

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 12 September 2023
7.30pm

Ensemble Modern

Sir George Benjamin conductor

Eric Lamb flute, piccolo
Delphine Roche flute, piccolo
Christian Hommel oboe
Valentine Collet oboe, cor anglais
Jaan Bossier clarinet
Hugo Queirós clarinet, bass clarinet
Sergi Bayarri Sancho clarinet
Johannes Schwarz bassoon
Ronan Whittern bassoon, contrabassoon
Saar Berger horn
Martin Gericks horn

Anna Prohaska soprano

Sava Stoianov trumpet
Uwe Dierksen trombone
Ueli Wiget piano
Jagdish Mistry violin
Giorgos Panagiotidis violin
Veronika Paleeva violin
Megumi Kasakawa viola
Victor Guaita Igual viola
Eva Böcker cello
Paul Cannon double bass

Edgard Varèse (1883-1965)

Octandre for 7 winds and double bass (1923)

*I. Assez lent • II. Très vif et nerveux •
III. Grave - Animé et jubilatoire*

Saed Haddad (b.1972)

Mirage, Mémoire, Mystère for violin and string trio (2011-2)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

3 Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé (1913)

Soupir • Placet futile • Surgi de la croupe et du bond

Interval

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

From *Art of Fugue* BWV1080 (by 1742, rev. 1745-9)

arranged by Sir George Benjamin

Canon in Hypodiapason • Contrapunctus 7

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Kammersymphonie No. 1 Op. 9 (1906)

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For reasons both aesthetic and economic, the early 20th Century saw blurrings of the previously highly demarcated lines between the grandiosity of orchestral music and the intimate world of chamber music. Many institutions and orchestras struggled to survive financially (especially once the First World War struck), whilst burgeoning salon cultures in Paris, moves away from Vienna's *fin-de-siècle* decadence, and a generation of individual patrons all meant that extravagant orchestras were no longer the automatic vehicle for composers' visions.

The conditions were set for a number of striking and varied 'medium-sized ensemble' scores from around Europe – virtuosic soloists in dialogue, sometimes with the timbral range and heft of the orchestra, sometimes as a distinctive palette of artfully constructed groupings. Later, this repertoire would gain dedicated champions, with the formation of flexible 'new music' ensembles – the London Sinfonietta in 1968, Ensemble intercontemporain in 1974, and, in 1980, tonight's Ensemble Modern.

Varèse was an early inheritor of this world, and *Octandre* was part of an important triptych of wind- and brass-based ensemble pieces in the early 1920s, alongside *Hyperprism* and *Intégrales*. The smallest of these in terms of forces, and with the omission of percussion, *Octandre* has a more focused and melodic quality, though it is far too muscular in nature to be called 'intimate'.

'Octandrous' flowers are those with eight stamens. Clearly this refers to the piece's eight instruments, but there is also the signal that this is an organism, something that grows and flowers. All three movements begin with solo wind instruments – oboe, piccolo, finally bassoon. Each takes these modest openings and their tiny motivic fragments, and grows them outwards into incisive, precisely calibrated and granite-like summits.

Jordanian composer **Saed Haddad's** *Mirage, Mémoire, Mystère* is at first glance written for the more conventional chamber grouping of a string quartet, though Haddad introduces the hierarchy of being a 'string trio with solo violin' – a soloistic role shared by the quartet's two violins.

Split into three sections by sharp snap *pizzicati*, Haddad's music frequently plays with the title's implication of the illusory, the intangible, the sense of uncertain or slippery realities. In *Mirage*, soaring violin lines or flowing torrents are often closely echoed, as if chased by their own shadows. *Mémoire's* more distant, reverie-like quality hints at melodic behaviours of Arabic music. In the much longer *Mystère*, the solo violin is a traveller, moving through diverse and enigmatic regions and terrains, towards a funereal darkness Haddad describes as 'oblivion'.

Haddad's suggestive ambiguity is echoed in the veiled symbolism of Stéphane Mallarmé, and of **Ravel's** treatment of it. Ravel called him 'not only the greatest French poet, but also the *only one*' for his poeticism with the French language.

Ravel's instrumentation for the *3 Poèmes* – two each of flutes and clarinets, piano and string quartet – is shared with a piece by Stravinsky, in turn influenced by Schoenberg's recent *Pierrot lunaire*. Ravel greatly admired the Austrian,

though as he wrote, 'I am less afraid of the element of charm, which he avoids to the point of asceticism'.

There is great charm here, not to mention elegance, beginning with the brittle luxury of the opening 'Soupir', the voice drifting dreamily into an icy texture of string harmonics. The exquisite lyricism of the second song prefigures his later opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, whilst the final poem's imagery of death and sex imbue the music with a haunting, nocturnal eroticism.

Sir George Benjamin similarly took the instrumentation for his **Bach** arrangements – flute, two horns and six strings – from another master, in this case Pierre Boulez's *Mémoriale. Canon in Hypodiapason* speeds briskly along in a dancing three-in-a-bar, with a constant interplay between bowed and plucked strings characteristic of Benjamin. The horns are less busy, but provide a great sense of direction, plucking notes out the texture before surging to the next.

