

SOMBRE – In the Shadows of our Time



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Short Description

An interdisciplinary music theatre work exploring themes such as cultural identity, the search for beauty and its associated dangers, as well as collective memory. At its heart are works by Kaija Saariaho, with which Swiss composers Cécile Marti and Asia Ahmetjanova, together with French composer and video artist Jean-Baptiste Barrière, enter into dialogue through their new compositions.

ARTISTIC AND TECHNICAL TEAM

Robert Koller, CH (bass-baritone)
 Eija Kankaanranta, FIN (kantele)
 Camilla Hoitenga, D/USA (flute)
 Aleksander Gabrys, CH/PL (double bass)
 Fritz Hauser, CH (percussion)

Aleksi Barrière, FIN/F (direction, text)
 Jean-Baptiste Barrière, F (sound design, video)
 Étienne Exbrayat, F (lighting)
 Lea Vaterlaus, CH (dramaturgy)
 Prof. Gary Berger, CH (audio and video coordination)
 Jens Schubbe, DE (production management)

PERFORMANCES

05-06/12/2026, Basel, Gare du Nord
 21/01/2027, Stadttheater Biel
 23-24/01/2027, Zurich, Kunstraum Walcheturm
 26/01/2027, Stadttheater Solothurn

Supported by :

schweizer kulturstiftung

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PROJECT DESCRIPTION

AMBIVALENCES

Can love for beauty turn into barbarity? In many of her works, the celebrated Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho approached ambivalent cultural figures in an attempt to understand how destructive tendencies can arise not at the margins of our culture, but from within its very heart.

Saariaho's music explores the layers of dreams, subconscious, and hidden realities that shape the human mind and our cultural fabric. Just as her operas are more concerned with moral ambiguity than with epic heroism, difficult subjects throughout her work are examined through problematic figures. One such figure is the poet Ezra Pound, initially an advocate of intercultural dialogue, who embarked on a disastrous path by supporting Mussolini's regime. Pound's fragmentary Cantos provide the textual material for *Sombre*, the central work of this production. Jean-Baptiste Barrière will respond to it with a new musical setting of poems by Primo Levi about his experiences as a Holocaust survivor and his fear that history might repeat itself.

The other works by Saariaho featured in this production address the complex history of colonial hegemony. Paul Gauguin's Tahitian notebooks, which served as the starting point for Saariaho's *NoaNoa* for flute and electronics, lie at the heart of Cécile Marti's new work. It examines the exoticising gaze through which anonymous women are transformed into works of art. Saariaho's songs from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, set on a remote tropical island, explore the tension between the coloniser Prospero and the indigenous slave Caliban—a tension that will be further examined in a new work by Asia Ahmetjanova.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE ARTS

Kaija Saariaho's works often originate not only from literary impulses but also visual ones. In this production, for example, *NoaNoa* draws on Gauguin's Tahitian paintings and woodcuts, while *Sombre* takes inspiration from Mark Rothko's dark paintings—the works that form the environment of the Rothko Chapel in Houston, where the piece received its world premiere.

For twenty years, Jean-Baptiste Barrière has explored ways of expanding the performance setting through live video, revealing the multisensory dimensions of Saariaho's works. This communication between artistic disciplines lies at the heart of our production and is approached in a variety of ways. Asia Ahmetjanova's interweaving of music and instrumental theatre will open up new perspectives on Shakespeare, complementing Saariaho's acoustic theatre. Cécile Marti, who is both a composer and a sculptor, will bring her own distinctive voice to her musical miniature inspired by Gauguin and will also contribute to the stage design.

The music theatre evening as a whole is unified by Jean-Baptiste Barrière's multimedia design—video and electronics—and by Aleks Barrière's dramaturgy, direction, and lighting, which transcend the dialogue between art and artists, transforming it into a collective meditation. Based on the idea of suspended time, Kaija Saariaho's music creates the ideal mental space in which to look beyond the surface and delve into our past and our unconscious more deeply than would be possible in a conventional performance setting.

HOMMAGE



@zVg.

Ultimately, this music theatre work should also be understood as a tribute to Kaija Saariaho. What makes the project unique is not only the newly composed works by the emerging and established composers Ahmetjanova and Marti, but also the involvement of people from Saariaho's closest personal and artistic circle. Her son, Aleks Barrière, is an internationally active director and the librettist of several of her later works. Her husband, Jean-Baptiste Barrière, is one of the influential figures associated with IRCAM in Paris and a pioneer in electronic music and video art. Both will contribute not only to shaping the evening's artistic unity but also to the new commissioned works: Aleks Barrière as director and librettist, and Jean-Baptiste Barrière as composer and sound designer.

