


Mogens Christensen

Growing Darkness

Messiaen Quartet Copenhagen



Mogens Christensen (b. 1955)

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Messiaen Quartet Copenhagen

Malin William-Olsson, violin

Carl-Oscar Østerlind, cello

Viktor Wennesz, clarinet

Kristoffer Hyldig, piano

1 **Nordic Summer Ghosts** (1996) 9:39  
for piano trio

2 **Gura – Det groende mørke** ('Gura – The Growing Darkness') (1993) 25:27  
for clarinet, cello and piano

3 **Angelo silente** (1994) 14:19  
for violin, clarinet, piano and cello

**Flumina mortis** (2022) 23:59  
for violin, clarinet, piano and cello

4 **Styx** 4:42

5 **Acheron** 3:29

6 **Phlegethon** 5:44

7 **Cocytus** 4:24

8 **Lethe** 5:40

Total 73:50

World premiere recordings<sup>3-8</sup>

Live recording<sup>4-8</sup>



## Between Dream and Reality

By Andrew Mellor

Mogens Christensen is one of Denmark's foremost musical communicators, whether in disseminating the wonders of the art form for children and students or in writing music that manages to combine the poetic and the functional – that unites the fluidity of dreams and poetry with an aphoristic concision.

Christensen was born on Læsø, a Danish island in the Kattegat between the Jutland peninsula and the west coast of Sweden. He was raised in the North Jutland city of Aalborg and in 1983 enrolled as a composition student at the Royal Academy of Music, Aarhus, where he was made aware of the power of the musical statement by Per Nørgård; of the importance of structure by Hans Abrahamsen

and of the world beyond lyricism by Poul Ruders.

Later that decade, Christensen established himself as a teacher at higher education institutions around Denmark, also teaching at the Bergen Academy of Music in Norway. But he soon returned to his studies, this time in Copenhagen, graduating from Ib Nørholm's composition class at the Royal Danish Academy of Music in 1993 with a concert including seven original works.

Poetry was a significant influence in Christensen's early career, when he produced settings of verse by Friedrich Hölderlin and Ole Sarvig, and was notably influenced by the latter's visions of the crisis of modernity. A 1983 setting of Hölderlin's poem 'Hyperions Schicksalslied' from the novel *Hyperion* reveals Christensen's ability to blend the Arcadian and the functional in an apparent meeting of French and Nordic ideals.

Christensen's delight in the object of his inspiration comes across

strongly in music that aspires to take its audience by the hand. It is influenced as much by literary models as by dreams, fantasies, fairy tales and the animal kingdom. His music first came to international attention when the chamber work *Vinterlys* ('Winter Light') was picked up by UNESCO's forum for new music in 1994 – the middle of a decade in which the composer produced a series of significant works of chamber music.

Across a career of over four decades, Christensen has written operatic, symphonic, sinfonietta, chamber, solo and vocal works. He was the first composer appointed to a composer-in-residence position in Denmark when he took up that role with the Copenhagen Phil in 1997 following a series of fruitful collaborations which included the orchestra performing his works at the Festspielhaus in Salzburg. Residencies followed at the Randers Chamber Orchestra and Athelas Sinfonietta.

In addition to composing, Christensen has created a considerable legacy

as a musical educator through books, works, collaborations, pioneering educational projects and his appointment in 2005 as Denmark's first Professor of Music Communication at the West Jutland Music Conservatory in Esbjerg (now the Danish National Academy of Music). Being a musical educator, entrepreneur and realist has surely shaped Christensen's musical thinking and the work it has produced.

#### **Nordic Summer Ghosts (1996)**

Christensen's piano trio *Nordic Summer Ghosts* was commissioned by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. One August day shortly before it was written, the composer found himself in the dungeon of the castle at Hämeenlinna – the small Finnish town that is famous as the birthplace of the composer Jean Sibelius.

'Whether it was the place, the eeriness or the warmth, I cannot say,' writes the composer, 'but it was as if familiar apparitions, submissive ghosts and friendly composer spirits

were standing in line – indeed, even talking to each other.' His only task, he reports, was to write down what he heard, and 'a rejuvenated *Ghost Trio* took shape just as imperceptibly' (the reference is to Beethoven's Piano Trio No. 5).

