

Plain Air

Lucy Goddard *mezzo-soprano*
Siwan Rhys *piano*

JAMES WEEKS (b. 1978)
Plain Air

1 Plain Air (2021–23) [53:19]
for mezzo-soprano, piano and electronics

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James WEEKS: Plain Air

Plain Air is a response to one of the most extraordinary and celebrated works of nature-writing in English, *The Living Mountain* (1977), a lyrical, visionary text by the Scottish writer Nan Shepherd (1893–1981), detailing her experiences over many years of walking in the Cairngorms.

One of the beauties of Shepherd's book (together with her limpidly poetic style) is the way that her attention to the tiniest details of the mountain world she encounters opens up paths of profound philosophical reflection. Her writing has been described as a kind of informal phenomenology: she observes her environment with crystalline precision – its weathers, terrains, animals, birds, plants – and explores minutely its effect on her as she traverses it – how the light falls on a particular loch, the feel of different textures of plants or cold water against her legs, the sounds of birds and wind. By the close of the book she has identified herself completely with the mountain world:

‘I have walked out of the body and into the mountain. I am a manifestation of its total life, as is the starry saxifrage or the white-winged ptarmigan.’
(Chapter 12, ‘Being’)

This is reminiscent of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961):

‘Myself as the one contemplating the blue of the sky is not an acosmic subject standing before it [...] Rather, I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it “thinks itself in me.” I am this sky that gathers together, composes itself, and begins to exist for itself, my consciousness is saturated by this unlimited blue.’

(*Phenomenology of Perception*, II.1.c)

Of particular importance to Shepherd's writing is her sense of the scale of the landscape, and how that interacts with the level of individual detail: part of her genius lies in the way she builds up the living texture of the Cairngorms in the reader's mind through multiple vantage points, sometimes deployed with almost kaleidoscopic speed, other times slowing down to focus on one particular phenomenon in detail:

‘The sound of all this moving water is as integral to the mountain as pollen is to the flower. One hears it without listening as one breathes without thinking. But to a listening ear the sound disintegrates into many different notes – the slow slap of a loch, the high clear trill of a rivulet, the roar of spate. On one short stretch of burn the ear may distinguish a dozen different notes at once.’
(Chapter 4, ‘Water’)

We are standing in one position but – if we listen closely – we

hear a multiplicity, all coming from different places, all with different speeds, forces, sounds. In this single spot to which Shepherd has brought us, we hear all of the mountain's waters at once, picture the torrent, the rivulet and the loch in the space of the sentence: the mountain's scale and terrain is both universal and particular at the same time. And this image is set up with another, even more disarming, almost surreal: the equating of mountain with flower – the colossal with the tiny.

In *Plain Air*, I was interested in creating a sense of scale through a kind of musicalised empty space, into which are placed a series of vocal episodes setting Shepherd's exploration of the different sensory stimuli of the mountain. The space is articulated by piano and electronic tones – a container for weather, light, the textures and resonances

of the landscape. Each vocal episode is in two parts, a recitation followed by a wordless vocalise. In the vocalise sections I aimed to draw out the strong sense of embodiment in Shepherd's writing: not only her mind but her body is inhabiting this place, walking, breathing, sensing, feeling. Over the course of the piece, these episodes gradually expand the range of the singer upwards and outwards from simple breath sounds, until the body is entirely opened up by its own sounding.

The title, *Plain Air*, is a kind of mistranscription of 'plein air' – 'outdoors'. If Shepherd had been a painter she would surely have painted *en plein air*; I like, too, the association of plain with openness, and perhaps too the plateau terrain of much Cairngorm landscape.

James Weeks, 2026

Nan Shepherd
The Living Mountain

from *Chapter 11, 'The Senses'*

[04:58]

For the ear, the most vital thing that can be listened to here is silence. To bend the ear to silence is to discover how seldom it is there. Always something moves. When the air is quite still, there is always running water; and up here that is a sound one can hardly lose, though on many stony parts of the plateau one is above the watercourses. But now and then comes an hour when the silence is all but absolute, and listening to it one slips out of time. Such a silence is not a mere negation of sound. It is like a new element, and if water is still sounding with a low far-off murmur, it is no more than the last edge of an element we are leaving, as the last edge of land hangs on the mariner's horizon. Such moments come in mist, or snow, or a summer night (when it is cool for the clouds of insects to be abroad), or a September dawn. In September dawns I hardly breathe – I am an image in a ball of glass. The world is suspended there, and I in it.

[...]

[10:15]

Bird song, and the noises birds make that are not singing, and the small sounds of their movements, are for the ear to catch. If there is one bird-call more than another that for me embodies the spirit of the mountain, it is the cry of the golden plover running in the bare and lonely places.

[...]

