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MIDDLEBURY  
PERFORMING ARTS SERIES

P R E S E N T S

*Caroline Shaw & Go Percussion  
featuring Ringdown*

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2024

7:30 PM ET

ROBISON HALL, MAHANEY ARTS CENTER



# **CAROLINE SHAW & SŌ PERCUSSION featuring Ringdown**

Songs from *Rectangles and Circumstance* (2024)

and *Let the Soil Play its Simple Part* (2021)

by Caroline Shaw and Sō Percussion

Staging and Design by Mark DeChiazza

## **Sō Percussion**

Eric Cha-Beach ● Josh Quillen  
Adam Sliwinski ● Jason Treuting

## **Ringdown**

Danni Lee Parpan ● Caroline  
Shaw

***Some Bright Morning***

***Let the Soil***

***This***

***Silently Invisibly***

***Long Ago***

***Sing On***

***Who Turns Out the Light***

***Slow Motion***

Ringdown featuring Danni Lee Parpan and Caroline Shaw

Sō Percussion

**Sense (2024) – Jason Treuting**

**4+9 (2017) – Eric Cha-Beach**

***Lay All Your Love on Me***

***To Music***

***To the Sky***

***Rectangles and Circumstance***

***The Parting Glass***

*Note: the concert will be performed without intermission.*

*Special thanks this evening to Performing Arts Series intern*

*Tyler Stark '27.*

*This performance is made possible with generous support  
from the Paul Nelson Performance Endowment and the Rothrock Family  
Residency Fund.*

*Please turn off all electronic devices prior to the performance,  
and refrain from texting. Photography and the use of audio or video  
equipment are prohibited.*

**Sō Percussion and Caroline Shaw's** latest collaboration is *Rectangles and Circumstance*, the "hypnotically beautiful" (BBC Radio 3) new album from Nonesuch Records. The current tour of the album is augmented by songs from their previous collaborative work *Let the Soil Play its Simple Parts* well as an interlude from Caroline's cinematic pop duo Ringdown, featuring co-songwriter and partner Danni Lee, plus recent compositions for Sō by members Jason Treuting and Eric Cha-Beach. The evening-length performance is a band-generated theatrical experience, featuring staging and design by director Mark DeChiazza. The musicians gradually place lights and reveal novel instruments as the show builds from a lone spotlight on Shaw singing *I'll Fly Away* to the ecstatic full ensemble performing thrilling up-tempo songs like *Sing On* and *To the Sky*, as films by Sō Percussion member Jason Treuting splash across canvases throughout the stage. This production melds DIY design with dazzling original songs, to sensational effect.



## **Program Note**

*The following is the liner note from Rectangles and Circumstance, written by Sō member Adam Sliwinski. Not all works referenced in the note will be performed this evening, and additional works from the collaboration's previous album will also be included.*

I once asked Caroline Shaw how she knew she wanted to be a composer. She said, "When I perform pieces by other composers, I often hear the music going somewhere else in my head." For her, the urge to compose manifests not only as creating from scratch, but as listening and responding, and the question of what comes next is just as important as where to start.

When Sō Percussion started working with Caroline, we noticed that her first creative step, before writing any music, was to suggest sounds. Then, she would step back and listen. The first piece she composed for us was the meditative *Taxidermy*, written for mallet instruments and flowerpots. On the day we started working on it, she brought in a few ideas of sounds to hear us play (striking softly and steadily in unison, rolling, tapping with fingers). As a result of this

careful listening, the flowerpot gestures in the eventual piece felt perfectly timed and distributed, calmly confident in their simplicity.

After collaborating in a similar way on 2017's Grammy-winning composition, *Narrow Sea*, we started to co-compose music for *Let the Soil Play Its Simple Part*, which was released on Nonesuch Records in 2021. Caroline's gift for deciding what to do next animated the process, no matter whose ideas we were trying. After a few years of touring *Let the Soil Play Its Simple Part* together, with a pandemic in between, we came to record our second album, *Rectangles and Circumstance*, as a road-tested band who knew each other's strengths, weaknesses, and tendencies intimately.

