

The Last Tree

Alastair Penman's new release is a suite for saxophone orchestra with a strong ecological message. He tells Catherine Smith about how to choose a saxophone to represent Donald Trump, planting trees daily, and why he plays every line on the recording himself

The Last Tree, the fifth recording released by Alastair Penman (the third on his own label Meadowbank Music) is, on paper, an eight-movement suite for saxophone orchestra – but it's also so much more. It's a multimedia work – inspired by quotes from famous figures about the climate crisis, which are themselves worked into images produced by Penman and projected onto a screen during live performance – and, of course, a rousing call for action in the urgent fight against climate change, in the language he knows best: music.

better way to get a totally homogenous sound than one person playing. I recorded it over a period of about three or four months – whenever I had a free day, basically. The editing and mixing was done over a long period."

This is Penman's second album directly inspired by and centred around climate activism (after 2020's *Do You Hear Me?*). He certainly isn't alone in his attempts to use music to contribute to the campaign for urgent action. Penman has teamed up with Jenni Watson to create *The Sound Earth*

can be recruited to play different characters or influence the listener's mood. As he explains: "The second movement, 'Men Argue', opens with the sopranos shouting at each other and it's in a standard 4/4. Then this baritone sax line comes in, in a different time signature – representing nature. The baritones eventually succeed in dragging us off in their time signature. In the end the argument kind of comes back. Nature is going to just keep doing what it's doing, and human beings just keep talking over the top of it."



The premiere of
The Last Tree at
Guildhall's Music Hall
in November 2024

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The piece was originally written for the Guildhall School of Music Saxophone Ensemble – Penman is professor of saxophone there – and was premiered in the Music Hall in November last year. However for this recording Penman has meticulously performed all fourteen parts, playing soprano, alto, tenor and baritone saxophone. He is also, of course, the composer and producer. He has a Masters' degree in Information and Computer Engineering from the University of Cambridge, as well as his degree in Saxophone Performance from the Royal Northern College of Music, so he is well placed to do it all himself, and do it he has. In fact the last time he wrote for this magazine he outlined why he prefers to produce his own music; clearly that decision still stands. As we chatted on a rare teaching break at the end of the summer term, he laughed ruefully about that. "I'll admit to being a bit of a control freak," he says. "It was a slightly crazy project. But I like the sound of really well-blended saxophones and there is no

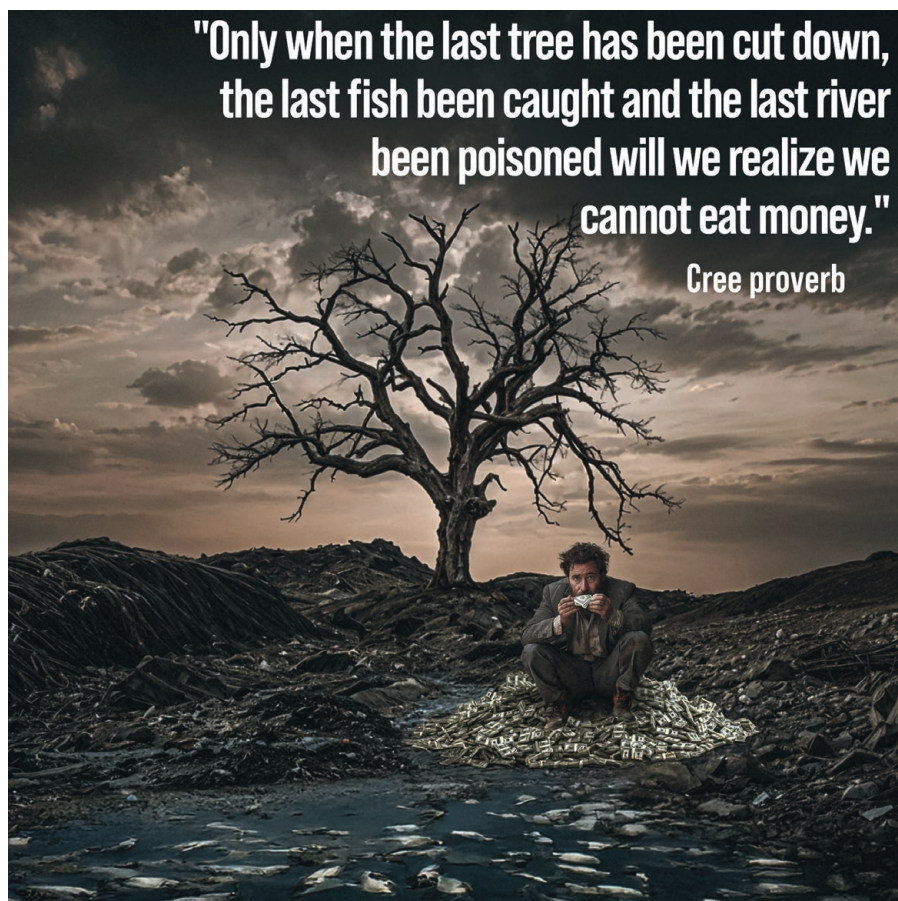
Collective; they perform multimedia nature-inspired works, from classical transcriptions and unique arrangements through to their own original compositions, as a duo. Their next performance is at St John's Church in Peterborough on 4 November. They are part of a growing movement of musicians who want to direct art towards climate activism and bring likeminded people together; the organisation No Music on a Dead Planet has created a declaration that both calls on governments to take urgent action, and acknowledges that the music industry itself has had an impact on climate change which must be addressed. In the Summer issue we featured Emma Johnson's piece for clarinet choir, *Tree of Life* (see page 32 for a review of the Wigmore Hall performance in July). In common with Penman's piece, Johnson also created her work around visual imagery.