The work contains a few Christensen fingerprints: the alternation of fast, agitated music with slow, ethereal music being one; another being the sharp rhythmic profile that is often overlooked in commentary on his music. The single-movement trio starts out almost as a gaseous presence – existing only in the air, appearing here and there. Ghostly harmonics on cello and violin seem to lure the piano into its own series of ghoulish, glassy chords but as the work proceeds, the music steadily feels more present and more real.

#### **Gura – Det groende mørke (1993)**

While working on a new clarinet trio commissioned by Ensemble Lin and the Dartington International Summer

School in Britain, Christensen became increasingly absorbed by the myth of Gura, as written by the Danish Nobel laureate Johannes V. Jensen. The myth, in Christensen's words, 'slowly but inexorably crept into the universe of the work'.

The composer describes the intangible figure of Gura as 'a fog' who exists 'in the divide between day and night'. You sense, writes Christensen, that 'she contains the memory mass of all humanity'. As for her effect on the 25-minute, single span of his highly distilled trio, 'she takes over more and more ... like an enveloping fog'. Eventually she gave the work its title: *Gura – Det groende mørke* ('Gura – The Growing Darkness').

The trio opens with a serpentine clarinet solo and is gradually lifted some way out of the shadows by the arrival of the piano and cello. Together, the three instruments interact like elements of a kinetic sculpture, highly aerated and carefully balanced until they reach a more brittle and con-

frontational central section. A long, exploratory cello solo coaxes the other instruments into a delicate union again, before the work apparently ascends to a plateau created by a long, sustained E-flat drone in the cello to which the clarinet adds languorous multiphonics – an effect likened by one critic to ‘a magical illusion of the suspension of time’.

#### **Angelo silente (1994)**

In the early days of laptop computers, at the old monastery at San Cataldo on Italy’s Amalfi Coast, Christensen began work on his quartet for violin, clarinet, piano and cello – writing on an example of said device. During a violent thunderstorm, the file containing the work disappeared, and had not been backed up. The work, untitled at the time, had to be rewritten from scratch. In another of the monastery’s cells, the professor of literature Erik A. Nielsen consoled Christensen with recollections of the poem by Rilke which tells of an angel who remembers

everything others forget – the Silent Angel (‘Angelo silente’).

‘If there is an angel in the piece,’ writes Christensen, ‘it is not one drawn from idylls.’ More likely, the composer suggests, is that this angel channels another theme from Rilke – that of the violent, terrifying and whirling revelation. He quotes Rilke’s First Duino Elegy: ‘Who would hear me if I screamed in the throng of angels? / and if one of them suddenly took me to heart: / then I would be destroyed simply by the strength of its presence.’

The work opens with an almost diabolical fury and proceeds to push instrumental capabilities to extremes. Amid this discourse, musical gestures appear that try but mostly fail to bring peace and concord or to lift the music out of its petrified state. Eventually, a lilting piano solo seems to do the trick by briefly recalling music from another time and place – the Silent Angel, perhaps? It persuades the other instruments to join it on an exalted ascent.

#### **Flumina mortis (2022)**

The quartet for violin, clarinet, piano and cello *Flumina mortis* was written for Messiaen Quartet Copenhagen with support from the Danish Arts Foundation and first performed on 26 January 2024. The title, Latin for ‘Rivers of Death’, refers to the five rivers in Hades’s underworld. Each of the rivers, referred to in various sources of ancient Greek and Roman literature as well as Renaissance plays and stories, is given a movement to itself. The stories associated with these rivers are ambiguous and often incoherent; they are best understood, says Christensen, as continuously flowing narratives.

From sources including the legend of Orpheus, Charon is known as the ferryman of the River Styx. Christensen describes the river as ‘the great portal into the inexplicable’. His music suggests deep, dark, still waters until it surges with energy; gradually, the music appears to make it to the other side.

Some ancient sources have Charon as the ferryman not of the Styx, but of the River Acheron. The music for this movement is characterised by a fixed melody that ‘dissolves and transforms into unrecognisable echoes of itself’, in the composer’s words; the shadow voices of the dead, perhaps, that resound over the river of pain and lost souls.

The Phlegethon is the underworld’s purifying flood of fire – an unstoppable, movable furnace represented here by a musical *moto perpetuo* that roars to a flashpoint. The Cocytus is the river of lamentation and weeping on whose banks reside the unredeemed souls that Charon refused to transport. In its music, a flutter-tongued clarinet seems caught in limbo before arriving at pitchless tapping; ‘Are there memories of the life lived, in the music, that will not completely disappear?’ asks the composer.

