

SIMON STEEN-ANDERSEN

CHAMBERED MUSIC

OSLO SINFONIETTA

REI MUNAKATA



Simon Steen-Andersen

Simon Steen-Andersen (b. 1976)

Chambered Music

Oslo Sinfonietta

Conducted by Rei Munakata

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1 Chambered Music (2007)
for 12 instruments and sampler | 11:03 |
| 2 Amid (2004)
for flute, clarinet, piano, guitar, percussion, violin and cello | 9:29 |
| 3 Besides (2003)*
for amplified piano, piccolo flute, violin and dampened string trio | 12:08 |
| 4 Praesens (2001)*
for sinfonietta | 16:01 |
| Total 48:43 | |
| * World premiere recording | |

The Idea of Changing the Perspective and Meaning of Familiar Things

By Tim Rutherford-Johnson

Simon Steen-Andersen describes his String Quartet (1999) as his 'opus 1': the zero point of his subsequent compositional development. It earns this status, he says, by being an attempt to remove all the 'distracting' elements – that is, intervals and harmonies – from his music. As he heard it, any two pitched notes – in either a tonal or atonal context – placed together would create associations with other pieces of music and thus distract from the experience itself. With his quartet, then, Steen-Andersen sought for the first time to write a music that does not evoke harmonic listening; that is, a *non-tonal* music.

A year later, Steen-Andersen developed this idea in the guitar solo *in-side-out-side-in ...*. Along the way, he found the beginnings of a repertory of sounds – especially hushed dry flurries, evoking guiros or rattles – that would soon become signatures of that non-tonal music for more than a decade: sounds that not only evade harmonic distractions but also highlight the physical energies behind individual musical gestures. Sounds like these enter the foreground in *Praesens* (2001), the next step in the composer's development and the first major ensemble piece after his String Quartet. In just the opening moments, they can be heard in the form of sheets of paper rubbed against cardboard, a credit card strummed across the piano keyboard, a rapid flurry of clarinet key clicks and bouncing string jétés – to say nothing of the actual guiros and cabaças in the percussion section.

Praesens ('Presence') begins from the idea of a constantly transforming

energetic flow, inspired by the memories of the composer's mother's recordings of Glenn Gould playing Bach. To begin with, this takes place across the whole ensemble, in a plasmatic exchange of individual and group identities. About midway through, however, the music coalesces momentarily into a double concerto for violin and clarinet. Two of the composer's favourite instruments – the former (often playing *sul ponticello*) sharp and metallic, the other warm and rounded – they carry the energy forward in a two-part relay until, after a sort of joint cadenza, they recede once more, leaving the music to continue, less certainly, towards its unknown destination.

Musical energy is also a theme of *Besides* (2003) – and in particular an interplay of energetic extremes that are brought onto the same dynamic plane. On one level are the sorts of active micro-sounds that first appeared in *in-side-out-side-in ...*.

These are put under a microscope in the form of an amplified trio of piano, piccolo and violin, who use volume pedals to magnify their quiet actions. The other voice, as it were, is a second trio of violin, viola and cello (playing with a drastically detuned, and hence heavily distorting bottom string) that plays with the force of multiple fortissimos but against heavy mutes. The 'quiet' sounds of the piano/piccolo/violin trio bloom far beyond their actions suggest; the 'loud' sounds of the string trio struggle beneath the dampening effect of the mutes, their efforts leaking out in the sounds of friction and acoustic distortion. As the work progresses, this counterpoint fractures into increasingly isolated shards; short jabs held together only by the spaces between them, until the cello takes up that space and ends the work with an extended cadenza.

Besides has been one of Steen-Andersen's less-performed pieces. Yet that final cadenza has been

responsible for an extensive series of spin-offs, beginning with *Beside Besides*, a fragment for solo cello based on the final pages of the ensemble piece. This, in turn, has spawned many related works for other solo instruments and ensembles, each of them a 'choreographic translation' of the physical gestures of the cello piece into the physical realm of another instrument or group of instruments. Called *Next to Beside Besides*, these may further be performed with video (or the performer playing a different version), in which case they carry the name *Self-Reflecting Next to Beside Besides* ...

Amid (2004) continues the idea of interplaying extremes, but this time hardwires them directly to the physical actions of the musicians. The work begins with loud, unison gestures: a full, triple-fortissimo exhalation across the mouthpiece (flute); the same, but into the body of the instrument (clarinet); an upward glis-

sando across the full range of the keyboard (piano); a five-string, two-octave slide (guitar); triple-fortissimo bursts of noise (percussion, violin and cello). Each gesture requires a full commitment of energy; each lasts little more than a second before it is repeated.