Most of the songs started with instrumental pieces or fragments of pieces from Sō's Jason Treuting or Eric Cha-Beach. Sometimes those sketches came fleshed out with verse and chorus structure; other times they started as exercises or variations for us to jam on.

Eric first introduced "Sing On" as one of his characteristic explorations of number-dividing at macro and micro levels. The song is organized around phrases of four bars with seven pulses each ( $7/4$  meter), each of which is divided into two sets of seven smaller pulses ( $7/8 + 7/8$ ). The opening pulses therefore divide each bar neatly in

half, giving no indication of their “odd” character until a tiny hitch in each fourth bar, which is divided as four big pulses plus three (8 + 6 small pulses). Is knowing this necessary to enjoy the song? No, because Caroline composed a gently rollicking four-bar chord progression with her Helicon voice synthesizer, which creates a harmonic structure for a joyful and climactic song. In fact, I don’t remember us ever discussing the metrical scheme with her.

The same process applies when we are making one of Caroline’s songs. This entire collaboration started with us taking extra time at the end of the *Narrow Sea* sessions to make our version of her piece “Other Song.” We recorded a base layer of the tune and its elements, then stacked up multiple passes of percussion sounds, adding and subtracting them with the expert help of our co-producer and engineer, the estimable Jon Low. On this album, we made a new arrangement of Caroline’s song “And So.” As with “Other Song,” Jason and I outlined the structure with drums and piano. Once that was complete, all of Sō added flowerpots, Fender Rhodes, vibraphone, organ, steel drums, more percussion, and vocals.

The first stage of this layer-making occurred at Guilford Sound, a state-of-the-art recording studio in a bucolic hilltop setting in Southern Vermont. Each time we record there, it feels like a retreat:

just the kind of environment for the intimate collaboration which makes these songs flourish. Most days at Guilford, Caroline could be found either tucked into the capacious armchair in the control room, with a keyboard and headphones on, or in a vocal isolation booth. Sometimes we could hear her trying out melodies and harmonies over our tracks, while other times she would be working things out privately, so that only she and Jon could hear. With Caroline, this process of listening and experimenting goes on longer than with any other composer I've ever worked with. She waits for sounds to ripen, which may be one reason why organic symbolism is prevalent in much of her music.

After the Vermont sessions, we had nearly completed the instrumental tracks. Caroline returned to them that fall in New York, in smaller sessions with Eric Cha-Beach (who was the lead producer from Sō Percussion on the album) and Jon Low. It was in the New York sessions that she started to fit poetry to new melodies, grabbing bits of the recordings we'd made. Sometimes she composed a melody to sing over the completed track; other times, such as with "Rectangles and Circumstance," she pulled the track apart and reassembled it with new material.



“The Parting Glass” started as a composition by Jason Treuting. He was fascinated by J. S. Bach’s *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*, which is in 9/8 meter (nine small pulses to a bar, with a big “walking” pulse every three small pulses, three to a bar). He conceived of a piece for all of Sō Percussion around a vibraphone playing in 9/8, in which he took the original chord progression from Bach’s piece and ran it backwards, altering it in places as the harmonic structure took shape. It is unusual for Jason to write Bachian chord progressions like these, and it was a fresh spin on his style.

When we performed the composition for Caroline, the harmonies and repetition reminded her of an Irish reel or some other sort of perpetual-motion music, and she suggested a brief switch to a related minor key during the transitional sections, a matter of changing one note in the mode. Later, after the Vermont sessions, Caroline found the traditional Scottish song “The Parting Glass,” adapted the lyrics, and composed a new melody to fit within Jason’s harmonic cycles.

