



# Advance Program Notes

Ambient Orchestra  
David Bowie's *Blackstar*  
Friday, October 12, 2018, 7:30 PM

These Advance Program Notes are provided online for our patrons who like to read about performances ahead of time. Printed programs will be provided to patrons at the performances. Programs are subject to change.

## Ambient Orchestra David Bowie's *Blackstar*

*Blackstar* Concerto

David Bowie  
(1947-2016)

Conceived and adapted for orchestra by Evan Ziporyn

*Blackstar*

*'Tis a Pity She Was a Whore*

*Lazarus*

*Sue (Or in a Season of Crime)*

*Girl Loves Me*

*Dollar Days*

*I Can't Give Everything Away*

Maya Beiser, solo cello  
Evan Ziporyn, conductor  
Dave Cook, sound design

The Ambient Orchestra, featuring musicians from Boston Conservatory at Berklee

NO INTERMISSION

# Program Notes

## BLACKSTAR (2016)

David Bowie released *Blackstar* on January 8, 2016; he passed away two days later: in characteristic fashion, he had written and staged his own eulogy! *Blackstar* was his parting gift to the world—dark but luminous, richly textured and deeply moving. It sounded this way even in the two days before he died; afterwards, as the world realized what he'd been trying to tell us, the album's poignancy became overwhelming.

*Blackstar* is a concept album, but the concept itself is unnamed, perhaps because it is the unnameable itself, death, how to face it, and how to celebrate life—his and ours—even in its shadow. Unlike Bowie's 2015 musical *Lazarus* (which shares similar concerns and one song), *Blackstar* has no clear storyline; unlike many of his earlier albums, there is no single alter ego—no Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, Major Tom, Thin White Duke. Rather a collection of characters, some of whom may remind us of all of the above, taking us through aspects of their lives, then returning to the deathbed and the final passage. The two videos Bowie made for the album also provide clues with images of hospital beds, death masks, possession, and trance. I am not alone in having come to regard the album as Bowie's personal guide to the ultimate career move, his own personal Book of the Dead.

Bowie spent his life playing with personae, but the character in the first song, the title track *Blackstar*, is beyond anonymous. He is "somebody else" who "took his place." A lot of time is spent telling us who he's not ("I'm not a film star, I'm not a gangster, I'm not a porn star, I'm not a wandering star"), and very little telling us who he is (only the enigmatic "blackstar"). The "spirit" who "rose a metre, then stepped aside" in the first song checks back in with us two songs later, in *Lazarus*. He's "in heaven," or "so high it makes my brain whirl," or possibly both. In either case, he's gone, beyond reach, having "dropped my cell phone down below." These songs alternate with tales from the "bardo," the point between life and death, where worldly images are retained but gradually slip away. Bowie jump-cuts from the ethereal death-bed scenes of *Blackstar* and *Lazarus* to images from lives fully lived. 'Tis a Pity and Sue are intense soliloquys of passion and violence, while *Girl Loves Me's* profane, sing-song refrain ("where the f\*ck did Monday go?") is couched in the menacing argots of Nadsat, the made-up language of *Clockwork Orange*, and Polari, a London street slang. The final two songs take us back to the point of departure. In *Dollar Days*, the character struggles to let go ("I'm trying to...I'm dying to..."); in *I Can't Give Everything Away* he does exactly that, flying away, "seeing more and feeling less, saying no but meaning yes, this is all I ever meant, that's the message that I sent."

Tonight's orchestral version is without lyrics (short excerpts are printed below, and full lyrics can be found online), but the words and their meaning—this tale of Death and Transfiguration—are very much in our minds. They hover over the music; like *Blackstar's* "spirit" figure, they "rose a metre and stepped aside." We made our *Blackstar* to honor Bowie and his influence, but also to immerse ourselves in this amazing music, to live inside it, explore it, embody it. Also to transform it, in the spirit of Bowie and of the record itself. In making these arrangements, Jamshied Sharifi and I followed Bowie's breadcrumbs, keeping closely to the paths of the original songs, but never trying to imitate or replicate his original "sound and vision." As it turns out, Bowie's music, which so radically transformed the ecosphere of the recording, is vibrant enough to thrive in a very different one, the acoustic and live biome of the orchestra.