The images help, of course, but Penman's creative talent for musical storytelling is on full display here. He seems to have had great fun thinking about how the character of the different saxophones' soundworlds

He also showcases an ability to write in various styles – the flowing, melodic, almost Romantic style of the third movement, 'A Fine Place' (Ernest Hemingway said, "The earth is a fine place and worth fighting for") transitions abruptly, almost rudely, into the overblown, dramatic opening of 'Big Fat Dose' – an abbreviated quote by Donald Trump, who said "It's really cold outside, they are calling it a major freeze, weeks ahead of normal. Man, we could use a big fat dose of global warming." Penman switches into a blues style here and it makes you sit up and take notice; there is no ignoring the bombastic theme blasted out on the soprano sax. Penman reveals that he also had a little fun with AI when it came to writing the programme notes for this movement. This is an extract of what it came up with: "It's the greatest blues piece you've ever heard, believe me. Nobody knows blues like I do. This song is big, it's bold, and it's got everything – the drama, the tension, the beautiful chord changes." What a great use of a new tool to satirize someone who is part of the problem here!

The following movement, 'Surging Seas' (inspired by Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, who said "The surging seas are coming for us all"), plays with blending classical and jazz styles together.

Penman introduces a series of new motifs here, layered over one another. ➡



is a vegan, and a regular user of an app that plants a tree for every advert you watch – in fact, he will also have a tree planted for each copy of this album sold. Releasing his own music also means he has complete control over everything from production and advertising to distribution. He says: "There are choices you can make when you do it yourself. A while back when I was working with a bigger label, the distributor would only agree to distribute the album if the CDs were plastic-wrapped. They had that policy because of the risk of damage in transit. When I set up my own label, I did card packaging. And I haven't had anything damaged in transit yet! In short, if you're recording with a big studio you don't have as much choice in these decisions."