The flute must wait for the *Contrapunctus 7* for its first contribution, dreamily echoing the fugue theme upside-down and half the speed, launching games of inversion and rhythmic augmentation that drive the whole movement. The slowest of these augmentations comes imposingly into view four bars in – two horns, violin and cello, spanning four octaves, four times slower than the original. Later, like an enormous organ stop, this layer gains a parallel fifth, later still a third as well, winding its way eerily through the insectoid *pizzicato* texture.

'When I had finished my first *Kammersymphonie*, I told my friends: "[...] I know now how I have to compose".'

– **Arnold Schoenberg**, 1948

Scored for 15 instruments, this strutting, declamatory piece has some sense of a classical sonata form, though one increasingly unmoored by conventional tonality: we wait ten whole bars for anything approaching the stated E major key. Indeed everything – tonality, rhythm, orchestration – seems liquid. Each note, chord, melody or timbre is thrusting somewhere else, often forcefully so. The piece's thrilling, white-knuckle quality, its hectic polyphony, conjures the dizzying movement and modernity of contemporary Vienna.

For audiences of the time, this was a shock. Alongside works by Schoenberg's pupils Anton Webern and Alban Berg, it formed part of a 1913 performance dubbed the *Skandalkonzert*, where fighting broke out between supporters and horrified critics of these journeys towards and beyond the limits of tonality.

But this work was not created (solely) to shock – for Schoenberg, music needed to take its next logical steps. In the next two years, his astonishingly rapid development would contribute three scores where the bonds of tonality break altogether: the Second String Quartet, *5 Pieces for Orchestra*, and *Erwartung*. For now, however, there is a final hat-tip to conventional form – to the extent that it ever had a grip on the music, E major manages to hold on to round off the work in a final cadence.

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Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

3 Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé (1913)

Stéphane Mallarmé

Soupir

Mon âme vers ton front où
rêve, ô calme sœur,
Un automne jonché de
taches de rousseur,
Et vers le ciel errant de ton
œil angélique
Monte, comme dans un
jardin mélancolique,
Fidèle, un blanc jet d'eau
souple vers l'Azur!
– Vers l'Azur attendri
d'Octobre pâle et pur
Qui mire aux grands bassins
sa langueur infinie
Et laisse, sur l'eau morte où
la fauve agonie
Des feuilles erre au vent
et creuse un froid
sillon,
Se traîner le soleil jaune d'un
long rayon.

Placet futile

Princesse! à jalouser le
destin d'une Hébé
Qui poind sur cette tasse au
baiser de vos lèvres,
J'use mes feux mais
n'ai rang discret que
d'abbé
Et ne figurerai même nu sur
le Sèvres.

Comme je ne suis pas ton
bichon emparé,
Ni la pastille ni du rouge, ni
jeux mièvres
Et que sur moi je sais ton
regard clos tombé,
Blonde dont les coiffeurs
divins sont des orfèvres!

Nommez-nous ... toi de
qui tant de ris
framboisés
Se joignent en troupeau
d'agneaux apprivoisés
Chez tous broutant les
vœux et bêlant aux
délires,

Sigh

My soul rises toward your
brow where, calm sister,
an autumn strewn with
russet spots is dreaming,
and toward the restless
sky of your angelic eye,
as in some melancholy
garden
a white fountain faithfully
sighs toward the Azure!
– Toward the tender Azure
of pale and pure October
that mirrors its infinite
languor in the vast pools,
and, on the stagnant water
where the tawny agony
of leaves wanders in the
wind and digs a cold
furrow,
lets the yellow sun draw
itself out in one long ray.

Futile supplication

Princess! In envying the
fate of a Hebe
who appears on this cup
at the kiss of your lips,
I expend my ardour but
have only the modest
rank of abbé
and shall not figure even
naked on the Sèvres.

Since I am not your
bearded lap-dog,
nor lozenge, nor rouge,
nor affected games,
and know you look on me
with indifferent eyes,
blonde, whose divine
coiffeurs are goldsmiths –

Appoint me ... you whose
many laughs like
raspberries
are gathered among
flocks of docile lambs
grazing through all vows
and bleating at all
frenzies,

Nommez-nous ... pour
qu'Amour ailé d'un éventail
M'y peigne flûte aux
doigts endormant ce
bercaïl,
Princesse, nommez-nous
berger de vos sourires.

Surgi de la croupe et du bond

Surgi de la croupe et du
bond
D'une verrerie
éphémère
Sans fleurir la veillée
amère
Le col ignore
s'interrompt.

Je crois bien que deux
bouches n'ont
Bu, ni son amant ni ma
mère,
Jamais à la même Chimère,
Moi, sylphe de ce froid
plafond!

Le pur vase d'aucun
brevage
Que l'inexhaustible
veuvage
Agonise mais ne
consent,

Naïf baiser des plus
funèbres!
A rien expirer
annonçant
Une rose dans les ténèbres.

Appoint me ... so that
Love winged with a fan
may paint me there,
fingering a flute and
lulling this fold,
Princess, appoint me
shepherd of your smiles.

Risen from the crupper and leap

Risen from the crupper
and leap
of an ephemeral
ornament of glass,
without garlanding the
bitter vigil,
the neglected neck stops
short.

I truly believe that two
mouths never
drank, neither her lover
nor my mother,
from the same Chimera,
I, sylph of this cold
ceiling!

The vase pure of any
draught
save inexhaustible
widowhood
though dying does not
consent –

Naive and most funereal
kiss –
to breathe forth any
annunciation
of a rose in the shadows.