The Lethe, which flowed around the cave of Hypnos, was known by the Greeks as the ‘river of unmindful-

ness' – where the dead would drink the waters to forget their earthly existence. In the tradition of a multi-movement work, this last movement appears to digest and then relieve itself of what has gone before. 'The purified soul is in the grip of new powers,' says the composer; 'in the music, you can now see the great portal from the inside, so to speak.'

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*Andrew Mellor is a freelance journalist and critic based in Copenhagen and author of The Northern Silence – Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture (Yale University Press, 2022).*

**Messiaen Quartet Copenhagen** comprises violinist Malin William-Olsson, cellist Carl-Oscar Østerlind, clarinetist Viktor Wennesz and pianist Kristoffer Hyldig. Founded in 2018, the ensemble takes its inspiration from Olivier Messiaen's iconic *Quartet for the End of Time*, a work whose unique combination of instruments offers a wealth of diverse sonorous possibilities. This instrumentation has driven the quartet to actively expand its repertoire through contemporary commissions and acclaimed transcriptions of orchestral staples such as Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* and Schönberg's *Verklärte Nacht*. By blending symphonic grandeur with the poignant intimacy of chamber music, the quartet has established a vibrant presence on the music scene, with regular broadcasts on DR P2 and collaborations with renowned artists such as violinist Ray Chen. The players all possess extensive international experience as soloists and chamber musicians, and their tireless exploration of

a wide-ranging repertoire allows the group to create concert programmes that highlight the contrast between different musical eras while constantly challenging the specific boundaries of their instrumentation.



## Mellem drøm og virkelighed

Af Andrew Mellor

Mogens Christensen er en af Danmarks førende musikformidlere, uanset om han åbner kunstformens forunderlige verden for børn og elever eller selv skriver musik, som formår at kombinere det lyriske med det funktionelle – som forener drømmenes og poesiers flydende karakter med aforistisk præcision.

Christensen er født på Læsø. Han voksede op i Aalborg og blev i 1983 optaget som kompositionselev på Det Jyske Musikkonservatorium i Aarhus, hvor han stiftede bekendtskab med det musikalske udsagnskraft hos Per Nørgård, med strukturens betydning hos Hans Abrahamsen og med en verden hinsides det lyriske hos Poul Ruders.

Senere i samme årti begyndte Christensen at markere sig som lærer

ved højere undervisningsinstitutioner i Danmark samt på det daværende musikkonservatorium i Bergen. Han vendte imidlertid hurtigt tilbage til studierne, denne gang i København, hvor han i 1993 havde debutkoncert fra Ib Nørholms kompositions-klasse på Det Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatorium med syv originale værker.

Poesi spillede en væsentlig rolle for den tidlige del af Christensens karriere, hvor han satte digte af Friedrich Hölderlin og Ole Sarvig i musik og samtidig blev stærkt påvirket af Sarvigs forestillinger om modernitetens krise. En tonesætning fra 1983 af Hölderlins 'Hyperions Schicksalslied' fra romanen *Hyperion* viser Christensens evne til at forene det arkadiske og det funktionelle som et møde mellem franske og nordiske idealer.

Christensens glæde ved sine forskellige inspirationskilder kommer navnlig til udtryk i musik med ambitioner om at tage publikum ved hånden. Den er lige så påvirket af litterære

forbilleder som af drømme, fantasier, eventyr og dyreriget. Han vakte første gang international opmærksomhed med kammermusikværket *Vinterlys*, som i 1994 blev udvalgt til UNESCOs forum for ny musik – endda midt i et årti, hvor komponisten producerede en hel række betydningsfulde kammermusikværker.

Gennem over 40 år har Christensen skrevet både opera, symfonisk musik, musik for sinfonietta, kammermusik, solo- og vokalværker. I 1997 fik han som den første komponist i Danmark nogensinde titel af huskomponist, da det daværende Sjællands Symfoniorkester udnævnte ham til posten efter en række frugtbare samarbejder, hvor orkestret blandt andet opførte værker af ham i Salzburg Festspielhaus. Senere fulgte poster som huskomponist hos Randers Kammerorkester og Athelas Sinfonietta.