Many of Jason’s songs contain noisy elements that mesh with the drums, for which he uses a Roland SPD-SX drum pad to trigger sampled sounds. He sampled excerpts from his own previous compositions, and made new samples of sounds such as piano

chords (sometimes with birds chirping in the background), while stretching, inverting, or reversing them along the way. Most of them are altered enough to be unclear, and they scatter a gritty patina on top of Jon Low's pristine acoustic sounds. This is especially true for songs such as "Like a Drum" and "Slow Motion."

As both a songwriter and a classical composer, Caroline is accustomed to writing lyrics as well as setting them. In *Let the Soil Play Its Simple Part*, she and I pulled excerpts from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which I was reading during the time of that recording session. Several songs on that album used fragments from *Ulysses* in their lyrics. Going over texts with her is like working on music: I collect a handful of poems and send them over to her, waiting to see if anything catches her interest, then I modify my search based on her feedback.

For this album, Caroline, Eric, and I sourced a group of 19th-century poems that shaped its expressive mode. Most of them are by women. In *Let the Soil Play Its Simple Part*, two of the most affecting songs are "To the Sky," which is a text from the Sacred Harp by the 18th-century poet and hymnist Anne Steele, and "A Gradual Dazzle" by the contemporary poet Anne Carson. During the making of *Rectangles and Circumstance*, I was reading a newly revised *Penguin*

*Book of English Verse*, which includes far more female poets in its anthology than the volumes I grew up with. We ended up using verses by Christina Rossetti, Emily Brontë, Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, and William Blake. In some songs, particularly “Sing On,” Caroline freely mixes the poet’s words with her own.

The title track, “Rectangles and Circumstance,” proposes a reflection on technology-saturated modernity. In many ways, the 19th-century texts remind us that love, loss, and true connection will always be our human obsessions, no matter what comes along to mediate them. As is usual with our creative process, these connections emerged rather than being planned. For instance, “Rectangles and Circumstance” was one of the last tracks to come together.

The lyrics on this album by members of the band contain wordplay that explores the same profound feelings explored by Blake and Dickinson. Eric’s “Who Turns Out the Light” expresses the loving but exhausted thought patterns of a parent trying to coax and calm a young child (and themselves). Caroline’s lyrics on songs like “And So,” “Slow Motion,” and “Rectangles and Circumstance”—the latter two of which she wrote with her Ringdown bandmate, Danni Lee—often employ a meta-layer of words that talk about structures of words:

*And so, you say, the saying goes  
A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose  
Is a rose is a rose is a tired rhyme  
But in the verse there's always time*

These playfully recursive lyrics sometimes hint at loss and futility:  
*Or will we fade to stanzas of the dust  
That, I suppose is all we were and all we'll be?*

The meta-layers suggest that the game of words is sometimes all that's available to us to communicate what Wordsworth called "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

We produced such a large body of material to record in Vermont that it was busier and more task-oriented than our sessions for *Let the Soil Play Its Simple Part*. On the last day of recording, Josh Quillen introduced an idea that recalled our version of ABBA's "Lay All Your Love On Me," which Caroline and I had arranged for the previous album. He was inspired in part by an experiment he had conducted with Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight" on steel pans, where he recorded the song at almost half tempo to hear all its fascinating details.

All five of us attended The Yale School of Music for graduate school, where each year at convocation, there was a tradition of the students and faculty singing Franz Schubert's song "An Die Musik" at the beginning of the ceremony like a congregation in church. The song is a secular hymn of gratitude to the art form of music, with words by the early 19th-century German poet Franz von Schober. It is gorgeous, and famous for its complex bass line.

Josh and Caroline concocted their own warped version of the song: They printed out the music, set a very slow tempo, and guided the rest of us to perform multiple recording passes, in which each performer was free to pick out notes from the harmony and bass line, but in which we mostly avoided the main melody. The result is a glacial, minimalist version that is almost three times longer than the original. Without the melody, and at this pace, Schubert's magnificent voice-leading, his small passing notes in the bass voice, and his luscious harmonies all seem to be suspended in the air. This leaves the ghost of a structure, like a ruined building or an ancient underwater city.

