

A portrait of Philip Venables, a bald man with a nose ring, wearing a black tuxedo jacket over a white shirt with gold buttons. He is standing against a dark grey background.

# The European dreamer

Following a string of operatic successes, composer Philip Venables brings his largest-scale opera yet to Amsterdam's Opera Forward Festival

**By Claire Jackson**

He was one of those enthusiasts. The type that either inspires extreme delight or mysterious urgent phone calls that require immediate attention. They have, according to one friend, the ability to stop a nascent interest in its tracks. Personally, I can't get enough of the opera collector. But then, as someone who often goes to extreme scheduling measures in order to see new works and productions – such as running from a concert at the Southbank Centre during the interval to get to Covent Garden for the final act – I am not immune to the urge to add to my own opera museum. This particular collector was a charming German professional who had an eye-watering list of opera attendances to his name. We played gentle opera-fan tennis, a carefree volley that took in various international artists and venues, including the one we were in, Semperoper Dresden. Our game reached the inevitable deuce, and I asked the tiebreaker question: what is the best opera? While this person's tastes were not particularly unusual – he enjoyed Verdi, had been to Bayreuth – his answer, as the clickbait copy goes, might surprise you. 'By far, the opera that has had the biggest effect on me,' he revealed, 'was 4:48 Psychosis.'

That work, the first opera by Philip Venables and completed as part of his doctoral residency with the Royal Opera and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in 2014-16, is based on Sarah Kane's play – a gritty, abstract portrayal of unipolar depression. Its title references the time the author would wake from fitful sleep to grapple with her own illness; Kane died by suicide before the play was staged. Opera has never shied away from such topics, but creating a piece that focuses solely on depression presents particular challenges. Venables received backing from Kane's brother and the 2016 Royal Opera production went on to win that year's UK Theatre Award for Opera, the 2017 Royal Philharmonic Society Award for Large-scale Composition and the 2017 British Composer Award for Stage Work, as well as being nominated for an Olivier Award and Sky Arts South Bank Award. It has since been staged by Opéra national du Rhin in Strasbourg, the Bayerische Theaterakademie in Munich and Dresden's Semperoper, the production that so impressed my friend.

The opera 4:48 Psychosis represented a shift in Venables's compositional style. Around that time, the British composer moved to Berlin after several years in London, working as a violin teacher and school orchestra conductor to support his creative

endeavours. 'I became more interested in cleaner forms and integrating text,' he says. 'The thing about composing is that, unlike performing, it's not necessarily tied to where you live. Going to Germany was the best decision I could have made.' We're talking in one of the many underwhelming eateries along London's Southbank. It's busier than usual around Royal Festival Hall – Angela Merkel will be appearing on stage tonight as part of her book tour and the area is mid-security sweep. The Teutonophiles are gathering – and after our interview, Venables, who now has German citizenship, will join them.

Like Rebecca Saunders, Venables is a UK composer who has – perhaps unconsciously – achieved a confidence and cleanliness of sound that feels more closely aligned with European

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peers. And, also like Saunders, he is highly respected in his adopted home country. In 2023, in the wake of Arts Council England funding cuts, Charlotte Higgins wrote in the *Guardian* about our apparent embarrassment of our operatic achievement. 'If you happen to travel through Paris on the Métro, as I did recently,' observed Higgins, 'you'll see huge, distinctive posters for this year's Aix-en-Provence opera festival flash past. Sandwiched round "Stravinsky – Ballets Russes", you'll see the names of two British composers, George Benjamin and Philip Venables, writ large and proud – doubtless in the expectation that Parisian commuters will be sufficiently intrigued to plan a summer trip to the opposite end of the country to see their new operas. Both premieres are actually co-productions, with the Royal Opera and Manchester International Festival respectively, so they will wend their way to the UK in due course. But it is hard to imagine they'll get quite as much fanfare on British mass transportation systems.'

She was of course absolutely correct, although in Venables's case, the title made promotion somewhat complex. *The Faggots and their Friends Between Revolutions*, based on Larry Mitchell's 1977 book, premiered in Manchester in 2023 and has since been staged at Bregenz Festival in Austria, Ruhrtriennale in Bochum, Germany, Holland



CHAR ADAMS

Venables' upcoming opera focuses on dance forms, big bands and Hollywood sound

Festival in Amsterdam and Southbank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall. 'It gathered momentum,' smiles Venables. 'Manchester International Festival really took a risk and it paid off.' A New York production is in the works for this year, with some members of the original cast reprising their roles.

Venables' piece, like Mitchell's book, gives representation to queer culture – not with coded nods, but with unapologetic realism that reclaims former insults. 'The word had different resonances with different people, so Ted [Huffman, the librettist and Venables' regular collaborator] and I talked about that a lot to begin with, and also not just what it meant for us, but how it felt to say it on stage. The show only uses the word with a great

deal of love. It's a word of solidarity.' The style is reminiscent of Julius Eastman, the US composer who wrote *Joy Boy*, *Gay Guerrilla* – and a series that uses a word we're not allowed to publish. Eastman (1940–90), whose work is currently being revived, suffered for his titles – it's unlikely the more controversial ones will be read aloud on Radio 3 any time soon. 'You can't post anything on Instagram using the word faggot,' says Venables. 'My account got banned a number of times, even replacing letters with punctuation. In the end, we used a cigarette emoji.'

Promotion for the next opera should be more straightforward: *We Are The Lucky Ones* premieres at the Opera Forward Festival in Amsterdam in March, commissioned by Dutch National Opera. 'It's my first opera with orchestra,' says Venables. 'The festival put on *Denis & Katya* [the 2019 chamber opera with a libretto by Huffman] during Covid – it's scored for two singers, four cellos and pre-recorded sound so it was ideal for a socially distanced performance [it also happens to be set online] – and commissioned this work soon afterwards. It was inspired by *The Years* by Annie Ernaux, which considers a life through old photos.'

*We Are The Lucky Ones* is based on interviews with dozens of people in western Europe born between 1940 and 1949. 'It's like lots of postcards,' explains Venables. 'We also hear snippets of fictionalised verbatim text as flashbacks and flashforwards, as people question their decisions.' And the composer will be utilising his extended palette: 'The music draws on dance forms, big bands and Hollywood sound – with more obvious contemporary colours,' he says. That sort of splicing builds on the effect created in *Illusions*, a piece commissioned by the London Sinfonietta in 2015 and developed as part of the New Music Biennial 2017, with performance artist David Hoyle (The work appears on *Below the Belt*, NMC's 2018 composer portrait album that also features the 2013 vocal piece *The Revenge of Miguel Cotto*.) The collage is pasted over the post-war backdrop, intended to be an analogous story of threats we now live with daily: globalism, consumerism and, because of that, climate change. But this is not some sort of boomer bashing. It's the story of the 'European Dream'. 'This piece is about humans trying to do their best,' says Venables, observing a constant theme in his work, 'It's more critical of the system than the individuals.' [ON](#)

*We Are The Lucky Ones* is at the Amsterdam Opera Forward Festival from 14 March. [operaballet.nl](http://operaballet.nl)

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# We Are The Lucky Ones

Philip Venables, Ted Huffman  
14–30 March 2025

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