

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 11 May 2024
3.00pm

Modern Medieval 2

JACK Quartet

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

Juri Seo (b.1981)

3 Imaginary Chansons (2024) *UK première*
Descent of the Serpent • Swan Song • Confronted Cocks and Running Dogs

Johnny MacMillan

Songs from the Seventh Floor (2022) *UK première*

Vicente Hansen Atria (b.1992)

Roundabout (2024) *world première*
I. About the round • II. At midnight the dance • III. Yet again

Nicolà Vicentino (1511-c.1576)

Madonna il poco dolce (pub. 1555) *arranged by Christopher Otto UK première*

Amy Williams (b.1969)

Tangled Madrigal (2024) *UK première*

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In today's second concert by the JACK Quartet, the emphasis turns from rhythm to harmony – more precisely, to the expanded world of melody, harmony and harmonic connection made possible by extended just intonation, i.e. just intonation in which frequency ratios involve numbers up to seven.

The Korean-American composer Juri Seo writes music whose tight motivic and contrapuntal structure often leads to cheerful craziness. Of her *3 Imaginary Chansons* (2024) she writes: 'Three Imaginary Chansons are inspired by the speculative music of the late medieval *ars subtilior*, in which the refinement of notation led to an unprecedented rhythmic complexity. I wanted to extend the same kind of exercise to pitch, utilising the new intervals of extended just intonation.

'The first song, *Descent of the Serpent*, opens with a series of harmonic shifts downward by justly tuned minor thirds, overshooting the octave by 'the greater diesis', about 62 cents. [A minor third in just intonation has the frequency ratio 6:5, which four times over gives the ratio 1296:625, a little over 2:1. A cent is a hundredth of a semitone in equal temperament and is the customary unit of measurement for small intervals.] The following section erupts in bitonality a diesis apart. The song roughly follows medieval rondeau form, ABABAB.

'The second song *Swan Song*, is inspired by lute music. The ending descent is marked by a series of septimal commas [eighth-tones, approximately], symbolising a sinking heart and dying breaths.

'The third song, *Confronted Cocks and Running Dogs*, takes its name from an elaborate early Byzantine tapestry in the Metropolitan Museum. The symmetrical image is striking in its invocation of vigor, violence and speed. The song unfolds in a quasi-*virelai* form [with a refrain followed by seven stanzas and a repeat of the refrain]. Most of the materials are presented in hockets.'

Johnny MacMillan's 10-minute piece also works with extended just intonation, but opens into a quite different sort of time. A unison E – but not quite the E with which we are familiar – becomes gradually more present and begins to release offerings of chords with which we certainly are familiar (minor triad) and others with which we are not, chords that chime with the ancient freshness of just intonation and chords that growl. Then the songs come, and with them direct echoes of Renaissance music. The first violin, playing harmonics, and the viola twist around each other in duet over the others' drone. Then a cello ostinato gets everything going with another sort of energy, leading to a crisis and a reintegration elsewhere. This is the seventh floor, to which admittance is gained by extended just intonation and where strange things happen.

Vicente Hansen Atria, born in Chile, opens another angle on working with extended just intonation through his familiarity with South American traditions and jazz. The first movement of his *Roundabout*, which plays altogether for around 20 minutes, begins with a fluid violin solo that develops into a fughetta, sustained for a while between first violin and viola.

Next to enter is the second violin, the cello coming in at first to shadow the first violin an octave below, though later it takes its own course. This highly contrapuntal music gives way to a short violin duet headed 'Organilleros' ('organ grinders'). From here the upper trio and then the full quartet have brushes with bagpipes, and the movement gradually settles towards a closing 'Ballade'.

Contrary to the first movement, the second, *At midnight the dance*, starts with a cello solo joined by the viola. Then the violins come in with wobbly hocketing ostinatos that move around the ensemble on the way to a crunchy cadence about halfway through the eight-minute movement. A new section, 'Tessellatus', has the upper trio spinning over the cello until they meet bumps in the road and the music winds down past 'Midnight' (violins as banjos) through 'Breathing' to a close in flavourful chords. The much shorter finale is played entirely with leather mutes and starts out as a *pianissimo* whirling through which the dance gradually re-establishes itself. Awaiting it is a gently winding succession of harmonies: 'Spiralis'.

Nearly half a millennium ago Nicola Vicentino was also on the track of extended just intonation in his search for how the music of ancient Greece must have sounded. In his treatise *L'antica musica ridotta alla moderna prattica* (1555) he included the first section of a four-part madrigal, *Madonna il poco dolce*, as an example of the fine tuning, with fifth-tone intervals, that was implied by ancient Greek musical theory. Christopher Otto takes this to the next level by transposing the piece into extended just intonation, with dynamic contours and changes of string sonority to bring out the effect that was so important to the original composer.

Tangled Madrigal by Amy Williams takes another gaze at the fertile past. It plays for something over a quarter-hour, through sections that are, in order of appearance, fast, faster and moderately paced. 'The title', the composer explains, 'is taken from the last line of a Robert Morgan poem entitled *History's Madrigal*, a poem that references "fiddle makers" and their need to use "antique" wood to make "truer and deeper music,...the memory and wisdom of wood delighting air as century speaks to century and history dissolves history across the long and tangled madrigal of time".' There is a further relevance to the title, for, to quote Williams again, 'the piece interfaces quite continuously and in varied ways with the Vicentino *Musica prisca caput*', another piece the 16th Century composer wrote to support his notion that Ancient Greek music worked with microtones. Microtonal tunings are relatively sparsely distributed until near the end of *Tangled Madrigal*; not so spinning energy. The first violin wanders off by itself at one point, and there is a short unaccompanied solo for the second, as well as a much larger one for the viola, a real cadenza, on the way to an ending on the cello; a homing in on the part of a work that has referred also to the prelude from the first Bach cello suite.

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