

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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## Evening Land

### Bent Sørensen

**B**ent Sørensen, a leading voice among Danish composers of his generation, was initially self-taught, drawing particular inspiration from folk music. Not until he was in his mid-20s did he seek more formal instruction, studying with two of his prominent compatriots, Ib Nørholm at the Royal Danish Academy of Music (from 1983 to 1987) and Per Nørgård at the Royal Academy of Music in Aarhus (from 1988 to 1990). This more structured approach to composition led him to a style distinct from his folkish beginnings. His music from 1984 on tended toward sonorities that emerged from, and receded back into, near-silence — detailed combinations of sounds whose ghostly parts were indistinct around the edges, whose melodic and harmonic contours were obscured by portamentos, glissandos, and microtones. Encountering a work by Sørensen, the Norwegian composer Arne Nordheim remarked, “It reminds me of something I’ve never heard!”

The evocative titles of many Sørensen compositions suggest their inherent spirit of mystery, shadows, or otherworldliness: the string quartets *Alman* (1984), *Adieu* (1986), *Angels’ Music* (1988), and *Schreie und Melancholie* (*Shrieks and Melancholy*, 1994). Larger works include *The Echoing Garden* (1990–92) for soloists, choir, and orchestra, which the composer Karl Aage Rasmussen said “unfolds as wandering weightless melodies in an echo chamber of many different simultaneous tempi”; the violin concerto *Sterbende Gärten* (*Dying Gardens*, 1993, which Rasmussen called “a concerto in the grand tradition, dramatic, graceful, and wild”); *Birds and Bells* (a 1994 concerto for trombone, an instrument

Sørensen has often featured); and *Whispering* (2014, for recorder and strings). Chamber titles include *The Birds of Lament* (1997), *The Deserted Churchyards* (1990), *The Weeping White Room* (2002), *The Wings of Night* (2007), and *Phantasmagoria* (2007).

Sørensen’s collaboration with the Danish playwright Peter Asmussen has yielded two dramatic works: the opera *Under the Sky* (completed in 2003 on commission from the Royal Danish Opera Company in Copenhagen); and the music-theater piece *Sounds Like You* (2008), for two actors, chorus, and orchestra, which was premiered by the Bergen International Festival. He has written multiple pieces for that festival and for such leading music organizations as the Ensemble Intercontemporain, Ensemble Modern, London Sinfonietta, and Arditti Quartet.

He was awarded the Nordic Council Music Prize in 1996 for *Sterbende Gärten*, and in 1999 he received the Wilhelm Hansen Composer Prize. He is composer-in-residence for the Danish ensemble Scenatet and in 2011 held a similar position at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in the United

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** July 18, 1958, in Borup, Zealand, Denmark

**Resides:** in Copenhagen

**Work composed:** 2015–17, on commission from the New York Philharmonic Society, with generous support from The Marie-Josée Kravis Prize for New Music

**World premiere:** these performances

**Estimated duration:** ca. 23 minutes

Kingdom. He was named chairman of the Danish Composers Society in 2014, the same year he was awarded the Wilhelm Hansen Prize of Honor. He has also served since 2008 as visiting professor of composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

*Evening Land* came about through the advocacy of Per Nørgård. In 2014 Nørgård was named the recipient of The Marie-Josée Kravis Prize for New Music, a major biennial award presented by the New York Philharmonic to a distinguished composer who is unaware that he or she is under consideration. Under normal circumstances, the prize would include a commission for a new work to be premiered by the Orchestra. In the event, Nørgård's commitments prevented him from composing such a piece, and he instead diverted a portion of the prize to underwrite this new work by Sørensen.

"Per Nørgård was my teacher for three years," Sørensen observed, "and then he

became a friend and good colleague; he helped me see and hear my own music." The new work draws partly from imagery connected with New York City, but it also grew out of the composer's long-standing admiration for the Orchestra. About the commission, he said:

I have a picture in my mind when I start writing. I grew up with New York Philharmonic recordings and I've heard the New York Philharmonic at Lincoln Center, so that was the picture in my mind in this case ... this sound that comes all the way from Bernstein.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (both doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, orchestra bells, sandpaper blocks, claves, bass drum, log drum, and strings.

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## In the Composer's Words

A picture, a vision: I am six or seven years old. I am standing in my childhood home in a small town on the island of Zealand in Denmark. I am looking out of the window, and there is a very special evening light over the fields. Far away there are trees and a cow. It is as if the world is infinite.

I have forgotten so much from my childhood, but for some reason this vision has kept coming back to me. The vision returned many years later, as I was looking out over New York from a high balcony. The vision from more than 50 years ago — the vision of quiet — was mixed with the new vision of flashes of light and bustling activity. Those two visions led me to the title *Evening Land* and the music came out of that title.

The work begins so softly, as quiet as possible, and the softness remains behind the bustling and flashing music that turns up later in the piece. Toward the end, a little solo for oboe emerges. It is a greeting to my dear father-in-law, the oboist Frederik Gislinge, who fell seriously ill while I was composing *Evening Land*. I guess I hoped the solo would help him heal. Unfortunately, that did not happen and to our great sorrow he died before he could hear the solo and the whole of *Evening Land*. Thus did *Evening Land* come into contact with another evening — the evening of life, a finality.

— Bent Sørensen

