

Nick Martin

Composer



Nick Martin is a Copenhagen-based composer. His music has been performed by leading ensembles and orchestras including Copenhagen Phil, Concerto Copenhagen, Manchester Camerata, Danish Radio Vocal Ensemble, The Marian Consort, Ensemble Intercontemporain, Esbjerg Ensemble, Solem Quartet and The Nordic String Quartet, and by soloists including accordionist Bjarke Mogensen, cellist Clare O'Connell and violinist Tamsin Waley-Cohen. His violin concerto *Maternal*, written for Waley-Cohen and Manchester Camerata, was premiered in September 2025.

Performances have taken place at Carnegie Hall, The Barbican, Wigmore Hall, Kings Place, Koerner Hall (Toronto), and DR Koncerthuset (Copenhagen), with broadcasts on BBC Radio 3, Danish Radio P2, Deutschlandradio Kultur, and ABC Classic.

Martin released the album *Terroir* under his ensemble project Blue Luminaire on Bella Union in 2022, and has also released music on Platoon, Orchid Classics, Dacapo Records and NMC. He is the recipient of the 2023 Pelle Prize, awarded in honour of the late Danish composer Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen, and has received grants from the Danish Arts Council, KODA, Art Music Denmark, Culture Moves Europe and the Francis Routh Trust.

He has made his home in the Nordic countries since 2009, based in Copenhagen and formerly in Helsinki, with periods working in Reykjavik.

ON THE MUSIC

Introduction

Much of Nick Martin's work takes shape around a single vivid image — a fragment of poetry, or an atmosphere that unlocks the expressive world of a piece. Across more than fifteen years, a coherent set of preoccupations has emerged: the mother–child relationship and its psychological residue; the lullaby as consolation and care; the tension between structural discipline and lyrical openness; and music that, whatever its scale or ambition, always reaches toward intimacy.

The vocal works extend this terrain. *Bittersweet* (2019) sets Sappho alongside Juan Ramón Jiménez, holding personal longing and ecological fragility in the same breath. *A Land Not Mine* (2024), setting the late poetry of Anna Akhmatova, evokes a dreamlike northern landscape while reaching back to Martin's earliest musical memory: his father, a pianist, performing Rachmaninoff's Second Concerto. The string trio *Eldhav* takes its title from a word in one of Edith Södergran's letters, and finds in that epistolary world a formal template for music that is simultaneously forceful and fragile.

The *Violin Concerto: Maternal* (2025) was commissioned by Manchester Camerata and premiered with violinist Tamsin Waley-Cohen in September 2025. Written while living in St Ives and inspired by Barbara Hepworth's exploration of landscape, line, and the mother–child relationship, it foregrounds tenderness and interdependence over virtuosity, the orchestra and soloist breathing as a single organism.

Martin's earliest mature works — *Mother and Child* (2010) and its companion *Mother of Sorrows* — established the vocabulary he has since refined. The accordion in *Mother of Sorrows* becomes both voice and body, recalling the Pietà as it rests across the performer's lap; the grief it carries is not abstract but physiological. This somatic quality — music felt in the chest, in held breath — reappears throughout his work, from the glissandi that recur as a motivic thread through *Queer Tears* to the sympathetic resonances woven through the *Violin Concerto: Maternal*. In each case, instrumental texture is chosen not for colour but for closeness.

Terroir (2020) marks a watershed. Released under the Blue Luminaire project on Bella Union, it brought Martin's sensibility to a wider audience: nine movements moving from dawn to dusk, with self-authored texts exploring vulnerability, reflection, and growth, and harmonies indebted as much to the Flemish polyphonists as to Gavin Bryars. Critics noted its 'intoxicating elegance' and emotional precision. The word *terroir* — the soil that shapes the wine — cuts to the heart of Martin's practice: that music is inseparable from where, and from whom, it grows.

“deliciously sparse and exquisitely controlled... contemporary music that can be of interest as much to Sigur Rós and Can fans as to lovers of Birtwistle and Cage.”

— Paul Morley, *The Guardian*



SOLO / DUO

Mother of Sorrows

2010 · 8' · For solo accordion

In my work, I often begin with a poetic image or a memory that creates a strong atmosphere, a space in which music can unfold. *Mother of Sorrows* for solo accordion grew directly from this approach and can be understood as a sister piece to *Mother and Child* for violin and viola. In *Mother of Sorrows*, the roles are transformed: instead of hearing the child, we hear the grieving mother — lamenting the death of her child. There is a cruel irony, as she comforts herself by singing the lullaby she once sang to her baby, a gesture of tenderness shaded by loss.

The idea for the work emerged while watching Bjarke Mogensen play. I was struck by the way the accordion stretches across his lap, its form and posture recalling the image of the Pietà — the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Christ. The accordion becomes both voice and body: intimate, expressive, vulnerable and human, carrying the tension between mourning and the memory of care.

Commissioned and premiered by Bjarke Mogensen, Carnegie Hall, 30 May 2011.

