

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 20 June 2023
7.30pm

Hilary Hahn violin

Kaleidoscope Chamber Collective

Elena Urioste violin

Melissa White violin

Nathan Amaral violin

Rosalind Ventris viola

Juan-Miguel Hernandez viola

Laura van der Heijden cello

Tony Rymer cello

Graham Mitchell double bass

Jane Mitchell flute

Carlos Ferreira clarinet

Amy Harman bassoon

Tom Poster piano

Carlos Simon (b.1986)

be still and know (2015)

Jennifer Higdon (b.1962)

Dark Wood (2001)

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

String Quartet Op. 11 (1936-8 rev. 1943)

I. Molto allegro e appassionato

II. Molto adagio

III. Molto allegro

Interval

Jessie Montgomery (b.1981)

Starburst (2012)

Aaron Copland (1900-1990)

Appalachian Spring (1943-4)



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There is an immediacy of appeal about the works on this all-American programme. Bringing together three leading composers active today with two mid-century giants, something of the North American spirit seems to be captured and conveyed. This is music dynamic in approach and direct in communication.

Carlos Simon *be still and know* (2015)

The subject of *be still and know* is faith. Atlanta-based Carlos Simon was raised in the church, but the inspiration came from an unlikely source: the final episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Airing in 2011, Winfrey's farewell saw her muse on a range of topics, including her relationship to God:

I have felt the presence of God my whole life. Even when I didn't have a name for it, I could feel the voice bigger than myself speaking to me, and all of us have that same voice. Be still and know it. You can acknowledge it or not. You can worship it or not. You can praise it, you can ignore it or you can know it. Know it. It's always there speaking to you and waiting for you to hear it in every move, in every decision.

Featuring slowly shifting chords, Simon's reflection sees the violin and cello in a gentle exchange with the piano, each instrument emerging and receding in turn. An undulating piano figure heralds the arrival of a second section and guides a work suffused with Simon's characteristic sincerity to a quiet and contemplative conclusion.

Jennifer Higdon *Dark Wood* (2001)

The bassoon takes the lead in Jennifer Higdon's propulsive *Dark Wood*. Commissioned by St Luke's Chamber Ensemble and premièred in 2002, the title honours the instrument's material and is Higdon's response to noticing bassoon repertoire was often slow and lyrical. In *Dark Wood* she celebrates and revels in its virtuosic capabilities.

Pitting the bassoon in an often-thrilling dialogue with the violin, cello, and piano, Higdon accentuates what she calls the bassoon's 'bite'. Rhythmically driven passages – described by one critic as having 'rock 'n' roll energy' – are interspersed with moments of repose. Demands are made of all players with Higdon exploring and exploiting the quartet en route to the work's dizzying finale.

Barber *String Quartet Op. 11* (1936-8; 1943)

It was in May 1936 when Barber, then in his mid-20s, wrote to Orlando Cole, the cellist of the Curtis Quartet, declaring, 'I have vague quartettish rumblings in my innards.' Those rumblings resulted in the *String Quartet in B minor Op. 11*, but the piece had a complicated early life. Premièred in an early version in Rome in 1937 by the Pro Arte Quartet, it was subsequently revised and performed in other iterations before reaching its definitive form, heard tonight. The Budapest Quartet gave the first performance in January 1943 at the Library of Congress, Washington DC, and the long journey to get there reflects Barber's struggles with the genre.

The first movement looks to 19th-century models through its sonata form construction, and yet its rhythmic verve and changing moods firmly root it in the 20th. The heart of the quartet is the second movement, known in its later string orchestra rescoring as the famous *Adagio for Strings*. Its steady stepwise lines and controlled harmonic tensions have seen it accompany national mourning and loss, but Barber's views on completing it were more celebratory – he described it as a 'knockout'. Early critics recognised its monumentality and though Barber rarely commented on its elevation to a lament, it holds a unique place in the repertoire and his output. The brief finale that follows was Barber's solution to his principal compositional battle: the third movement. Having discarded earlier attempts, themes from the first movement are repurposed, bringing the quartet full circle.

Jessie Montgomery *Starburst* (2012)

In 2021 *The New York Times* ran a headline, 'The changing American canon sounds like Jessie Montgomery,' and *Starburst*, one of her most popular works, sums up the vibrant and colourful approach she is known for. Written in 2012 for Sphinx Virtuosi, an orchestra of preeminent Black and Latinx musicians, Montgomery – previously a violinist with the group – composed with its 'dynamic in mind'. The result is a compact *tour de force* imbued with a spirited kinetic energy. Lasting but a few minutes, each player is a soloist, with Montgomery combining what she calls 'exploding gestures' and 'fleeting melodies' into a vivid and brilliantly realised whole.

Copland *Appalachian Spring* (1943-4)

'Ballet for Martha' was the title Copland used when composing what would become *Appalachian Spring*. The Martha in question was pioneering choreographer and dancer Martha Graham, and it was in 1943, following a commission from Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, that Copland began work.

The ballet tells the story of a frontier wedding in 19th-century Pennsylvania. Copland remembered the brief: 'it had to do with the pioneer American spirit, with youth and spring, with optimism and hope.' His score, which won a Pulitzer Prize, encapsulates all of this, though the title *Appalachian Spring* – taken from a Hart Crane poem and with no connection to the story – was only added during rehearsal.

Premièred on 30 October 1944 at the Library of Congress, Washington DC, it was written for 13 instruments due to the small size of the pit. Copland subsequently created a concert suite for orchestra and then, as heard here, for the ballet's original forces. At once tender and joyous, it features Copland's trademark rhythmic vitality, wide-open harmonies, warm lyricism, and economy of means. The inclusion of playful and exuberant variations on the Shaker tune 'Simple Gifts' – which spoke to a unity of spirit that appealed to Copland – is a standout moment in one of the defining works of 20th-century American art.

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