

GEORGE BENJAMIN

WRITTEN  
ON SKIN

Opera in Three Parts

TEXT BY MARTIN CRIMP

FULL SCORE

FABER *ff* MUSIC

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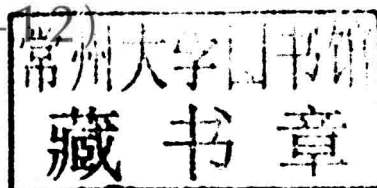
## WRITTEN ON SKIN

Opera in Three Parts

after the anonymous 13th century *razo*  
'Guillem de Cabestanh – Le Cœur Mangé'

TEXT BY MARTIN CRIMP

(2009-12)



FULL SCORE

(First Edition)

FABER *ff* MUSIC

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# GEORGE BENJAMIN WRITTEN ON SKIN

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George Benjamin's *Written On Skin* (Full Score) have been  
produced as a Special Limited Edition  
and are numbered, signed by the composer and  
included in a presentation slipcase

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Five additional copies numbered i–v  
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*George Benjamin*

George Benjamin

*Musique: George Benjamin*

*Texte: Martin Crimp*

*Commande du Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, De Nederlandse Opera (Amsterdam),*

*Théâtre du Capitole (Toulouse), Royal Opera House Covent Garden London,*

*Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino*

*Editions Faber Music Ltd*

*Music: George Benjamin*

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*Commissioned by the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence,*

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*Royal Opera House Covent Garden London,*

*Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino*

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The composer and writer would like to express their gratitude to Bernard Foccroulle, general director of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, for his support throughout the gestation and composition of this work.

The first performance was given at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, conducted by the composer, at the Grand Théâtre de Provence, on 7 July 2012

*The cast was:*

The Protector	Christopher Purves
Agnès	Barbara Hannigan
Angel 1 / The Boy	Bejun Mehta
Angel 2 / Marie	Rebecca Jo Loeb
Angel 3 / John	Allan Clayton
Stage direction	Katie Mitchell
Sets and costumes	Vicki Mortimer
Lighting	Jon Clark

## CHARACTERS

THE PROTECTOR	Baritone
AGNÈS, his wife	Soprano
ANGEL 1 / THE BOY	Counter-tenor
ANGEL 2 / MARIE	Mezzo-soprano
ANGEL 3 / JOHN	Tenor

## INSTRUMENTATION

3 flutes (II = piccolo, III = piccolo & alto flute)

2 oboes

2 clarinets in B♭ & A

bass clarinet (= B♭ clarinet)

contrabass clarinet

2 bassoons (II = contrabassoon)

4 horns in F

4 trumpets in B♭ (1 = piccolo trumpet)

3 trombones

tuba

percussion (4 players) – see facing

harp

glass harmonica



NB not an octave higher

bass viola da gamba



strings

(8.6.6.6.4 players) 2 first violins doubling mandolins;

all doublebasses must have extensions to low B natural

THE SCORE IS IN C

## PERCUSSION REQUIREMENTS

glockenspiel

2 single crotales 

steel drum (low tenor) 

3 tubular bells 

5 tuned cowbells (cencerros)  NB not an octave higher

vibraphone

gong  NB not an octave higher

2 small timpani 

6 mini-tablas (2 sets of 3 each – tuned very high)

3 bongos (high-pitched – 2 sets)	}	ranged from high to low
2 side drums		
2 tenor drums (no snares)		
tumba		
bass drum (large and deep)		

small pair of claves	}	ranged from high to low
3 mokubios		
4 temple blocks		

sleighbells (2 sets each of high and low)

maracas (3 large pairs)

pebbles (2 pairs – small & large)

guiro

whip

sandpaper blocks

typewriter

small triangle

untuned cowbell (attached to tenor drum)

clash cymbals (2 pairs – small and large),

5 suspended cymbals – very small, small, medium, large, very large

tam-tam (large)

## PERCUSSION DISTRIBUTION BY PLAYER

### PLAYER 1

glockenspiel, crotales, tubular bells, timpani,  
3 mini-tablas, 3 bongos, 4 temple blocks, small claves, small pair of pebbles,  
small suspended cymbal, small triangle

### PLAYER 2

steel drum, 3 mini-tablas, 2 side drums, 3 mokubios, large pair of maracas,  
small clash cymbals, 2 suspended cymbals, (medium and very large)  
2 sets of high sleighbells, typewriter

### PLAYER 3

3 bongos, 2 tenor drums (one with attached untuned cowbell), guiro,  
sandpaper blocks, large pair of maracas, whip, large suspended cymbal, tam-tam

### PLAYER 4

vibraphone, tuned cowbells, tuned gong,  
very small suspended cymbal, large clash cymbals, 2 sets of low sleighbells,  
large pair of maracas, large pair of pebbles, tumba, bass drum

## PERFORMANCE NOTES

### RECITATIVES

*Ad libitum* pauses in the vocal parts:

- / short
- // medium
- /// long
- //// very long

Vocal rhythms during free bars should be close to natural speech patterns,  
and above all not strictly metrical.

