# Saunders, Rebecca (1967–)

Mark Barden

One of her generation’s foremost composers, Saunders was born into a musical family (both parents were freelance musicians) on 19 December and raised in Brixton, a suburb in southeast London. Upon completing her bachelor’s degree in violin and composition (with Nigel Osborne) at the University of Edinburgh, Saunders moved to Germany in 1991 and, abandoning violin, dedicated herself fully to compositional studies with Wolfgang Rihm. She returned to Edinburgh for her doctorate in 1994, permanently relocating to Berlin in 1997. Among her many awards are a DAAD fellowship (1991–94), the Busoni Förderpreis from the Berlin Academy of the Arts (1995), an Ernst von Siemens Förderpreis (1996), the Paul Hindemith Prize (2003), and the GEMA Deutscher Musikautorenpreis (2010). She was Composer-in-Residence at the Konzerthaus in Dortmund from 2005–06 and Capell-Compositeur at the Staatskapelle Dresden from 2009–10. Following guest professorships in Dresden and Cologne, she was appointed Professor of Composition at Hochschule für Musik, Theater und Medien in Hanover in 2012. She is frequently invited to give masterclasses and workshops at prominent music schools and international festivals (Darmstadt Summer Courses, Oberlin Conservatory, impuls academy, Ostrava New Music Days, Hochschule für Musik Freiburg, and others).

Saunders accentuates in her music the sensuous qualities of sound (in particular of those produced by so-called extended performance techniques) and the physicality of corporeal gesture within a reduced harmonic context based on clusters, seconds, and microtonal inflections. When composing, she will often tape large portions of the score to the wall to visualize more clearly the work’s morphology—a practice that accentuates her intuitive, sculptural approach to musical form. Silence plays a major, recurrent role in her works; extended pauses are common and sounds often seamlessly emerge from and dissolve into silence.

Musical influences include Palestrina’s counterpoint, Ustvolskaya’s brutal contrasts and severe reduction of material, Feldman’s care for his material and unabashed delight in pulchritude, Webern’s precision, Cage’s radio pieces, Brahms’ lyricism, and the dense sound masses of Xenakis’ orchestral writing. Meticulously detailed “sound palettes”—ever-expanding catalogues of sounds and playing techniques developed in close collaboration with leading performers of contemporary music such as Teodoro Anzelotti, Séverine Ballon, Helen Bledsoe, Carl Rosman, Carolin Widmann, *et al*.—form the basis for her musical material and, germinating as they do intuitively from the seeds of this material, indeed for the works themselves. Much of her oeuvre is concerned with presence and absence, with early works often establishing dialectic relationships between “objects” (her term for vertical sound events, usually brief and loud) and “resonances” (the horizontal sonic textures to which “objects” give rise, usually prolonged and quiet). Later works couple this with an interest in a collage technique that superimposes independently composed layers of material, some of which are performable as concert works in their own right. The concert installation *chroma* (2003), the choreographic installation *Insideout* (2003, with Sasha Waltz), and the spatial collage *Stasis* (2011) employ spatialisation of musicians as a vital compositional parameter. Recent collage works such as *stirrings still* and *murmurs* abandon loud sounds altogether, exploring instead fragility and near-silence. Noteworthy is also her use of nostalgic technology (radios, music boxes, 78rpm gramophones, Korg organ) and less-common concert instruments (button accordion, electric guitar, double-bell trumpet, Baroque strings), as well as her growing body of virtuosic concerti (*cinnabar, miniata, still*) that pit soloist(s) against orchestra.

## Key Works

*dichroic seventeen,* for piano, two percussionists, two double basses, accordion, and e-guitar (1996)

*quartet,* for piano, violin, double bass, and accordion (1998)

*cinnabar*, for violin, trumpet, and ensemble (1999)

*vermilion*, for clarinet, electric guitar, and violoncello (2003)

*insideout*, music for the choreographic installation by Sasha Waltz (2003)

*miniata,* for solo piano, solo accordion, choir and symphony orchestra (2004)

*blaauw*, for double-bell trumpet (2004)

*a visible trace,* for eleven soloists (2006)

*traces*, for orchestra (2006–09)

*still,* for violin and orchestra (2011)

*Stasis*, a spatial collage for sixteen soloists (2011)

*chroma*, for chamber groups in several spaces (2003–2013)

## Further Reading

Wilkins, Caroline. “Die britische Komponistin Rebecca Saunders” *MusikTexte* v.88 February 2001

R. A D I I N G T O N , The Music of R. Saunders, in; MT 1 4 0 , 1 9 9 9 , 4 8

» CWLLKINS, In Stille jerahmt Ein Portrflt der brit Komponistin RSounders,

in:

MusikTexte 8 8 , 2 0 0 1 , 4 8

Supplemental Materials

1. Interview (German): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIkvcW8UsHA>
2. EN Profile on Peters website: <http://www.edition-peters.com/composer/Saunders-Rebecca>
3. DE Profile on Peters website: <https://www.edition-peters.de/cms/englisch/general/komponist.html?composer_id=368>
4. Brief video piece on Stasis @ 2011 Donausechingen Festival (Köhler description, ‘sculpture’) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LWhh7oh_z8>
5. Marco Blaauw demonstrates double-bell trumpet (Saunders’s composition *BLAAUW* is a pioneering work for this instrument, written especially for Mr. Blaauw): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=1Bj8Al9vk4o>