

ABOUT THE ARTIST



JONATHAN BISS,
piano

Jonathan Biss was recently named Co-Artistic Director at the Marlboro Music Festival, where he has spent 12 summers. A member of the faculty of his alma mater, the Curtis Institute of Music, since 2010, Biss leads the first massive open online course offered by a classical music conservatory, *Exploring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas*, which has reached more than 150,000 people in 185 countries. As the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth approaches in 2020, Biss continues adding lectures to his online course and progresses in his nine-year, nine-disc recording cycle of the complete piano sonatas.

This season, Biss premieres Caroline Shaw's new concerto alongside Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 at the Seattle Symphony, and then performs both works with the North Carolina Symphony, The Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra. He also performs with many other orchestras and tours in Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

Biss represents the third generation in a family of professional musicians that includes his grandmother Raya Garbousova (for whom Samuel Barber composed his Cello Concerto) and his parents, violinist Miriam Fried and violist/violinist Paul Biss. He began his piano studies at age six, and his first musical collaborations were with his mother and father. He studied at Indiana University and at the Curtis Institute of Music with Leon Fleisher.

Biss has been recognized with honors including the Leonard Bernstein Award at the 2005 Schleswig-Holstein Festival, Wolf Trap's Shouse Debut Artist Award, Lincoln Center's Martin E. Segal Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, the 2003 Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award, and a 2002 Gilmore Young Artist Award. His albums have won Diapason d'Or de l'année and Edison awards. He was an artist-in-residence on American Public Media's *Performance Today* and was the first American chosen to participate in the BBC's New Generation Artist program. 

Roll Over, Beethoven!

A Piano Concerto 219 Years in the Making

"Our first movements are the longest and follow a sonata form, our second movements are the contemplative heart of the whole piece, and our third movements rip quickly through a rondo form," says Caroline Shaw, describing her new piano concerto, *Watermark*, and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3. Her use of the word "our" is charming and immediately creates a sense of time-travel between the two composers, who wrote their respective works 219 years apart — and that's exactly the point.

Shaw was one of five composers chosen to create new piano concertos in dialogue with each of Beethoven's five piano concertos, through a project called *Beethoven/5* — the brainchild of Jonathan Biss, who premieres each of the new works. For her concerto, co-commissioned by the North Carolina Symphony, Shaw was asked to respond to Beethoven's Third.

It was a work she didn't know nearly as well as some of Beethoven's other piano concertos, but she did a "deep dive" — from listening to recordings on repeat, to reading musicological studies. In fact, she decided on her title as she read about how the watermarks on Beethoven's manuscript paper are used to date his sketches. "I liked the idea of something being embedded in a document, telling a bit about the time in which it was made," she says. "Just like Jonathan Biss and Beethoven have their stamp on this music I've made in 2019."

10 Fun Facts: Caroline Shaw's *Watermark*

- 1 *Watermark* took four years to write, from the very first idea to the final note.
- 2 Shaw jokes that over the past few years, **she listened to Beethoven's concerto "somewhere between 38 and 79 times."** ("Likely about 50," she clarifies.)
- 3 During her study of Beethoven's concerto, Shaw says that she most enjoyed "peeling back the layers" of the middle movement.
- 4 The recording she "returned to most often" is Mitsuko Uchida's, with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra.
- 5 ***Watermark* begins and ends with the orchestra's musicians humming together.** "I like the idea of hearing the orchestra as a group of people, through the instruments of their own bodies, before we hear their instruments made of wood and brass," Shaw explains.
- 6 Her biggest challenge was writing for Jonathan Biss, whom she greatly admires. "It's always a bit scary to write for someone that you don't want to let down!" she says.
- 7 **Much of *Watermark* was written on airplanes** — and Shaw always kept paper beside her bed or in her bag so she could "jot something down at any time."
- 8 The instrumentation of *Watermark* is identical to that of Beethoven's concerto, with three exceptions — Shaw uses bass clarinet in place of a second clarinet, contrabassoon in place of a second bassoon, and bass drum in place of timpani.
- 9 **"Velvet, mahogany, salt"** are the three words that come to Shaw's mind to describe *Watermark*.
- 10 Direct quotations from Beethoven's concerto — "little hidden Easter eggs" — are peppered throughout *Watermark*. (How many do you hear? Hint: One of them is Beethoven's opening theme!)