

YOUR DIGITAL PROGRAM / TEXT ONLY VERSION

# Is this the gate?

**Composer Nichols Lens / Libretto J.M. Coetzee**

**Dates:** 8 Mar 2024

**Venue:** Elder Hall, The University of Adelaide

**Duration:** 1hr, no interval

*Presented with the support of the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice & the Elder Conservatorium of Music.*

*Presenting Partner: The University of Adelaide.*

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## CREDITS

**Nicholas Lens**, composer

**J.M. Coetzee**, libretto

**Rachel M. Cholz**, dramaturg

## PERFORMERS

**Judith Dodsworth**, voice

**Elizabeth Layton**, violin

**Helen Ayres**, violin

**Stephen King**, viola

**Thomas Marlin**, cello

**Matthew Kneale**, bassoon

**Michael Ierace**, piano

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# Program Note

**The famous author Elizabeth Costello has died.  
In the afterworld she arrives at a massive gate.**

**(‘If this is the threshold to the afterlife,’ Elizabeth thinks truculently,  
‘couldn’t they have come up with something more original?’)**

**Costello is curious to see what is behind and  
wants to pass.**

**She is being stopped. As before, she has to  
justify her life as a writer.**

*Is this the gate?* is a preview of the full fledged 2.5 hour opera *Costello in Limbo (Elizabeth Costello at the gate)* based on the novel *Elizabeth Costello* by J.M. Coetzee. It is the second opera I am writing

with a libretto by J.M. Coetzee. The first was called *Slow Man* and premiered at the Malta Festival, Poznan. Our third opera will be *The Master of Petersburg*, centred around an event that happened during the life of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

In this preview of *Is this the gate?*, the orchestration has been reduced from symphonic orchestra, female choir, six soloists (Costello, the Gatekeeper, Kapo, the three Judges) to just one vocal soloist (Elizabeth Costello) and a small chamber ensemble. In this preview, Costello eagerly steals snippets of text from other soloists (out of the full opera) and adopts them to make her point. So to speak, she confronts herself in an imagined duality with her own intellectual rebelling nature.

**Nicholas Lens, Composer**

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## Lyrics

### Prologue

**Prudente, cerimoniale e bizzarro**

Straight out of Kafka!  
Straight out of Kafka!  
Not the light that Dante saw in paradise.

### 1. Is this the gate?

**Molto misterioso ma anche inquieto come un  
annuncio infausto – Un po’ confuso – Un po’  
clownesco con effetto wah wah**

Is this the gate?  
Can I pass through?  
Excuse me,  
can someone open the gate for me?  
You say: ‘First you must make a statement.’  
A statement of what?  
A statement.  
First I must make a statement of believe.  
A statement of what I believe.  
Thud, thud, thud.  
What if I do not believe?  
Thud, thud, thud.

### 2. We all believe

**Cambiamento o stato d’animo - A un ritmo  
moderato marcia, reale cerimoniale - Passaggio  
mediazionale espressivo**

We.  
But what?

What if I do not believe?  
‘We are not cattle,’ you say,  
‘there’s something for each of us’  
and I should write down what I believe.  
‘But we all believe.  
We are not cattle.

There is something for each of us.  
Write it down what you believe.’  
But what if I do not believe?  
And you say: ‘we all believe.  
We are not cattle.’  
You say: ‘there’s something for each of us.  
Write it down what you believe.’  
He says: *Believe*.

### 3. The other side

**Con una certa gioia**

That is what I said: what lies on the other side.  
I want to know if it is worth the trouble.  
The trouble of making my statement.  
What do you say?

### 4. I believe what I am (I)

**Grazioso, ma con un sottotono strano molto  
misterioso**

I believe what I am.  
I believe that what stands before you today is I.  
I am!

## **5. A stone does not believe in you**

**Movimento relativamente calmo ma con una certa inquietudine - Con grazia regale**

You say: 'A stone does not believe in you.  
But you choose to tell us not about stones but  
about frogs,  
to which you attribute a life story that is,  
as you concede, highly allegorical.  
These Australian frogs embody the spirit of life,  
which is what you as a storyteller believe in.  
Do we read you correctly?'  
They say:  
'She believed in the spirit of life.'  
Is that to be the last word on me, my epitaph?  
If you like. Like a bell: that is how one tests words,  
that is how the test works.  
Send out the word into the darkness  
and listen for the sound that returns.  
What tone?  
Listen for the sound that returns.

