



MUSICA
SOLIS

From the Depths

Jonathan Russell
Bass Clarinet

From the Depths

1. Prelude – Chant Jonathan Russell (b. 1979)	3:46
2. Hear My Prayer, O Lord (arr. Russell) Henry Purcell (1659-1695)	2:41
3. A Requiem for 2020 Jonathan Russell	19:38
4. Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child (arr. Russell) African-American Spiritual	3:37
5. We Are Broken Jonathan Russell	14:30
6. Postlude Jonathan Russell	1:34
TOTAL TIME:	45:46

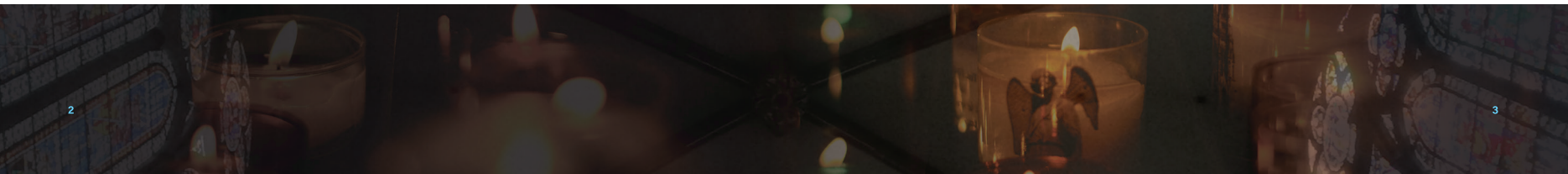
Jonathan Russell *Bass Clarinet*

FROM THE DEPTHS

Music of sorrow, rage, hope, and healing, for bass clarinet choir

"From the Depths" is both a literal description of the soundworld this album inhabits, and also a metaphor for its emotional and spiritual landscape. The bass clarinet ensemble sound is rooted in the instrument's deep resonances, but also rises and soars from these depths to unexpected heights, with a vast range of not only pitches but also colors and textures. Metaphorically, much of the music on this album springs from dark places of sorrow and contemplation – but also rises up from these depths into realms of consolation and hope.

The centerpieces of the album are my 20-minute composition for 14 bass clarinets, *A Requiem for 2020*, and my 13.5 minute composition for 9 bass clarinets, *We Are Broken*. *A Requiem for 2020* was composed as a response to the profound dislocations of that extraordinary year, from the pandemic-related deaths and lockdowns, to the summer's massive protests over racial injustice, to the disinformation-soaked election that nearly undid the United States' democracy (and still may). In many ways, "2020" is still with us: covid persists; U.S. democracy remains in profound peril; and the ugly backlash to 2020's racial justice reckoning continues. And now, for the first time in decades, a brutal and deeply unjust war rages in Europe, with inevitably tragic consequences that we can only guess at. There has been so much loss. Not only of lives, but also of shared experiences with loved ones – concerts, weddings, funerals, graduations, date nights, religious services, all those things that bind us together. There's been loss of faith in the political system and in so many institutions that have failed to protect the most vulnerable among us. There has been the



loss of loved ones not only to covid, but to wild conspiracy theories pushed by concerted campaigns of disinformation. And, for most of us, there has been precious little opportunity to fully acknowledge and grieve what we've been through and what we've lost. *We Are Broken* more generally addresses the fact that all of us, simply through experiencing life, are broken in some way, and offers the possibility that by facing, acknowledging, and sharing our own brokenness we may find redemption. My hope is that this album can create some space for reflection, contemplation, grief, and also for consolation and hope – now, and in the ever uncertain future.

Each track on the album reflects on the “from the depths” theme in a different way, drawing on a range of musical and cultural traditions. My own compositions (*Prelude / Chant*, *A Requiem for 2020*, *We Are Broken* and *Postlude*) draw on influences central to my own artistic and personal identity, from Jewish music to Heavy Metal to Minimalism and Western European imitative counterpoint. The two arrangements on this album (17th century English composer Henry Purcell's *Hear My Prayer, O Lord* and the African-American spiritual *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*) come from the two musical traditions so central to the musical culture of the United States: Western European classical music and African-American music.

The album will have its greatest impact, I believe, when listened to all the way through, in order, in a quiet space, with the lights low or off. Sit back and let the deep resonances of the bass clarinets wash over you, transport you, transform you – carry you down into the depths, and then beyond.

1. **Prelude – Chant**, by Jonathan Russell

The original version of this piece was simply a solo melody for any instrument. I composed it in 2006 or 2007 to use as a prelude for a church service when I was working as the music director at First Congregational Church, San Francisco. I didn't notate it down at



the time beyond a few quick sketches. Over the years, I drew on it from time to time to play in church services or other settings where some contemplative music was called for. It also evolved over the years, with slight alterations and adjustments each time I played it. In May 2020, flutist Laura Lentz asked me if I would contribute something to a collection of solo flute works she was compiling called “Comfort Pieces.” The idea of the collection was to provide comfort and connection in the midst of the pandemic lockdown that was taking such a devastating toll on musicians’ livelihoods and spirits. *Prelude – Chant* seemed like a good fit for this theme, and so I fully notated it for the first time, to contribute to her collection.

