Off the Beaten Path Ensemble

Lora Tchekoratova *piano* [1-3, 5-15]
Georgy Valtchev *violin* [2-12]
Nikola Takov *violin* [4-12]
Rumen Cvetkov *viola* [4-12]
Alexander Somov *cello* [4-12]
Alexander Fiterstein *clarinet* [8-12]
Mariana Karpatova *mezzo-soprano* [14-15]

Dobrinka Tabakova. Photo: Benjamin Ealovega

STONE TRAIL

DOBRINKA TABAKOVA

1	**Simple Prayer for Complex Times**	6’44
2	**Through the Cold Smoke**	13’33
3	**Rhodopa**	7’00
4	**On a Bench in the Shade**	6’50
	Stone Trail	
5	I. Carved in Time	4’52
6	II. Trail	7’00
7	III. Tesserae – Set in Stone	7’15
	Moreni	
8	I. Prelude	2’52
9	II. Stone River	2’42
10	III. Beyond the Moreni	3’27
11	IV. Returning to the Stone River	1’46
12	V. Postlude	2’49
13	**Cobble Tale**	2’39
	Two Songs	
14	I. Summer’s Night	2’25
15	II. Fall, leaves, fall	3’17
	Total Timing	75’11

INTRODUCTION

This album presents a sequence of chamber works shaped by landscape, memory and human connection. Written over the course of around twenty-five years, these works showcase some of the main qualities of my musical language: melody, clarity of expression and emotional directness. The performances bring together musicians from the Off the Beaten Path Festival, most of whom are Bulgarian-born and have flourishing international careers across North America and Europe, and who over the past decade have become good friends and loyal interpreters of my music. The combination of these musicians and the release on NMC Recordings — a label primarily dedicated to the work of British composers — represents a meeting point between the country of my birth and the one in which my musical voice has developed over the past three decades.

Through the programme runs the image of stone: enduring, elemental, and quietly expressive. From ancient mosaics and mountain moraines to cobbled village paths, stone carries traces of time and human presence, preserving stories across generations. These works explore that sense of continuity — how materials, places and musical ideas persist, transform, and re-emerge.

The natural world is a constant companion in these works. Mountain ridges, flowing water, birdsong, and open landscapes shape the musical language, not as direct depiction but as a reflection of scale and motion. Against this vastness, human gestures — song, conversation, remembrance — take on a particular intimacy and urgency.

Several works also touch, more indirectly, on the recent histories that have shaped Eastern Europe. Figures such as Petar Uvaliev, an émigré intellectual whose voice reached across political divides, bear witness to the importance of cultural exchange and intellectual freedom. The democratic changes of the late twentieth century form an unspoken backdrop to this music, making possible the collaborations and friendships at its heart.

Above all, this album is grounded in people: performers, collaborators, and long-standing friendships. The Off the Beaten Path Ensemble brings together musicians whose shared commitment to new music and to reaching audiences beyond traditional centres has shaped the identity of this recording. Their work resonates closely with my own path as a Bulgarian-born composer based in London, whose music has been shaped both by the awareness of tradition and by an ongoing search for connection across borders and time.

Dobrinka Tabakova

PROGRAMME NOTES

Simple Prayer for Complex Times *for piano* (2020)

During the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, Europe was repeatedly affected by devastating plagues. The nuns of the Monastery of St Clare in Coimbra wrote a prayer for such times — 'Stella caeli extirpivat' (*Chant in Time of Plague*) — which circulated widely and survives in several musical manuscripts.

One of the variations of the prayer was made by the English Rennaisance composer John Cooke and I came across his version at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic when I was invited by the BBC to contribute to their 'Postcards from Composers' series. I created a short response to the prayer based on Cooke's setting. A few months later the organisers of Bang on a Can in New York invited me to contribute to their online concerts. *Simple Prayer for Complex Times* was my response to that invitation and it continues the exploration of the chant, drawing on the opening phrase of the original plainchant, which appears at the heart of the work.

The music unfolds in a state of stillness and reflection. It should feel as if emerging from silence, with a sense of calm focus — like the quiet clarity that follows meditation.

Through the Cold Smoke *for violin and piano* (2014)

Commissioned by Sonia and Mila Rouve-Uvalieva

Inspired by an archival photograph of a cigarette held before a radio microphone, this work reflects on the life and influence of the Bulgarian-born writer, BBC broadcaster, producer and intellectual Petar Uvaliev (Pierre Rouve).

Rouve's voice reached tens of thousands through his BBC World Service broadcasts during the Cold War, a period often marked by obscurity and distortion. In this context, his broadcasts offered clarity and insight. The piece meditates on that presence, evoking both the atmosphere of the time and the intimacy of the spoken word.