Other long-standing collaborators of Saariaho are also involved in the project: the American-German flutist Camilla Hoitenga, for whom Saariaho wrote most of her flute works, and Finnish musician Eija Kankaanranta, who plays the kantele, a traditional Finnish type of zither whose repertoire Saariaho expanded in collaboration with her.

The other performers—the bass-baritone Robert Koller, percussionist Fritz Hauser, double bassist Aleksander Gabrys, and sound director Gary Berger—are distinguished figures on the Swiss contemporary music scene.

PROGRAM

KAIJA SAARIAHO (1952 – 2023)

Caliban's Dream (from Tempest Songbook)

for bass-baritone, flute, kantele, double bass
2'30"

NoaNoa

for flute and electronics
10'

CÉCILE MARTI (* 1973)

'ŌVIRI (libretto by Aleksī Barrière)

for bass-baritone, kantele, percussion, double bass
12'

KAIJA SAARIAHO

Ciel étoilé

for percussion and double bass
7'

JEAN-BAPTISTE BARRIÈRE (* 1958)

Un Tempo di Lampi Senza Tuono (texts by Primo Levi)

12'

KAIJA SAARIAHO

Sombre (texts by Ezra Pound)

for bass-baritone, flute, kantele, percussion, double bass
21'

ASIA AHMETJANOVA (* 1992)

New work in response to Tempest Songbook

for bass-baritone, kantele, percussion, double bass
(world premiere) 12'

KAIJA SAARIAHO

Prospero's Vision (from Tempest Songbook)

for bass-baritone, flute, kantele, double bass
4'30"

Approximate duration : 80 minutes

PORTRAITS

Kaija Saariaho

Kaija Saariaho (1952–2023), widely regarded as one of the most important composers of our time, has also frequently been described as an inspiring role model for women in music. Saariaho studied at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki with the avant-garde composer Paavo Heininen and founded the Open Ears group together with Magnus Lindberg and others. She continued her studies in Freiburg im Breisgau with Brian Ferneyhough and Klaus Huber, and from 1982 studied at IRCAM in Paris. She went on to develop a distinctive musical language blending modernist influences, and became one of the most performed and appreciated composers in the fields of electro-acoustic music, vocal and orchestral repertoire, and opera.

During the final years of her life, Kaija Saariaho composed works for the kantele that were premiered by Eija Kankaanranta, one of the world's leading performers of this traditional Finnish instrument. Kankaanranta also adapted previous works by Saariaho for the kantele, and these versions, authorized by the composers, will be made specially available for this project. The kantele will also feature in the newly composed works. This Nordic element gives the production a distinctive colour while reinforcing its musical coherence.

In 2013, Saariaho was awarded the Polar Music Prize jointly with Youssou N'Dour. In 2021, she received the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement from the Venice Music Biennale. She was voted most important living composer in a BBC poll conducted among her peers.

Asia Ahmetjanova

Asia Ahmetjanova (b. 1992) is a composer of experimental music and a pianist specializing in classical and contemporary repertoire. Her artistic and compositional practice balances experimental engagement with musical material and the human body, her personal spirituality, and her work with the classical piano repertoire. Originally from Riga, Latvia, she studied in Tallinn, Estonia, and at the Lucerne School of Music. In 2023, she won Phoenix Trabant, Ensemble Phoenix Basel's biennial composition competition. That same year, her orchestral work *après le chant* (2023) received international recognition when it was included on the list of recommended works at the 69th International Rostrum of Composers.

She has worked with numerous renowned ensembles, including the Basel Sinfonietta, Ensemble Phoenix Basel, Duo Alto, Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, Ensemble Latenz, United Instruments of Lucilin, Ensemble Montaigne, and Ensemble SoundTrieb. She has presented her compositions at festivals and events including the Darmstadt Summer Course, Festival Musica Strasbourg, the London Ear Festival, Tower of Babel II by Klangforum Wien, the Ticino Musica Festival, and the International Young Composers Academy in Ticino. She has also worked with conductors including Matthias Pintscher, Baldur Brönnimann, Clemens Heil, Michael Sanderling, Christian Schumann, and Francesc Prat.

Asia Ahmetjanova places great importance on each person's individuality and personal relationship with music. She rejects all forms of generalization about people and their activities. This way of thinking is also reflected in her compositions. She lives in Zurich, is a member of the music faculty at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, and teaches regularly.