## **6. Another hot day (I)**

**Piccola marcia lenta - Piccola passaggio con tristezza poetica**

Another hot day.

## **7. I am a secretary of the invisible**

**Amabile, con tristezza poetica – Con una certa goia**

I'm a writer, and what I write is what I hear.  
I'm a secretary of the invisible  
I'm a writer and what I am called to do:  
dictation secretary.  
It's not for me to judge,  
it's not for me to question.  
I listen for the words,  
I test for their soundness,  
I write them down,  
I'm hearing the words.  
That's my calling,  
what I'm called to do.

## **8. What have I seen?**

**Come camminare sul ghiaccio sottile – Come un rapido piccolo tifone – Di nuovo, come camminare sul ghiaccio sottile – Di nuovo, con una certa goia**

I have seen but what have I seen?  
Light? but light so blinding  
that the earthly senses are stunned?  
Not at all!  
No, not at all.  
I have seen but what have I seen?  
Brilliant,  
certainly brilliant;

but no more brilliant than a floodlight,  
no more brilliant than a flash bulb.  
'Now you have seen.  
Now you will try harder.'  
You say: 'Now you have seen.  
Now you will try harder. Harder.  
You will try harder. A statement, go! Go!'  
Brilliant,  
certainly brilliant;  
but no more brilliant than a floodlight.  
'Now you have seen.  
Now you will try harder.'  
You say: 'Now you have seen.  
Now you will try harder. Harder.'  
But what have I seen?

## **9. Another hot day (II)**

**Marcia lenta con tristezza poetica**

Another hot day.

## **10. Straight out of Kafka**

**Prudente, cerimoniale e bizzarro**

Straight out of Kafka!  
Straight out of Kafka!  
Not the light that Dante saw in paradise.

## **11. Not the light that Dante saw in paradise**

**Marcia funebre lugubre, con desiderio di morte**

In paradise.  
What a deception.  
Not the light that Dante saw in paradise.

## **12. We see people like you all the time Con una grandezza che viene da dentro un po' più lento**

Who can say?  
It's a matter for the boards, you say:  
'A matter for the boards.'  
'We all stand, we, we all stand a chance.'  
'Can you tell me,' I ask, 'can you tell, do I stand a chance?'  
As you see, you see people like me all the time, like me all the time.  
Do we all stand a chance?'

## **13. I believe what I am (II)**

**Grazioso, ma con un sottotono strano molto misterioso**

I believe what I am.  
I believe that what stands before you today is I.  
I am!

# Biographies

## NICHOLAS LENS

### Composer

Nicholas Lens is a Belgian composer of contemporary music, particularly known for his operas. Nicholas Lens was born in Ypres, the legendary little war town near the French border in Flanders, Belgium. He started studying music with his godfather when he was four.

His work is published by Schott Music and Mute Ltd, his cd's are distributed by Universal Music, DG and Sony BMG. In 2020 Nicholas Lens signed with Deutsche Grammophon. Notable works are: *Slow Man*, opera with J.M. Coetzee (libretto); *Shell Shock*, opera and *L.I.T.A.N.I.E.S.*, chamber opera, both with Nick Cave (libretto); *The Accacha Chronicles* (with *Flamma Flamma*, part I, premiering live in Australia in 1998); *Venticinque movimenti per Contrabbasso solo* (25 movements for double bass solo); *The Puppet Designer*, for baritone and chamber orchestra; *100 phrases tonales simples*, petites études et exercices pour piano -Vol. 1 (1-50) and Vol. 2 (51-100); *Love Is the Only Master I'll Serve*, film written & directed.

He is living in Brussels and Venezia. He has one daughter, the Berlin-based painter Clara-Lane Lens.

## J.M. COETZEE

### Librettist

J.M. Coetzee was the first author to win the Booker Prize twice and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. His work includes *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Disgrace* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. His most recent writing is a trilogy of novels: *The Childhood of Jesus*, *The Schooldays of Jesus* and *The Death of Jesus*.

## JUDITH DODSWORTH

### Voice

Judith Dodsworth is regarded as one of Australia's finest sopranos. A graduate of ANU, ANAM and the University Of Melbourne she has studied in Vienna and London, including with legendary new music soprano Jane Manning. She has created leading roles in premiere seasons for Canberra Street Theatre, Chambermade Opera, Stopera and Neue Oper Wien in Vienna, has worked with

Syzygy Ensemble and the Plexus Collective and been presented in the Sydney Opera House' Utzon Series.