I thought *Prelude – Chant* would make an effective first track for this album, acting as a gentle, meditative entry into everything that followed. I initially recorded only the melody on bass clarinet, and then recorded myself improvising various drones, echoes, and countermelodies against it. Through a process of iterative trial-and-error, I gradually crafted the arrangement heard on this album. It starts out calm and meditative, in the spirit of the original solo melody version, but becomes increasingly pleading and anguished as it progresses, before returning to quiet drones and distant filigrees at the end. This version also ended up connecting more strongly than I anticipated to the Jewish and klezmer music that I love. The second section of the melody always had a bit of a klezmer inflection, and this is strongly heightened in this multi-bass-clarinet version. It makes me think of many of the Psalm texts from the old testament, with their mournful pleas for God’s presence, guidance, and mercy. The melody in this setting ends up sounding somehow both deeply ancient and also modern, both ritualistic and personal.

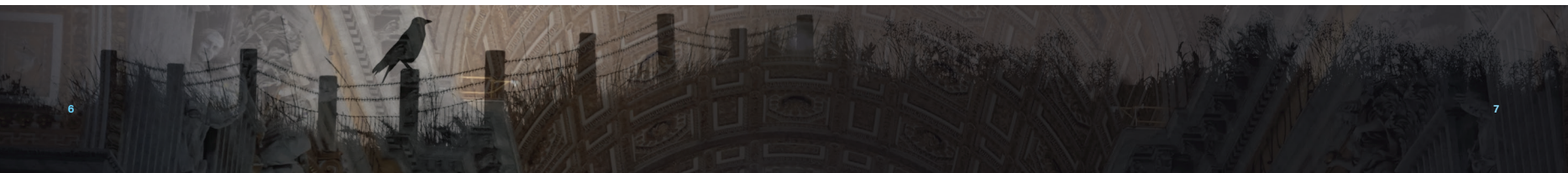
2. **Hear My Prayer, O Lord** by Henry Purcell (1659-1695), arranged by Jonathan Russell

Composed in 1682, this short 8-part choral work must be one of most emotionally concentrated musical works ever created. In under three minutes, it progresses from a simple, chant-like melody of just two pitches, to a searingly dissonant, pleading, 8-part contrapuntal texture spanning the entire range of the human voice. The text, the first line of Psalm 102, is simple yet poignant: “Hear my prayer, O Lord, and let my crying come unto thee.” Purcell wrings every possible emotional coloring out of this text, from contemplative to resigned to pleading to despairing. He is as daring with his use of dissonance as any composer would be before the 20th century.

The circumstances of the work’s composition are not known, but scholars suspect that it was planned to be the opening number of a larger work, given the many blank pages that follow it in the autograph manuscript. While I would love to know what Purcell intended to follow it with, much of the work’s extraordinary power and intensity comes from its brevity and compactness. Like much choral music, it translates quite effectively to bass clarinet choir, with little to no adjustment required. The range of a bass clarinet is about the same as a choir, and the homogeneity and clarity of the bass clarinet ensemble’s timbre can create an even more intense experience of the work’s numerous dissonances and resolutions.

3. **A Requiem for 2020**, by Jonathan Russell

2020 was an extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime (hopefully) year. It began with raging wildfires in Australia, a stark embodiment of the impending catastrophe of human-made climate



change. This was followed by a once-in-a-century (hopefully) global pandemic that would cause the deaths of millions around the world, as well as untold social disruption, as millions upon millions of people were forced to stay at home, lost work, and adjusted to lives of mask-wearing and isolation. In the United States, the summer brought an unprecedented outpouring of protest over the country's dark legacy of racism, as manifested most vividly in the brutal police murder of George Floyd. The year culminated in a shocking first: the refusal of an American president to concede his election loss. He and his allies disseminated a toxic stew of lies and conspiracy theories that tens of millions of Americans believed – and, on January 6th, 2021, acted on, in the violent storming of the U.S. Capitol, an unprecedented attempt to disrupt the peaceful transfer of power. There were moments of hope as well. The outpouring of demands for racial justice was notable in the breadth and depth of its support. The coronavirus pandemic laid bare the deep inequalities in society – and created hope that there could finally be the political will to address them. Covid vaccines were developed at a whirlwind speed, and scientists, healthcare workers, and public health officials displayed bravery and dedication that are an inspiration to all of us. It's a lot to process. No doubt social scientists, historians, public health officials, psychologists, artists, and all the rest of us will be reflecting on and learning from the events of 2020 for years, if not decades, to come. *A Requiem for 2020* is one early attempt at this processing. The work has no specific narrative, but taps into the swirl of emotions that dominated 2020 – fear, anxiety, sorrow, loneliness, rage – and slivers of hope. It is meant both to evoke the churning events and emotions of the year, and also to offer some space to grieve, reflect, remember, and find solace – hence the “requiem” in the title.