[▶ LISTEN](#)

SOLO / DUO

Vocalise

2022 · 18' · For solo cello & tape

Version for solo cello & cello ensemble also exists.

I remember as a child being told that a vocalise is a song without words, and have always loved this idea. Sometimes one is simply lost for words. Perhaps then, only music can express the inexpressible.

Having finished the second movement over a year ago, sitting in an apartment in Warsaw in May 2024, I really do want to restrain myself from putting words to this *Vocalise* — which by its very nature is 'without words'. In the end, my hope is that listeners find their own way into the music.

Commissioned and premiered by Clare O'Connell, King's Place, London, May 2025. Released on NMC.

[▶ LISTEN](#)

VOCAL

Bittersweet

2019 · 20' · For solo mezzo soprano, accordion & marimba

In the music of Bittersweet, I explore — with the help of Sappho's poetry — a sense of yearning: the mixed feeling of love and sadness, the gentle tension between presence and absence. Sometimes this expresses nostalgia and homesickness — a longing for something that perhaps never existed, or for an almost divine union. At other moments, it reflects a bittersweet awareness of the natural world's fragility, the sense of being amidst the slow disappearance of what we love in the face of ecological collapse.

Coupled with the settings of Sappho's fragments is a meditation on identity by Juan Ramón Jiménez, which poignantly questions the 'I' with whom we identify. Towards the work's end, an anonymous quotation takes the place of an expressive marking: 'And the day came when the risk to remain closed tightly in a bud became more painful than the risk it took to blossom'. In the end, breath, fingers and song must reach outwards into the world.

Premiered Copenhagen, 2019. Performed and recorded by trio Kimi, released on Dacapo Records, 2022.

[▶ LISTEN](#)

'Bittersweet in a way but with intimate elegance that makes every note strike your core. Blue Luminaire feels like they have poured all their fears, desires and tentative yearnings into an album that longs for solace.'

— Simon Smith, Higher Plain Music

'Stretched apart by private yearning and by its two companions, it reaches a point of crisis, supported by the words of Juan Ramón Jiménez's meditation on the division of the self.'

— Tim Rutherford-Johnson

VOCAL

A Land Not Mine

2024 · 3' · For solo soprano & piano · Text by Anna Akhmatova

Composed for Katrin Helena Kuslap for her graduation Debut concert from the Royal Danish Academy of Music, Copenhagen, November 2024. Having a love for Rachmaninov since childhood — my father is a pianist — I knew I wanted to set a Russian text, to pay homage in a way.

The poem by Anna Akhmatova, written in 1964, evocatively describes a dream-like landscape that is both familiar and other-worldly. As I have lived in and spent many summers in Finland, and since Katrin is from Estonia, this landscape — sea, trees, light — carries a deeply emotional resonance.

Premiered by Katrin Helena Kuslap & Hazel Friedman, Royal Danish Academy of Music, Copenhagen, 20 November 2024.

CHORAL

Terroir

2020 · 25'

For choir (SSAATTBB), piano, harpsichord & strings

Nine movements. Individual movements may be programmed separately.

Terroir is a work in nine movements with all texts written by the composer. The piece's title derives from the French terre — the soil in which a wine is grown — evoking the formative environments and relationships that shape identity and influence human connection. The work was conceived during personal reflection following a difficult break-up, emerging as an exploration of vulnerability, self-compassion, and growth.

Each movement inhabits a specific time of day, moving from the pale pinks and lavenders of dawn into the deep rusty oranges and indigo blues of dusk. Across its nine movements — Our, Let Go, Closeness Sighs, Tangled, Worlds, Learn To Trust, Your Skin Against Mine, Held, and Falling — the work traces an emotional and temporal arc, combining sparse textures with carefully layered vocal and instrumental lines.

Recorded 2020. Released on Bella Union, 2022, under the artist name Blue Luminaire. Falling premiered in new arrangement by Kantos & Manchester Camerata, The Stoller Hall, April 2024.

▶ LISTEN

'The album is almost intoxicating in its elegance.'

— Rhys Delany, Louder than War

'Breathes steadily in and out, aching with every exhalation.'

— Andrew Mellor, Seismograf

'Intimate chamber music to quietly devastate you.'

— Simon Smith, Higher Plain Music

'Its simple musical idea beautifully worked out in Gavin Bryars-like harmonies.'

— Andrew Clements, The Guardian

CHAMBER

Queer Tears

2021 · 8' · For string quartet

I composed *Queer Tears* in the summer of 2021, while visiting my parents in Cornwall. The piece is purely abstract in conception, but the constant glissandi throughout made me think of tears — whether responding unconsciously to the screeching gulls outside, or to something more personal, I cannot say. There is a deliberate ambiguity in these cries, which is reflected in the title; I use the word 'queer' here in the sense of odd or unusual.

Commissioned and premiered by The Nordic String Quartet, DR Koncerthuset, Copenhagen, July 2025. Solem Quartet, 29 November 2025, King's Place, London.