I can't imagine making this music without these six people, including Jon Low. Jon started shaping our sound when we first recorded

“Other Song.” In many ways, our enthusiasm for working this way together was a result of how quickly and effortlessly Jon pulled that track together that day, helping us to believe that this was a worthwhile effort. Rectangles and Circumstance is a manifestation of his precise ear and brilliance for engineering, Caroline’s flexibility, compositional vision, and beautiful voice, and the unique interests that each of us in Sō bring to our instruments and musical ideas. It was made with love, and we are honored to share it with you.



## ***Artist Biographies***

**Sō Percussion** is: Eric Cha-Beach, Josh Quillen, Adam Sliwinski, and Jason Treuting.

For twenty years and counting, Sō Percussion has redefined chamber music for the 21<sup>st</sup> century through an “exhilarating blend of precision and anarchy, rigor and bedlam” (*The New Yorker*).

Sō’s commitment to the creation and amplification of new work, and their extraordinary powers of perception and communication have made them a trusted partner for composers, allowing the writing of music that expands the style and capacity of brilliant voices of our time. Sō’s collaborative composition partners include Caroline Shaw, David Lang, Julia Wolfe, Nathalie Joachim, Dan Trueman, Kendall K. Williams, Angélica Negrón, Shodekeh Talifero, Claire Rousay, Leilehua Lanzilotti, Bora Yoon, Olivier Tarpaga, Bobby Previte, Matmos, and many others.

The current season hears Sō and Caroline Shaw perform a program highlighting their newest album, *Rectangles and Circumstance*, at the Barbican in London, the BOZAR in Brussels, Saffron Hall in Essex, the 92NY in New York City, and tonight in Middlebury. Recent Sō

highlights have included performances at Carnegie Hall, the Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, Big Ears, Cal Performances, at the Palau de la Musica Catalana in Barcelona, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Penn Live Arts in Philadelphia, the Hancher Auditorium at the University of Iowa, the Oklahoma Philharmonic, the Library of Congress, touring Benin and Burkina Faso with Olivier Tarpaga, and more.

In addition to *Rectangles and Circumstances*, their recent albums with Caroline Shaw include *Let the Soil Play its Simple Part*; and the Grammy-award winning *Narrow Sea* with Dawn Upshaw and Gilbert Kalish, all on Nonesuch Records. Other recent albums include an acclaimed version of Julius Eastman's *Stay On It*, and Darian Donovan Thomas's *Individuate*. This adds to a catalog of more than twenty-five albums featuring landmark recordings of works by Steve Reich, Steven Mackey, David Lang, and many others.

In Fall 2024, Sō Percussion began its eleventh year as the Edward T. Cone performers-in-residence at Princeton University. Rooted in the belief that music is an elemental form of human communication, and galvanized by forces for social change, Sō enthusiastically pursues a range of social and community outreach through their nonprofit umbrella, including partnerships with local ensembles including



Brooklyn's Pan in Motion; their Sō Laboratories concert series; a studio residency program in Brooklyn; fundraising for the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen; and the Sō Percussion Summer Institute, an intensive two-week chamber music seminar for percussionists and composers.

**Caroline Shaw** is a musician who moves among roles, genres, and mediums, trying to imagine a world of sound that has never been heard before but has always existed. She works often in collaboration with others, as producer, composer, violinist, and vocalist. Caroline is the recipient of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize in Music, several Grammy awards, an honorary doctorate from Yale, and a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship. This year's projects include the score to *Fleishman is in Trouble* (FX/Hulu), vocal work with Rosalía (MOTOMAMI), the score to Josephine Decker's *The Sky Is Everywhere* (A24/Apple), music for the National Theatre's production of *The Crucible* (dir. Lyndsey Turner), Justin Peck's *Partita* with NY City Ballet, a new stage work *LIFE* (Gandini Juggling/Merce Cunningham Trust), the premiere of *Microfictions Vol. 3* for NY Philharmonic and Roomful of Teeth, and a live orchestral score for Wu Tsang's silent film *Moby Dick* co-composed with Andrew Yee. Additional projects include two albums on Nonesuch (*Evergreen* and *The Blue Hour*), the score for Helen Simoneau's dance work *Delicate Power*, tours of *Graveyards & Gardens* (co-created immersive

