

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 1 April 2024
1.00pm

Quatuor Arod

Jordan Victoria violin
Alexandre Vu violin
Tanguy Parisot viola
Jérémy Garbarg cello

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Herzlich tut mich verlangen BWV727 (c.1708-17)

Benjamin Attahir (b.1989)

Al Asr (2017)

*I. Intense • II. Ancora poco più mosso •
III. Lontano e misterioso • IV. Agitato •
V. Fuga*

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

String Quartet in C Op. 76 No. 3 'The Emperor' (1797)

*I. Allegro • II. Poco adagio, cantabile •
III. Menuetto. Allegro • IV. Finale. Presto*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Many of **Bach's** chorale preludes are in four parts and so lend themselves to performance by a string quartet –especially at the start of a programme that has religious subtexts all through: a German chorale, a surah (chapter) from the Quran, an Austrian hymn. The words of the initial chorale, 'Herzlich tut mich verlangen' ('I dearly desire'), were set around 1600 to a secular tune by Hans Leo Hassler, a tune undoubtedly more familiar to many of us with the words of a different chorale: 'O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden' ('O sacred head, now wounded') – though some will remember it also from Paul Simon's 'American Tune'. Being in the Phrygian mode, it instigates chromaticism in Bach's setting.

The work referring to the Quran shares its title with the relevant surah: **Benjamin Attahir's** *Al Asr*, of which the Quatuor Arod gave the first performance in October 2017. French by birth and education, Attahir has invoked his Islamic heritage in many of his compositions, not least the cycle of five pieces in which this quartet takes third place, a sequence devoted to the *salah*, the daily cycle of prayers.

'Al-Asr is the afternoon prayer', he points out. 'I tried to translate the atmosphere of that exact moment of the day into music. Glaring light, sweltering heat, the diffraction of the air as it touches the ground - my mind was filled with images as I wrote this piece. But Al-Asr is also the 103rd surah of the Quran. Its structure in three verses dictated the form of this quartet'.

This surah, one of the most compact, states its subject, which is that of time as it passes, reminds us that our store of time is constantly diminishing, and advises us to perform good deeds. Time well spent, in other words, is not time lost.

Besides Islamic prayer and scripture, Attahir in his first quartet (he has since written a second) was also bound to consider the great string quartet tradition: 'I must admit', he has said, 'that the string quartet genre, one that has been handed down to us by our forebears, from Haydn to Dutilleux, Ligeti and Dusapin, can be rather 'paralysing' for a young composer. To alleviate my anxiety, I focused on creating the most compact and cohesive object possible. To do so, I approached the quartet as a single instrument, returning to the backbone of my writing: embellished monody, freely inspired by the music of the Near East'.

Playing for a little over twenty minutes, *Al Asr* has five movements proceeding without a break. The first may be regarded as introductory, putting forward essential intervals, beginning with the falling minor second. Eventually the near monody splits in two, the upper instruments providing a hazy, distant background to the pizzicato cello.

It is out of this background that the next movement emerges: a *moto perpetuo* revolving on the intervals

introduced in the first. We might easily imagine we are hearing time unfolding at speed. Briefly the energy recedes and returns. Then again the next movement is heard arriving from far away. This is the work's slow movement, a lament that might speak of human loss, while at the same time going further in bringing the work's intervallic material into order as a motif, finally heard in *pianissimo* harmonics and prompting a trace memory of the first movement.

It soon turns out that this has come only to announce the fourth movement, another circling *moto perpetuo* but now with the work's fundamental motif present both within the ostinato and above it. This movement leads directly into the final fugue, on a subject that presents the motif at its crux. If these final movements, as prelude and fugue, represent the sound of righteous living, they do so under high pressure.

Haydn's 'Emperor' Quartet owes its name to its inclusion of the tune he composed in January 1797 for an Austrian imperial hymn, 'Gott erhalte Franz der Kaiser' ('God save Franz the Emperor'). The idea, which seems to have come from his supporter Gottfried van Swieten, was that Austria should have such a hymn to parallel Britain's 'God Save the King' and that Haydn should be the man to provide the music – which he did. Close on 50 years later it was made the national anthem of the Austrian empire, which it remained until the empire's fall in 1918. That left it available to be adopted, with new words, by Germany in 1922.

Having no way to foresee the future his tune would have at ceremonial occasions and Olympic competitions, Haydn decided to memorialise it later the same year in one of the quartets he was writing for Count Joseph Erdödy. Hence the slow movement of this quartet, where the theme is sung by each of the instruments in turn, with changing decoration: first violin; second violin (accompanied only by the first); cello; viola; and again first violin, lifting it as if into the empyrean. Haydn honours the melody's nobility and adds his own affection for it.

Before all this comes a sonata *Allegro* whose first subject is a closed four-bar phrase that is then extended to finish within just another eight, the first violin high. The second subject takes over with almost the same head motif, and carries the music into patches of distant harmony. The development includes a country dance and a whisper before arriving at the recapitulation, which has some new twists. When the imperial hymn is done, the quartet goes on through a minuet in C with a trio in A minor to a *Finale* that starts intensely in C minor, seems to remember some turns of phrase from the hymn, and ends duly in C major.

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