The work was composed for my bass clarinet ensemble Improbable Beasts and premiered virtually at ClarinetFest 2021, and finally live in Boston in June 2022.

4. **Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child**, traditional African-American spiritual, arranged by Jonathan Russell

As with most Spirituals, little is known about the origins of *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*. It first became widely known to the general public when it was performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1870s, but its origins surely long predate that. There are a variety of different versions, but the most usual rendering of the text is “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, A long ways from home. True believer. A long ways from home” with variations on subsequent verses (“Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone” etc.). The literal meaning of the text is plain enough, seeming to refer to the common, heart-breaking practice of breaking apart enslaved families, sending children off to plantations far away from their parents. Additional possible meanings could be a long way from the “home” or “mother” of Africa where the enslaved people came from; or “home” could refer to death, a common metaphor in Spirituals, often seen as the only real release from the troubles of the enslaved life. However one interprets the text, the meaning of the musical melody itself is unmistakable: mournful, sorrowful, with only the slightest ray of hope coming with the “true believer” line, implying that belief in the ultimate mercy of God may one distant day bring relief. While many other Spirituals also have themes of hope or joy, and even carefully encoded instructions on how to escape slavery, *Motherless Child*, in both its text and musical content, seems to be fundamentally a song of lament and sorrow.

For the version on this album, I listened and read widely, seeking to understand the full context and meaning of the song. The song has been recorded numerous times in countless ways, by jazz singers, opera singers, choirs, and pop and rock singers. My arrangement was influenced by a combination of many versions, but draws most heavily on the deeply soulful

version sung by Odetta at her 1960 Carnegie Hall concert. (Odetta was one of the central musical figures of the civil rights movement, with a profound influence on artists from Harry Belafonte to Bob Dylan.)

As with the Jewish musical traditions that I love, Spirituals come from the very specific struggles of a particular people in a particular time – but they also tap into something universally human. Indeed, several Spirituals draw on Old Testament themes and texts to make an explicit parallel between the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt and the enslavement of Africans in America – tragic experiences separated by thousands of miles and years. My goal in recording this version of *Motherless Child* is to share a genuine, personal expression of what this music stirs in my soul, while also respecting and paying tribute to its origins in the experiences of a specific people that I will never fully comprehend, in whose subjugation my ancestors were complicit, and to whom my own life of relative ease is tragically, inextricably linked.

5. **We Are Broken**, by Jonathan Russell

All of us are broken in some way – whether it's the loss of a loved one, the end of a relationship, a professional setback, or even that bully in 4th grade whose cruel taunts still linger inside us. We all have parts that are stunted, twisted, broken. How much of our life do we spend avoiding those parts, suppressing them, pretending they're not there, or acting out to avoid acknowledging them? What if, instead, we were able to really look at our own brokenness, acknowledge it, try to make peace with it? And what if we could do the same with those around us – to see and acknowledge their brokenness, indeed finding in it our

common humanity? This piece is meant to create some space to acknowledge and reflect on our own brokenness, realize that we are all broken together, and hopefully find some peace and acceptance in this realization.

6. **Postlude**, by Jonathan Russell

Postlude, which I created just for this album, takes the *Prelude – Chant* melody from the first track, but sets it against a floating, serene, shimmering backdrop that eventually melts gently into murmuring silence. It brings the album full circle, returning us to where we began, but cleansed and transformed by what we've experienced.

Jonathan Russell



Jonathan Russell (b. 1979) creates music by turns tender and fierce, playful and profound, raw and refined, propulsive and still. In his work, he seeks to embody and express the full range of human experience in a way that speaks directly to people's hearts, minds, and bodies.



While he composes for all sorts of instruments, the extraordinary sound and spirit of the bass clarinet in particular is a driving force behind much of his work. His numerous compositions for bass clarinet(s) include solo works, sonatas, concertos, duets, trios, quartets, chamber works, and large bass clarinet ensembles. He was a longtime member of the Edmund Welles bass clarinet quartet, which channeled the ecstatic power of heavy metal through the deep acoustical resonances of four bass clarinets. He is a member, with Jeff Anderle, of the Sqwonk bass clarinet duo, which for the past 17 years has devoted itself to creating a new repertoire of expressive, vital, joyous music for two bass clarinets. He is also the founder and leader of Improbable Beasts, a professional 15-member bass clarinet ensemble in the Boston area. This group represents the culmination of Jonathan's bass clarinet journey, allowing him to fully realize the richly-textured, harmonious, ferocious music of his dreams.