A musical motif encoding his pseudonym is woven into the texture towards the end of the work, serving as a discreet tribute.

Rhodopa *for violin and piano* (2000)

The Rhodope Mountains, traditionally associated with the myth of Orpheus, provided the inspiration for this work. A continuous melodic line reflects the contours of the landscape: its ridges, streams, and expansive horizons.

Following an initial unison statement, violin and piano enter into an interwoven dialogue, with syncopated rhythms. The predominantly modal character of the work is occasionally inflected with chromaticism, a feature often encountered in the folk music of the region, but the modal centre prevails, acting as an anchor.

On a Bench in the Shade *for string quartet* (2004)

This piece draws on the atmosphere of summer afternoons, where conversation unfolds in shaded gathering places. The musical lines imitate the rhythms and inflections of speech, with gestures that suggest interruption, emphasis, and response.

Each instrument assumes a distinct role within the ensemble, contributing to an evolving dialogue. A contrasting central section introduces more sustained textures before the return of the opening material.

On a Bench in the Shade was first performed by the Brontë Quartet at the Cheltenham International Festival.

Stone Trail *for piano quintet* (2023)

This piano quintet was inspired by the mosaics of the Episcopal Basilica in Plovdiv, one of the most important monuments of early Christian art. Their intricate patterns and symbolic language, preserved across seventeen centuries, suggested a musical exploration of structure, durability, and encoded meaning.

The work unfolds in three linked movements. 'Carved in Time' is driven by a sense of forward motion, its resonant gestures suggesting both bells and the physical act of shaping stone. 'Trail' moves into a more fluid and unpredictable space, where fragments of earlier material reappear alongside textures inspired by the natural world and birds in particular (referencing the Basilica's impressive bird mosaics). A chorale passage leads into 'Tesserae', which culminates in a bubbling dance alluding to the typical irregular time signatures of Bulgarian folk music.

The symbolism and meaning of numbers forms a significant part of the way this quintet is constructed — the ancient mosaics are rich in this secret language, and I am grateful to my parents, especially my father's research on this topic, which ignited my curiosity and became an essential part of the composing process.

Stone Trail was commissioned by and written for the Off the Beaten Path Festival on the occasion of its fifth anniversary, with support from Siemens Stiftung.

Moreni *for clarinet, string quartet and piano* (2007)

Moreni (moraines) are vast accumulations of boulders found in Bulgarian mountain regions such as Vitosha and Pirin, sometimes concealing streams that flow beneath their surface.

The five movements of this work form a symmetrical structure. The 'Prelude' introduces the landscape, followed by 'Stone River', which employs unusual sonorities to explore the hidden movement beneath the moraines. 'Beyond the Moreni' presents a contrasting, dance-like world, after which the music retraces its path before concluding with a final reflection.

The work was commissioned by the Leicester Festival and by Katie and Jeremy Hill (serving as British Ambassador to Bulgaria at that time), to whom the work is dedicated.

Cobble Tale *for piano* (2024)

Written for pianist Lora Tchekoratova, *Cobble Tale* captures the character of the cobbled streets of Kovachevitsa, home to the Off the Beaten Path Festival.

The music draws on asymmetrical rhythms (notably 7/8) and characteristic intervallic writing, including prominent use of octaves and augmented seconds. These elements contribute to a compact, characterful miniature shaped around the performer's musical voice.

Two Songs *for mezzo-soprano and piano* (1999)

I. Summer's Night

This setting reflects the stillness and suspended atmosphere of a summer evening, where time seems momentarily held in balance.

Shades of night now sink and settle
Holy legions, star on star
Steadfast, shifting great and little
Glitter near and gleam afar
Gleam on high in cloudless hour
Glitter in the still lake glassed
while the full moon's radiant power,
Seals the bond of blissful rest.

Text: from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (adapted by the composer)

II. Fall, leaves, fall

A brief meditation on transience and renewal, the music follows the natural cadence of the text, allowing its imagery to unfold with clarity and restraint.

Fall, leaves, fall; die, flowers, away;
Lengthen night and shorten day;
Every leaf speaks bliss to me
Fluttering from the autumn tree.

Text: from Emily Brontë's 'Fall, leaves, fall'

BIOGRAPHIES

Dobrinka Tabakova is a Bulgarian-born British composer whose recent work has brought her sustained international recognition. Her music has been described as 'exciting [and] deeply moving' (*Washington Times*), with 'glowing tonal harmonies and grand, sweeping gestures [which] convey a huge emotional depth' (*The Strad*).