This is one half of the interplay: a single motion, requiring full physical effort and movement (of the hands, lungs, bow etc.). In between is what Steen-Andersen calls the 'reload': the swift movement required to reset the hands to their starting position, to refill the lungs, to draw the bow back again. These actions are notated in the score, but, in truth, the initial gestures are so deliberately big and the space between them so small that even the best player could not avoid creating a noise in between: it is key to Steen-Andersen's aesthetic that these 'accidental' sounds are not acted: they emerge from a specific musical situation. They are the background to the gestures' foreground,

the liminal, negative space between the sounds. As *Amid* progresses, it slowly expands to take the place of the foreground gestures, giving the whole piece a cross-like structure as background becomes foreground, and vice versa.

Described like this, *Amid* is the most formally straightforward piece on this release. There is one other thing, though. At the start of *Besides*, one can hear a strange 'whooping' sound – something distinctly alien, even within this world of unusual noises. You could be forgiven for assuming it to be an electronic keyboard, but it is the sound of the piano, amplified through a guitar Whammy pedal that enables the sound to be transposed gradually by up to two octaves. In the context of the acoustic instruments, it's a sound that temporarily pulls you out of the work and forces you to recalibrate your expectations of it. Something similar, but more precisely situated, takes place just over halfway

through *Amid* with the introduction of a major sixth, softly but deliberately arpeggiated on the piano. This is the first instance of an explicitly harmonic (even tonal) moment in Steen-Andersen's music since before the String Quartet, yet its effect is not to distract from but to enlarge our experience of the music, enabling us to experience the familiar sound anew or as something alien.

In *Chambered Music* (2007), another such moment occurs around one-third of the way into the piece. Although brief, it provides the only overt clue to the work's principal source material – the spoken diaries of one of history's most famous (and revered) political prisoners. The identity of that individual is not important, but the idea of incarceration and the stifling of speech – as an extension of the muted energies first explored in *Besides* – is. It is extended in multiple dimensions across the work: Steen-Andersen began by collect-

ing dozens of ideas for how music or sound could be 'chambered'. Among those that made it into the piece are: jam jars; metronomes placed within soundproof boxes (to be opened at appropriate moments); a high E played on piccolo trumpet with practice mute, which sounds a tiny but highly pressurised vibrating air column; samples recorded from the inside of a piano and the inside of a loudspeaker; the locks on a briefcase; and looping repeats that create rhythmic chambers within the flow of the music itself.

Most important, though, is a solo trombone, which is placed offstage, 'several doors or walls away from the hall'. Recalling the action dynamics of *Besides*, the idea is that even when the soloist is playing as loud as possible the sound that reaches the hall is only *pp–mp* in volume. Melodically doubling the prisoner's muffled speech (played on a sampler keyboard), they stand in for that prisoner, another figure shut away and placed

at such a distance that we can barely hear them any more. In performance, Steen-Andersen says, the trombonist registers at first as an annoyance – why is someone practising next door when a concert is on? – then as amusing, as their interruptions take a comic turn; and finally as the work's emotional core.

And where do these four early works stand in relation to Steen-Andersen's later career? The gestural dynamism and forward-falling momentum are easily apparent in two of the next pieces he wrote – *On and Off and Two and Fro* (2008) for ensemble, another exploration of contrasting performance actions; and the video performance *Run Time Error* (2009–20), which entails the composer recording himself running around a performance space, sounding objects as he encounters them. The use of musical actions as elements in an abstract drama that first appeared in *Chambered Music* is

developed further in works such as *Black Box Music* (2012) and *Korpus* (2015). And alienated familiars, like the major sixth of *Amid*, have become a frequent feature, albeit in a more dramatic style, of pieces like the *Piano Concerto* (2014), in which the soloist is paired with a video doppelgänger, playing a piano that has been dropped from height onto a concrete floor; and *TRIO* (2019), in which an orchestra, choir and big band are placed in counterpoint with each other and historical film footage of their predecessors. Most recently, the opera *Don Giovanni's Inferno* (2023) remixes three centuries of operatic history as it follows Don Giovanni into hell. 'I'm more and more fascinated', the composer says, 'by the idea of changing the perspective and meaning of familiar things by placing them upside down or changing their context'.

