

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 10 April 2023
1.00pm

Meta4

Antti Tikkanen violin
Minna Pensola violin
Atte Kilpeläinen viola
Tomas Djupsjöbacka cello

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

Fantasia a4 No. 7 in C minor Z738 (1680)

Amy Beach (1867-1944)

String Quartet Op. 89 (1921-9)

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Molto adagio from String Quartet Op. 11 (1936)

Krishna Nagaraja (b.1975)

Stringar (2020)

I. Udelt takt • II. Telespringar • III. Valdresspringar



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Purcell, at the age of 20, wrote out a collection of his instrumental pieces that includes 15 fantasias: short, spirited compositions in which sage counterpoint is conveyed stoutly around some tight harmonic corners. An early starter, he might have composed these pieces when he was in his teens, but even then the fantasia was an antiquated genre, at its height a generation or two earlier. At that time such compositions would have been played on viols, but by young Purcell's time the violin family had taken over. So Purcell might have imagined something like the sound of a string quartet - though it is equally possible the pieces were never performed and never meant to be, that they were composed for the pleasures of invention and of writing in an antique form.

The essence of that form was imitative counterpoint (as in a fugue) on a sequence of 'points', or short ideas, generally with slower sections interleaved with faster. In the case of this C minor instalment, slow music predominates, on a point marked by a lift and a chromatic fall. When this eventually comes to a cadence, fast music dashes in but cannot establish itself. The slow music continues, and though there is another intervention, again it is shortlived.

Almost two and a half centuries later, **Amy Beach** found herself following something like a Purcellian fantasia form of linked but distinct sections in her only string quartet. She began the composition in 1921, but did not complete it until 1929, when she was staying in Rome. She seems to have been disappointed that it was not recognised for its audacity. Where most of her work stays close to Anglo-American traditions of the period, this quartet is remarkable not only for its form but also for its level of dissonance and its derivation from Inuit melodies as transcribed by the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas in his book *The Central Eskimo* (1877).

Such an affiliation rather counters the impression one might have of Beach in her later years as a Jamesian figure, a wealthy widow wintering in Rome, for Boas was an early proponent of cultural relativism. Having worked with indigenous populations in Alaska and northwestern Canada, he wrote: 'I often ask myself what advantages our "good society" possesses over that of the "savages" and find, the more I see of their customs, that we have no right to look down upon them... We "highly educated people" are much worse, relatively speaking.' Beach's quartet implicitly speaks for this view.

The work begins with slow, highly chromatic music that reaches an expectant chord, whereupon the viola, alone, introduces a first Inuit theme, 'Summer Song'. This tune, in a scale of just three notes and played by a solo instrument, could hardly be more different from the rich-textured late-Romantic music that went before; not so much a summer song, it sounds like spring. The contrast is much reduced when the other

instruments re-enter to secure the cadence and continue into a second Inuit tune, 'Playing at Ball', whose rudimentary outlines are now dressed up for their new environment in terms of line, texture and development. Following a change of speed, the viola solo returns to round off this opening section.

Bold chords kick off a new section - fast and *moto perpetuo* except for a passage of reflection - which draws on a third Inuit tune, 'Ititaujang's Song', and then on the second again, in dotted rhythm. This is followed by a fugue on 'Ititaujang's Song' and then by an abbreviated reprise of the *moto perpetuo*. The whole opening then returns, to lead this time into an apotheosis that takes all four instruments into a high register.

Barber wrote the slow movement of his own single quartet in 1936, and wrote to the cellist of the quartet due to perform the work: 'It's a knockout!' Of course he was right. That same year he arranged it for orchestral strings.

Krishna Nagaraja, Indian-Italian by birth but Finnish by residence, is himself a string player. Since moving to Helsinki in 2012 he has developed a fascination with the Hardanger fiddle of Norway (a traditional instrument with sympathetic strings to add resonance) and its repertory of *springar*, or dance tunes. His *Stringar* (2020) takes off from there by way of Indian rhythms, progressive metal and western classical music from across the ages.

'The first movement,' he writes, '*Udelt takt* (Undivided beat)', explores the bouncy and lively *springars* from Southwestern Norway with an undivided beat and connects them with techniques as foreign as Southern Indian rhythms and progressive metal polymeters and odd time signatures. The second movement, *Telespringar*, takes the peculiar asymmetrical metres of *springars* from Telemark into a sound world where rhythm and time are conceived as elastic, malleable material, to be moulded with micro-variations, pattern morphing, and guided improvisation on behalf of the performers. The third movement, *Valdresspringar*, is the musical depiction of a traditional farmhouse dance night on the mountainous slopes of the Valdres region. Hypnotic tunes, unusual Hardanger fiddle scordaturas, a certain wild character of Valdres folk tunes and dances, everything evokes an enchanted atmosphere that slowly seizes and electrifies all the tired guests at the end of the long night of dancing. The energy grows more and more irresistible, it peaks as the fiddler lets out a joyful cry and powerfully stomps a foot on the floor, right before the first rays of the rising sun penetrate the dimly lit hall, and the music dies out sending everybody home. The dance is over.'

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