▶ LISTEN

*“There are some sonic marvels here: UK-born, Copenhagen-based composer Nick Martin transforms *The Firebirds*' dark, throbbing improvisation *Low* into the delicate, deeply emotional *Queer Tears*, played with enormous sensitivity and also strong definition by the Nordic musicians.”*

— David Kettle, *The Strad*

CHAMBER

Eldhav

2024 · 8' · For string trio (violin, viola & cello)

The inspiration for *Eldhav* — a composite Swedish word meaning 'fire' and 'sea' — comes from a 1919 letter by the Finnish modernist poet Edith Södergran (1892–1923) to the writer Hagar Olsson. In it, she writes: 'I want you to see me as I really am and show yourself to me as you really are. Could we become divine companions, so that all barriers fall away? ...Are you that sea of fire I want to dive into?'

Södergran spent much of her short life living with tuberculosis. In composing *Eldhav*, I sought to reflect the tension between intensity and fragility: the forcefulness of her imagery, the depth of longing, and the transience of those 'short moments where the desert blooms' — precious and precarious.

*Eldhav can be paired with *Ingenting*, a setting of Södergran for solo mezzo soprano and string trio.*

*Composed for Clare O'Connell's *Behind The Mirror* series. Premiered 21 July 2024, Berkhamsted Town Hall, by Eloisa Fleur Thom, Luba Tunnicliffe and Clare O'Connell.*

STRING ENSEMBLE

Kołysanka

2021 · 5'

For solo violin, string quartet & chamber organ

Alternative version for solo violin & string orchestra

Kołysanka continues my ongoing exploration of the mother-child relationship, and specifically the lullaby as a musical form. The title, meaning 'lullaby' in Polish, reflects its origin as a birthday gift for a Polish friend. It is an intentionally simple piece: a short series of chords in C major from which the solo violin part gradually gains independence.

I am drawn to the lullaby both for its direct reference to maternal care and for the soothing, meditative effect it can have on a listener. At the same time, I often allude to the motif of crying, introducing an ironic tension, since the traditional purpose of a lullaby is to calm a crying child.

Beyond harmonic and melodic simplicity, I focus on textural layers, bringing foreground attention to 'sheets' of sound that might normally remain in the background. In much of my work, I seek the friction between a constructivist approach and a more poetic, fluid mode of writing — hard and soft elements interweaving to create a deliberate expressive tension.

Also available as a version for solo violin & string orchestra.

Premiered by Daniel Pioro & Katherine Tinker, Wigmore Hall, July 2021. Recorded by Daniel Pioro for Saint Boy (Platoon, 2023). String orchestra version premiered by Daniel Pioro & Manchester Camerata, Bridgewater Hall, June 2023.

[▶ LISTEN](#)



LARGE / ORCHESTRAL

Violin Concerto: Maternal

2025 · 38' · For solo violin and orchestra

2 fl (1. dbl picc., 2. a.fl) · 2 ob (2. dbl c.ang) · 2 hn · strings (6.5.4.4.2)

Nick Martin's Violin Concerto: Maternal is inspired by the work of British sculptor Dame Barbara Hepworth and composed while living in St Ives, Cornwall. The piece engages with Hepworth's exploration of landscape, line, and form, as well as her recurring depictions of mother and child. A particular influence was Hepworth's Landscape Sculpture, a torso-sized work strung with nine fishing lines; the number nine resonated symbolically, evoking pregnancy and maternal themes. The sculpture's intimate scale suggests objects of comfort, music, or passage — a cradle, a lyre, or a boat — and its taut strings inspired the concerto's attention to fragility, resonance, and line.

Walking the coastal paths that informed Hepworth's work, Martin became attuned to what Robert Macfarlane has described as the 'harrowing' act of tracing lines in the landscape, where both the marks left by others and those we leave ourselves carry memory, grief, and desire. The concerto synthesises emotional, sensual, and spatial experiences, uncovering interior worlds while listening to the landscape, the sculpture, and the orchestral ensemble as a living organism.

The work foregrounds tenderness, interdependence, and intimacy over traditional virtuosity or confrontational dialogue between soloist and orchestra. Maternal themes, explored earlier in *Mother and Child* (2009), remain central, reinforced by literary influences including Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*. Martin integrates sympathetic resonance, where orchestral strings vibrate in response to the soloist's pizzicato, reflecting bonds of care and connection. Spatial interplay, textural layering, and carefully calibrated lines echo Hepworth's idea that music requires 'order, composition, harmony, and...definitive lines.'

Soloist Tamsin Waley-Cohen's sensitivity and understanding bring these dynamics vividly to life, shaping a concerto that is both formally rigorous and deeply intimate.

Commissioned by Manchester Camerata. Performed by Tamsin Waley-Cohen & Manchester Camerata. 4 September 2025, The Whitworth, Manchester. 5 September 2025, The Hepworth, Wakefield. World premiere: 18 September 2025, King's Place, London.

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PERFORMANCE ENQUIRIES

contact@blueluminaire.com

blueluminaire.com

Score and parts available on request

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