This release thus presents four early works from a career – beginnings that

would prove to be the very foundation of what it would later become.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson is a writer with a focus on new music. He is the author of the widely praised Music after the Fall (University of California Press) and The Music of Liza Lim (Wildbird), and has co-authored Twentieth-Century Music in the West (Cambridge University Press).

Oslo Sinfonietta, Norway's oldest running contemporary ensemble, was founded by the Norwegian composer Asbjørn Schaathun in 1986. The ensemble's artistic director since 1993 has been Christian Eggen, who also serves as principal conductor. Oslo Sinfonietta consists of leading freelance musicians and members of some of Norway's most prominent orchestras, including the Oslo Philharmonic, the Norwegian Radio Orchestra, the Norwegian Opera and Ballet Orchestra, and the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra. This ensures the ensemble possesses the quality and flexibility required for a contemporary repertoire. In 1999, Oslo Sinfonietta was awarded the prestigious Spellemannspris, Norway's equivalent of a GRAMMY, for *Boyl* with music by Rolf Wallin. The ensemble performs regularly at Norwegian and international festivals and was among the co-founders when the Ultima Festival was established in 1990. Abroad, it has visited festivals and concert halls

such as Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ in Amsterdam, Casa da Música in Porto, Festival Présences in Paris, the Venice Biennale, Milano Musica, Music Biennale Zagreb, and the ECLAT Festival.

Rei Munakata, born in Yokohama, Japan, is a conductor and composer specialising in contemporary classical music. Known for his imaginative creativity and experimental curiosity, he conducts, composes, and leads workshops for ensembles and orchestras worldwide. Since 2003, Munakata has been the artistic director and principal conductor of Curious Chamber Players, driving innovative concert formats. Their breakthrough came at the Darmstädter Ferienkurse in 2012, leading to performances at leading new music festivals such as IMPULS Graz and Gaudeamus Muziekweek. Munakata collaborates with ensembles including Athelas Sinfonietta and Oslo Sinfonietta, and teaches at institutions such as the Royal Academy of Music Aarhus.

Idéen om at ændre perspektivet og betydningen af velkendte ting

Af Tim Rutherford-Johnson

Simon Steen-Andersen kalder sin strygekvartet (1999) for sit "opus 1": Et nulpunkt for hans senere udvikling som komponist. Den fortjener en sådan status, siger han, i kraft af at være et forsøg på at fjerne alle "forstyrrende" elementer – det vil sige intervaller og akkorder – fra sin musik. Enhver kombination af to toner ville for ham automatisk skabe associationer til anden musik og dermed aflede opmærksomheden fra den konkrete oplevelse. Og det uanset om musikken er tonal eller atonal, i hans ører. Med kvartetten søgte han derfor for første gang at skrive en musik, der ikke lægger op

til harmonisk lytning, det vil sige en *non-tonal* musik.

Et år senere udviklede Steen-Andersen denne tankegang videre i solo-guitarværket *in-side-out-side-in ...*. Undervejs begyndte han at opbygge et repertoire af lyde – især sagte, sprøde hvirvler af lyd med mindelser om guiroer og knitrede elektricitet – der gennem mere end et årti skulle blive kendetegnende for denne ikke-tonale musik. Disse lyde undgår ikke blot de harmoniske distraktioner, men fremhæver også de fysiske energier bag de enkelte musikalske gestus. Disse lyde træder i forgrunden i *Praesens* (2001), som både markerer det næste skridt i komponistens udvikling og det første større ensembleværk efter strygekvartetten. Alle rede i løbet af de første sekunder høres de som papirark gnedet mod pap, et kreditkort strøget hen over klaverets tangenter, en række hurtige klik fra klarinetklapper samt hoppende buestrøg – for slet ikke at tale

om de rigtige guiroer og cabasaer i slagtejsgruppen.

Praesens (præsens, nærvær) tager udgangspunkt i en konstant foranderlig energistrøm, inspireret af minderne om komponistens mors optagelser af Glenn Goulds Bachfortolkninger. Til at begynde med udspiller dette sig på tværs af hele ensemblet i en flydende udveksling mellem individuelle og kollektive identiteter. Omtrent halvvejs samler musikken sig dog kortvarigt i en dobbeltkoncert for violin og klarinet. Disse to af komponistens yndlingsinstrumenter – violinen (ofte spillet *sul ponticello*) skarp og metallisk, klarinetten varm og afrundet – bærer energien videre i en slags stafet, indtil de efter en form for fælles kadence trækker sig tilbage, og lader musikken fortsætte, mindre retningsbestemt, mod en ukendt destination.

