

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 13 May 2024
7.30pm

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Castalian String Quartet

Sini Simonen violin
Daniel Roberts violin
Natalie Loughran viola
Steffan Morris cello

Daniel Lehardt piano

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in A Op. 20 No. 6 (1772)

*I. Allegro di molto e scherzando • II. Adagio cantabile •
III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Fuga a 3 soggetti. Allegro*

Kaija Saariaho (1952-2023)

Terra Memoria (2006)

Interval

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Piano Quintet BB33 (1903-4, rev. 1920)

*I. Andante • II. Vivace (Scherzando) • III. Adagio •
IV. Poco a poco più vivace*

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Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho offered a perspective on all tonight's music in her observation: 'The idea of taking a predefined form and saying, "Okay, let's write a sonata or compose something according to a classical, predefined form" – it's just not possible with my music. It can't survive like that; it would be dead before it was even born!' Contrast her need to evolve a new form for every piece (her two quartets are chalk and cheese) with **Haydn**, whose 68 quartets almost all use the same 'classical, predefined form': four movements in an order you will find in countless pieces of all genres from around 1760 on. Then take any two Haydn quartets and you swiftly learn that for him, defined form was a spur, not a brake, to invention.

Haydn was rarely guilty of conventional thought: he was like a chef who cannot resist putting a new twist on a familiar dish. Here, we have three movements in which he treats the first violin as most of his contemporaries would – almost like a soloist supported by three colleagues. So far, so well-behaved – though listen to it closely a few times and you will find no shortage of quirky details to enjoy. Then, his finale is a fugue with three subjects in which every instrument plays an equal part. Richard Wigmore observes that Haydn was far from alone in writing fugues in quartets, but he stands out for his brilliance at lightly balancing complexity with brio: appealing, falling phrases propel the banter between the players forwards beautifully until they resolve on a closing unison. This miniature tour-de-force is as enjoyable as it is formidable.

Saariaho's *Terra Memoria* is preoccupied with loss and memory; she wrote: 'The piece is dedicated "for those departed". Some thoughts about this: we continue remembering the people who are no longer with us; the material – their life – is 'complete', nothing will be added to it. Those of us who are left behind are constantly reminded of our experiences together: our feelings continue to change about different aspects of their personality, certain memories keep on haunting us in our dreams. Even after many years, some of these memories change, some remain clear flashes which we can relive. These thoughts brought me to treat the musical material in a certain manner; some aspects of it go through several distinctive transformations, whereas some remain nearly unchanged, clearly recognisable'.

Saariaho draws the listener to follow her transformations by using thematic material that is intentionally minimal – often no more than an oscillation between two notes or clearly defined and repeated motifs of handfuls of notes. The thematic transformations play out against fleeting trills and drones and occasionally erupt into cadenza-like flourishes. At times the instruments share material, chasing each other through phrases; but often, each occupies its distinct space or layer in the texture. And

what textures! One way to enjoy this piece is simply to relish her virtuoso sound world.

If one were to draw a 230-year-long line between Haydn in the 1770s and Saariaho in the 2000s, a progress, say, from predefined forms to fluidity, **Bartók's** Piano Quintet would sit at a fascinating mid-point on it. For such a big piece by a major composer, it is little known. He composed it in 1903-4 soon after graduating from the Liszt Academy in Budapest. It had a few performances to mixed receptions, but it was a very successful performance in 1921 that caused Bartók to withdraw it. After 17 years he had moved on and would rather his public had enjoyed his recent, more challenging work instead. It disappeared and was thought lost until the 1960s.

This piece is so intriguing vis-à-vis the 230-year evolutionary timeline because it stands at a crossroads both for Bartók personally and more widely in Western music. Generalising a little: since Beethoven, composers had pursued individual expressive goals which radically evolved musical language and structure. Mendelssohn and Schumann ignored conventions to connect the movements of larger works; composers of fantasias and tone poems followed poetic or narrative lines to shape music that told stories in sound. This was thrilling for those confident enough to ride the wave, but in the early 1900s, young Bartók, fresh out of music college faced a crisis of uncertainty. The predefined forms and languages were not for him, but what next?

His answer proved to be along the lines of: 'forget what you have been taught'. He found it in the tone poems of Richard Strauss (or possibly Liszt, depending on who you read) cross-fertilised with his epiphanic discovery of Hungarian folk music, which, as he wrote: '...freed me from the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys... the melodies were full of most free and varied rhythmic phrases and changes of tempi, played both rubato and giusto'. The Quintet was among the very earliest of his works to manifest this new musical direction: musicologist David Cooper has shown how folk rhythms, modes, dance forms, even an actual folk tune appear in it. Yet its most radical step could easily pass unheard by the listener. It appears still to be in the predefined form of four movements, like Haydn...yet it isn't really. Haydn's four movements are separate entities, while Bartók's Quintet is a single immense entity, and what sound like breaks between movements are actually notated pauses in the musical continuity. Here is the influence of Strauss, freeing Bartók to extend his musical thinking across a wider canvas: themes migrate from section to section, and the trajectory builds from a rather sombre opening to unbridled jubilation in the closing bars. From here, it is not so great a leap to Saariaho's single movement.

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