Her profile has been shaped by major residencies, including Composer in Residence with the BBC Concert Orchestra 2017-2021 and Truro Cathedral 2016-2019 as well as associated artist roles with the Hallé and MDR Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra. Her music has been featured at festivals across Europe, North America and Australia.

Recordings of her music have achieved particularly notable success. Her debut album *String Paths* on ECM Records was nominated for a Grammy in 2013, her choral album with Truro Cathedral Choir and the BBC Concert Orchestra was a Gramophone's Critics' Choice in 2019, and her Hallé orchestral album was nominated for a *BBC Music Magazine* Award in 2024. A second ECM album, *Sun Triptych*, was released in 2025 and received the *BBC Music Magazine* 'Premiere' Award at the 2026 ceremony.

Other accolades include the prize for an anthem for HM Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee, the Sorel Medallion in Choral Composition, and in 2023 she received an Ivors Composer Award for *Swarm Fanfares*, written for the Hallé Youth Orchestra.

Tabakova graduated from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and received a PhD from King's College London.

The **Off the Beaten Path Ensemble** is a flexible chamber-music collective founded in 2018 at the Off the Beaten Path Festival in Bulgaria. Bringing together renowned Bulgarian and international classical musicians who live and perform across the world, the ensemble is dedicated to presenting new, lesser-known, and rarely performed works

of the chamber music repertoire, with a particular focus on commissions of new music. Their principal venues are in rural Bulgaria — regions where classical music is rarely heard live — where the musicians spend considerable time each summer developing chamber music initiatives, composer residencies, and collaborations with international artists. A defining feature of the ensemble's programming is the presentation of world premieres by leading contemporary composers. To date, the Off the Beaten Path Ensemble has premiered over twenty-five new works, including commissions from Dobrinka Tabakova, David Serkin Ludwig, Valentin Silvestrov, Peter Kerkelov and many others.

Winner of the Washington International Competition, pianist **Lora Tchekoratova** is a renowned performer of solo and chamber music repertoire. She holds a doctorate from the Juilliard School and serves as Artistic Director of Salon de Virtuosi, and Chair of the Off the Beaten Path Foundation. She teaches at Mannes Prep at The New School, New York. Lora is a Steinway artist.

A Juilliard alumna and recipient of the Alice Tully Vocal Arts Debut Award, mezzo-soprano **Mariana Karpatova** has performed with the Metropolitan Opera, Sofia National Opera, and leading companies across the USA. A co-founder of the Off the Beaten Path Festival, she teaches at Fairleigh Dickinson University, New Jersey.

Winner of the Carl Nielsen International Clarinet Competition and the Avery Fisher Career Grant, clarinettist **Alexander Fiterstein** performs worldwide as soloist and chamber musician, and collaborates regularly with the Chamber Music Society at Lincoln Center. He is Professor of Clarinet and Chair of Winds at the Peabody Institute of the John Hopkins University.

A Juilliard graduate, violinist **Georgy Valtchev** has performed at venues including Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, the Sydney Opera House, and Suntory Hall. He has served as guest concertmaster of the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Orchestra of the Royal Opera of Madrid, and is co-founder and Artistic Director of the Off the Beaten Path Festival.

Trained in Sofia, Louisiana, and Boston, violinist **Nikola Takov** has performed across the USA and Europe as soloist and chamber musician. Since 2010 he has been a member of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Navarra Pablo Sarasate, and is a founding member of the Fluencias string quartet and a co-founder of the Off the Beaten Path Festival.

Since his solo debut at age eight, violist **Rumen Cvetkov** has performed in numerous prestigious venues including Carnegie Hall, Walt Disney Hall, and the Philharmonie Berlin. He has collaborated with Ida Haendel, Christian Tetzlaff, and with Yo-Yo Ma's Silk Road Project, and performs on a rare 1785 Simon Schodler viola named 'The Time'.

A former recipient of the Guildhall School of Music & Drama's prestigious Gold Medal, cellist **Alexander Somov** has performed with the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg, and leading ensembles across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. He is currently Violoncelle Super-Soliste with the Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg.



Back Row L-R: Georgy Valtchev, Nikola Takov, Rumen Cvetkov, Alexander Somov, Alexander Fiterstein
Front Row L-R: Stephen Portnoi, Dobrinka Tabakova, Lora Tchekoratova, Karolina Koynova



Dobrinka Tabakova and Stephen Portnoi



Lora Tchekoratova and Mariana Karpatova



Back Row L-R: Alexander Somov, Rumen Cvetkov, Dobrinka Tabakova, Stephen Portnoi, Georgy Valtchev
Front Row L-R: Lora Tchekoratova, Nikola Takov

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OFF THE BEATEN PATH CHAMBER MUSIC

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