

MusicalLandscape

WINTER SOLSTICE

Talea Ensemble will welcome winter by performing ‘Solstices’ IN COMPLETE DARKNESS



BEOWULF SHEEHAN — TALEA ENSEMBLE

Talea Ensemble will welcome the winter solstice with Georg Friedrich Haas’ “Solstices,” performing at sunset in complete darkness, 4:26 p.m. Dec. 21 in PS21’s Black Box Theater.

By SHARON SMULLEN
Eagle correspondent

CHATHAM, N.Y. — Around the world and across the ages, the winter solstice has represented a time of reflection and mystery.

The night is long on the day of the winter solstice, a day with the shortest period of sunlight. Near the Arctic Circle, the sun doesn’t appear at all.

In the Northern Hemisphere, the winter solstice, also the first day of winter, falls on Thursday. To honor the occasion, New York City-based chamber orchestra Talea Ensemble will perform Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas’ 2017 work, “Solstices,” at PS21: Center for Contemporary Performance. The 75-minute instrumental piece will begin at sunset, precisely at 4:26 p.m., and is presented with the orchestra and audience shrouded in complete darkness.

Now in its 15th season, Talea Ensemble has been led for the past two years by bassoonist Adrian Morejon, who has performed with the group for more than a decade. Last winter he coordinated the group’s inaugural performance of “Solstices,” and was instrumental in reprising the piece this year.

“It’s becoming a winter tradition, the idea of repeating this performance, especially since the musicians spent a lot of time memorizing it and preparing the parts,” he said.

During 75 minutes of visual obscurity, Haas creates a sound world of microtonality and overtones. “He’s so meticulous in how he crafts it,” Morejon said.

The work spans a broad dynamic range, from reflective repetition to the dramatic and elicits a deep listening experience for both audience and

musicians. It’s about the transition of music into different states, with a lot of texture, Morejon said.

Since there’s no conductor, things aren’t perfectly aligned rhythmically, Morejon said. “The ten musicians memorize their parts, then, based on what they hear from each other, they find little aural cues that help them know to go on to the next section. It creates this intimacy that’s very unique and different from typical chamber music.”

While it’s easy for musicians to be intimidated at first, rehearsing with sleep masks to simulate darkness has proven helpful, he added.

Some instruments face more challenges than others.

“Percussion choreography is always important, but in this case, it’s crucial,” Morejon said. With a sonic menagerie that includes vibraphone, timpani, cymbals, rainstick and more, “it’s a lot of rehearsal getting that really down right.”

Throughout its 15-year history, Talea Ensemble has played many works by Haas, a member of Columbia University’s composition faculty since 2013.

“I really made quite an effort to make [Solstices] happen last season,” Morejon said. “I grew attached to the concept of complete darkness, allowing your audience to experience the music in a different way and having a completely different sound world. I think it takes the audience somewhere new, compared to many other pieces.”

So far, the work has been performed predominantly in Europe — it premiered in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 2019, performed by U.K. contemporary music ensemble Riot — and has been presented on both winter and summer solstices.

Part of the program is preparing the audience for what they will experience.

“We do a pre-concert talk, with a 2-minute trial of the darkness to make sure no one is uncomfortable,” he said.

Trained ushers wear night-vision goggles to ensure the audience’s wellbeing.

“People can raise their hand if they need to step out,” Morejon said. “It didn’t happen last year, but we have to prepare for that.”

In order not to disturb the immersive process, house lights are brought up gradually as the music nears completion.

“Little by little, the lights start coming back,” Morejon said — just as light returns to the Earth following the solstice.

The concert marks the PS21 debut for the well-traveled ensemble, which has appeared in Europe, North America, Mexico and beyond, performing in configurations from quintet to chamber orchestra. In 2025 they head to Brazil for a new opera production.

Percussionist Matthew Gold, who regularly performs with Talea and teaches at Williams College, helps program PS21’s contemporary music offerings.

“Matt really helped create a collaboration between Talea and PS21 for this performance,” Morejon said. “We’re trying to find new venues off the beaten path a little bit, to reach out to new audiences.”

“PS21 is the perfect collaborator for this, because it’s very site specific, and they really care about the natural environment. A sense of place and time is an important part of what they present. Having this done on the solstice in complete darkness right as the sun is setting, it all works together.”

Housed in a modern building in a

If You Go

What: “Solstices” by Georg Friedrich Haas, performed in complete darkness at sunset on the winter solstice.

Who: Talea Ensemble, a 10-piece chamber orchestra

Where: Black Box Theater, PS21: Center for Contemporary Performance, 2980 NY-66, Chatham, N.Y.

When: 4:26 p.m. Dec. 21

Running time: 1 hour, 15 minutes

Tickets: \$35, general admission; \$10, student, youth and educators

Information and reservations: 518-392-6121. ps21chatham.org

former apple orchard, the stage of PS21’s open-sided summer pavilion is enclosed in winter to create a black box theater.

“Solstices” reflects PS21’s commitment to presenting compelling new music, and is an extension of its annual summer House Blend concert series.

“House Blend is a bespoke series that focuses on more unusual repertoire, things we find exciting, relevant, topical and contemporary in the 21st and 20th century repertoire,” said Elena Siyanko, PS21’s executive director. “Our eccentric habit is to present holiday programming outside the box, to shift away from the conventional. The holiday season of gratitude is a more introspective time, and we wanted to introduce a more introspective perspective for the audience members.

“It’s a pretty unusual kind of holiday programming that nobody else in this area would do. The normal modus operandi is Christmas carols, and we just wanted to change that a little bit.”



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