

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 11 May 2024
11.30am

Modern Medieval 1

JACK Quartet

Christopher Otto violin
Austin Wulliman violin
John Pickford Richards viola
Jay Campbell cello

Christopher Otto (b. 1983)

Miserere, after Nathaniel Giles (2023) *UK première*

Ruth Crawford Seeger (1901-1953)

String Quartet 1931 (1931)

I • II • III • IV

Elliott Carter (1908-2012)

String Quartet No. 1 (1950-1)

*I. Fantasia. Maestoso - Allegro scorrevole •
II. Allegro scorrevole - Adagio • III. Variations*

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Was Mozart aware of Machaut? Almost certainly not. He lived musically in a narrow band of time, barely wider than half a century, stretching back only to JS Bach. For medieval music to come alive again required it to be known and published, of course, but there also had to be some overlap between its techniques and expectations, and those of composers working at whatever later time. That began to happen with Stravinsky, whose *Mass* of the mid-1940s salutes Machaut's.

Eighty years on, the conversation goes on widening – especially in New York, home to most of the composers represented in today's concerts, often directly stimulated by the JACK's keen interest in these borderlands. Fine divisions of time and pitch are exciting composers now as they did then. Between distant ages, across a long dormancy, sparks fly.

The JACK has made a small speciality of compositions springing from pieces of the distant yet close past that show a speculative turn of mind with regard to tuning or rhythm. Each programme today will include a piece of this kind, starting now, when the accent this morning is on rhythm, with a re-creation of a *Miserere* by **Nathaniel Giles**, a contemporary of Shakespeare. Giles's original is an extraordinary essay in mixed meters, where two voices run at different speeds in ratios from 1:1 to 9:1 by way of such arcane possibilities as 32:5. The faster voice can turn on a dime from dawdling to hurtling, a bit like a car on a rollercoaster, in rhythms that may be regular or jerky. **Christopher Otto**, who made this version for strings, ups the stakes by doubling the number of voices.

Ruth Crawford Seeger's *String Quartet 1931* consists of four astonishing movements all done in 12 minutes. She took up the idea of dissonant counterpoint from Charles Seeger (who later graduated from mentor to husband), but applied it to achieve not ruggedness but a new fluency. This she realized in the first movement of her quartet partly by how the individual parts are strongly differentiated, in tempo and character (as, 20 years later, in Carter's First Quartet to follow). In the scherzo the parts are contrastingly similar, slipping over each other in nimble canons. The remarkable slow movement has the four instruments playing almost continuously, moving independently from one pitch to another and bringing forward their pitch of the moment by means of a crescendo, or contrariwise retracting it. The harmony becomes an elastic sheet held between four rods, constantly changing as these push and pull back. Harmonic tension gradually rises to breaking point and the sheet sheers. The finale splits the quartet into two organisms: first violin and the remaining trio, playing a game of desperate inevitability. There is nothing medieval here except that which is most important: the precision engineering of time.

An **Elliott Carter** classic from more than 70 years ago might seem an outsider today, but Carter was already working with elaborate cross-rhythm back then, perhaps in ignorance of Nathaniel Giles and other early practitioners.

This starts happening as soon as the four instruments are in play together. The viola here has three notes for the cello's two, the second violin four for the cello's five, and the first violin, much slower, two for the cello's seven. Words make this sound complicated, but the notes do not: these are separate but connected dreamers.

Carter wrote at some length about the nature and circumstances of this First Quartet, which he composed in 1950-1 during a stay in the Lower Sonoran Desert near Tucson, Arizona: 'Like the desert horizons I saw daily while it was being written, the First Quartet presents a continuous unfolding and changing of expressive characters – one woven into the other or entering from it – on a large scale. The general plan was suggested by Jean Cocteau's film *Le sang d'un poète*, in which the entire dreamlike action is framed by an interrupted slow-motion shot of a tall brick chimney in an empty lot being dynamited. Just as the chimney begins to fall apart, the shot is broken off and the entire movie follows, after which the shot of the chimney is resumed at the point it left off, showing its disintegration in mid-air, and closing the film with its collapse on the ground. A similar interrupted continuity is employed in this quartet's starting with a cadenza for cello alone that is continued by the first violin alone at the very end. On one level, I interpret Cocteau's idea (and my own) as establishing the difference between external time (measured by the falling chimney, or the cadenza) and internal dream time (the main body of the work) – the dream time lasting but a moment of external time but, from the dreamer's point of view, a long stretch. In the First Quartet, the opening cadenza also acts as an introduction to the rest, and when it reappears at the end, it forms the last variation in a set of variations'.

The 'continuous unfolding' means that the four standard movements – strenuous argument, scherzo, adagio and relatively frolicsome finale – are linked. Then the chain is broken in different places, so that the scherzo has already established itself before the first pause comes and the finale is in train when the second arrives. Key to a piece with this complex flow is the detail: the rich harmonic world; the profusion of characters and incidents, often in open dispute; and the conception of the four players, especially in the first movement, as resolute individuals. Much of this opening movement strides forward powerfully through the tussle of four-part writing in which each part has its own rhythmic style, its own manner of speaking. At one rare point of relaxation the viola recalls the cello cadenza of the start. When this movement becomes more thoroughly becalmed, from it emerges the scherzo. The *Adagio* divides the ensemble into two duos: violins playing the music of heaven; and viola and cello, earthier, intemperate. Eventually, perhaps tired of objecting to the violins' unworldliness, the two low instruments join them, but only for a short while. In the finale may be heard Carter's feelings for jazz, all compounded with much else in these variations squared.

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