

## PROFILE: REBECCA SAUNDERS

Rebecca Saunders was born in London in 1967. She studied composition with Nigel Osborne in Edinburgh and with Wolfgang Rihm in Germany. She teaches regularly at the Impuls Academy in Graz and the Darmstadt Summer Academy, and since 2012 has been Professor for Composition at the Hochschule for Music Theatre and Media Hannover. Rebecca is a member of the Berlin Academy of Arts and the Sachsen Academy of Arts in Dresden. Recent accolades include a British Composer Award (2014), the Happy New Ears Composition Prize (2015) and the prestigious Mauricio Kagel Music Prize (2015). From 2013 to 2015 she focused on an expansive series of solo works and extended her series of orchestral concertos to include a double concerto for 2 percussion, *Void*, and a trumpet concerto, *Alba*. A music theatre dance project is planned for 2018 at the Cologne Opera, which will be preceded by a series of vocal compositions over the next two years. She lives in Berlin.



Rebecca Saunders  
(photo: Katrin Schander)

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Q. *What is inspiring you at the moment?*

A. Three sounds. First, two strange vocal noises (I am writing for voice at the moment): a rolled ‘r’ that starts behind almost closed lips, *pianissimo*, then opens suddenly to a full-voiced *forte* – a short, sharp, fragmentary yet expressive gesture which seems (to me at present) to embody a whole world of sonic potential. Also, a ghostly half-air semitone drop held for several seconds. And lastly, a quickly repeated minor third scale played *ppp* very low on the marimba with large bass drum beaters – a haunting blur of dark sound.

I’m also returning again and again to a film on YouTube of an old production of Samuel Beckett’s TV play *Ghost Trio*. The voice-over says, ‘this is the room’s essence ... not being ... now look closer. mere dust. dust is the skin of a room. history is a skin, the older it gets the more impressions are left on its surface. look again’. So now the word ‘skin’ as a possible title circles in my head. This word infers a feast of things: sensuality, sexuality, mortality. The wonderfully intimate, reduced and fragile language of Beckett inspires me again and again. This skeletal fragility coupled with an almost terrifying directness and openness. I find it very powerful, the way he encircles an idea, never quite naming it.

Q. *What’s your working space like? What is most conducive to a productive composing day?*

A. I compose in a separate flat next door to our apartment. One room is full of things and instruments, a piano and paper work (it’s often a complete mess!); the other room is just to write in. It may have several instruments lying around on the floor but is basically empty and white, with two very large desks and blank, white walls where I hang

sketches of the score I am working on. I like the empty resonant acoustic – it seems like it is saturated with the potential of sound.

I can pretty much compose under any circumstances. I do need double espressos to get going in the morning and like to go for a run in the middle of the day if I can. Also, it's ideal if my children are at school, I have no email and I can enjoy the luxury of not talking.

*Q. What are some of the fundamental principles you espouse when teaching?*

A. 1) Necessity: weigh carefully the necessity of each sound you write. At the critical moment forgetting every thought and idea, focusing and listening to the music being written: staying inside the sound. 2) Working closely with performers: exploring an instrument with a performer before writing for it. 3) Defining a clear and precise notation. 4) Encouraging self-criticism/honesty: if something doesn't feel right it is usually simply wrong. 5) Imagine chasing or pursuing your sounds, tracing their path through silence.

*Q. What does collaboration mean to you?*

A. I think it's the basis of my work. The actual act of composition is something I seem only to be able to do completely alone, but working extensively with musicians, exploring sounds, timbres, physical and sonic limits is a critical part of the composing process. There is something wonderfully intimate and fascinating about the relationship between a musician and his or her instrument – observing and engaging with this can be fascinating. With a number of performers I have developed inspiring working relationships over many years, going back again and again to the essence of their playing; exploring the breath, the precision of attack, the very physicality of their playing, is very important to me.

I also very much enjoy my spatial installation pieces where the rehearsal process is more hands-on, working with musicians directly. I like the opportunity to spontaneously write something new, extend or modify something, tailoring it exactly for a given space and performance. It is a healthy change from the 'controlled' full scores I most often write.

*Q. What are you reading at the moment?*

A. I am re-reading Molly Bloom's monologue from *Ulysses*. No, it's true! I am using some sections for the piece I am currently writing.

*Q. Which piece of art (of any media) has most affected you recently?*

A. Beckett's TV plays (see above). I have submerged myself in his works again and am watching the TV plays one by one.

*Q. London/Berlin: what do these cities mean to you?*

A. Home and home; past and present. I have lived in the same apartment in Berlin now for 20 years, which is the longest I have lived anywhere in my life. London was my youth. It has changed dramatically since I left; for me, it is full of memories. Berlin is about my family – it is my children's city.

*Q. Is there a project you are dreaming about creating?*

A. There are two. I would love to work more with dance: I'd be fascinated to modify, extend, contort and manipulate already written pieces, working on them with a choreographer to go further in terms of the physicality of the performance situation. For me, instrumental soloists are often like a protagonist in a kind of abstract

theatre – dance could take this one step further. Also, I think the use of dance and movement would make it possible for me to explore a significantly prolonged use of silence and very, very quiet music.

The other fantasy I have is to extend a recent music box installation, doubling it in scale and creating an acoustic dialogue between two enormous banks, each of 2500 music boxes. It sounds crazy I know, but it isn't sweet at all, rather, strangely brutalistic. The single sonic image that emerges is quite startling and incredibly loud.