Musikalsk energi er også et tema i *Besides* (2003) – her især i form af et samspil mellem energimæssige yder-

punkter, der bringes ind på samme dynamiske plan. På ét niveau finder vi de aktive mikrolyde, som først optrådte i *in-side-out-side-in ...*. Disse sættes under lup i form af en forstærket trio bestående af klaver, piccolo-fløjte og violin, der bruger volume-pedaler til at forstørre deres stille handlinger. Den anden "stemme", om man vil, er en anden trio bestående af violin, bratsch og cello (hvis dybeste streng er stemt drastisk ned og dermed stærkt forvrænget), som spiller med flere fortissimoer, men med kraftige dæmpere. De 'stille' lyde fra klaver/piccolofløjte/violin-trioen udfolder sig langt mere, end deres handlinger antyder, mens de 'kraftige' lyde fra strygetrioen kæmper under dæmpernes undertrykkende effekt og blander sig med friktionslyde og akustisk forvrængning. Efterhånden som værket skrider frem, splintres dette kontrapunkt i stadig mere isolerede fragmenter; korte stød, der kun holdes sammen af pauserne imellem dem, indtil celloen

overtager rummet og afslutter værket med en udvidet kadence.

Besides har været et af Steen-Andersens mindre hyppigt opførte værker. Den afsluttende kadence har imidlertid ført til en omfattende række af satellitværker, begyndende med *Beside Besides*, et fragment for solocello baseret på de sidste partitursider af ensembleværket. Det har så igen affødt adskillige beslægtede værker for andre soloinstrumenter og ensembler, der hver for sig udgør en "koreografisk oversættelse" af de fysiske gestus i celloværket til et andet instruments eller en anden instrumentgruppes fysiske univers. Disse har fået samletitlen *Next to Beside Besides* og kan også opføres med video (hvor samme udøver spiller en anden version), hvor de så bærer titlen af *Self-Reflecting Next to Beside Besides ...*

Amid (2004) fortsætter idéen om samspil mellem yderpunkter, men kobler dem nu direkte til musiker-

nes fysiske handlinger. Værket åbner med kraftige, enstemmige gestus: en massiv udånding i tredobbelt fortissimo hen over mundstykket (fløjte), det samme ind i instrumentets krop (klarinet), et opadgående glissando over hele klaverets omfang (klaver), et to oktaver langt glissando over fem strenge (guitar), eksplosioner af støj i tredobbelte fortissimo-stød (slag-tøj, violin og cello). Hver gestus kræver fuld fysisk indsats og handling og varer kun lidt over et sekund, før den gentages.

Dette er den ene halvdel af samspillet: en enkelt bevægelse, der kræver fuld fysisk anstrengelse (af hænder, lunger, bue osv.). Mellem disse ligger det, Steen-Andersen kalder "genopladning": de hurtige bevægelser for at bringe hænderne tilbage til startpositionen, fylde lungerne igen eller trække buen tilbage. Disse handlinger er noteret i partituret, men de indledende gestus er bevidst så store og mellemrummene så små, at selv de bedste musikere uundgåeligt skaber

støj imellem. Det er centralt for Steen-Andersens æstetik, at disse “utilsigtede” lyde ikke er påtaget, men opstår ud af en specifik musikalsk situation. De udgør baggrunden i forhold til forgrunden af gestus, det flygtige negative rum mellem lydene. Efterhånden som *Amid* udvikler sig, udvides dette langsomt og afløser forgrunden af gestus, så hele værket antager en krydslignende struktur, hvor baggrund bliver til forgrund og omvendt.

Beskrevet sådan er *Amid* det formmæssigt mest overskuelige værk på denne udgivelse. Der er dog én ting mere: I starten af *Besides* hører man en mærkelig syntetisk lyd – noget påfaldende fremmed, selv i denne verden af usædvanlige lyde. Man kunne tro, det var et elektronisk keyboard, men det er klaveret, forstærket gennem en Whammy-guitarpedal, der kan transponere lyden gradvist op til to oktaver. I sammenhæng med de akustiske instrumenter er det en lyd, der midlertidigt river dig ud af værket og tvinger dig

til at justere dine forventninger til det. Noget lignende, men mere præcist placeret, sker lidt over halvvejs i *Amid*, hvor klaveret sagte, men bevidst spiller en brudt stor sekst. Dette er det første eksempel på et tydeligt harmonisk (og endda tonalt) øjeblik i Steen-Andersens musik siden strygekvartetten, men det distraherer ikke; det udvider vores oplevelse af musikken og lader os opleve det velkendte som noget nyt eller fremmed.

