

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 14 September 2022
7.30pm

Brentano String Quartet

Mark Steinberg violin
Serena Canin violin
Misha Amory viola
Nina Maria Lee cello

Jean de Ockeghem (c.1410-1497)

Charles Wuorinen (1938-2020)

Orlande de Lassus (c.1530-1594)

Richard Mico (c.1590-1661)

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Carlo Gesualdo (c.1561-1613)

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643)

Ave Maria

Josquiniana (2001) *based on Josquin des Prez*
I. Helas madame • II. Faulte d'argent •
III. Cela sans Plus • IV. Comment peult •
V. Vive le Roy • VI. El Grillo

Prologue 'Carmina Chromatico' from *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* (1600)

Fancy No. 5

Sibylla Cimmeria from *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*

Fancy No. 9

Sibylla Persica from *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*

Fancy No. 7

Jubilate Deo omnis terra a4 (1585)

Asciugate i begli occhi (1611) *arranged by Mark Steinberg*

O voi, troppo felici (1611) *arranged by Mark Steinberg*

Tu m'uccidi, o crudele (1611) *arranged by Mark Steinberg*

Lamento d'Arianna: Lasciatemi morire SV22 (1607) *arranged by Mark Steinberg*

Ohimè il bel viso, ohimè il soave sguardo SV112 (1614) *arranged by Mark Steinberg*

Ditelo, o fiumi, e voi ch'udiste Glauco from *Sestina: Lagrime d'amante al sepolcro dell'amata* SV111 (1614) *arranged by Mark Steinberg*

Zefiro torna e' il bel tempo rimena SV108 (1614) *arranged by Mark Steinberg*

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Sacred objects in Papua New Guinea include ornate, intricately carved bamboo flutes, used only in specific rituals with the initiated, which, when played, are said to speak and sing with the voices of the dead - spirits with tales of heroism and wisdom. A portal into the past, a direct taste of the continuity of human experience. Ancient song, brought into the present moment, infiltrates and enriches the sense of who we are in the vast network of time.

And so we aspire to use our present-day instruments, ornate and intricately carved wood, to conjure the ancestral echoes of voices preceding their birth. We share much genetic material with our precursors: the assemblage of human voices, and the gathering of string players in the consort of viols. Both are evoked by the modern string quartet. The intimacy of woven threads of sound, the individual subsumed into the color and texture of the whole. And then again, the tapestry reveals discrete strands, and the pleasure of the amalgamation coexists with that of the separate identities within: the one and the many.

Broadly speaking, these Renaissance works fall into two groups. There are those that share the magical spirit of a Chagall painting, where recognisable forms float around and past each other, defy the organisational pull of gravity, morph and transmute and shape-shift. The works of **Ockeghem**, Lassus and Gesualdo are suffused with chromatic alchemy. Chromaticism in music has to do with shades of colors, as the root word suggests, with explorations of peripheral harmonies that slip and kaleidoscopically metamorphose, seemingly immune to expected architectural relationships. There are mercurial shifts, deviations and distortions, the immediacy of passions untethered, flirtations with madness, and the gift of visions and divinations that transcend the rational. The **Lassus** *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* sing prophecies of the coming of Christ, voiced by various sibyls, seers of ancient times - though the first of the set, included here, is a prelude announcing the composer's intent to write a set of such pieces in the chromatic style. The **Gesualdo** madrigals likewise dart and drift, the texts gloomy, the mood tenebrous, yet not unremittingly so. In the spirit of a Sophist, every expression of pain holds equally the refutation of its antithesis, and when words such as 'love,' 'happy,' 'sun' appear, the music emits a brief phosphorescence within the oceanic depths of despair, the dimming of which accentuates the shackling darkness.

The second group contains works that evoke something of the spirit of Cubist painting, with multitudinous coexisting perspectives on a single idea. These are works in which contrapuntal imitations and reflections abound. An idea is taken up by each part,

lines chase each other, follow each other, twist around each other, and thus form a multidimensional latticework, beholding the idea from many sides at once. The **Mico Fancies**, written for a consort of viols, direct progenitor of the string quartet, balance accord and debate, consideration and persiflage. There is an intimacy in the conversational texture; the pleasures of thought and discourse abound. We are not in the volatile world of Gesualdo, but rather in the realm of the contemplated, of emotions tempered and organised by the rational mind. Likewise, the secular **Josquin** works often start with an idea that is multiplied as in a Hall of Mirrors, melodic strings braided together. In contrast to the mystery of direct apparitions, the inner world wondrously beheld and apprehended, these more cerebrally organised works offer joyful entanglements, the way shared experience delights in the communal complexity of convivial chatter.

The concluding set of **Monteverdi** madrigals brings us to the cusp of the Baroque period, and to the era of the birth of opera, Monteverdi's precious gift to us. These works lean more toward dramatic extroversion, often opulent textures, and deliciously piercing dissonances, redolent of the doubleness of pain and love. The final phrase of the last madrigal included here, 'Zefiro Torna', is amongst the most vivid and heart-shattering examples of such music.

Confession: this is a programme born from one of the deadly sins, envy. Ridiculous to feel such an emotion as a member of a string quartet, with our mind-blowingly rich repertoire. And yet, who is not further enriched by touching something of his roots, his family tree, the continuity of emotional resonance that transcends time? Who would not want to experience the vast repository of felt impressions that can link us across centuries in the blink of an eye, a harkening of the ear? As the majority of works here are vocal in origin, there is, of course, the issue of the missing text. The words are absent, yet fossilised impressions remain, the sounds and rhythms sculpted by the shape of the sung language, the meanings of the words dyed into the fabric of the music. And anyone who doubts that an instrument can speak need only listen to a small bit of Louis Armstrong's trumpet to be disabused of such a notion. The string quartet loses one sort of specificity here, and we certainly have no notion of replacing the originals. But there is ineffable beauty, as well, in observing the shadows of Indonesian puppets on a screen that is of a different flavor than the examination of the puppets themselves. The flutes of Papua New Guinea offer up no specific word. And yet.

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