

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 22 April 2023
11.30am

JACK Quartet

Christopher Otto violin
Austin Wulliman violin
John Pickford Richards viola
Jay Campbell cello

Erin Gee (b.1974)

Mouthpiece 39 (2022) *UK première*

Caleb Burhans (b.1980)

Contritus (2009)

Eric Wubbels (b.1980)

phrēn (2022)

John Zorn (b.1953)

Necronomicon (2003)

*I. Conjurations • II. The Magus • III. Thought Forms •
IV. Incunabula • V. Asmodeus*

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Many of the works the JACK play today were written for them, beginning with three by New York composers in their 40s. First comes *Mouthpiece 39*, from a series **Erin Gee**, a Californian who completed her training with Beat Furrer in Graz, has been working on since 2000. The performers of these compositions have to make vocal sounds and also use their instruments in a vocal manner, enveloping the two, voice and instrument, in the one utterance.

'I notate the vocal sounds using the International Phonetic Alphabet', Gee explains on her website, 'in order to accurately transcribe both the type of sound and the place of articulation in the mouth....The articulatory possibilities of the mouth are often mapped onto the instruments, mirroring and expanding the vocal sounds to form a kind of "super-mouth".' And she concludes: 'Not pre-meaning, simply never in the direction of meaning.'

This particular *Mouthpiece*, which she composed last year, leans to the *sotto voce* - or perhaps one should say *sotta bocca*, since Gee's precise and useful term 'never in the direction of meaning' goes some way to explaining how she distinguishes mouth from voice. The mouth sounds are most often whispers and whistles, blending into the string sound or standing apart. Some small modules, defined by rhythm and timbre, recur in the skein, which plays for around 15 minutes.

Contritius, by **Caleb Burhans**, is similar in duration, but fills that time very differently. The opening slow oscillation, of simple but strange and wonderful cadences that grow into longer progressions, is scored for muted violins with, above them, harmonics on the cello, everything *non vibrato*. Excluded for some while, the viola (the instrument that was the composer's principal conservatory study) comes in subtly and begins to steer the music towards its next region of gently swinging stasis. This eventually melts and rises in volume on the way to the white-note music of the close, still rocking but perhaps now appeased.

"Contritius", Burhans reminds us, 'is Latin for "crushed by guilt".' And he goes on: 'In the Catholic Church there are many prayers of contrition and penance. Composed in the fall and winter of 2009, *Contritius* is in three sections that organically flow into one another. These sections represent three different prayers of contrition. Much of the string writing in *Contritius* is evocative of early music and viol consorts while still portraying a sense of modern guilt.'

Eric Wubbels, a pupil of Tristan Murail and Fred Lerdahl at Columbia, where he now teaches, likes to quote a statement by the Austrian composer Klaus Lang: 'Music is time made audible.' Made audible in Wubbels's music, time takes on a corporeal character: organic, substantial, as if palpable, and indeed pulsing. In *phrēn* (2022) this bodily time stays with us through two separate parts each ten minutes long.

At the beginning the musicians take up their bows together to summon, then release, a chord of five notes, including microtonal deviations needed to shift the system from equal temperament to just intonation, within a narrow range around middle C. We are at once in an extraordinary world, and so it continues. Coming at intervals of around four seconds, the chords might give the impression of a slowly breathing organ of bowed string tone. The second chord is the same as the first, but after that each chord, consisting of between four and seven notes, is a little different, so that each is a 'No. 1' - or perhaps a 'No. 0' in a potentially infinite succession. Often narrow intervals bring about beats, in waves or buzzings depending on their frequency. 'Resonant, but focussed and inward' is the marking.

As slow pulsing becomes constancy - first in the cello's part, then, for much longer, in the viola's - the beats between near adjacencies emerge more strongly. This first part ends on a suspended unison - though no doubt any unison would be suspended in harmony that knows different shadings of consonance and dissonance but no certain home.

In the second part the harmony at any point is built from partials of an imaginary bass note, which may account for a burnished metallic timbre, bristling with beats and again changing in degree of consonance. To the startling opening Wubbels gives the appropriate marking: 'Strobing, juddering...a sculpture of pressurized air.' And though the music does not stay like this, it maintains its fierce presence.

This, though in quite different terms, is also an attribute of **John Zorn's** *Necronomicon* (2003), one of several works by him relating to occult literature - in this case, stories by HP Lovecraft in which the 'Necronomicon' is introduced as a book of black magic. Music is a very suitable medium for exploring this area, its abundant figments and relationships notoriously hard to interpret. Music can also take on board esoteric numbers, as in this case five (the number of syllables in the title and of movements in the piece), six-six-six (the number of the beast in Revelation) and fifteen (associated with the demon Asmodeus). These are incorporated in the score, the most prominent example being the fifteenfold repetition of a chord at the midpoint of the central movement - the midpoint, therefore, of the entire composition. There are also symmetrical connections, as in several Bartók works, between the first movement and the last, which are both short and wild, and the second and the fourth, which are conversely long and mostly slow, with interruptions. Such connections are sometimes reinforced by recurrences of events, though these weave through the whole work.

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