

Max Richter's 'Sleep': The longest continuous piece of music broadcast by the BBC

As Max Richter prepares to premiere his eight-hour 'lullaby for a frenetic world', before a live, if slumbering, audience, he tells Jessica Duchen why he dreamt up the experiment

Tuesday 15 September 2015

When composers unveil new works, they do not generally want the audience to nod off. Not so Max Richter. The intention behind his latest piece, *Sleep* – which is eight hours long – is that his listeners should slumber peacefully throughout. He has termed it "my personal lullaby for a frenetic world" and "a manifesto for a slower pace of existence". The world premiere, on 26 September, will apparently offer beds instead of chairs – and as it is broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 you can even try it at home.

And this week, the album of a condensed version of the piece went straight to the top of the classical charts.

Richter, 49, knows plenty about frenetic pace. This German-born British composer's works have become increasingly high-profile, and many are ambitious in scale. His *Recomposed by Max Richter: Vivaldi – The Four Seasons* was a smash hit in 2014; his score for the Royal Ballet's *Wolf Works* triumphed earlier this year, and his many film soundtracks include *Testament of Youth*, *Sarah's Key* and *Waltz with Bashir*. Yet the notion of a piece devoted to the vital nature of sleeping, he says, simply wouldn't leave him alone.

"My starting point was a personal fascination," says Richter. "I couldn't ignore the idea. It kept popping up while I was in the middle of working on other things. It was something I had to get off my chest."

The premiere is to be given not in a traditional concert hall, but at the Wellcome Collection, central London, where it forms part of a long weekend of talks, discussions and performances entitled *Why Music?*, from 25 to 27 September. A collaboration with BBC Radio 3, this intensive series explores the power of music and the way it can affect our brains, minds and bodies; in

the middle, Sleep will become the longest continuous piece of music the BBC has broadcast.

He adds: "I have a sense that while I'm asleep some of the most important work is taking place 'under the hood'. I started talking with the neuroscientist David Eagleman, and it seems that cognitive mental processes really are going on while we're sleeping that relate to our waking life. I think most creative people would intuitively agree: for instance, if we sleep on a decision we often feel more comfortable about our thinking in the morning.

"I see the eight-hour piece as an environment, a place to inhabit," he adds. "If it has a subject, it's that the piece is the experience of the listener. The consciousness of the listener is the story."

This idea might have rung a bell with the composer John Cage (1912-1992), whose most famous work, 4'33" – supposedly of silence – is really about the audience's personal experience of the ambient sounds that occur during that silence. Cage, almost as much a philosopher as a composer, had embraced Zen and mysticism while the musical world was still dominated by modernism; and Richter agrees that Sleep bears the influence of the American alternative scene, notably 1960s New York, where the notion of an all-night concert at which people could relax, sleep, or come and go as they pleased, was pioneered. "It's a very New York thing," he notes. "From 'the city that never sleeps'..."

"[The piece] is another step away for me from the modernist position," he adds, "which was: 'The composer's smarter than you and you'd better sit down and listen, and if you're clever enough you might understand it.' I always had a problem with that, and in various overt or covert ways I've been critiquing it for a long time. I think of musical performance more as a conversation than a lecture."

This work, he suggests, reflects trends that counter information overload, such as the widespread interest in "mindfulness" (a rehash of ancient principles of meditation). "Sleep is under siege by contemporary culture," he says. "We live in a dense data universe; many of us spend a lot of time curating our own data landscapes from email, social media and TV. It's a significant psychological load to manage all that. I feel that creative work can provide a holiday from that experience. Painting, cinema, music, books: these are places where you have a single object for contemplation and engagement, rather than millions of little objects which we're forced to react to in a one-dimensional way.

"You never hear people complain that life's getting slower or less complicated," he points out. "I think many of us do feel that there's a huge emphasis on quantity of information and objects at the expense of real reflection and quality. To a certain extent that's the inevitable consequence of a networked world: everything just gets multiplied. Therefore there's this statement of mine – a 'manifesto for a slower pace of existence' – which sounds very grand and ambitious! But at heart it's about engaging with fewer objects in a more extended and deliberate way, which I find rewarding.

There's something about it that connects with the renewed interest in mindfulness, or slow food – those traditions. It's a kind of ecology of mind. "In a painting by Mark Rothko, for instance, there can be a single object with which you engage; it leads to lots of thought, but it is very simple in essence. That's what I've sought to do with Sleep: make a single object that can function like a landscape for the listener to inhabit while sleeping."

Some people will not sleep at all, though: namely, the performers, including Richter himself (it is scored for piano, strings, electronics and wordless vocals). "It's a bit like preparing for a marathon," Richter remarks, "but I've structured it so that everyone gets a break. Nobody actually has to play for eight hours. Perhaps the ideal thing would be to be in the right time-zone: to arrive from somewhere jet-lagged and jump straight on stage."

One possible downside exists. If someone near you drifts off during the performance, they might snore. What happens then? Richter takes the question in good spirit. "Performance traditions are practical things as well as conventions," he says. "Some of those conventions I find, personally, sometimes rather oppressive, but at their root they're there for a reason: so that people can enjoy the music. I think we'll just have to wing it and see."

The one-hour album version of Sleep contains material that is notably different, intended more for active listening than dozy absorption. "The one-hour piece is a little like a daydream, or the tip of the iceberg which pokes above the sea," Richter says. "I think of that as intentional music: music that you can engage with consciously, listen to analytically and make judgments about. There's music in the one-hour piece that isn't in the eight-hour version at all, and vice-versa, because it's structured for wakeful consciousness. In a way, the two pieces are asking a question about the difference between experiencing or inhabiting the material and listening to it consciously."

Don't be put off by the unfamiliarity of it all. "I see the concerts as a laboratory – a bit of an experiment," says Richter. "I expect some people will try to stay up; others will sleep and I imagine most will do a bit of both. It's a voyage of discovery. But don't worry about not knowing the rules. There are no rules." 'Sleep' will be broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 from the Wellcome Foundation, London, from midnight on 26 September. It is part of Why Music?, a weekend of talks and concerts (wellcomecollection.org/exhibitions/why-music). The one-hour album is out now on DG; the eight-hour version will be available as a digital download