

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 19 July 2024
7.00pm

Attacca Quartet

Amy Schroeder violin
Domenic Salerni violin
Nathan Schram viola
Andrew Yee cello

Philip Glass (b.1937)

String Quartet No. 3 'Mishima' (1985)

*I. 1957: Award Montage • II. November 25:
Ichigaya • III. Grandmother and Kimitake •
IV. 1962: Body Building • V. Blood Oath •
VI. Mishima/Closing*

John Adams (b.1947)

String Quartet No. 2 (2014)

I. Allegro molto • II. Andantino - Energico

Interval

Caroline Shaw (b.1982)

3 Essays (2016-7)

Nimrod • Echo • Ruby

Paul Wiancko (b.1983)

LIFT (2016)

Part I • Part II • Part III. Glacial - Maniacal - Lift

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Following a primeval First Quartet of 1966, **Philip Glass** absented himself from the medium until the scores he wrote for a New York staging of Samuel Beckett's story *Company* in 1983 and Paul Schrader's biographical film *Mishima* in 1984. In each case, a finished quartet was the result a year later.

The six short movements of the 'Mishima' Quartet, whose combined duration is not much more than a quarter of an hour, are titled after scenes from the film – 25 November 1970 being the date of Mishima's assault on the military headquarters at Ichigaya and subsequent ritual suicide, and Kimitake the first name he was given at birth. However, the music is in no sense atmospheric or narrative, nor is it identifiably Japanese, though it could be said to underline the highly formal, semi-abstract nature of Schrader's work.

At the same time it is thoroughly characteristic of Glass's output in its oscillations, its level surfaces barely ruffled by arpeggiation and its repeated, repeatedly rescinded, harmonic progressions, motors of stasis or circularity.

Glass so far has produced eight string quartets; **John Adams** is still at his Second. 'String quartet writing', he has observed, 'is one of the most difficult challenges a composer can take on. Unless one is an accomplished string player, the demands of handling this extremely volatile and transparent instrumental medium can easily be humbling, if not downright humiliating. Quartet writing for me seems to be a matter of very long-term "work in progress".'

Indeed, the proof is here. Adams turned 60 before, in 2007, he composed his First Quartet (implicitly setting aside a work he had written in 1994 for quartet plus recorded quartet, *John's Book of Alleged Dances*). This was followed quite quickly by two more works for quartet: a concerto, *Absolute Jest*, in 2011, and three years later this Second Quartet, which was performed here in 2015. Dissatisfied (as he was at first with the concerto), Adams has withdrawn that version for revision, while allowing the members of the Attacca Quartet, on hearing them play it, to keep it in their repertory. This gives us the opportunity to encounter a work still on its way: when we next hear Adams's Second Quartet, it is likely to be different.

What probably will not change is the two-movement design, within a total duration of 20 minutes, as well as the embedding in tags from Beethoven's late piano music and the virtuosity on display from composer and performers jointly. The first movement is entirely based on the opening of the scherzo of Beethoven's Op. 110 piano sonata, where scales in contrary motion, moving at a rush, enclose a zigzag alto part. The rush, the scales and the zigzag (taken at the start by the viola) are all there in the Adams, together

with the urgent quiet. In the Beethoven sonata, these first four bars are kind of turned inside out to make the loud response, and from this hint Adams creates a wild and dazzling fractal flow, where the same elements are always present but always in process of transformation. Fast from the first, the movement soon finds itself in tricky metres and cross-rhythms, stalled sometimes in repetition, and travelling towards an access of higher speed somewhere after the halfway mark.

The second movement takes off from a melody in the first movement of the same sonata, and again opens into a wide space of reference and transition. Again, too, the music builds towards a change of pace – and this time a change of model, to one of the 'Diabelli' *Variations*. By the end we may feel Adams has taught us a lot about himself and something, too, about Beethoven.

Caroline Shaw is one of those composer opposites of whom Adams was rather ruefully speaking: 'an accomplished string player' for whom the string quartet is native ground. Her *3 Essays* (2016-7), which make up the third of her four full-length quartets, have to do with what was a particularly relevant topic at the time of the Trump election: the understanding and misunderstanding or obfuscation of language. The first essay takes its title from the architect of the Tower of Babel and seeks an ideal in the prose rhythm of Marilynne Robinson, hymnlike as Shaw reads her. *Echo*, the middle movement, with its ominous beginning, refers to the echo chamber within which social media invites us to voice our opinions and have them magnified back to us. Calm and concurrence may be a threat. In the finale, *Ruby*, Shaw was thinking both of the gemstone and the programming language. There are recollections of the earlier essays, energized by bouncing on D.

Also a string player, now a member of the Kronos Quartet, Shaw's contemporary **Paul Wiancko** wrote *LIFT* in 2016 and it is again a very American piece, hailing from a perplexing time. Perhaps it responds to what were current events in its rotations and dead-ends, not unlike those that run through all these pieces from the middle of the last decade, contrasting with the easy glide of the Glass.

If Shaw's haven is the hymn, Wiancko's is the country song, echoing through the first movement and reduced to whispers and accompanimental gestures in the slow second. The third movement has three sections: a slow introduction, a country-style jam, and an unabashed, unrepentant finale that finds joy and release just where they had been hiding before.

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