

Friday and Saturday, April 28–29, 2023, 8pm  
Zellerbach Hall

## Michel van der Aa's

### *Blank Out*

(West Coast Premiere)

#### Cast

*Woman* Miah Persson  
*Man* Roderick Williams  
*Choir* Nederlands Kamerkoor  
*Conductor* Klaas Stok

#### Team

*Composer, Stage and Film Director, Concept* Michel van der Aa  
*Dramaturge* Sophie Motley  
*Lighting* Floriaan Ganzevoort  
*Production Development* Frank van der Weij  
*Movement Advice* Thom Stuart  
*Director of Photography* Joost Rietdijk  
*Film Producers* Melvin Kant, William Griffioen

*Tonight's program will be performed without intermission  
and last approximately 70 minutes.*

*Blank Out received its world premiere on March 20, 2016  
at the Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam, Netherlands.*

*Blank Out was commissioned by Nationale Opera, Lucerne Festival, and Teatro dell'Opera di Roma,  
with financial support of Nederlands Kamerkoor, Ammodo, Fonds Podiumkunsten,  
and Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst.*

*The April 28th performance of Blank Out is made possible,  
in part, by an Anonymous patron sponsor.*

Using the intersecting and reflecting planes of live action and video to explore the human condition, *Blank Out* centers on a dialogue between a man and his mother. The libretto is based upon the work and life of South African poet Ingrid Jonker. A deeply human story, *Blank Out* uses innovative techniques of interactive 3D film and electronic music to consider memory and the way in which people reconstruct and deal with traumatic life events.

The set of *Blank Out* is constructed in miniature, like an architect's model. A 3D film acts as a backdrop and is projected live via a camera that the singer moves around the model. As the woman moves the camera, she not only changes her visual sur-

roundings but also appears to be "playing" her environment.

The impression is given to the audience of being both within and outside of an abstract country house. Musically, the text begins disjointed, but as words loop and accumulate, the story of some unnamed trauma begins to emerge. As reality and the world of the model begin to blur, a man appears on screen. We discover that the woman's words are connected to his; he is her son, and she drowned when he was a child. He is left to reconstruct the painful memories of his past.

*Blank Out* is a coproduction of the Dutch National Opera with the Lucerne Festival, and Teatro dell'Opera di Roma.

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## SYNOPSIS

A woman, alone onstage, is lost. She sings fragmented texts, recording herself with a video camera. Her sentences gradually become complete and coherent. We learn of a devastating trauma that took place in 1976, when her son was seven years old. From the edge of the dike near their house she watched him swim, then drown. She was paralyzed, unable to act.

The woman shares memories of her son while slowly building a small model house. She reconstructs and explains her relationship with her son, exploring her emotional displacement from him. As the line between reality and the world of the model begins to blur, a man appears on screen.

The man sings a duet with the woman's recording from earlier in the opera, filling

out her story of that day in 1976. He also experienced a trauma: the woman on stage is his mother, who died that day—she drowned saving his life.

In taking us back to the accident, the man adds a new perspective to the events. We realize the woman on stage is a reconstruction of his memory. They sing together, dance together. As the piece builds to a climax, the woman drowns in her own words while the man desperately clings to his treasured memories.

The woman disappears from stage. The man mourns her.

*Blank Out's* text and characters include elements by the South African poet Ingrid Jonker. The story, however, is not biographical.

Sarah Wijzenbeek



**Michel van der Aa** (*composer, stage and film director, concept*), winner of the 2015 Johannes Vermeer Award and 2013 Grawemeyer Award, is one of today's most sought-

after composers and stage directors. A pioneer in the realms of new music and technology, his staged works—incorporating film and sampled soundtracks—are a seamless hybrid of musical theater and multimedia.

Van der Aa's imaginative music-theater works *The Book of Water* (2021–22), *Upload* (2019–20), *Blank Out* (2015–16), *Sunken Garden* (2011–12), *The Book of Disquiet* (2008), *After Life* (2005–06), and *One* (2002) have received critical and public acclaim internationally. Staging, film, and music are interwoven into a collage of transparent layers, resulting in works that are part documentary, part philosophy. In *Eight* (2018–19), his recent virtual reality installation, he has created a unique, groundbreaking fusion of musical theater, VR, and visual art.