Bowie's four-octave vocal range matches that of the cello almost exactly; I knew immediately that *Blackstar* would be a cello concerto, with Maya Beiser as soloist. Bowie's voice is unique and inimitable, and his range was matched by his stylistic breadth. Over his career, from album to album, but also within a single song, sometimes a single phrase, Bowie would shapeshift while always remaining himself. He could be a brooding rocker one moment and an English music hall star the next; he could start a phrase *bel canto* and end it like a blues man. He could be a jazz crooner, soul stylist, folk singer, sprechstimmer, and always sound expressive and authentic. Maya Beiser does similar things on the cello: she transforms the instrument with each performance, whether she's playing Bach, Dvořak, Piazzolla, or Janis Joplin. In *Blackstar* she is vocalist one moment, lead guitarist the next; she evokes Bowie's spirit while never ceasing to be herself.

—Evan Ziporyn

# *Excerpted Lyrics*

## **BLACKSTAR**

*Something happened on the day he died  
Spirit rose a metre then stepped aside  
Somebody else took his place and bravely cried  
I'm a Blackstar, I'm a Blackstar*

## **'TIS A PITY SHE WAS A WHORE**

*Man, she punched me like a dude!*

## **LAZARUS**

*Look up here, I'm in heaven,  
I've got scars that can't be seen  
I'm so high it makes my brain whirl  
Dropped my cell phone down below*

## **SUE (OR IN A SEASON OF CRIME)**

*Ride the train, I'm far from home  
In a season of crime none need atone*

## **GIRL LOVES ME**

*Where the f\*ck did Monday go?*

## **DOLLAR DAYS**

*If I never see the English evergreens I'm running to  
It's nothing to me  
It's nothing to see*

## **I CAN'T GIVE EVERYTHING AWAY**

*Seeing more and feeling less  
Saying no but meaning yes,  
This is all I ever meant  
That's the message that I sent*

# Biographies



## MAYA BEISER

Avant-garde cellist and multifaceted artist Maya Beiser defies categories. She has captivated audiences worldwide with her virtuosity, eclectic repertoire, and relentless quest to redefine her instrument's boundaries, passionately forging a career path through uncharted territories. Praised by *Rolling Stone* as a "cello rock star," she has been hailed by the *The New York Times* for her "stirring emotional power," while the *Boston Globe* described her as "a force of nature." Raised in the Galilee Mountains in Israel, surrounded by the music and rituals of Jews, Muslims, and Christians while studying classical cello repertoire, Beiser is dedicated to reinventing solo cello performance in the mainstream arena. A featured performer on the world's most prestigious stages including Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, BAM, Kennedy Center, London's Southbank Centre, Royal Albert Hall and the Barbican, Sydney Opera House, Beijing Festival, Barcelona's L'auditori,

Paris' Cité de la Musique, and Stockholm's Concert Hall, she has collaborated with a wide range of artists including Tan Dun, Brian Eno, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Louis Andriessen, Shirin Neshat, Bill Morrison, Robert Woodruff, and Lucinda Childs, among many others. Her discography includes 10 solo albums and numerous feature appearances on film and TV soundtracks; her 2016 album *TranceClassical* debuted at number one on the Apple Music classical chart, and her acclaimed album *Uncovered* also topped the classical music charts, making the number one spot on both Amazon and Apple Music. Beiser is a 2015 United States Artists (USA) distinguished fellow and a 2017 Mellon Distinguished Visiting Artist at MIT. Her 2011 TED Talk has been watched by over one million people, and she was recently a presenting artist at the inaugural CultureSummit in Abu Dhabi. Beiser was a founding member of the Bang on a Can All-Stars and is a graduate of Yale University. For more information, please visit [mayabeiser.com](http://mayabeiser.com).



## EVAN ZIPORYN

Composer/arranger Evan Ziporyn's music has taken him from Balinese temples to concert halls around the world. He has composed for and collaborated with Yo-Yo Ma, Brooklyn Rider, Ethel, Anna Sofie Von Otter, the American Composers Orchestra, BMOP, Iva Bittova, Terry Riley, Don Byron, Wu Man, and Bang on a Can. In 2017 his arrangements were featured on Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's *The Vietnam War* and on Silkroad's Grammy-winning album *Sing Me Home*. Recent conducting appearances include LA Opera (Keeril Makan's *Persona*), Hamburg Elbphilharmonie (Julia Wolfe/Bill Morrison's *Fuel*), the Barcelona Symphony, and the Cleveland Museum of Art. At MIT he is distinguished professor of music and director of the Center for Art, Science and Technology. He studied at Eastman School of Music, Yale, and UC Berkeley with Joseph Schwantner, Martin Bresnick, and Gerard Grisey. He received a Fulbright in 1987, founded Gamelan Galak