Jonathan also has a significant body of work for "bass clarinet-adjacent" instruments such as B-flat clarinets, saxophones, and other wind instruments. He loves the deeply human, physical quality of breath-produced sound, the wide spectrum of colors winds can produce, and the vast range of musical genres they can tap into, from Mahlerian bombast to jazz, klezmer, Balkan, Dixieland, funk, Latin, and beyond. His many wind-based compositions include works for solo saxophone, clarinet duet and trio, clarinet choir, saxophone choir, reed quintet, wind/brass octet, wind band, and clarinet and saxophone concertos. His wind works have been commissioned and performed by ensembles such as the Eastman Saxophone Project, Eastman Wind Ensemble, Imani Winds, Splinter Reeds, Nomad Session, Égide Duo, and Paradise Winds. Jonathan also writes for more conventional ensembles: orchestras, string quartets, choirs, mixed chamber ensembles, solo piano, etc., and these

works have been performed by groups such as the San Francisco Symphony, Roomful of Teeth, So Percussion, and JACK quartet, among many others.

Arranging music of the past for implausible combinations of modern instruments is another one of Jonathan's favorite activities. Imani Winds commissioned his woodwind quintet arrangements of *The Rite of Spring* and *Scheherazade*, which the ensemble has performed dozens of times throughout the United States and internationally. Other examples include Bach's *Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor* and *Dear Theodosia* from *Hamilton* arranged for two bass clarinets; *The Rite of Spring* for electric guitar, percussion, and two bass clarinets; Ligeti's harpsichord work *Hungarian Rock* for reed quintet; and numerous works, from choral motets to string quartets to 11th-century chant, for bass clarinet ensemble.

Many of Jonathan's projects have involved collaborations with or responses to other artists. He is fascinated by the similarities and vast differences between music and these other art forms, and by the challenges of "translating" from one to the other. He has served as music director for seven evening-length dance productions with San-Francisco-based choreographers Janice Garrett and Charles Moulton (Garrett + Moulton Productions), working closely with them to select, edit, arrange, and compose music for the productions, and then to organize, play in, and lead an ensemble of live musicians. In 2017, he wrote a work for the ZOFO piano duo to accompany a work of street art by Stormie Mills that he discovered while living in east London (and which has since been painted over). In 2019, he composed a piece to accompany a work by master woodcarver David Esterly. That same year he composed music for the Rochester-based ensemble fivebyfive to accompany Judith Schaechter's stunning stained glass work *The Battle of Carnival and Lent*. In 2020 he wrote his first film score for the silent film *Demons Before Breakfast*, which premiered at the 2020 "Sound of Silent Film Festival" in Chicago.

As a performer, Jonathan seeks to explore and master the entire range of what his instruments can do, from the refinement and precision of the classical tradition, to the driving grooves of heavy metal, to the fiery wails of klezmer. He appears frequently with the Sqwonk bass clarinet duo, the Kalliope Reed Quintet, the Improbable Beasts bass clarinet ensemble, as a freelancer in the Boston-area music scene, and as a clarinet and bass clarinet soloist. He is also a sought-after guest clinician in composition, clarinet/bass clarinet, and creative/unusual musical career paths. He has appeared in this capacity throughout the United States, as well as in Mexico, Germany, and New Zealand. In 2021, he was one of ten bass clarinetists from around the world selected to produce a series of instructional videos and give a masterclass for the online Digital Clarinet Academy. In 2023, he served on the faculty for the first-ever San Francisco Conservatory Bass Clarinet Intensive, a joyous week-long clinic on all aspects of bass clarinet performance.

An active member of the clarinet and bass clarinet communities, Jonathan is a regularly featured performer at the International Clarinet Association's annual ClarinetFest, serves on the ICA's New Music Committee, and is on the artistic team for the biennial Low Clarinet Festival. A card-carrying music theory nerd, Jonathan's doctoral dissertation is a 400+ page harmonic analysis of the entire *Rite of Spring*. He holds degrees from Harvard University (B.A.), San Francisco Conservatory of Music (M.M.), and Princeton University (Ph.D.), and has taught at Harvard, San Francisco Conservatory, and MIT. His primary composition teachers have included Paul Lansky, Dmitri Tymoczko, Dan Trueman, Barbara White, Steve Mackey, Dan Becker, Elinor Armer, Eric Sawyer, John Stewart, and Eric Ewazen. His clarinet teachers have included Janet Greene, Alan Kay, and Jo-Ann Sternberg.

When not making music, Jonathan loves exploring cities, bicycling, and improv comedy (both watching it and feebly attempting to do it himself). He lives in Cambridge, MA.