



Light and space

Pianist Dustin O'Halloran
talks to **Claire Jackson** about
wanderlust, imagery and
composing through colour

'Maybe I am a bit nomadic,' admits Dustin O'Halloran, explaining why his latest record, *Lumiere*, was recorded in Italy, Germany and the US. O'Halloran's life across continents has lent itself to wistful, minimalist writing. *Lumiere*, as its name suggests, places emphasis on light and the use of space. Motifs are explored with limpid beauty, like a painter experimenting with different shades of the same colour. As these themes develop, the compositional brushstrokes become broader; colours merge and create new hues.

'The whole idea came about because I'd started reading a lot about synaesthesia, and that was how I'd always experienced music; that is, through colour,' O'Halloran says via phone from his home in Berlin. Synaesthesia is a neurological condition that takes several forms. One of these is colour synaesthesia, which causes the person to experience letters or numbers as inherently coloured. O'Halloran refers to a synaesthete reaction when translating his thoughts into music, and, when he was working on *Lumiere*, using different instruments heightened this process. 'I felt that there was always a limited palette of colours with the piano because it was a single instrument,' he explains. 'I wanted to expand and use more colours and sounds. I also wanted to bring more collaboration into my music... I have been writing alone for five years which was quite a solitary experience.'

The project involved some exciting collaborators. In addition to his good friend and fellow newcomer to FatCat records Jóhann Jóhannsson, who assisted with the final production, O'Halloran's musicians read like a who's who of the alternative contemporary classical field: Owen Pallett, Nico Muhly, Max Richter and Peter Broderick all make appearances. The final result is a delicate blend of strings, piano and electronics, carefully sculpted into symphonic miniatures.

The way O'Halloran approaches composition almost as a visual art – he describes his methodology in terms of colour, texture and shape – perhaps owes something to his time spent at Santa Monica College studying art. Appropriately, the Los Angeles-born musician was chosen to perform at the NY Guggenheim Museum's Kandinsky retrospective, held to mark the gallery's 50th anniversary last year. He's also made a name for himself as an accomplished film composer since he was plucked from relative obscurity to contribute to the soundtrack for Sofia Coppola's film *Marie Antoinette* (2006).

Living in different locations has had a profound impact on O'Halloran's compositional style. 'It's a subconscious difference,' he says. 'In Italy I was surrounded by the sounds of nature; here [Berlin], it's the city. I have this train that goes by my window and I just love it.'

**'Opus 55 was recorded
in a church in Berlin at
five in the morning...
I think these ideas
about space and time
really add another layer
to the work'**

Lumiere does feel like an ode to both the urban and the natural environment, one example being the track *Snow and Light*, written about Berlin. 'It was when I first moved here and experienced my first serious snowfall,' he reveals. 'When the snow comes down it becomes

so quiet, the whole city stops. I was totally fascinated that a huge, bustling city could feel like a desolate small town.

'But actually, I don't like to invoke my own imagery,' he pauses, adding that this is the reason why many of his pieces have generic titles (Quartet N. 2, Opus 43 and so on). 'I want the listener to find their own images in my music.'

A self-taught pianist from the age of seven, O'Halloran is intrigued by the different tonal qualities of each keyboard. 'For this album I wanted to record with different pianos for different pieces,' he says. 'Every piano has such a specific tone and voice, and I wanted to bring this out.'

'Opus 44 was recorded on a really old English piano from the 30s and it has this woody sound that feels like an old ship. I tried recording the piece on different pianos but this was the one that had the quality I was looking for. Opus 55 was recorded in a church in Berlin at five in the morning on this beautiful Bösendorfer. The ambience and piano created a specific feeling that I couldn't get from any other piano or space. I think these ideas about space and time really add another layer to the work.'

O'Halloran's attention to detail lies at the core of his contemplative output; he will not set his music to disc until he has secured the best possible surroundings for his sound, wherever in the world those locations may be. 'Hopefully I won't have to be constantly moving to make the next record,' he chuckles quietly. His fans may disagree; O'Halloran's restlessness is his music's stillness.

Lumiere is released on 28 February via 130701, an imprint of FatCat Records

Dustin O'Halloran performs at *The Vortex* in London on 21 February and at the *South Street Arts Centre, Reading*, on 23 February