### BRASS

All the brass players apart from the tuba require practice mutes, if possible from the  
same manufacturer.

### STRINGS

First violin players 1–3, all the violas and all the cellos require practice mutes.

# SYNOPSIS

## PART ONE

### I Chorus of Angels

"Erase the Saturday car-park from the market place —  
fade out the living — snap back the dead to life".

A Chorus of Angels take us back 800 years, to a time when every book is a precious object "written on skin". They bring to life two of the story's protagonists: the Protector, a wealthy and intelligent landowner "addicted to purity and violence", and his obedient wife — his "property" — Agnès. One of the angels then transforms into the third protagonist — "the Boy" — an illuminator of manuscripts.

### II The Protector, the Boy and Agnès

In front of his wife, the Protector asks the Boy to celebrate his life and good deeds in an illuminated book. It should show his enemies in Hell, and his own family in Paradise. As proof of his skill the Boy shows the Protector a flattering miniature of a rich and merciful man. Agnès distrusts the Boy and is suspicious of the making of pictures, but the Protector over-rules her and instructs her to welcome him into their house.

### III Chorus of Angels

The Angels evoke the brutality of the biblical creation story — "invent man and drown him", "bulldoze him screaming into a pit" — and its hostility to women — "invent her / strip her / blame her for everything".

### IV Agnès and the Boy

Without telling her husband, Agnès goes to the Boy's workshop to find out "how a book is made". The Boy shows her a miniature of Eve, but she laughs at it. She challenges the Boy to make a picture of a 'real' woman, like herself — a woman with precise and recognisable features — a woman that he, the Boy, could sexually desire.

### V The Protector and the Visitors — John and Marie

As winter comes, the Protector broods about a change in his wife's behaviour. She hardly talks or eats, has started to turn her back to him in bed and pretends to be asleep — but he knows she's awake and can hear her eyelashes "scrape the pillow / like an insect".

When Agnès' sister Marie arrives with her husband John, she questions the enterprise of the book, and in particular the wisdom of inviting a strange Boy to eat at the family table with Agnès. The Protector emphatically defends both Boy and book, and threatens to exclude John and Marie from his property.

### VI Agnès and the Boy

The same night, when Agnès is alone, the Boy slips into her room to show her the picture she asked for. At first she claims not to know what he means, but soon recognises that the painted image of a sleepless woman in bed is a portrait of herself, her naked limbs tangled with the covers. As they examine the picture together, the sexual tension grows until Agnès offers herself to the Boy.

## PART TWO

### VII The Protector's bad dream

The Protector dreams not only that his people are rebelling against the expense of the book, but also, more disturbingly, that there are rumours of a secret page — “wet like a woman's mouth” — where Agnès is shown “gripping the Boy in a secret bed”.

### VIII The Protector and Agnès

The Protector wakes up from the dream and reaches out for his wife. She, however, is standing at the window watching black smoke in the distance, as the Protector's men burn enemy villages.

She asks her husband to touch and kiss her — but he's disgusted at being approached in this way by his wife and repels her, saying that only her childishness can excuse her behaviour. She angrily refuses to accept the label “child” — and tells him that if he wants to know the truth about her, he should go to the Boy: “Ask him what I am”.

### IX The Protector and the Boy

The Protector finds the Boy in the wood “looking at his own reflection in the blade of a knife”. He demands to know the name of the woman who “screams and sweats with you / in a secret bed” — is it Agnès?

The Boy, not wanting to betray Agnès, tells the Protector that he is sleeping with Agnès' sister, Marie — and conjures up an absurd scene of Marie's erotic fantasies.

The Protector is happy to believe the Boy, and reports back to Agnès that the Boy is sleeping with “that whore your sister”.

### X Agnès and the Boy

Believing that what her husband said is true, Agnès furiously accuses the Boy of betraying her. He explains he lied to protect her — but this only makes her more angry: it wasn't to protect her, it was to protect himself. If he truly loves her then he should have the courage to tell the truth — and at the same time punish her husband for treating her like a child. She demands that the Boy — as proof of his fidelity — creates a new, shocking image which will destroy her husband's complacency once and for all.

## PART THREE

### XI The Protector, Agnès, and the Boy

The Boy shows the Protector and Agnès some pages from the completed book, a sequence of atrocities which make the Protector increasingly impatient to see Paradise. The Boy is surprised: he claims that these are indeed pictures of Paradise here on earth — doesn't the Protector recognise his own family and property?

Agnès then asks to be shown Hell. The Boy gives her a page of writing. This frustrates Agnès because, as a woman, she hasn't been taught to read. But the Boy goes, leaving Agnès and her husband alone with the "secret page".

### XII The Protector and Agnès

The Protector reads aloud the page of writing. In it the Boy describes in sensuous detail his relationship with Agnès. For the Protector, this is devastating, but for Agnès it's confirmation that the Boy has done exactly as she asked. Excited and fascinated by the writing, indifferent to his distress, she asks her husband to show her "the word for love".