[15:08]

The palate can taste the wild berries, blaeberry, 'wild free-born cranberry' and, most subtle and sweet of all, the avern or cloudberry, a name like a dream. [...] One must find the berries, golden-ripe, to know their taste.

So with the scents. All the aromatic and heady fragrances – pine and birch, bog myrtle, the spicy juniper, heather and the honey-sweet orchis, and the clean smell of wild thyme – mean nothing at all in words. They are there, to be smelled. [...] On a hot moist midsummer day, I have caught a rich fruity perfume rising from the mat of grass, moss and wild berry bushes that covers so much of the plateau. The earthy smell of moss, and the soil itself, is best savoured by grubbing. Sometimes the rank smell of deer assails one's nostril, and in the spring the sharp scent of fire.

[...]

[21:25]

The eye brings infinity into my vision. I am lying on my back, while over me huge cumuli tear past upon a furious gale. But beyond them, very far away, in a remote pure sky, there float pale exquisite striations of cloud that can hardly be detected. I close one eye and they recede, only with both eyes open do they come into sharp enough focus for me to be sure that they are there. So now I know that the mountain makes its own wind, for these pale striae float almost motionless, while still the gale above my head drives the monstrous

cumuli on. It is the eye that discovers the mystery of light, not only the moon and the stars and the vast splendours of the Aurora, but the endless changes the earth itself undergoes under changing lights.

[...]

[22:47]

Now scaur and gully take on a gloss, now they shimmer, now they are stark – like a painting without perspective, in which objects are depicted all on one plane and of the same size, they fill the canvas and there is neither foreground nor background. Now, there are sky-blue curves on the water as its slides over stones, now an impenetrable tarry blackness, slightly silvered like tar. The naked birches, if I face the sun, look black, a shining black, fine carved ebony. But if the sun is behind me it penetrates a red cloud of twigs and picks out vividly the white trunks, as though the cloud of red were behind the trunks.

[...]

[27:50]

Other delights the eye can catch – quick moments that pass and are gone for ever: spray blown like smoke from a mountain loch in a gale; a green gleam on the snow where I know a loch lies, caught before I can see the water itself; Loch Avon, glimpsed on a rainy day from the side of the rocky burn above it, as deep a green as Loch an Uaine itself; a rainbow wavering and flickering, formed on a small shower blown by a furious wind; the air quivering above sun-filled

hollows on drowsy summer afternoons; a double rainbow, dark sky between, arched over the river, its reflection stretching from bank to bank.

How can I number the worlds to which the eye gives me entry? – the world of light, of colour, of shape, of shadow: of mathematical precision in the snowflake, the ice formation, the quartz crystal, the patterns of stamen and petal: of rhythm in the fluid curve and plunging line of the mountain faces.

[...]

[35:00]

A certain kind of consciousness interacts with the mountain-forms to create this sense of beauty. [...] It is, as with all creation, matter impregnated with mind: but the resultant issue is a living spirit, a glow in the consciousness, that perishes when the glow is dead. It is something snatched from non-being, that shadow which creeps in on us continuously and can be held off by creative act. So, simply to look on anything, such as mountain, with the love that penetrates to its essence, is to widen the domain of being in the vastness of non-being.

[...]

[35:35]

The feel of things, textures, surfaces, rough things like cones and bark, smooth things like stalks and feathers and pebbles rounded by water, the teasing of gossamers, the delicate

tickle of a crawling caterpillar, the scratchiness of lichen, the warmth of the sun, the sting of hail, the blunt blow of tumbling water, the flow of wind – nothing that I can touch or that touches me but has its own identity for the hand as much as the eye.

[...]

[42:10]

In fording a swollen stream, one's strongest sensation is of the pouring strength of the water against one's limbs; the effort to poise the body against it gives significance to this simple act of walking through running water. Early in the season the water may be so cold that one has no sensation except of cold; the whole being retracts itself, uses all its resources to endure this icy delight. But in heat the freshness of the water slides over the skin like shadow. The whole skin has this delightful sensitivity; it feels the sun, it feels the wind running inside one's garment, it feels water closing on it as one slips under – the catch in the breath, like a wave held back, the glow that releases one's entire cosmos, running to the ends of the body as the spent wave runs out upon the sand.

[...]

from *Chapter 12, 'Being'*

[50:31]

Here then may be lived a life of the senses so pure, so untouched by any mode of apprehension but their own, that the body may be said to think. Each sense heightened to its most exquisite awareness is in itself a total experience.

[...]

[51:05]

It is therefore when the body is keyed to its highest potential and controlled to a profound harmony deepening into something that resembles a trance, that I discover most nearly what it is to be. I have walked out of the body and into the mountain. I am a manifestation of its total life, as is the starry saxifrage or the white-winged ptarmigan.

James Weeks (b. 1978) is a composer, conductor and artistic director, based in the North of England.