Omkring en tredjedel inde i *Chambered Music* (2007) optræder der et lignende øjeblik. Selvom det er kortvarigt, udgør det også den eneste åbenlyse ledetråd til værkets primære kildemateriale – en af verdens mest berømte (og respekterede) politiske fangers dagbøger. Den pågældendes identitet er ikke vigtig, men det er tanken om indespærring og manglende mulighed for at ytre sig – som en udvidelse af de dæmpede energier, der første gang blev udforsket i *Besides*. I løbet af værket bliver den-

ne idé udfoldet i flere forskellige dimensioner. Steen-Andersen begyndte med at indsamle talrige modeller for, hvordan musik eller lyde kunne blive “indkapslet” (chambered). Med i værket kom blandt andet syltetøjsglas, metronomer i lydtætte bokse (der åbnes på passende tidspunkter), et højt E spillet på piccolotrompet med øvedæmper, så det lyder som en lillebitte vibrerende luftsøjle under stærkt tryk, samplede lyde fra klaverets indre og fra det indre af en højttaler, låsene på en kuffert og evige gentagelser, der skaber rytmiske kamre i musikkens flow.

Vigtigst er dog en solobasun placeret uden for scenen, “adskillige døre eller vægge væk fra salen”. Med mindelser om handlingsdynamikken fra *Besides* er tanken bag, at selv når solisten spiller så kraftigt som overhovedet muligt, vil lyden kun nå frem til salen som *pianissimo-mezzopiano*. Som en melodisk fordobling af fangens dæmpede tale (afspillet på et samplerkeyboard) repræsenterer ba-

sunen fangen, en anden figur, der er spærret inde og placeret så langt væk, at vi næsten ikke kan høre dem længere. “Under opførelsen opleves basunisten først som et irritationsmoment,” siger Steen-Andersen – hvordan kan nogen finde på at øve sig inde ved siden af under en koncert? – derefter som morsom, efterhånden som afbrydelserne begynder at virke komiske, og til slut som værkets følelsesmæssige kerne.

Og hvor placerer disse tidlige værker sig så i forhold til Steen-Andersens senere karriere? Den gestiske dynamik og fremadfaldende bevægelsesenergi er tydeligvis også til stede i to af hans efterfølgende værker – *On and Off and Two and Fro* (2008) for ensemble, en anden udforskning af kontrasterende opførelseshandlinger, og videoperformancen *Run Time Error* (2009-20), hvor komponisten optager sig selv løbende rundt i en koncertsal og slår på genstande, han møder. Brugen af musikalske hand-

linger som elementer i et abstrakt drama, der først sås i *Chambered Music*, udvikles videre i værker som *Black Box Music* (2012) og *Korpus* (2015). Velkendte, men fremmedgjorte elementer som den store sekst i *Amid* er blevet et hyppigt træk, omend i mere musikdramatiske former, i værker som *Piano Concerto* (2014), hvor solisten parres med en videodobbeltgænger, der spiller på et klaver, som er blevet kastet ned på et betongulv fra stor højde, og *TRIO* (2019), hvor et orkester, kor og bigband sættes i kontrapunkt med hinanden og historiske filmoptagelser af deres forgængere. Senest remixes operaen *Don Giovanni's Inferno* (2023) tre århundreders operahistorie, mens den følger Don Giovanni ned i helvede. "Jeg bliver mere og mere fascineret," siger komponisten, "af idéen om at ændre perspektivet og betydningen af velkendte ting ved at vende dem på hovedet eller ændre deres kontekst."

Denne udgivelse præsenterer således fire tidlige værker fra en karriere – begyndelser, som skulle vise sig at være selve grundlaget for, hvad den senere udviklede sig til.

Tim Rutherford-Johnson er forfatter med speciale i ny musik. Han har skrevet den anerkendte Music after the Fall (University of California Press) og The Music of Liza Lim (Wildbird). Han er desuden medforfatter til Twentieth-Century Music in the West (Cambridge University Press).

