's lilting lovesongs are interleaved with Evan Johnson's delicate treatment of Petrarch, and then filtered through a work by John Cage in James Weeks' *Four Virelais*.

At the heart of the programme is the world premiere of a brand-new work, speculative in every sense, by the composer Mark Dyer. Dyer trained a computer to 'learn' the notation of the English Old Hall manuscript, dating from c.1415, using machine learning, and to produce new facsimiles, which Dyer transcribed. The resulting compositions are attributed to a fictional 14th-century musician and presented alongside original Old Hall works in a fascinating extension (and obfuscation) of 'speculation' – this time by an incognito, non-human composer.

The programme is introduced by director James Weeks, and presented in an approachable and engaging way that balances the educational with the entertaining.

Programme

The Mirror of Speculation is a 60-minute recital but can be extended with more original works by Machaut and Ars Subtilior composers into a full-length concert (45+45).

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| Ciconia | Le ray au soleyl | 3' |
| Senleches | La harpe de melodie | 3' |
| Rodericus arr. Weeks | Angelorum psalat | 10' |
| **** | | |
| Music from the Old Hall MS | | 8' |
| Mark Dyer | Scribe (world premiere) | 10' |
| **** | | |
| Machaut | Rondeaux and ballades | 8' |
| Evan Johnson | Three in, ad abundantiam | 3' |
| James Weeks, after Machaut | Four Virelais | 10' |

Performers

6 voices, SSAATT and conductor/harp