The 2022–23 season includes the world premiere of van der Aa's new chamber music-theater project *The Book of Water* at the Venice Biennale, followed by performances in the Netherlands and Belgium, and at the Hong Kong Arts Festival and the South Korean Tongyeong International Music Festival.

Intermusica represents Michel van der Aa projects worldwide. His music is published by Boosey & Hawkes.

Monika Ritterhaus



Swedish soprano **Miah Persson** is one of the world's principal Mozart interpreters, having left a lasting legacy on those lyric soprano roles for which she has become most

celebrated: *Susanna/Le nozze di Figaro*, *Zerlina/Don Giovanni*, *Sophie/Der Rosenkavalier*, *Poppea/L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, and later *Fiordiligi/Così fan tutte*, *Donna Elvira/Don Giovanni*, and the Countess/*Le nozze di Figaro*. Persson has now also “cemented her place as one of the most intelligent Strauss sopranos of our time at the peak of her powers” (*Bachtrack*).

She has appeared at the Metropolitan Opera, Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Teatro alla Scala, Wiener Staatsoper, Opéra National de Paris, Liceu Barcelona, Bayerische Staatsoper, Hamburgische Staatsoper, Netherlands Opera, New National Theatre Tokyo, and Dallas Opera. Equally treasured on the concert platform, she has performed with the major international orchestras with conductors including Zubin Mehta, Bernard Labadie, Simone Young, and Vladimir Jurowski.

Highlights of the 2022–23 season include the *Governess/Turn of the Screw* with the Budapest Festival Orchestra; the Countess/*Le nozze di Figaro* at Opéra National de Paris; Solomon's Queen in Handel's *Solomon* on tour with Harry Bicket and The English Concert (seen recently at Zellerbach Hall); Haydn's *Creation* with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, and Beethoven Symphony No. 9 with the Orchestre National de Lyon.

Miah Persson was appointed Hovsångerska, Court Singer, by H.M. the King of Sweden in 2011.







**Roderick Williams** is one of the most in-demand baritones of his generation with a wide repertoire spanning Baroque to contemporary that he performs in opera, concert, and recital.

He enjoys relationships with all the major UK opera houses and has sung opera world premieres by Michel van der Aa, David Sawer, Sally Beamish, Robert Saxton and Alexander Knaifel, as well as performing major roles including Papageno, Don Alfonso, Onegin, and Billy Budd.

He performs regularly with leading conductors and orchestras throughout the UK, Europe, North America and Australia, and his many festival appearances include the BBC Proms, Edinburgh, Cheltenham, Aldeburgh, and Melbourne.

As a composer, he has had works premiered at Wigmore Hall, the Barbican, and the Purcell Room, and on national radio. In December 2016, he won the prize for Best Choral Composition at the British Composer Awards. From 2022–23 season, he takes the position of Composer in Association of the BBC Singers

Williams was awarded an OBE in June 2017 and was nominated for Outstanding Achievement in Opera in both the 2018 Olivier Awards for his performance in the title role of the Royal Opera House production of Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* and in 2019 for his role in ENO's production of Britten's *War Requiem*. He was Artist in Residence with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra from 2020–21 for two years and is Artist in Residence at the 2023 Aldeburgh Festival.

For more almost 90 years, the **Netherlands Chamber Choir** has enjoyed a place at the top of the international choral world. Using choral music as a medium, the ensemble explores contemporary themes and tells relevant stories in its performances and collaborations with actors, dancers, poets, VJs, and DJs, as well as scientists, healthcare professionals, and opinion leaders, to give new meaning to the stories the choir tells during its performances.

In recent years, the choir has collaborated with choreographers Huang Yi and Nanine Linning, director Pierre Audi, performance artist Marina Abramović, and with ensembles like the Freiburger Barock Orchester, Amsterdam Sinfonietta, and Les Talens Lyriques, as well as the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.

In the past, composers like Poulenc, Frank Martin, and Sofia Gubaidulina wrote important works for the choir. More recently, the choir has commissioned works from composers such as Michel van der Aa, David Lang, Nico Muhly, James MacMillan, Huang Ruo, Mohammed Fairouz, Lera Auerbach, Mathilde Wantenaar, and many young talents from the Netherlands and abroad.

Since September 2015, Peter Dijkstra has been chief conductor of the Netherlands Chamber Choir. Amongst his predecessors were such renowned conductors like Uwe Gronostay, Tõnu Kaljuste, Stephen Layton, Risto Joost, and founder Felix de Nobel.