

Carnival

Aurora at 20

Aurora Orchestra

Christopher Akrell actor, dancer

Naomi Frederick actor

Simisola Majekodunmi lighting design

Jane Mitchell co-director

Scott Graham co-director

Jon Bausor production design

Tom Lightbody lighting associate

Kate Wakeling script (The Carnival of the Animals)

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)

The Carnival of the Animals (1886)

1. Introduction and royal march of the lion
2. Hens and roosters
3. Wild asses (swift Animals)
4. Tortoises
5. The elephant
6. Kangaroos
7. Aquarium
8. Characters with long ears
9. The cuckoo in the depths of the woods
10. Aviary
11. Pianists
12. Fossils
13. The Swan
14. Finale

Richard Ayres (b.1965)

Dr Frompou's Anatomical Study of an Orchestra (2025)

1. Under ground
2. The doctor
3. The viola
4. Followed
5. Experiment one
6. The twins
7. The shrinking flute player
8. Experiment two
9. Gassiness
10. Feeling joy

'I visited the oldest museum in the Netherlands,' notes composer Richard Ayres, on the genesis of his new work, *Dr Frompou's Anatomical Study of an Orchestra*. 'It was full of seemingly random exhibits: some fossils, some minerals, jars of gooey body parts, a few skeletons, landscape paintings, and a lot of old and experimental machines including musical instruments. It was more like the private collection of a mad scientist than a public museum. I imagine this work to be in this spirit; a sort of cabinet of musical curiosities in the form of a concert. Within it you might find descriptions and demonstrations of instruments and their histories, analysis of the players that perform on them, failed instruments and perhaps a mutant instrument or two.'

In taking flight from these themes, Ayres' work for narrator and chamber ensemble conjures up the mercurial character of 'Professor Doctor Frompou', an unhinged scientist and showman who has 'collected his own orchestra.' We will learn more about the circumstances of Frompou's orchestra as the performance progresses, but first we see the Doctor in action as he presents his unusual charges via a reimagining of **Saint-Saëns'** *The Carnival of the Animals*.

Composed in 1886, *The Carnival of the Animals* became one of Saint-Saëns' most celebrated works, albeit not during his lifetime. Having written the piece for a private performance, Saint-Saëns forbade any complete performances following its premiere and permitted only one movement, 'The Swan', to be published while he was still alive, fearing that the work's light touch would damage his reputation as a 'serious' composer. Saint-Saëns did however agree to the complete work's publication after his death, and the suite of fourteen short movements remain a delight, rich and varied in orchestral colour. From the twinkle and rumble of the 'Introduction and Royal March of the Lions' to the delicate call of the cuckoo and the clatter of the fossils, each scene at the menagerie is depicted with a shrewd warmth and the odd wry twist: the tortoises enjoy a supremely patient account of the 'can-can' from Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, the elephant retreads a less-than-fleet rendition of Berlioz's *Dance of the Sylphs*, while the 'Persons with Long Ears', scored just for violins, portrays both the donkey and Saint-Saëns' wickedly acerbic view of the critic in its whistles and brays.

In our performance, the specific creatures of Saint-Saëns' *Carnival* are referenced more obliquely through text and movement, as Frompou's charges are put through their paces during this 'presentation' of the orchestra. 'We were interested in this idea of instrumentalists almost as strange hybrids,' explains Jane Mitchell, co-director and Aurora Creative Director. 'The show as a whole looks at the nature of playing an instrument and how strange, physically, that is. We wanted to think more about what it is musicians actually do when they play; whether it's breathing or scraping a bow or hitting something – and to think about how far musicians begin to take on the traits and personality of their instrument as they play.'

To explore (and push the limits of) these particular kinds of physicality, Aurora is collaborating with Scott Graham, Artistic Director of acclaimed theatre company Frantic Assembly. 'This is the first time that I've worked with musicians on a project like this,' Graham notes, 'and it's been extraordinary. I think what first struck me is that these are people who are saying 'I might not be able to do this' but who are generous enough and brave enough to open themselves up to the process and they find that they can. And then they start to play their instruments and it's mind-blowing.' In the show, 'the role of movement is not so much to embody the animals within *The Carnival of the Animals* but more to show the drive of Dr Frompou to present the players and what this might mean for them; how they're being whipped into shape, and how that's interesting and problematic. You have all this beauty and playfulness in *The Carnival of the Animals*, but how is all this light created? It might be through repetition and force, and it's a bit scary – [the show] is about opening up an area of creativity you don't normally see.'

Richard Ayres' *Dr Frompou's Anatomical Study of an Orchestra* forms the second part of the performance and explores this darkness behind the scenes. The piece is written for narrator and chamber ensemble – which includes an armoury of percussion, a keyboard loaded with original midi sounds, and the cimballo (a low brass instrument, once popular in 19th-century Italian opera orchestras, that covers the same range as a tuba or contrabass trombone). The composer writes:

When I was asked to write a piece that could accompany *The Carnival of the Animals* my first thought was 'where do the animals go after the concert?' As a child I was obsessed with both the circus and travelling theatre. I had (still have) a fascination with the nomadic lifestyle, and with the strange duality of shiny public glamour, and the tiny cages and boxes in which the participants, both animal and human, have to live.

I then realised that I knew almost nothing about Saint-Saëns' life. He lived a long time, and in France would have witnessed the birth of cinema, industrial mechanisation, medical discoveries, several brutal wars, political unrest, alongside startling artistic/musical/theatrical achievements. I decided to invent an evil doctor that had imprisoned the animals that were forced to perform in the Carnival. It seemed appropriately dark and Victorian, and would allow me to make up some of the biographic information about the captured characters.

Doctor Frompou and his Most Magnificent Orchestra welcome you to the show.

Programme notes by Kate Wakeling © 2025