Cécile Marti

Cécile Marti (b. 1973) works both as a composer and as a visual artist. These two distinctive areas of expertise bring a defining dimension to the project's interdisciplinary conception: in addition to her new composition, she is also contributing the stage design and video.

Cécile Marti studied composition with Dieter Ammann at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts and also took private lessons with Georg Friedrich Haas in Basel. She completed her doctorate at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London in 2017, followed by postdoctoral work with George Benjamin at King's College London.

Her Violin Concerto *AdoRatio* was premiered in 2010 by violinist Bettina Boller and Collegium Novum Zürich at the Lucerne Festival; her second orchestral work, *wave trip*, received its world premiere that same year. More recently, she has received commissions from Ensemble für neue Musik Zürich, Basel Sinfonietta, the ZeitRäume Basel festival, and Radio France, among others. Her works are performed on every continent, including at the Lucerne Festival, reMusik Festival in St Petersburg, Warsaw Autumn, and Festival Présences in Paris.

In 2011, she received the City of Zurich's annual work grant. This was followed by a six-month composition residency in London and a residency with the Biel Solothurn Symphony Orchestra. In 2025, the fifth part of her monumental ballet cycle SEEING TIME for large orchestra was premiered by the Bern Symphony Orchestra, while her string quartet Polygon received its world premiere at the Musikverein in Vienna.

Alongside her work as a composer, Cécile Marti also practises sculpture. She pursues independently chosen projects and subjects that are often connected with her compositions. This has resulted in numerous sculptures that either enter into dialogue with music or stand as free and independent works. Musikpodium Zürich dedicated a concert and exhibition to her at the Pavillon Le Corbusier. She also opened her own studio gallery in Wetzikon, where she explores the connections between music, sculpture, and film.

Jean-Baptiste Barrière

Composer and multimedia artist Jean-Baptiste Barrière (b. 1958) is from Paris. Alongside his work as a composer, he pursued a scientific career at IRCAM from 1981 to 1998, working there in research, teaching, and composition. He has led projects such as Chants—computer synthesis of the singing voice—and Formes—computer-assisted synthesis and composition.

Today, he works primarily as a composer for multimedia projects and art installations. He has created music for the Salzburg Festival, international festivals in New York and Montréal, and IRCAM projects, among others. His collaborations with international artists—including Pierre Friloux, Françoise Gedanken, Catherine Ikam and Louis Fléri, Peter Greenaway, and Maurice Benayoun—now take him around the world. Far beyond Europe, his works are presented at major festivals and exhibitions in cities including Tokyo and Shanghai.

Aleksi Barrière

Aleksi Barrière (b. 1989) is a French-Finnish director, dramaturge, and writer, as well as the artistic director of the French collective La Chambre aux échos. His productions in Europe, the United States, and Japan have been acclaimed for their intercultural and intermedia approach and their engagement with social issues.

Barrière's productions, which include collaborations with conductor Clément Mao-Takacs, draw inspiration both from presenting 20th-century works in a new light and from collaborations with living composers, including Kaija Saariaho's *La Passion de Simone* and *Only the Sound Remains*, and Djuro Zivkovic's *Bogoluchie*.

The music theatre work *Violences*, created with composer Juha T. Koskinen for the Finnish National Opera and Ballet in 2019, was described by FMQ magazine as one of the most significant events not only of the Musica Nova festival but of the entire year.

Barrière has written several libretti for composers including Kaija Saariaho, Juha T. Koskinen, and Diana Syrse, and is currently developing libretti for Outi Tarkiainen and Tomás Bordalejo. His recent productions include the music-theatre works *Between* (2022) and *Earthrise* (2024) for the Finnish National Opera and Ballet; a new version of *The Soldier's Tale* featuring his own original text, presented at the Helsinki Music Centre in 2022; and new stagings of classics at Espoo Organ Night and Aria Festival: Britten's *Curlew River* (2023), Handel's *Messiah* (2024), and Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (2024).

Lea Vaterlaus

Lea Vaterlaus is a dramaturge and music writer. She studied musicology and English language and literature in Basel, as well as music theater dramaturgy at the Bavarian Theater Academy August Everding in Munich. From 2021 to 2024, she was engaged in concert dramaturgy for the Basel Symphony Orchestra. She writes and presents for the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, the Basel Chamber Orchestra, the Stradivari Quartet, and the Musikdorf Ernen Festival, among others.