Judith performed Boulez' *Le Marteau sans maître* and in the Australian premiere of Outi Tarkiainen's *Naarasäiti* in the Adelaide Festival's 2023 Chamber Landscapes series, and will return to UKARIA in early 2024 as part of a residency to develop and workshop her new song-cycle, *The Unknown Swimmer* with composer, Kevin March.

## ELIZABETH LAYTON

### Violin

Described as "one of the most outstanding performers of her generation" (The Strad), Elizabeth Layton enjoys a varied career playing at festivals throughout Australia and New Zealand. She is Head of Classical Performance at the Elder Conservatorium, and a regular guest Concertmaster with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra.

A former concertmaster of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Elizabeth has toured chamber music worldwide with the Nash Ensemble. Her recordings are available on DG, Hyperion, Chandos, Naxos and NMC.

## HELEN AYRES

### Violin

Helen Ayres is a Doctoral graduate of the University of Melbourne and current violin teacher at the Open Music Academy, University of Adelaide. She is a founding member of Seraphim trio, resident leader of the Adelaide Hills Chamber Players and has appeared as guest leader with numerous Australian ensembles and orchestras.

Helen's chamber music concerts are regularly broadcast on ABC Classic and in 2019 Seraphim Trio's *Thirteen Ways to Look at Birds* with Paul Kelly, James Ledger, and Alice Keath won the ARIA award for Best Classical Album. Other albums include *Trio Through Time*, *The Trout*, *Beethoven Piano Trios* and most recently *Women in Music*.

## STEPHEN KING

### Viola

Violist Stephen King is a sought-after collaborator and creator. He performed with the Australian

String Quartet from 2012-21 developing projects with First Nations artists, emerging talent, Australian commissions, recordings and digital collaborations. From 2003 he was a member of the Australian Chamber Orchestra where he played a major role in building the Emerging Artists program and ACO2. Stephen was violist of the Coolidge String Quartet in Washington D.C. and earned a Doctorate with the Guarneri Quartet. Recently he has been a regular guest principal of the TSO and ARCO. Stephen teaches viola and chamber music at the University of Adelaide.

## **THOMAS MARLIN**

### **Cello**

Thomas Marlin is cellist of the Alma Moodie Quartet and the Tarrawatta Trio, is principal cellist of Adelaide Baroque, and regularly performs with Australia's leading musicians. Having performed extensively throughout Europe, Asia and Australia, he has graced numerous prominent concert halls including Wigmore Hall (London), the Rudolfinum (Prague) and the Barbican (London), and has been broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and ABC Classic FM. His performance with Michael Ierace for Tarrawatta's Exclusive Musical Soiree in December 2022 was described by Limelight as "chamber music playing at its best." Recent highlights include solo performances with the Adelaide Chamber Singers, Southern Cross Soloists, and the Elder Conservatorium Chamber Orchestra. Originally from Adelaide, he studied with Janis Laurs at the Elder Conservatorium of Music, before studying with Li Wei Qin at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music (Singapore) and completing a Masters with Distinction under Louise Hopkins at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama (London).

## **MATTHEW KNEALE**

### **Bassoon**

Hailed by the Daily Telegraph as "a new star...who wields his instrument with virtuosic skill and with moves you usually associate with a rock guitarist", Matthew Kneale is one of Australia's leading lights on the bassoon. He was the first ever bassoonist to be awarded the prestigious Freedman Classical Fellowship. Matthew used this award in late 2019 to embark on an international concert tour that aimed to shatter preconceived notions by presenting the bassoon as a brilliant solo and chamber entity in its own right, with a strong emphasis on music by Australia's leading young composers. Matthew is

a founding member of Arcadia Winds, Australia's leading young wind ensemble, and Musica Viva's inaugural FutureMakers musicians as well as award winning Ensemble Francaix. With both ensembles and as a soloist, Matthew appears at many major chamber music festivals around Australia.

## **MICHAEL IERACE**

### **Piano**

Cited as having "an exceptional gift" and his playing described as 'revelatory', Adelaide-born Michael Ierace had much success in local and national competitions before receiving the prestigious Elder Overseas Scholarship, enabling him study at London's Royal College of Music. He was selected as an RCM Rising Star was later on staff as a Junior Fellow in Piano Accompaniment. He won several competitions in the UK and performed extensively throughout the country.

Much sort after as an associate artist for national and international guests, Michael also teaches at the Elder Conservatorium and is the regular pianist for State Opera and Adelaide Festival productions.