

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 21 October 2022
7.30pm

Castalian String Quartet

Sini Simonen violin
Daniel Roberts violin
Ruth Gibson viola
Steffan Morris cello

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

String Quartet No. 1 in D Op. 25 (1941)

*I. Andante sostenuto - Allegro vivo •
II. Allegretto con slancio • III. Andante calmo •
IV. Molto vivace*

Charlotte Bray (b.1982)

Ungrievable Lives (2022) *UK première*

I. • II. • III. • IV. • V. • VI. • VII. • VIII. • IX. • X. • XI. • XII. • XIII.

Interval

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

String Quartet in D minor Op. 56 'Voces intimae' (1908-9)

*I. Andante - Allegro molto moderato • II. Vivace •
III. Adagio di molto • IV. Allegretto, ma pesante •
V. Allegro*

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This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25



Burraway's installation can be seen at Wigmore Hall this evening, and is supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

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Britten wrote the first of his three string quartets in California in the summer of 1941, when he was staying with Peter Pears at the home of the British duo pianists Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson, outside San Diego. The work was commissioned by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who belonged to the great tradition of women patrons in the United States and had already commissioned quartets from Bartók, Schoenberg, Prokofiev and others - quite a record. The deadline was tight, three months away, but Britten got the job done - and of course also wrote something for his hosts.

He started the quartet with a fairly unusual sound: violins and viola enter high, eerily high, above the treble staff, the cello plucking away below. D major harmony is spiked with dissonance. Then this music is replaced by a rugged, angular *Allegro*, and we might think that, true to tradition, a slow introduction has been the entrance to the main part of the movement. That is not, however, Britten's way. The 'slow introduction' turns out to be part of a dialogue of musical types: heaven, as it were, but a strained heaven, and awkward, bounding earth. There are motivic connections between the two, and the high, still music presses back into the other until it takes over. Then the same thing happens again, differently, and the movement ends with traces of the two musics nearing one another.

The soft pizzicatos at the very close are picked up by the next movement, an *Allegretto* 'with momentum' that provides the work's short scherzo. By contrast, the slow movement is long, in five-beat bars that provide for a rhythm of short-long-long steps. This reaches a glowing plateau of C major, which is reached again after a middle part building to a quietly intense solo for viola (Britten's instrument). The finale is set going by a skidding idea that is, like other things in this quartet, seized on for counterpoint. Once more, though, speed debates with stillness, until finally the skids take us home to D major.

Charlotte Bray could be regarded as one of Britten's musical grandchildren, having studied at Snape with Oliver Knussen and Colin Matthews. Her music is strong on images, impulses and emotions, which give it access to corollaries in visual art and also in current events - or both at the same time in the case of *Ungrievable Lives*. Chamber music is a lively part of her output, but this is her first string quartet, on which she has written as follows:

'Under the weight and seriousness of the current migration crisis, I feel compelled to respond to it with the means that I have. With shocking news stories appearing almost daily, I attempt to imagine, and find a way of expressing, the dangers and suffering that millions of migrants across our globe endure in search of a safe and better life.

'I was deeply moved and motivated by the work of the British artist Caroline Burraway. Since 2015 she has responded to the crisis through her art, having witnessed first-hand the situation and refugee camps in the Mediterranean. Burraway's powerful installation

Ungrievable Lives comprises 13 dresses for children, handmade from refugee lifejackets gathered at the "Lifejacket Graveyard" in Lesvos, Greece, hanging from iron and brass Salter scales, above small mounds of sand.

'Each dress represents one million of the 13 million child-refugees there are worldwide. They signify "absence", evoking memories of a former life, of family, of love and, ultimately, of loss. The work invites the viewer to meditate upon and contemplate the often harrowing journey of refugees as they try to reach the shores of Europe. The scales, an ancient symbol of justice, denote the weighing of the body and soul, prompting the difficult question: "Are the lives of some more valuable than those of others?" The sand, stacked below each of the dresses, represents borders, physical, political and cultural, which, like sand, constantly shift and change over time.

'This forms a large part of the stimulus behind my string quartet; the music explores it through the 13 highly contrasting miniature movements.'

These movements, one might add, are impelled by conditions of pain, sorrow, tragic beauty and, of course, loss: the loss of so many innocent childhoods. A middle group of movements (VII-IX) is played without a break, after which come two for first violin and cello alone.

Burraway's installation can be seen at Wigmore Hall this evening.

Those same two instruments initiate **Sibelius's** 'Voces Intimae', in a dialogue of phrases that seem to come out of an older, modal world. (Composed in 1908-9, between the Third and Fourth Symphonies, this was the mature Sibelius's only chamber work, though, a violinist himself, he had composed three quartets and many separate movements in his 20s.) In their development these phrases prompt other ideas until they wind back. A sudden fast break pre-empts Stravinsky for a moment, before the smooth unfolding continues to more reminiscences and a chorale-ending in wide chords.

As in the Britten quartet, a brief scherzo is followed by a ten-minute slow movement. The lifting motif that opens this again has a time-delving quality that becomes all the more marked as it returns again and again to begin and sustain successive waves, of which the last is climactic. The music moves to settle by way of repetitions of a haunting minor chord in a gesture brought back from earlier in the movement. It was over that previous moment that Sibelius wrote the words 'voces intimae'.

Next comes a movement whose grim determination comes from its fixation on an up-down scale idea. In places this is opened out and thrown back and forth between first violin and cello, in dialogue again over rushing triplets from their companions. The finale is a dance that becomes a *moto perpetuo*, driving to a climax and homecoming.

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