IN FOCUS

‘We’ve had people storm out’: Max Richter and Yulia Mahr stage a hopeful show for hard times

As part of its 75th anniversary, the Southbank Centre hosts the Oscar-nominated composer and his creative partner for a sweeping orchestral show that dares to imagine a more hopeful future. Yulia Mahr speaks to Annabel Nugent

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Max Richter and Yulia Mahr *(Getty)*

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As far as human emotions go, hope is a complicated one. It can be joyful. It can be fickle. It can be dangerous. Increasingly, it can be hard to come by. But above all hope is necessary – that is the message at the heart of *Possible Futures*, a new show at the Southbank by the composer Max Richter and his creative partner Yulia Mahr, the husband-and-wife duo behind seminal projects like *SLEEP*, an eight-hour album of lullabies released in 2015 and performed live to an audience in beds.

“Hope is the central theme of everything we do,” says Mahr. “We made a decision a long time ago when we were young and going on protests and doing our activism, we thought – well we’re not making much of a difference here. Is it presumptuous to even think that you can make a difference? So we started exploring that in our various practices, and we thought OK; it’s about these small impulses of hope, small impulses of connection.”

Taking place this week as part of the Southbank’s 75th-anniversary programme, the orchestral concert asks attendees to envision a different kind of future from the dystopian one that today’s political and social climate seems to promise.

Hot on the heels of Richter’s first Oscar nomination, for his slow-burning score for *Hamnet*, the performance comprises two parts. The first half, performed by Richter and the Philharmonic Orchestra, is a rendition of his and Mahr’s 2017 orchestral album *VOICES*. Created in response to the “post-truth politics” coming out of 2010, in turn, spurred on by the advent of social media, *VOICES* took inspiration from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document drawn up in the aftermath of World War Two to establish a baseline for human rights around the world. The album has only become more relevant in the years since.

“Looking back now, 2010 was a glorious time of relative stability,” says Mahr. “The challenges on human rights and international institutions have just amplified.” In an age of democratic decline and an erosion of civil liberties, the ideals that the declaration espouses, including freedom from discrimination and right to asylum, feel almost romantic – a juxtaposition reflected in the piece itself, the chasm between its hopeful words and melancholic music. “It’s interesting, we’ve had people storm out a couple of times,” says Mahr. “I think to myself, really? It couldn’t be a more humane piece.”

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VOICES was inspired partly by Mahr’s life story. When she was seven, she and her mother fled communist Hungary for London. As hard as the move was, there were moments of hope too – those “small impulses of connection”. Her mother found a place to live after spotting an ad in *Time Out* looking to house a single mother who was either a refugee or migrant. At school, “incredible teachers” went out of their way to help Mahr learn English. “Individual human beings away from systems are more [kind],” she says now.

Possible Futures is the latest collaboration between Mahr and Richter, who met at Edinburgh festival in 1988. He saw her perform in a play and fell in love instantly. Their joint early experience in the art world – he in composing, and she in visual arts – fed directly into the creation of Studio Richter Mahr, a residency programme where artists are given free studio space, lodging, and uninterrupted time to refine their practice within state-of-the-art facilities in the Oxfordshire countryside.

Sheila Atim as part of ‘VOICES’, performed at the Barbican in 2020 *(Mike Terry)*

Inspired by the bucolic setting of creative communities around the world, like Blue Mountain College in the US, Bauhaus in Germany, and Kala Bhavana in India, Studio Richter Mahr serves as an incubator for emerging artists. “We understand what it’s like to be a young artist; there’s no real support. It took a really long time to earn any money, to make ends meet,” says Mahr. “It was awful and it wasn’t so long ago. So after we’d done *SLEEP* and *VOICES*, we thought, OK, for our next project, we need to not just talk the talk, but actually walk the walk in helping these artists.”

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Crucially, that support extends past the residencies themselves. “People need more than that; they need doors opened for them,” says Mahr, who knows first hand the power of an introduction. “So many people pull the drawbridge up behind them. I didn’t want to do that.”

One of their residents, Cassie Kinoshi, a Mercury Prize-nominated and Ivor Academy Award-winning composer, will perform a piece in the second half of *Possible Futures* alongside a host of other musicians whose work provokes questions. “Is the future already written? Is it inevitable, all this awfulness going on?” says Mahr. “Can we change it? And how do we change it?” Hope is a good place to start.

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‘Possible Futures’ is on at Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre on Friday 27 March; tickets here

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