

## Matt Copson Takes to the Stage

The artist, showing at Frieze London, discusses his and composer Oliver Leith's debut opera, premiering this week

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BY MATT COPSON, IGOR TORONYI-LALIC AND OLIVER LEITH IN FRIEZE LONDON & FRIEZE MASTERS, FRIEZE WEEK MAGAZINE, INTERVIEWS |

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Enjoying its world premiere at London's Royal Opera House just ahead of Frieze Week, *Last Days* is a new opera composed by Oliver Leith to a libretto by contemporary artist Matt Copson, and directed by Copson with movement director Anna Morrissey. An adaptation of Gus Van Sant's 2005 film of the same name, which speculated on the titular 'last days' of musician Kurt Cobain, the opera follows a musician returning from rehab to a haunted home. Frieze Week invited Igor Toronyi-Lalic, Director of the London Contemporary Music Festival, whose acclaimed eighth edition this year took as its theme 'The Big Sad', to talk to Copson and Leith about collaboration, drama and endings.



Matt Copson. Photograph: Aidan Zamiri

**Igor Toronyi-Lalic** So the Queen is dead. Jean-Luc Godard is dead.

**Matt Copson** The most radical aesthetic decision of Godard's life – and I say this heavily on the record – was killing himself. He's gone up in my estimations. Death is the main theme of this opera. Death is truly the main theme of everything I've ever done.

**ITL** You said once the best bit of any drama is the ending. This opera is all epilogue.

**MC** The entire thing is an epilogue. Everyone's last days are fucking crazy. Because the most silly things take on the most significance. Particularly when someone's killing themselves, because you know what you're doing. I heard this story about someone who washed all their clothes and then killed themselves. Somebody killing themselves is not interesting. Cleaning your clothes and folding them then killing yourself, that's suddenly the most interesting act ever.

**ITL** The last works of yours I saw were giant suicidal laser-beam babies, all of whom die in a kind of aesthetic apocalypse. There's always a kind of wild, apocalyptic drive to your art. You get off on disaster. You find beauty in things dying.

**MC** Absolutely. But dying and renewal. Bear in mind what happens after the baby explodes. It's constant revolution. The idea is that: that's not scary, that's actually just really beautiful. We will change; we will remain. Those things are fine. The only thing that's bad is stasis.

**ITL** What's the process been like writing this opera?

**MC** Super collaborative. Much more so than normal on something like this. I'll send Oli a bit, and he's like, 'What about this?', and I send it back saying 'I want to do this.'

**Oliver Leith** And we're not talking about words. Words are at the bottom of the pile in this. We're talking about action and tone and sound. Which is not a normal thing in an opera. The hierarchy is usually text, music, direction, whereas this is all three at the same time.



Composer Oliver Leith and artist Matt Copson.  
Photograph: Camilla Greenwell

**MC** It's super collaborative and yet it feels like a Matt Copson piece. It involves all my interests: total banality and hugely grand themes and how you drag all of these things through the muck of the world.

**OL** And it feels the same to me. That's a happy collaboration: where you're both like, 'It's mine.' But it's great that Matt thinks the music is subservient to the theatre because I think the opposite.

**ITL** This is an ancient battle within opera [laughs].

**MC** As you've heard me say a million times, the reason we call things 'drama' is because it's about conflict. All great art is just conflict happening in front of your eyes. That's what I want to watch. We need to get back to gladiatorial stuff. That's the most beautiful it can get. These are the stakes of life.

**ITL** In terms of the characters in your art, you went from devils to animals to overgrown babies and now we're finally getting adults. But Blake, the opera's protagonist, is more like a child or a dying animal. In Gus Van Sant's film he's almost incidental...

**MC** Wait till you see the opera. Blake's hardly even a character. They're an actor on stage who just runs and mumbles. They're reduced to pure, guttural stuff. This is an archetype of a 27-year-old who thinks it's radical to kill themselves. And there is an idealism to that pursuit of an alternative life that goes catastrophically wrong. It's the death of a certain kind of purity. It's the failure of something. But that failure is also very beautiful. I really think it's very admirable and noble. To fail spectacularly, to make oneself a firework show, to live life in that way, I genuinely think that societally we must sacrifice some lambs. But maybe art is that? A catharsis of some kind.

**ITL** What's your relationship to theatre? Because you did a play without actors at the Serpentine in 2016: *A Woodland Truce*.

**MC** I've always felt that art is theatre. That's why sculpture is a really profound idea within art. Because you have to go into a space and grapple with an alien. And if it's a great sculpture, it has presence, and that is a theatrical thing. I've always wanted to be overwhelmed as a viewer. I wanted to feel like a child. Like when you see the Milky Way. Powerless.

**ITL** Are you interested in opera?

**MC** I'm not an expert on opera, but I really like Harrison Birtwistle. He's the greatest. I've been watching a lot of his stuff: *The Minotaur*, *Gawain*. Doing this has made me feel more like an artist than doing any show.

**ITL** What comes after *Last Days*?

**MC** Landscapes. No humans. In the opera you'll see I've designed a 17-metre backdrop, which is a huge landscape that's constantly shifting and moving. A kind of John Martin, Max Ernst kind of thing. It's printed and has painted elements. It's extreme collage, and it's being manipulated constantly with light. The works showing with my gallery at Frieze came out of this.

*Last Days*, 7th–11th October at the Royal Opera House. Based on the film *Last Days* written and directed by Gus Van Sant and produced by HBO Films. A co-commission with Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

**To join Matt Copson and Oliver Leith for a talk at No. 9 Cork Street on 13th October, 7:30pm, email: [CorkStRSVP@frieze.com](mailto:CorkStRSVP@frieze.com)**