Since 2021, she has been a freelancer in the dramaturgy department of Theater Basel, where she has worked with directors such as Lydia Steier, Sebastian Baumgarten, Harry Fehr, Thomas Verstraeten, and Romeo Castellucci. She has been associated with the Zurich Opera House as a freelancer since 2023. In 2024, she was selected by the Swiss Richard Wagner Society as a scholarship holder for the Bayreuth Festival. Recent projects include guest dramaturgy for "Giulio Cesare in Egitto" at the Zurich Opera House and a world premiere with the Munich Chamber Orchestra at the Munich Biennale.

Gary Berger

After studying percussion at the Zurich University of Music and training in electroacoustic music, Gary Berger (b. 1967) specialized in contemporary music and in the performance and sound direction of live-electronic works. He subsequently studied composition with Iannis Xenakis and Julio Estrada at CEMAMu and IRCAM in Paris, as well as at the Zurich University of Music.

His works have been performed in Switzerland and abroad, including at the Lucerne Festival, Wien Modern, the ISCM World New Music Days, and SWR's MATRIX Festival. He teaches electroacoustic and intermedia composition at the Zurich University of the Arts.

Robert Koller

Basel-born bass-baritone Robert Koller (b. 1973) has performed a wide range of substantial solo parts under conductors with highly diverse artistic profiles, including Andrea Marcon, Heinz Holliger, Jordi Savall, Emilio Pomárico, Simon Gaudenz, and Christian Schumann.

He sang the bass part in Handel's *Siroe, re di Persia* at the Musikhalle Hamburg and Zellerbach Hall in San Francisco with the Venice Baroque Orchestra, as well as at Styriarte in Graz. This was followed by leading roles and orchestral recitals at the Cervantino Festival in Mexico, Gaida Festival in Vilnius, Davos Festival, Società del Quartetto in Milan, Cantiere Internazionale in Montepulciano, Acht Brücken Festival in Cologne, Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, and the Kyiv Philharmonic.

In 2012, the Semperoper Dresden engaged him for the title role in Hans Werner Henze's *El Cimarrón*, which he also performed in Bremen in 2020. He sang the bass part in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the Berlin Philharmonie and the Aichi Arts Center in Japan, performed in Holliger's *Dunkle Spiegel* at the Goldberg Variations Festival at the Alte Oper Frankfurt, and sang the leading role in the opera *Die künstliche Mutter* at the Lucerne Festival. He also performed the solo parts in Mendelssohn's Walpurgisnacht with the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich and in Saariaho's *Sombre* at the Schwetzingen SWR Festival.

Other roles and engagements include Noah in Britten's *Noah's Fludde* with the Basel Symphony Orchestra, Beethoven's Ninth at the Kulturcasino Bern and in Toyota City, the leading role in *Luthers Träume* with the

Brandenburg State Orchestra, and, in 2019, Haydn's *The Creation* with the Basel Chamber Orchestra and Honegger's *Danse des morts* with the Jena Philharmonic.

He sang in the memorial concert for Hans Heinz Schneeberger under Heinz Holliger, in Mahler's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* at the Ernest Ansermet Radio Studio in Geneva, in Zimmermann's *Ekklesiastische Aktion*, and in the world premiere of Christfried Schmidt's Symphony *In memoriam Martin Luther King* in Dresden. Recent engagements have taken him to the Musikverein in Vienna, the Bern Festival, and the Arnold Schönberg Center in Vienna, as well as to Collegium Novum Zürich under Heinz Holliger. In 2026, he will appear as a soloist at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich and at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma in *La Piccola Cubana* and *El Cimarrón*.

Eija Kankaanranta

Eija Kankaanranta is one of the most celebrated performers of the kantele, a traditional Finnish plucked-string instrument. She is also a specialist in contemporary music and improvisation and has distinguished herself through numerous world premieres of works by renowned composers including Asta Hyvärinen, Michael Finnissy, Jukka Tiensuu, Lotta Wennäkoski, Juhani Nuorvala, and Kaija Saariaho.

In 2009, she became the first kantele player to receive a doctorate from the Sibelius Academy. She has appeared as a soloist with the Avanti Chamber Orchestra, Pori Sinfonietta, Joensuu City Orchestra, and Netherlands Wind Ensemble. She has also performed with the Uusinta Chamber Ensemble, Tapiola Sinfonietta, Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble, and Athelas Sinfonietta Copenhagen, among others.