### XIII Chorus of Angels and the Protector

The Angels evoke the cruelty of a god who creates man out of dust only to fill his mind with conflicting desires, and "make him ashamed to be human". Torn between mercy and violence the Protector goes back to the wood, and — "cutting one long clean incision through the bone" — murders the Boy.

### XIV The Protector and Agnès

The Protector attempts to reassert control over Agnès. She is told what to say, what she may or may not call herself — and, sitting at a long dining-table, is forced to eat the meal set in front of her to prove her "obedience". The Protector repeatedly asks her how the food tastes and is infuriated by her insistence that the meal tastes good. He then reveals that she has eaten the Boy's heart.

Far from breaking her will, this provokes a defiant outburst in which Agnès claims that no possible act of violence — "not if you strip me to the bone with acid" — will ever take the taste of the Boy's heart out of her mouth.

### XV Angel 1

The Boy reappears as an Angel to present one final picture: in it, the Protector takes a knife to kill Agnès, but she prefers to take her own life by jumping from the balcony. The picture shows her as a falling figure forever suspended by the illuminator in the night sky, while three small angels painted in the margin turn to meet the viewer's gaze.

M.C.

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# WRITTEN ON SKIN

## PART ONE

Text by  
MARTIN CRIMP

Music by  
GEORGE BENJAMIN

### I – Chorus of Angels

Fast, energetic (♩ = 96)

1. Oboes  
2. Clarinets in B $\flat$   
3. Bass Clarinet in B $\flat$   
4. Contrabass Clarinet in B $\flat$   
5. Bassoons  
6. Trumpets in B $\flat$   
7. Trombones  
8. Tuba  
9. Percussion  
10. Violins 1  
11. Violins 2  
12. Violas  
13. Violoncellos  
14. Double Basses

1. 3 Bongos  
2. 2 Side Drums (snare off)  
3. 2 Tenor Drums  
4. Tumba (with hands)

light (bamboo) sticks

Fast, energetic (♩ = 96)

non div.

6

Ob.

Cl.

B. Cl.

Cb. Cl.

Bsn.

Tpt.

Tbn.

Tba.

Perc. (Bongos)

ANGEL 2

ff harsh

Strip, \_\_\_\_\_

ff

Strip, \_\_\_\_\_

ff

Strip the ci-ties of

ANGEL 3

ff harsh

Strip, \_\_\_\_\_

ff

Strip the ci-ties of

1

Vln. 1

non div.

Vln. 2

12

Ob. (cresc.) *f* *ffp*

Cl. (cresc.) *f* *ffp*

Cl. *mf* *ff*

B. Cl. *mf* *ff*

Cb. Cl. *ff*

Bsn. (cresc.) *f* *ff* *p*

Tpt. 1.2. *ff* *p*

Tpt. 3.4. *ff* *p*

Tbn. *ff* *p*

Tba. *ff* *p*

(Bongos) *pp* sempre *ffp*

Perc. (S.D.) *p* *f*

(T.D.) *p* *f*

(Tumba) *mf* *f*

A.2 brick dis-man-tle them. *ff* Strip,

A.3 brick dis-man-tle them. *ff* Strip,

2

Vln. 1 *ff* *ff*

Vln. 2 *ffp* *ff* (non div. sempre) *ff*

17

Ob. *mf cresc.* *f* *molto* *ffpp pale*

Cl. *cresc.* *p* *molto* *ff*

B. Cl. *mf* *molto* *ff*

Cb. Cl. *f* *molto* *ff*

Bsn. *mf cresc.* *f* *molto* *ff*

Tpt. 1. *marc.* *p* *molto* *ff*  
2. *marc.* *p* *molto* *ff*  
3. 4. *p* *molto* *ff*

Tbn. 1. *p* *molto* *ff*  
2. *p* *molto* *ff*  
3. *mf* *ff*

Tba. *mf* *ff*

(Bongos)  
(pp sempre)

Perc. (S.D.) *pp* *mf* *f*  
(T.D.) *p* *mf* *f*  
(Tumba)

A.2 *ff* *ff* *ff sempre*  
Strip out the wires co-ver the land with grass. Force

A.3 *ff*  
and co-ver the land with grass.

Vln. 1 (non div. sempre) *sfpp* *pp* *ff* *sf* 1. solo *p*  
altri *sf*

Vln. 2 *sfpp* *f* *sf*

23

Ob. *pp*

Cl. *pp pale*

B. Cl. *p*

Bsn. *pp secco*

Tpt.

Tbn.

Tba. *pp leggero* *poco*

A.2 chrome and a-lu-min-i-um back in-to the earth

A.3 *ff sempre* Can - cel all flights from the in-ter-na-tional air - port

I. solo

Vln. 1 *pp leggero*

altri

I. solo

Vln. 2 *p* *pp leggero*

altri