He has clearly looked deeply into the intersection between musical life and environmentally friendly living. Apparently buying and selling CDs is actually gentler to the environment than using streaming services. Penman says: "Streaming is bad for the environment because of all the data centres which use water to cool them and power to keep them running. There was a BBC documentary called *Streaming Secrets* – it opened my eyes to how much power is used in these data centres. It is better for the environment to buy a CD, despite the impact of distribution and delivery." He says that he sells a good number of CDs after concerts, but still allows his music

At first the simple tune is treated a bit like a variation, repeated and layered by the various instruments – but with a jazzy flavour. Yet there is a sudden pause about two and a half minutes in, leading to a second half with a very different character. The lower instruments softly play long, held notes, recreating a classical soundworld, before the higher instruments bring a pensive tune over the top. The last eighteen seconds jerk us straight back to the jazz club again with the theme speeded up and taken to a sudden no-strings climax. I thought I detected a musical reference to *Rule Britannia*, and Penman confirms this; "There is so much that gets ignored in many conversations about climate change. Essentially the global north has been exploiting the global south for so long. Climate change is interlinked with colonialism."

Overall Penman describes the album as 'loosely contemporary classical' but agrees there is a jazz influence in there. "I used jazz set-ups for 'Every Man's Greed' and 'Big Fat Dose'. The biggest challenge in the mastering process was to give those two a different sound but still feel like they belong in the set. There was a different edge to the more jazzy movements."

The sixth movement, 'Doorway to Love', is based on a poignant quote from the book *Braiding Sweetgrass* by scientist and nature writer Robin Wall-Kimmerer. Musically, some of the structure of the previous movement is carried over here; in a minor key, the tune



is divided between a very soft bass line, a repeated motif in the middle and a soprano almost seeming to sing plaintively: "If grief can be a doorway to love," says Wall-Kimmerer, "then let us all weep for the world we are breaking apart so we can love it back to wholeness again." This piece seems to focus primarily on the first half of that statement with a sad, plaintive, reflective tune continuing throughout. Penman says: "I was reading Robin's book and it was clearly so relevant to this project. She has a PhD and is also an indigenous person – the science supports what indigenous people have long known."

He certainly walks the talk in his own life when it comes to environmental action – he



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to be on streaming services. "For all of us there is a trade-off – yes, I could choose not to let my music go on streaming services but then I'd reduce how many people would hear it."

And this, ultimately, is the point: for people to hear the music and to change hearts and minds, to galvanise concern and awareness into action. I asked him why he feels so drawn to combine his two passions in this way. "I've always liked being outside and nature. When I started to really research the problems of climate change, I went vegan for ethical reasons. One of the best things you can do for the environment is to be vegan as industrial farming is so destructive. I also had a teaching job for a while where I worked opposite a butchers and I just couldn't look at the meat. The more research I did the more I realised how bad the situation is. It's shocking how long we've known about this and nothing has really happened. All governments are about short-term policy. All our economic systems are based on infinite growth, but we live on

a finite planet. There is so much we can do as individuals, but ultimately we also need politicians to step up and hopefully if we apply pressure on them that will help."

It's a noble aim and, I suggest, the act of releasing music in the fight for the climate cause also gives something else to those who care about it – a sense of hope rather than overwhelm at a huge problem that no individual can tackle alone. Penman agrees: "I like Barack Obama's quote because it says that the urgency is there now but there is hope that there is something we can do." The music is indivisible from the message, and that's the point, but it's also a brilliant listen – creative, storytelling composition, skilful playing, a soundscape that draws you in – and all from a true one-man band. ■

The Last Tree is out now on Meadowbank Music. meadowbankmusic.co.uk

POSITIVE ACTIONS

What can you do to play your part in reducing the effects of climate change?

Plant a tree via your phone

Penman uses **Treeapp** on a daily basis to help with reforestation. It allows users to help plant trees simply by watching an advert (all ads are for environmentally friendly products that may interest you anyway). He has pledged to have a tree planted for every *Tree of Life* album sold.

Stay informed

No Music on a Dead Planet has a mailing list with updates on climate action campaigns, music and sustainability news, event invitations and practical sustainability tips. Sign up at musicdeclares.net.

The Climate Majority Project (CMP) is a UK-based organisation aiming to support a climate-concerned majority of citizens to respond in meaningful ways to the climate and ecological emergency (CEE). Read more at climatemajorityproject.com

Recommended reading

Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways To Think Like a 21st-century Economist by Kate Raworth

Less is More: How Degrowth will Save the World by Jason Hickel

Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer

The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future by David Wallace-Wells