His music typically explores pared-down musical materials, microtonality and Just Intonation, and ideas of duration and temporality, text and rhetoric, and plain-speaking. His most recent work has focused increasingly on a deeply embodied relationship with the natural world.

His music has been performed and broadcast worldwide, and numerous recordings of his work have been released, including recently *GOMBERT* (Another Timbre, 2025), *Primo Libro* (New Focus, 2024), *Book of Flames and Shadows* (Winter&Winter, 2022) and *Summer* (Another Timbre, 2021).

Collaborators and performers of his work have included GBSR Duo, Quatuor Bozzini, Explore Ensemble, London Sinfonietta, Royal Northern Sinfonia, BBCSSO, Ives Ensemble, Plus-Minus, An Assembly, Talea, EXAUDI, Ekmeles, CoMA, Mira Benjamin,

Saviet/Houston, Apartment House and Anton Lukoszevieze. Awards include a British Composer Award (2018) for *Libro di fiammelle e ombre*, written for EXAUDI, and an Ivors Academy Composer Award (2019) for *Leafleohht*, written for Quatuor Bozzini.

In 2002 he founded EXAUDI with soprano Juliet Fraser, now regarded as one of the world's leading vocal ensembles for new music, with whom he maintains a busy international touring and recording schedule. In demand as a conductor of new music across the UK and Europe, he has also worked extensively with amateur and young musicians, and in 2025 he founded the project Composing Ecology, exploring creative engagement with the soundscapes of natural ecosystems in participatory contexts as a way to enhance environmental connectedness and mental health.

He is currently Associate Professor in Composition at Durham University.

jamesweeks.org



Lucy Goddard divides her time between singing and conducting. She is a passionate exponent of both early and contemporary music, which she often performs as a core member of EXAUDI. She has performed as a soloist in venues such as Wigmore Hall and Cadogan Hall with groups such as Academy of Ancient Music and the Dunedin Consort. Concert highlights include performing one-per-part Italian madrigals at the Wigmore Hall with EXAUDI live on BBC Radio 3, second soprano soloist in Mozart *Mass in C Minor* at the St Endellion Festival, Berio's *Sinfonia* with Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra and Susanna Mälkki, alto soloist in James Macmillan's *Since it was the day of Preparation* with the Hebrides Ensemble and Dunedin Consort, mezzo soloist in George Benjamin's *Upon Silence* with the Hathor Consort in Bruges Concertgebouw, and in the world première of Georges Aperghis' *Tell Tales* at Donaueschingen Festival with EXAUDI. She works regularly with pianist Siwan Rhys, recently performing An American

Songbook at the Turner Sims Concert Hall, Southampton, and commissioning composers Laura Bowler, Chris Mayo, Josh Levine and James Weeks.

Goddard is Music Director of Orlando Chamber Choir and Associate to Ben Parry at London Voices, London's predominant film choir, conducting sessions at Abbey Road and Air Studios. She has recently conducted *Divine Feminine*, a new opera by Shiva Feshareki for the BBC Singers, and Schumann's *2nd Symphony* and Cassandra Miller's *Swim* at Royal Irish Academy of Music Philharmonic. Goddard studied at Modern Languages at Cambridge University, where she held choral and instrumental scholarships, spent a year playing violin in L'Orchestra Giovanile Italiana in Fiesole and subsequently completed her Masters in Vocal Performance at the Royal Academy of Music.

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Welsh pianist **Siwan Rhys** enjoys a varied career playing solo, chamber, and ensemble music with a strong focus on contemporary music and collaboration with composers and other artists. Her playing is renowned for its multifaceted virtuosity and its rich palette of timbral and dynamic control – from her Barbara Monk Feldman solo recordings ('luminous, gorgeous piano sound... a beautiful vulnerability' – BBC Radio 3 *Record Review*) to her performances of Ustvolskaya's piano works ('singular, stupendous, percussive works, superbly played' – *The Observer*).

Her recordings include solo music by Barbara Monk Feldman, Ryoko Akama, James Weeks and Mira Calix/John Cage, and chamber music by Lisa Illean, Oliver Leith, Alex Paxton, Stockhausen, Cassandra Miller, Eva-Maria Houben, Lawrence Dunn and Steve Reich, featuring on labels such as Platoon,

NMC, New Amsterdam Records, all that dust, Nonesuch and Another Timbre.

Her work has taken her to major venues across the United Kingdom, and abroad to the Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Philharmonie de Paris, Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Philharmonie Luxembourg, Carnegie Hall, Walt Disney Hall, Tokyo Opera City, Shanghai Symphony Hall and Esplanade Singapore. She has appeared at the BBC Proms, Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Aldeburgh Festival, Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, Darmstadt Festival and many others.

With percussionist George Barton, she makes up one half of award-winning piano-percussion duo GBSR Duo and is a member of new music groups Explore Ensemble and the Colin Currie Group.

siwanrhys.co.uk



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