Tika in 1993, and has composed a series of groundbreaking compositions for gamelan and western instruments, as well as evening-length works such as 2001's *ShadowBang*, 2004's *Oedipus Rex* (Robert Woodruff, director), and 2009's *A House in Bali*, which was featured at BAM Next Wave in October 2010. Awards include a USA Artist Fellowship, the Goddard Lieberman Prize from the American Academy, Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellowship, and commissions from Carnegie Hall, Kronos Quartet, Rockefeller Multi-Arts Program, and Meet the Composer. From 1992-2012 he served as music director, producer, and arranger for the Bang on a Can All-Stars, winning *Musical America's* Ensemble of the Year award in 2005. He has also recorded with Paul Simon, Christine Southworth, and the Steve Reich Ensemble (sharing in their 1998 Grammy for Best Chamber Music Performance). For more information, please visit [ziporyn.com](http://ziporyn.com).

# *Biographies, continued*

## **AMBIENT ORCHESTRA**

Evan Ziporyn started the Ambient Orchestra in 2016 to create living orchestral versions of great ambient recordings, such as those of Robert Fripp, Brian Eno, and Terry Riley. David Bowie's untimely death impelled him to launch the ensemble with two tributes to this seminal figure. "We wanted to do something now, in the present moment, while our thoughts and feelings about David Bowie and what he represents are still all too present. Brian Eno defined ambient music as 'an atmosphere, a surrounding influence, a tint...pieces for particular times and situations.' Ambient also means 'of or relating to the immediate surroundings.' The Ambient Orchestra is devoted to both." In its debut performance on January 29, 2016, just two and a half weeks after Bowie's death, the 80-member ensemble performed Philip Glass' symphonic tributes to Bowie: Symphony no. 1, *Low Symphony*, and Symphony no. 4, *Heroes Symphony*, in a fundraiser for cancer research. The following March, the ensemble reconvened to premiere *Blackstar*, with Maya Beiser as soloist. This program also featured a new ambient-ized version of Erik Satie's *Gymnopedies* and Ziporyn's own *Frog's Eye*. Ziporyn and Beiser have since performed *Blackstar* with the Barcelona Symphony and with the LPR Ensemble at SummerStage in New York's Central Park. Tonight's performance is the debut of the 26-member Ambient Orchestra, in which our principal soloists are joined by wonderful faculty and students of the Boston Conservatory's Contemporary Classical Music Program. We are deeply grateful to this visionary institution for the embrace and support of this program. For more information, please visit [ambientorchestra.com](http://ambientorchestra.com).

## **BOSTON CONSERVATORY AT BERKLEE**

Boston Conservatory at Berklee provides a progressive learning environment where students are challenged to realize their potential as artists and inspired to pursue their dreams. Long recognized for its specialized training in dance, music, and theatre, the conservatory's merger with Berklee now combines this rigorous, focused instruction with unparalleled access to a broad range of academic and creative opportunities. Set in the cultural, historical, and educational hub of Boston, this extraordinary institution represents the future of performing arts education.

## **CREDITS**

All compositions by David Bowie, ©RZO Music; *Sue* by David Bowie, Paul Bateman, Bob Bhamra, and Maria Schneider; © Music Sales Corporation, Tintoretto Music

All arrangements by Evan Ziporyn; *Lazarus* and *I Can't Give Everything Away* arranged by Jamshied Sharifi and Evan Ziporyn

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Alex Rigopulos and Sachi Sato  
Boston Conservatory at Berklee  
Cathy Young, executive director  
Michael Shinn, dean of music  
Sarah Brady, director of contemporary classical music  
Ryan Fossier, chief ensemble operations coordinator  
MIT Center for Art, Science and Technology  
MIT Music and Theater Arts