theatrical work with Vanessa Goodman), and tours with Sō Percussion featuring songs from *Let The Soil Play Its Simple Part* (Nonesuch), amid occasional chamber music appearances as a violist (Chamber Music Society of Minnesota, La Jolla Music Society). Caroline has written over 100 works in the last decade, for Anne Sofie von Otter, Davóne Tines, Yo Yo Ma, Renée Fleming, Dawn Upshaw, LA Phil, Philharmonia Baroque, Seattle Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Aizuri Quartet, The Crossing, Dover Quartet, Calidore Quartet, Brooklyn Rider, Miro Quartet, I Giardini, Ars Nova Copenhagen, Ariadne Greif, Brooklyn Youth Chorus, Britt Festival, and the Vail Dance Festival. She has contributed production to albums by Rosalía, Woodkid, and Nas. Her work as vocalist or composer has appeared in several films, tv series, and podcasts including *The Humans*, *Bombshell*, *Yellowjackets*, *Maid*, *Dark*, Beyoncé's *Homecoming*, *Tár*, Dolly Parton's *America*, and *More Perfect*. Her favorite color is yellow, and her favorite smell is rosemary.

**Ringdown**—featuring composer-musicians Caroline Shaw and Danni Lee Parpan—is an “ecstatically blissful” (*Night After Night*) and “irresistible” (*Feast of Music*) cinematic electro-pop duo creating music that floats up from the dusty record bin between Brahms and

Brandi Carlile, and centers around joy, human connection, and trying to inspire people to feel more love (and maybe even reach out to a crush).

The duo was drawn to each other through mutual admiration of each other's work; Shaw has won a Pulitzer Prize and several Grammy Awards for her boundary-breaking compositions and contributed music to films including Beyoncé's *Homecoming* and the upcoming Ken Burns documentary *Leonardo da Vinci*, and Parpan is a dynamic vocalist and folk-pop singer-songwriter who writes emotionally stirring lyrics and relishes in challenging how instruments are “supposed” to be played. Together as Ringdown, they forge a new realm that unlocks ways to write, sing, and perform that they can only access with each other, encouraging each to loosen their grip on the music they have created before and fully revel in the intricate pop music they have both always loved. Their songs are built on late nights of countless back-and-forths on tables covered in instruments and wires, sonically merging Shaw's pull toward the abstract with Parpan's directness, perhaps with a playlist of Sylvan Esso, Glasser, Robyn, James Blake, and The Blow in the background. The result is music that invites deep listening but also welcomes you to sing along, and – they hope – helps people feel everything they have been too afraid to feel.

As for the band's name: A ringdown is the theorized sound two black holes make in the final microseconds when they merge, a sub-bass whoosh and glide that suggest the world's biggest synthesizer, sighing in contentment. This might also describe how Ringdown's music sounds. Or at least how it feels to the band.

Ringdown is working on a debut album for Nonesuch Records and has performed across the U.S. and abroad at Big Ears, Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Public Records, SXSW, Thuringia Bach Festival, and more. The duo, who are partners on and off the stage, split their time between Portland, OR and New York, NY. Learn more at [ringdownmusic.com](http://ringdownmusic.com) and follow them on what they are proud to share is "their friend Virginia's favorite Instagram account" at [@ringdownmusic](https://www.instagram.com/ringdownmusic).



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*We remember their connection to this region and the hardships they continue to endure. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it.*