In 2007, she recorded her solo album *Griffur*. In 2017, she received a grant from the Arts Promotion Centre Finland. She regularly performs as a duo with Camilla Hoytenga. Eija Kankaanranta is supported by Koistinen Kantele Ltd.

Camilla Hoytenga

Camilla Hoytenga is one of Kaija Saariaho's most important interpreters and close artistic collaborators. She is internationally known for premiering numerous chamber and flute works by some of the most prominent contemporary composers of the past 40 years. At Saariaho's recommendation, she performed *Sombre* with Robert Koller at the annual meeting of the Paul Sacher Foundation and at the Schwetzingen SWR Festival. Born in the United States, she has lived in Cologne since 1980.

Extensive travels have taken this internationally sought-after soloist not only to major music centres such as Salzburg, Paris, Helsinki, and New York, but also to festivals in Moscow, Tongyeong in Korea, Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates, and the Forbidden City in Beijing. She performs regularly in the United States, Europe, and Scandinavia and, with increasing frequency since 1984, in Japan.

Her speciality is contemporary music, an interest that has led her to collaborate with numerous composers, including Karlheinz Stockhausen and Shoko Shida in Cologne, Kaija Saariaho in Finland and Paris, Kenichiro Kobayashi in Tokyo, and Anne LeBaron in New York. Camilla Hoytenga is also known for her collaborations with visual artists such as Ansgar Nierhoff, Mutsumi Okada, and Jörg Immendorff, and for her improvisations in galleries and museums—including a sound walk at Insel Hombroich in May 2006.

Camilla Hoytenga can be heard in numerous radio, CD, and television recordings. The multimedia CD-ROM *Prisma* and her album *L'aile du songe*, featuring Kaija Saariaho's flute concerto dedicated to her, have received several awards.

Aleksander Gabrys

Aleksander Gabrys is a double bassist, performer, and composer. He appears as a soloist with ensembles including Klangforum Wien, Ensemble Modern, Collegium Novum Zürich, and *œnm – österreichisches ensemble fuer neue musik*. He has been a permanent member of Ensemble Phoenix Basel since 2001. He has performed in New York, Moscow, Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Cape Town, Montevideo, Tbilisi, Warsaw,

Nairobi, Gothenburg, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Zagreb, Sarajevo, Novi Sad, and Zurich, among other cities, as well as at festivals including the Venice Biennale, MaerzMusik, and Wien Modern. In 2020, he was a resident at Stanford University, where he led a master class for composers and gave a solo recital at CCRMA.

Many composers have dedicated works for double bass to him, including Helmut Oehring, Ulrich Krieger, Douglas McCausland, Edward Bogusławski, Thomas Kessler, Ryszard Gabryś, Krzysztof Knittel, Junghae Lee, Michel Roth, Nicolas Tzortzis, and Erik Ulman.

His compositional output includes works for double bass, chamber music, and computer music, often tending towards paratheatrical forms. Characterized by expressive density, his solo performances are rooted in the tradition of one-person theatre. In 2024, he created and released the film *Sonata b*, based on S. I. Witkiewicz's *Beelzebub Sonata*. In 2025, his double bass concerto *Rio, mein Rio* received its world premiere with Ensemble Phoenix Basel.

Fritz Hauser

Basel musician Fritz Hauser (b. 1953) regularly develops solo programmes for drums and percussion, which he performs throughout the world. His output includes compositions for percussion ensembles and soloists, chamber orchestra, and choir, as well as sound installations and interdisciplinary projects involving theatre, dance, film, radio drama, and architecture.

As a percussionist, he performs and works with ensembles around the world. Numerous recordings, both as a soloist and with various ensembles, document his artistic career. Fritz Hauser received the City of Basel Culture Prize in 2012 and the Basel-Landschaft Culture Prize for Music in 1996. In summer 2018, he was composer-in-residence at the Lucerne Festival, and in 2022 he received the Swiss Music Prize.

Freunde & Freundinnen von SOMBRE

The association Freunde & Freundinnen von Sombre, based in Arlesheim, Switzerland, initially aims to support the music-theatre production SOMBRE – In the Shadows of Our Time in every respect. Beyond this, its principal objective is to bring contemporary music to audiences and to promote and perform it through interdisciplinary projects.

The association pursues these objectives by raising the necessary funds, developing partnerships and collaborations with other institutions and organizations, and establishing a patronage committee composed of figures from culture, politics, sport, business, and academia.

www.sombre.ch

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