

INCANDESCENCE

Incandescence for 10 instruments (flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, and 5 percussion) was commissioned for Eighth Blackbird by the MacArthur International Connections Fund and was written in 2017 for joint performances by Eighth Blackbird and the Amadinda Percussion Group, a percussion quartet from Budapest.

During my earliest days as a composer, in 1987, I learned about the traditional court music of the Kingdom of Buganda (Uganda), wherein musicians play fast, interlocking melodies. Rather than syncopate over long periods, each musician conceives of their own pattern as on the beat, and of countermelodies played by others as offbeat. This notion of a relative beat, and the cognitive and compositional possibilities it engenders, dramatically changed how I experienced music, from both a player's and a listener's perspective. Inspired by this, I composed a marimba quartet, *Pattern Transformation* (1988), which I initially thought unplayable. But it turned out that a percussion group in Budapest had named itself after the amadinda, a xylophone of the Baganda, and had mastered this music's complex technique of interplay. They premiered *Pattern Transformation* in 1990 and have performed it countless times since. In 2002, commissioned by the Vienna Festwochen, I wrote the quartet *Independence* for Amadinda, expanding on techniques developed in *Pattern Transformation*, resulting in arguably the most difficult piece ever written for percussion ensemble.

Given this long history of collaboration, it was a special pleasure for me to compose for Amadinda again, heightened by the likewise special pleasure of writing for the wonderful Eighth Blackbird. Having developed a highly individual, African-based approach to rhythm and meter, my most recent music integrates these techniques into an environment where the African influence is more subtle, maintaining my metric language while reducing the complexity of the interplay. As the title suggests, *Incandescence* harkens back to *Independence*, combining and confronting interlocking polymetric structures with my more recent harmonic and textural developments - a stylistic amalgam featuring various elements of my compositional voice. Consonant and dissonant fields are juxtaposed; unusual clavé patterns suggest a constantly variable tempo. Themes reminiscent of melodies of the Mandé people of West Africa (I have collaborated with musicians in that region for over 20 years), played mostly by the piano, are overshadowed or drowned out by the other instruments. In this ensemble of 5 percussionists and 5 other instrumentalists, percussion and non-percussion instruments pair up as duos, dance as partners as it were, and cue off each other to creating an interdependence of rhythm and melody.