Ud over at komponere har Christensen også haft stor betydning som underviser både gennem bøger, værker, samarbejder, nyskabende ud-

dannelsesprojekter og udnævnelsen i 2005 til Danmarks første professorat i musikformidling ved Vestjysk Musikkonservatorium i Esbjerg (nu Syddansk Musikkonservatorium). Arbejdet som musikunderviser, iværksætter og praktiker har givetvis været med til at forme Christensens musikalske tankesæt og de deraf følgende værker.

#### **Nordic Summer Ghosts (1996)**

Christensens klavertrio *Nordic Summer Ghosts* er et bestillingsværk fra DR. En dag i august kort tid før værkets tilblivelse befandt komponisten sig i fangehullet på slottet i den finske by Hämeenlinna.

“Om det var stedet (Sibelius’ fødeby), uhyggen eller varmen skal ikke kunne siges,” skriver komponisten, “men det var, som om velkendte genfærd, underdanige spøgelser og venligtsindede ånder stod i kø – ja, ligefrem talte i munden på hverandre. Det var blot at fatte pennen og skrive ned: En forynget *Geistertrio* tog lige så

umærkeligt form ...” (der hentydes til Beethovens klavertrio nr. 5).

Værket omfatter flere af Christensens kendetegn, for eksempel skift mellem hurtig, agiteret musik og langsom, æterisk; et andet er den skarpe, rytmiske profil, som ofte overses i beskrivelser af hans musik. Trioen i én sats begynder næsten som et flygtigt væsen, der kun findes i luften og dukker op hist og her. Spøgelsesagtige overtoner på cello og violin synes at lokke klaveret til selv at bevæge sig ind i en række makabre, glasklare akkorder, men efterhånden som værket udvikler sig, føles musikken stadig mere nærværende og mere virkelig.

#### **Gura – Det groende mørke (1993)**

Under arbejdet på en ny klarinettrio, et bestillingsværk fra Ensemble Lin og Dartington International Summer School i Storbritannien, blev Christensen i stigende grad optaget af myten om Gura, som man finder den hos Johannes V. Jensen, og med kompo-

nistens egne ord sneg erindringen om myten sig “langsomt, men ufravigeligt ind i værkets univers”.

Komponisten kalder Guras flygtige skikkelse for “en tåge”, der med Johannes V. Jensens ord “holder sig midt i skellet mellem dag og nat”. “Man fornemmer,” skriver komponisten, “at hun rummer hele menneskehedens erindringsmasse.” Til sidst kom hun også til at give værket dets titel: *Gura – Det groende mørke*.

Trioen begynder med en bugtet klarinetsolo og bliver gradvist løftet delvist ud af skyggerne ved klaverets og celloens ankomst. Tilsammen fungerer de tre instrumenter som elementer i en mobile, meget luftigt og omhyggeligt afbalanceret, indtil de rammer en mere strittende og konfrontatorisk midterdel. En lang, søgende cellosolo trækker på ny de andre instrumenter med i en sart forening, før værket synes at stige op til et plateau med udgangspunkt i en lang, vedvarende drone på tonen Es i celloen, tilføjet længselsfulde

multifoner i klarinetten – en kritiker har sammenlignet virkningen med “et magisk illusionsnummer om tidens ophævelse”.

### Angelo silente (1994)

I de bærbare computers barndom begyndte Christensen under et ophold på San Cataldo-klosteret ved Amalfikysten i Italien kompositionen af sin kvartet for violin, klarinet, klaver og cello – på et sådant apparat. Under et uvejr forsvandt filen med værket uden at være blevet sikkerhedskopieret. Det endnu titelløse værk måtte komponeres helt forfra. I en anden af klostercellerne trøstede litteraturprofessor Erik A. Nielsen Christensen med at mindes Rilkes digt om en engel, der kan huske alt det, som andre glemmer – Den Tavse Engel (*Angelo silente*).

“For så vidt der overhovedet er en engel i stykket,” skriver Christensen, “hører den næppe til i den idylliserede og glansbilledagtige sfære. Mere sandsynligt kunne den være en voldsom, rædselsvækkende og hvirvlende

åbenbaring.” Han citerer Rilkes første Duino-elegi: “Hvem ville høre mig, hvis jeg skreg i englenes vrimmel? / og om en af dem pludseligt tog mig til hjerte: / da ville jeg tilintetgøres blot ved dens stærkere tilstedeværelse.”

