



ALARM WILL SOUND

TEN THOUSAND BIRDS

September 25, 2021 | Morris Arboretum

Artistic Director Alan Pierson

Executive Director Gavin Chuck

Assistant Director of Artistic Planning Peter Ferry

Production Manager Jason Varvaro

General Manager Annie Toth

Librarian Chihiro Shibayama

PROGRAM

Ten Thousand Birds (Philadelphia premiere)
John Luther Adams, composer
Conceived, designed and directed by Alan Pierson
Staging and assistant direction by Peter Ferry

Ten Thousand Birds was written for Alarm Will Sound.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Ten Thousand Birds is based on the songs of birds that are native to or migrate through the American Northeast and Midwest. It explores the connections between nature and music, a topic that John Luther Adams has pursued over the course of his remarkable career. Most recently in *Sila: Breath of the World* and *Become Ocean* (for which he won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize and Grammy®) he has portrayed—in big musical gestures—the awe one experiences in response to nature's grandeur. In *Ten Thousand Birds*, on the other hand, the source of inspiration is particular birdsongs, captured in minute detail.

Ten Thousand Birds has an open, modular structure: each page of music can be combined in varied ways. This 70-minute interpretation follows the cycle of a day, starting with bird songs heard in the morning, then afternoon, evening, night and return to morning. It also uses space by moving the performers around the venue as they play and encouraging the audience to walk around to experience the music from many perspectives.

Ten Thousand Birds was supported by New Music USA, made possible by annual program support and/or endowment gifts from Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Helen F. Whitaker Fund, The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Inc., New York State Council on the Arts.

FROM ALAN PIERSON, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

I've lived my entire life in urban spaces, mostly hectic ones: Chicago, New York, Boston. The rumble of cars and trucks has always felt like home. So, when I closed my eyes for my first night of camping out in the wilds of Alaska's Denali National Park, the thing that hit me was the depth of the quiet all around me. The world felt so strangely silent. It was only after some minutes that my ears, gradually acclimating to this unfamiliar world, began to perceive just how alive that world was with sound.

Similarly, when I first looked at John's music for *Ten Thousand Birds*, my very first reaction was shock at what was absent: there was no score in a conventional sense, just page after page of songs for individual instruments, with no indication of how they were to be played in relation to each other. Which songs are played simultaneously? What order should the other songs be played in? And what material would be left out entirely? (This was surely more music than we would play in a single performance!) And where should the players be in relation to each other? I'm used to scores that more specifically convey a composer's vision for a piece, and in the absence of that, I felt confused and unmoored.

The possibilities were overwhelming. I called John: "Um... what do I do here?" He said that it was up to me to structure Alarm Will Sound's performance using the material he'd created. He gave me just one suggestion: "Think about structuring the piece around the cycle of a day."

I loved that idea, which seemed the perfect way to structure music that's so deeply connected to the natural world. John is an artist who grew up in urban spaces too; but it was when he moved to Alaska in the 1970s that he found his voice. So, I carved out some quiet time at my desk, spread out all the pages of music that John had given me, and began to imagine how to put all of this together. Like that first night in Denali, it was only after adjusting to what was missing that I began to appreciate the richness of what was all around me. The day structure suggested a natural arc: beginning and ending with the delicate sounds of wind and the brightly delicate calls of morning birds, with thrilling climaxes that could be created out of aggressive afternoon calls and a cacophony of nighttime frog sounds. There were harmonic shapes to be created. There were opportunities for dialogue and for moments of surprise, drama and humor. And because John hadn't predetermined where players would be placed, I could uniquely create the piece for each environment in which we'd perform it, immersing the audience in a naturalistic musical environment for them to explore.

Despite spending so much time and care envisioning Alarm Will Sound's *Ten Thousand Birds* performance, there was one element that took me completely by surprise at our first performance: how small our own role is in the performance. John is an activist as much as a composer, and his music is always about connecting listeners to the sounds of the natural world. In *Ten Thousand Birds*, the performers are in dialogue with the sounds of the environment and because John filled the piece with sounds of birds of North America, our performances are often joined by the very birds whose songs we're playing.

This experience of connecting with the natural world through John's music has become particularly poignant during the pandemic, since so many of us—myself included—have spent so much of this year indoors, cut off from natural spaces. This poignancy inspired me to create a short online experience of John's piece—called *Ten Thousand Birds / Ten Thousand Screens*—early in the pandemic, and it's brought me back to this music again and again in the year since. I'm so happy to be sharing it with all of you today.

And because it is not a conducted work, I get to not only share *Ten Thousand Birds* with you, but to experience it alongside you. Which is a pleasure I never tire of; there are surprises in every performance. This is music that is utterly alive to the moment and to the ever-changing environment. I'm so happy to get to enjoy it with all of you. Let's explore it together.



Scan for more info on today's program and performers.

UPCOMING EVENTS

NOVEMBER

19 Maceo Parker

DECEMBER

9-11 Dorrance Dance
12 Cécile McLorin Salvant
16 Chris Thile
17 The Crossing @ Christmas

JANUARY

20-22 Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo
28 Campbell Brothers
John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*
30 Cirque Mechanics
Birdhouse Factory

FEBRUARY

4-5 Teatro delle Albe
fedeli d'Amore
4 The Jazz Gallery All-Stars
18-19 Trinity Irish Dance Company

MARCH

11-12 Circa
Humans 2.0
18-19 Rennie Harris: *LIFTED*
26 Ravi Coltrane
27 The Crossing

APRIL

3 SFJAZZ Collective
7 Zakir Hussain
Triveni
21 Lila Downs

MAY

1 Kalabanté
Afrique en Cirque
5-7 Mark Morris Dance Group
Pepperland

JUNE

2-4 MOMIX
Alice



PENN LIVE ARTS
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

PENNLIVEARTS.ORG
215.898.3900   