

BELFAST ENSEMBLE & ULSTER ORCHESTRA

Riot Symphony

an explosive new celebration of protest by Conor Mitchell fusing texts by
Pussy Riot and Sophie Scholl

World premiere

Friday 10 May 2024, 7.45pm, Ulster Hall

Video design: Gavin Peden

Conductor: Gabriel Bebeșelea

Soprano: Rebecca Murphy

Tenor: Michael Bell

Tickets: <https://www.ulsterorchestra.org.uk/whats-on/the-sun-still-shines/>



14th March 2024

The Ulster Orchestra and the award-winning Belfast Ensemble join forces for one night in the city's Ulster Hall to premiere Conor Mitchell's Riot Symphony.

An explosive new work for soprano, tenor, orchestra and video installation, the symphony uses the texts of **condemned 1940s student activist Sophie Scholl**, whose leaflets were distributed as part of the anti-Nazi 'White Rose' movement in Munich University, ultimately costing her life. Mitchell's fascination with music as politics brings this text right up to date, blending it with the contemporary punk vocals of **Russian group Pussy Riot** - using their anarchist anthem PUTIN LIGHT UP THE FIRES as an orchestral texture, standing as in contemporary relief to Scholl's words.

Presented by **two of Northern Ireland's finest young soloists** - soprano **Rebecca Murphy** and tenor **Michael Bell** - and played by its national symphony orchestra, this new work asks 'can young people challenge our leaders?'

Mitchell said: *“In a time of international conflict, and with a specific lens on the Russian/Ukrainian war, the question of how we protest seems even more important: How do we question? And can art, words and youth change the world? We are living in a time when governments are cracking down on protests and on people’s voices against injustices. It has never been more important for artists to speak up.”*

Patrick McCarthy, Deputy Chief Executive and Artistic Director, added: *“Our projects with Conor over the last few years have been both vital and profound. His work has brought a new social conscience to what we do, and this promises to be a hugely significant evening.”*

Composer Conor Mitchell is known for taking politically charged subjects and exploring them through music, visual media and the stage. His previous work has tackled themes as diverse as the Disappeared of the Northern Irish Troubles, homophobia in Irish political discourse and the Umbrella Riots in Hong Kong.

Here, he continues to explore the idea of the ‘personal as political’, taking the protest pamphlets of a 1940’s activist, Munich student Sophie Scholl, and blending them with the punk lyrics of Russian protest band Pussy Riot.

The **Belfast Ensemble** (established 2017) are an incredibly versatile, innovative group of musicians occupying a ‘free space’ in the artistic life of their city. For Riot Symphony the Ensemble collaborates again with Belfast based **video designer Gavin Peden (Mirrorball, Good Vibrations, The Doppler Effect)**.

The premiere will be conducted by **Gabriel Bebeșelea,**

Principal Conductor of the “George Enescu” Philharmonic Orchestra in Bucharest and Artistic Director of the period instrument ensemble and festival Musica Ricercata.

Mitchell and the Belfast Ensemble have previously collaborated with the **Ulster Orchestra** on several occasions. The epic **Mass** in 2021 literally placed the Orchestra in the centre of global queer film content, asking the audience to circle the musicians while vast walls projected queer visual art that asked ‘what is my queer religion?’ An earlier piece **Democracy Dances** premiered online as a film work during the pandemic. This work for video and orchestra explored the 2020 protests in Hong Kong and reacted - in musical terms - to the music of John Adams. The Riot Symphony is an exciting new co-commission for the two partners and promises a powerful evening of music at the Ulster Hall.