Værket åbner med nærmest diabolisk vrede og fortsætter med at presse instrumenternes muligheder til det yderste. Midt i dette forløb viser der sig musikalske gestus, som hovedsagelig uden held formår at tilføre fred og enighed eller løfte musikken ud af dens forstenede tilstand. Til sidst synes en melodisk klaversolo at formå det ved kortvarigt at mindes musik fra en anden tid og et andet sted – måske Den Tavse Engel? Den overtaler de andre instrumenter til at slutte sig til i en højstemt opstigning.

### Flumina mortis (2022)

Kvartetten *Flumina mortis* for violin, klarinet, klaver og cello er skrevet til Messiaen Quartet Copenhagen med støtte fra Statens Kunstfond og blev uropført den 26. januar 2024. Titlen

er latin for ‘dødens floder’ og hentyder til de fem floder i Hades’ underverden. Hver enkelt af floderne, der både omtales i forskellige kilder i oldtidens græske og romerske litteratur samt i skuespil og fortællinger fra renæssancen, får sin egen sats. Historien om floderne er tvetydig og ofte usammenhængende og kan ifølge Christensen bedst forstås som kontinuerligt strømrende fortællinger.

Fra kilder, heriblandt sagnet om Orfeus, kendes Charon som færgeomanden ved floden Styx. Christensen beskriver floden som “den store portal til det uforklarlige”. Hans musik antyder dybe, mørke og stillestående vande, men så begynder energien at tage til, og efterhånden lykkes det tilsyneladende for musikken at nå over på den modsatte side.

Ifølge visse oldtidskilder er Charon ikke færgemand ved Styx, men ved floden Acheron. Musikken i denne sats kendetegnes ved en klart defineret melodi, som med komponistens egne ord “opløser sig og forvandler sig til

uigenkendelige ekkoer af sig selv”; måske de dødes skyggestemmer, der klinger videre hen over floden af smerte og fortabte sjæle.

Phlegethon er underverdenens rensende flod af ild – en ustopkelig smeltedigel i bevægelse, som her symboliseres af et musikalsk *moto perpetuo*, som brøler hen mod et kulminationspunkt. Cocytus er floden for klagesange og gråd fra bredderne, der er hjemsted for de sjæle, der ikke er blevet frelst, og som Charon nægter at færge over. I musikken synes en klarinet med *Flatterzunge* (en vibrerende tungeteknik) fanget i limbo, der til sidst ender i en toneløs klappen på instrumentets klapper; “findes der minder i musikken om det levede liv, der nægter at forsvinde helt?” spørger komponisten.

Lethe, som løb forbi Hypnos’ hule, var blandt grækerne kendt som “glem-somhedens flod”, hvor de døde drak af vandet for at glemme deres jordiske liv. I traditionen for værker i flere satser synes den sidste sats at fortære og

derefter udskille det foregående. “Den lutrede sjæl er underlagt nye kræfter”, siger komponisten, “og i musikken ser man nu så at sige den store portal indefra.”

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*Andrew Mellor er freelancejournalist og kritiker med base i København og forfatter til The Northern Silence – Journeys in Nordic Music and Culture (Yale University Press, 2022).*

**Messiaen Quartet Copenhagen** består af violinisten Malin William-Olsson, cellisten Carl-Oscar Østerlind, klarinetisten Viktor Wennesz og pianisten Kristoffer Hyldig. Ensemblet blev grund-

lagt i 2018 med afsæt i Olivier Messiaens ikoniske *Kvartet til tidens ende*, hvis unikke instrumentkombination åbner for et væld af klanglige muligheder. Denne besætning har inspireret kvartetten til en yderst aktiv udvidelse af repertoiret gennem bestillinger hos nutidige komponister og anerkendte transskriptioner af store orkesterværker som Debussys *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* og Schönbergs *Verklärte Nacht*. Ved at forene symfonisk storhed med kammermusikkens tætte intimitet har ensemblet skabt en række markante koncertoplevelser, der ofte transmitteres i DR P2 og har inkluderet samarbejder med internationale solister som violinisten Ray Chen. Musikerne bringer alle mange års international erfaring med sig som både solister og kammermusikere, og deres utrættelige udforskning af det brede repertoire gør det muligt at skabe programmer, der udfordrer besætningens rammer og sætter forskellige tiders musik op mod hinanden i en intens, musikalsk dialog.

**DDD**

Recorded at Mantzius, Birkerød, 3 March 2019 (*Nordic Summer Ghosts, Gura, Angelo silente*) and live at Unitarernes Hus, Copenhagen, 26 January 2024 (*Flumina mortis*)

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