# *Orchestra Roster*

Conductor	Evan Ziporyn
Solo Cellist	Maya Beiser
Flute and Piccolo	Sarah Brady
Flute and Alto Flute	Caroline Shaffer
Oboe	Alexis Mitchell
Oboe and English Horn	Leo Ziporyn
Clarinets	Shannon Williams
Clarinets and Bass Clarinet	David Angelo
Horns	Maria D'Ambrosio Ryan Fossier
Trumpets	Jonah Kappraff Brian Voetz
Trombone	Justin Coyne
Bass Trombone	Steve Filippone
Keyboard	Lucy Yao
Percussion	Christopher Gunnell Daniel Reifsteck Nicholas Stevens
First Violins	Gabby Diaz, concertmaster Alex Norkey
Second Violins	Carlo Mauricio Brian Stuligross
Violas	Amelia Hollander Roselyn Hobbs
Cellos	Ben Baker Brianna Tagliaferro
Bass	Gillian Dana Chris Janson

# *Engagement Events*

Friday, October 12, 2018

## **A CONVERSATION WITH AMBIENT ORCHESTRA AND MAYA BEISER**

While they were in Blacksburg, members of Ambient Orchestra and Maya Beiser joined students in Studio 72—Virginia Tech’s arts living-learning community—for an informal discussion about their work.

Friday, October 12, 2018

## **TALK: DAVID BOWIE: “WHO CAN I BE NOW?”**

Merryman Family Learning Studio, Room 253

*Kevin Concannon, director, School of Visual Arts at Virginia Tech*

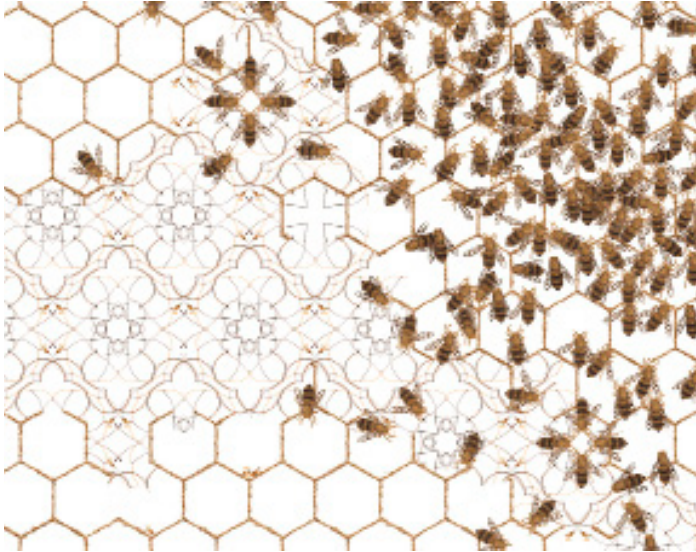
From the glam rock of Ziggy Stardust, the decadent Diamond Dog, the coke-fueled Thin White Duke, the Berlin-based Avant Gardist, Dance Floor Pop Star, and more, David Bowie was always one step ahead of the zeitgeist and, with Lazarus, one step ahead of his own mortality. This slide-illustrated talk considers his many changes.

*Special thanks to Kevin Concannon and Matt Ebert*

# *Go Beyond*

What does the arrangement and performance of *Blackstar* by Ambient Orchestra and Maya Beiser reveal about David Bowie’s final album? How does the orchestra elevate, inform, and explore the record? How does the experience of hearing Evan Ziporyn and Maya Beiser’s adaptation of the source material live compare with listening to Bowie’s album?

# *In the Galleries*



digitally-composed honeybees and comb constructed of dried flower stems and stamen, insect parts, and human hair.

## **GALLERY HOURS**

Monday-Friday, 10 AM-5:30 PM

Saturday, 10 AM-4 PM

To arrange a group tour or class visit, please contact Meggin Hicklin, exhibitions program manager, at [megh79@vt.edu](mailto:megh79@vt.edu).

Talia Greene

*Cross Pollination*, 2016 (detail, shown here in black and white)

Site-specific wallpaper installation

Image courtesy of the artist

## **SWARM**

**Talia Greene, Don Maynard, Björn Schülke, Leah Sobsey, and Marina Zurkow**

Thursday, October 25-Saturday, December 15, 2018

*Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery, Sherwood Payne Quillen '71 Reception Gallery, and Francis T. Eck Exhibition Corridor*

A selection of works from emerging and established artists explore bodies that converge to occupy, invade, or even dominate our airspace. From insects to birds, planes to drones, SWARM presents an array of digital, sculptural, and site-specific art works that portray the wondrous, delightful, ominous, and even unnerving imagery of objects and beings en masse, in flight, all around...

Featured here is a detail of Talia Greene's *Cross Pollination*, a wallpaper installation teeming with