Oslo Sinfonietta, Norges ældste ny musik-ensemble, blev grundlagt af den norske komponist Asbjørn Schaathun i 1986. Ensembles kunstneriske leder har siden 1993 været Christian Eggen, som også er ensembles chefdirigent. Oslo Sinfonietta består af førende freelance-musikere og medlemmer af nogle af Norges mest fremtrædende orkestre, herunder Oslo-Filharmonien, Kringkastingsorkesteret, Operaorkesteret og Det Norske Kammerorkester. Dette sikrer, at ensemblet har den kvalitet og fleksibilitet, som et moderne repertoire kræver. I 1999 blev Oslo Sinfonietta tildelt den ansete Spellemannspris, Norges svar på en Grammy, for *Boyl* med musik af Rolf Wallin. Oslo Sinfonietta optræder regelmæssigt på norske og internationale festivaler og var medstiftere, da Ultimafestivalen blev etableret i 1990. I udlandet har ensemblet besøgt festivaler og koncerthuse som Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ i Amsterdam, Casa da Música i Porto, Festival

Présences i Paris, Venedig Biennalen, Milano Musica, Music Biennale Zagreb og ECLAT Festival.

Rei Munakata, født i Yokohama, Japan, er dirigent og komponist med speciale inden for ny musik. Han er kendt for sin fantasifulde kreativitet og eksperimenterende nysgerrighed og har arbejdet med kammermusikere, ensembler og orkestre over hele verden. Siden 2003 har han været kunstnerisk leder og chefdirigent for Curious Chamber Players, som blandt andet arbejder med nyskabende koncertformer. Ensembles gennembrud kom ved Darmstädter Ferienkurse i 2012, efterfulgt af optrædener på førende festivaler for ny musik som IMPULS Graz og Gaudeamus Muziekweek. Munakata samarbejder desuden med ensembler som Athelas Sinfonietta og Oslo Sinfonietta og underviser blandt andet på Det Jyske Musikkonservatorium.

Chambered Music

Elisabeth Kristensen Eide, flute
Ingvill Hafskjold, clarinet
Asgeir Søfteland, horn
Jan Fredrik Christiansen, trumpet
Torild Berg, trombone
Håkon Stene, percussion
Kjell Samkopf, percussion
Bjarne Sakshaug, piano
Odd Hannisdal, violin 1
Hans Petter Mæhle, violin 2
Bendik Foss, viola
Tanja Orning, cello
Håkon Thelin, double bass

Amid

Elisabeth Kristensen Eide, flute
Ingvill Hafskjold, clarinet
Kjell Tore Innervik, percussion
Thomas Kjekstad, guitar
Bjarne Sakshaug, piano
Odd Hannisdal, violin 1
Tanja Orning, cello

Besides

Elisabeth Kristensen Eide, flute
Kristian Ofstad Lindberg, piano
Odd Hannisdal, violin 1
Karin Hellqvist, violin 2
Bendik Foss, viola
Gregor Riddell, cello
Tanja Orning, cello (cadenza)

Praesens

Elisabeth Kristensen Eide, flute
Ingvill Hafskjold, clarinet
Asgeir Søfteland, horn
Jan Fredrik Christiansen, trumpet
Torild Berg, trombone
Kjell Tore Innervik, percussion
Kjell Samkopf, percussion
Johanne Byhring, percussion
Kristian Ofstad Lindberg, piano
Odd Hannisdal, violin 1
Karin Hellqvist, violin 2
Bendik Foss, viola
Gregor Riddell, cello
Håkon Thelin, double bass

DDD

Recorded at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Bærum, Norway, February 2014 (*Chambered Music* and *Amid*) and March 2016 (*Besides* and *Praesens*)

Recording producer: Sean Lewis
Engineering, mixing and mastering: Sean Lewis

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The Idea of Changing the Perspective and Meaning of Familiar Things,
by Tim Rutherford-Johnson, translated from the English by Jakob Levinsen
Proofreaders: Hayden Jones, Jens Fink-Jensen
Photo p. 2 © Lars Svankjær
Cover and back cover photo: Simon Steen-Andersen

Publisher: Edition · S, www.edition-s.dk

With support from Augustinus Fonden and Koda Kultur

Oslo Sinfonietta, www.oslosinfonietta.no



8.224769 www.dacapo-records.dk

Dacapo Records is supported by the Danish Arts Foundation



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